

Art Review:

Charles Harlan

by David Everitt Howe in May, 2013



Ragnar Kjartansson: *The Visitors*
Luhning Augustine, New York
1 February – 23 March

The temptation when watching Ragnar Kjartansson's nine-channel videowork *The Visitors* (2012) is to succumb to joy. Based on a live musical performance at Rokeby Farm, a bohemian estate on the banks of the Hudson River in upstate New York, the installation features nine large screens on which are projected images of musicians, most alone and a few in groups, playing the same song in different rooms of the estate's white manor house.

At the beginning of the 64-minute loop, the screens are dark. They light up one by one as the performers, hipster types the artist knows from his native Iceland and beyond, enter the different frames. The artist himself (it goes without saying that he is bearded) appears naked in a bathtub clutching his guitar above the soapy water. Lackadaisically, the performers tune their instruments: a cello, a banjo, a grand piano, an electric bass. After a few minutes, all of the performers fall quiet save Kjartansson, who, in a reedy voice, begins his song. Basing it on a poem his ex-wife wrote, he warbles the words, "Once again I fall into my feminine ways", and then other musicians slowly join in. Before long, they are all singing together with their heads thrown back in ecstasy. The viewer, one presumes, is supposed to be swept up in this swell of collective emotion.

The problem with *The Visitors* is that it offers the same sort of pleasure as, say, daydreaming what life would be like if it were lived in a spread from *Dwell*. The work is aspirational rather than meaningful: you wish you were sitting on the columned patio of the house, listening to the music rise from within, but you don't walk away suddenly believing in God (as I did, for example, after sitting in the midst of Janet Cardiff's *Forty Part Motet*, 2001, at MoMA PS1). Or maybe you do, if your God looks like one of the guys from Bon Iver.

The beauty of the piece is obvious, but it's empty – a low-hanging fruit primed for embrace by an Internet generation used to watching music videos and live performances on YouTube. To call the work kitschy would give it too much agency. Kjartansson no doubt set out to stage a happening in which his friends could play great music and have a memorable time in an idyllic setting. But the performers aren't virtuoso enough to be arresting for more than a few minutes, and the music, arranged by Kjartansson and Davíð Þór Jónsson, lacks the depth and emotional weight to stand on its own. After a few minutes of pacing around the gallery, you're ready to click through to the next song.

If you stay until the end, you get to see the musicians leave their rooms and go frolicking together across the green – and misty! – hills that lead to the Hudson River. Outside of New York, all of this might seem exotic, but this jaded native rolled her eyes and made a mental note to check listings for a summer rental house in the Hudson Valley.

BRIENNE WALSH



Charles Harlan: *Cave*
JTT, New York
3 March – 14 April

Charles Harlan's *Cave* is nothing if not simple. The show consists of one work, but it's a whammy: *Pipe* (2013), a piece of steel piping about 4.5m long, with a 3m diameter. Weighing close to a ton, it rests against one wall of the gallery with a dumb, brute presence, and is held in place with wood stoppers so it doesn't roll over and crush any little children who choose to run around its curving, ribbed form (though that might do everyone a favour). Thin and hollow, it's like a culvert one would find in the suburbs, meaning it doubles as a creepy place in which to light fireworks, make out or dump the body parts of loved ones. Comically out of place in a gallery, *Pipe* is a deadpan, Duchampian joke rich with meaning and associations, proving that simple needn't mean one-note.

Harlan was raised in Smyrna, Georgia, and his work exhibits a vernacular, domestic flair, as if the suburban housing tracts featured in Dan Graham's *Homes for America* (1966) were taken apart and repurposed as elegant, redneck Minimalism. With *Shingles* (2011), for example, Carl Andre's floor-based metal works meet their working-class counterpart, as copper plates are exchanged for patterns of overlapping asphalt roofing tiles; *Siding* (2011), meanwhile, replaces Donald Judd's shiny metal cubes with the work's namesake – and very plebeian – exterior vinyl wallcovering found on many a tract house; and by simply lifting a marble countertop off the bathroom sink and onto the wall, *Counter* (2012) proves that even the slightest of gestures, such as a change of orientation and context, can render foreign something familiar – the everyday as convincing art object. Similarly, with *Pipe*, it's as if one of Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* (1976) was transported from the desert to this small, white cube gallery on the Lower East Side.

That *Cave* is concurrent with Jay DeFeo's Whitney retrospective is more than telling. DeFeo had to cut out part of a window and wall to remove her one-ton painting *The Rose* (1958–66) from her studio. Harlan, dealing with an object of similar weight, had to hire a team of construction workers to completely disassemble the gallery's storefront, as well as the tree in front of it, and then to put it all back together again as if nothing had happened.

Equally industrial as Holt's work, though perhaps more refined-looking with its clean metal surface and, when struck, resonant timbre, Harlan's invasive culvert more closely pressures the thin distinction between rote object and institutionally legitimated artwork. Even if they're in the middle of nowhere, Holt's tunnels are art because the artist presents them as such; *Pipe* is equally authored and institutionalised. That it's a pipe is precisely the point. While it's a beautiful object, it illustrates how arbitrary 'art' really is. The term may designate anything, from a painting to a pickle in a jar. The latter, displayed in the gallery's back office, is sold by Harlan's mother in her hardware store; it could be an artwork too, if he willed it.

DAVID EVERITT HOWE



Ragnar Kjartansson
The Visitors, 2012 (still),
nine-channel HD video
projection, 64 min. Photos:
Elisabet Davíðsdóttir. Sound:
Chris McDonald. Video: Tómas
Örn Tómasson. Courtesy the
artist and Luhning Augustine,
New York



Charles Harlan
Pipe, 2013, steel, 305 x 305 x
457 cm