

Jónsi

Obsidian

Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

October 30 – December 17, 2021

Tanya Bonakdar Gallery is pleased to announce the opening of *Obsidian*, Jónsi's second presentation with the gallery and debut solo exhibition in New York, on view from October 30 through December 17, 2021.

After lying dormant for nearly eight hundred years, the recent eruption of the Fagradalsfjall volcano in Iceland serves as the inspiration for the exhibition. Unable to travel to his homeland and experience the rare phenomenon, Jónsi instead conjures the majestic life force within the gallery space through two new sound installations and a series of sculptural works, each presenting a sensorial proposition.

Interdisciplinary artist and musician Jónsi grounds his visual practice in material and metaphysical experimentations with sound, often through the engineering of immersive installations that reconfigure the act of listening by means of sight, smell, taste, and touch. Known for synthesizing compositions that are at once ethereal and electrifying, Jónsi employs a tonal palette ranging from ambient sounds, mechanically generated frequencies, samples from nature, as well as his own voice in boundlessly innovative sonic arrangements. Using a perfume organ to develop new and invigorating scents, Jónsi infuses his works with earthy, atmospheric fragrances that are subtle and frequently overlooked. In concert, these seemingly invisible forces redouble on their emotive strengths, leaving the viewer anchored through corporeal engagement while simultaneously transported via their cognitive imaginary.

On the ground floor, visitors enter a darkened room, dimly lit to reveal a central plinth encircled by around two hundred speakers. Inspired by performances of Icelandic choir groups, Jónsi writes his own choral hymn in four parts. Primal in nature and devoid of identifiable lyrics, his piercing voice strikes an array of emotional chords, echoing and reverberating throughout the multi-channel installation. Soundscapes of gritty rocks and searing lava are coupled with smoky, tar-like aromas of fossilized amber, the only essential oil in existence that is mined (as opposed to harvested). Enveloped within this perceptual framework, the audience finds themselves negotiating through an uncanny, bordering on spiritual experience inside the cavernous belly of a volcano.

In the upstairs galleries, sculptural works composed of resin and obsidian glass engage in dialogue at opposite ends of one room. Crackling sounds intermingle with the visuals of burnt walnut trees, signaling destructive volcanic forces that ultimately have generative ends. Crafted from hand-carved obsidian blades and a cross-sectioned tree, these sculptures embody healing energies that stimulate growth and regeneration.

Another sound installation ensues from a convex armature that is affixed with flower-shaped metallic discs. Equipped with LEDs, the structure pulsates with light in short bursts, blinking slowly at first before swelling into rapid-fire successions, eventually forcing the viewer to close their eyes. A nod to Brion Gysin's 1960s Dream Machine, Jónsi's flashing lights similarly produce trance-like, hallucinatory effects. Here, the artist infuses the space with the scent of ozone known to engage photoreceptors inside the brain, further activating the mind's third eye.

In an environment where the visual has traditionally taken precedence, Jónsi's propositions of alternative forms of seeing meditate on the body's relationship with its immediate surroundings.

While it is tempting to focus solely on the formal qualities of acoustic hardware, surface properties, or architectural scale, these elements merely access the true works at hand, namely an alchemical mix of imagery, sensations, and emotions borne within the mind-body of his viewers.

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.

Launching in conjunction with the exhibition is *Obsidian*, Jónsi's third solo musical album that likewise centers on the Icelandic natural wonder. Recorded and produced in tandem with the works on view, the parallel formats inform one another and interweave through their embodiment of volcanic energies. Over the course of ten tracks, each with evocative titles referencing sights, textures, and aromas of the ashen terrain, Jónsi takes his listeners through narrative arcs between erupting flares. Through an instinctual sensibility for layering vocals over orchestral passages, Jónsi masterfully collapses the boundaries between the senses. Velvety, musky notes of amber translate through deep, sustained progressions of the double bass. Similarly, sharp, tapered edges of obsidian glass register through piercing and frenetic digital bursts. And finally, in the manner of falling ashes, sounds of rushing winds and water cascade steadily over listeners, signaling a return to serenity, stillness, and recovery.

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.

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 sound bath 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.

Born in Iceland in 1975, Jón Þór "Jónsi" Birgisson, lives and works in Los Angeles.

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