

Jónsi

November 16, 2019 – January 9, 2020

Tanya Bonakdar Gallery is pleased to announce its first solo exhibition with multidisciplinary artist Jónsi, on view at the gallery's Los Angeles space from November 16, 2019 through January 9, 2020.

What is the shape of sound? What does it feel like? Can we smell it? How does it move through your body and what kind of sensations does it trigger? These are the questions that are posed by Jónsi in his first exhibition at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery in Los Angeles. Best known for producing distinctive musical sounds ranging from hypnotic ambient incantations to driving sonic waves as a member of the band Sigur Rós, Jónsi has expanded his artistic practice over the past few years in a series of collaborations with visual artists such as Doug Aitken, Olafur Eliasson, Merce Cunningham and most recently the artist and composer Carl Michael von Hausswolf with whom he formed the musical duo Dark Morph. In the wake of these collaborations, Jónsi's most recent solo aesthetic explorations have resulted in a series of immersive installations that sculpt with sound as they ask us to meditate on the liminal threshold between our bodies and the world around us.

In a series of three new gallery-based works, Jónsi riffs on the invocation of sensory inversion in Goethe's fifth Roman Elegy in which the Romantic poet makes a connection between the experience of a lover's body and a classical marble sculpture with the phrase, "see with a feeling eye, feel with a seeing hand." In Jónsi's remix, Goethe's advice to experience the world in a different way is given a sonic update that might read as follows: "hear with a feeling ear, feel with a hearing hand." Seeing, hearing, feeling – each of these senses collapse upon one another in Jónsi's work as sound takes a concrete form and the tactile and the auditory merge into a surprising synesthesia. While one might read these works within the lineage of bombastic noise experiments harkening back to those of the Italian Futurists who championed the revolutionary aspects of noise in opposition to formal music, Jónsi's approach is far more interested in exploring the phenomenological complication and extension of the senses as an antidote to a world in which we are constantly confronted by the agitated white noise of contemporary civilization. In his work there is an overarching attempt to assert the primacy of the auditory, the tactile, and the visual in helping the human organism navigate its way through this unmoored and volatile world.

In one work, Sound Flower, Jónsi takes a group of fourteen institutional public address loudspeakers that you might see at a sporting event or on a prison yard and arranges them in a shape reminiscent of the leaves of the highly poisonous Foxglove flower, also known by its Latin name *Digitalis purpurea*. A highly toxic flower, Foxglove can cause hallucinations, heart palpitations and even death. Surprisingly, its active ingredient is also used in a cardiac medication known as digoxin, so this plant has the dual contradictory aspects of being both noxious and therapeutic at the same time. This wavering between the dangerous and the restorative is echoed sculpturally by a series of chrome-plated butt-plugs which act as the stamen of this industrial flower. Emanating from this sculpture is a sonic tapestry of human voices – multiple iterations of the artist's own voice – which have been layered across processed field recordings of the normally imperceptible sounds generated by the flowers themselves. In this call and response between flora and human fauna we hear evocations of pain and pleasure alongside a striving for intelligibility and the melancholy of a frustrated desire to communicate across a trans-species divide.

Walking into the main room of the gallery the visitor is confronted by a nearly empty neutral white space with overly bright light. This suggestion of a minimalist depiction of heaven evokes the sterile light of the mysterious room at the conclusion to Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey while being punctuated by sounds emanating from ten hidden speakers and two sub-woofers. Producing as much a space as a feeling, this ten-channel hallucinatory audio track encircles and penetrates our bodies transporting us to a place that is nowhere – in the original sense of the word utopia. Awash in this mesmerizing sonic bath, a human voice – that of the artist – sends out signals into a white void that transports us to somewhere outside of ourselves while very much insisting that we listen to the very bodies that constitute our subjectivity. Hearing is feeling is seeing is being.

The final room of the gallery veers into darkness with a work indebted to the recent popular explorations of autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) in which a highly particularized sensory input such as whispering triggers a mildly euphoric static-like or tingling sensation on the skin of an individual. In another work, Jónsi has created a wave-like structure of eight black ceiling panels which undulate slowly back and forth. Attached to each of these panels is a hyper-directional speaker projecting ASMR sounds created by the artist with his own voice – ocean waves, breaths, and finally a whispered version of an old Icelandic poem about the sea. As the speakers move with the wave-like action of the panels, these sounds created with the human voice wash over the visitor in the hope of provoking the bodily resonance associated with ASMR.

Another important element in Jónsi's work is his embrace of the sense of smell as an expanded field of artistic practice. Having worked with a perfume organ for the past few years he has experimented with the alchemy of perfume creation which, upon closer examination, seems to rely one part on chemistry and another on an elemental poetry. For this exhibition the artist has created three individual scents connected to each work that run the gamut from the pungently acrid Cadaverine – a scent common to decomposing flesh and sperm which emanates from his Foxglove sculpture – to a scent reminiscent of seaweed that will be paired with his ASMR invocation of the sounds of ocean waves.

Taken together, these works speak to the power of Jónsi's sonic, spatial and scent-driven interventions to upset the traditional division of the senses in the creation of a world of sensory confusion in which the olfactory, the haptic and the auditory collapse into one another in a poetic somatic reverie.

Artist Biography

Since the 1990s world-renowned interdisciplinary artist Jónsi has produced ethereal sounds through an astute aesthetic that combines the minimal, classical and the progressive. Jónsi initially gained international recognition as the lead vocalist for the Icelandic experimental rock band Sigur Rós, whose unique sounds have been equated with the sublime. Jónsi's unequivocal vocal and instrumental approach have expanded the boundaries of musical genres, rendering him one of the leading musical artists of our time.

Outside of Sigur Rós, Jónsi has cultivated a latticework of other interconnected music projects, inclusive of solo works and collaborations. In 2009 he and partner Alex Somers released the landmark ambient album *Riceboy Sleeps*, which they followed up in 2019 with *Lost & Found*. In 2018 Jónsi, Alex Somers, and Paul Corley formed Liminal, whose ambient soundbath events have been hosted at art spaces across the world to high critical praise. In 2019 he formed the musical duo *Dark Morph* with Swedish composer Carl Michael von Hausswolf.

Over the past two decades Jónsi has collaborated with musicians, visual artists, and filmmakers to create a robust body of work across disciplines. Working with such leading creative figures as Doug Aitken, Cameron Crowe, Merce Cunningham, Olafur Eliasson and Carl Michael von Hausswolf, Jónsi's artistic collaborations have resulted in prestigious awards and critical acclaim. In addition to his Golden Globe nomination for Best Original Song, Jónsi is the winner of the 2015 Annie awards for Outstanding Achievement in Music in an Animated Feature Production for his work on *How to Train Your Dragon 2*, and the winner of the 2012 BMI Film Music Award for his score of *We Bought a Zoo*. In 2014 Jónsi and Sigur Rós appeared on an episode of the acclaimed television series *Game of Thrones*.

In 2018 Jónsi contributed an original song titled *Revelation* to the soundtrack of Joel Edgerton's successful film *Boy Erased*, for which he was nominated for the Golden Globe and the Awards Circuit Community Awards. He is the composer of the score of Cameron Crowe's 2012 film *We Bought a Zoo*, and musical contributor to the films *How to Train a Dragon* (2010) and *How to Train a Dragon 2* (2014), *Disconnect* (2012) and *Vanilla Sky* (2001).

Born in Iceland in 1975, Jón Þór "Jónsi" Birgisson, lives and works in Los Angeles. In 2019 he will present his first solo exhibition at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, Los Angeles.