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Opinion

Ragnar Kjartansson Turns Politics and Sex Into White Noise

THE DAILY PIC: At Luhring Augustine, Kjartansson plays with normalizing the notable.

Blake Gopnik

December 2, 2016



THE DAILY PIC (#1688): These little paintings, each done in a single day, are from Ragnar Kjartansson's 2016 series called "Architecture and Morality," featured in his current [solo show at Luhring Augustine](http://www.luhringaugustine.com/exhibitions/ragnar-kjartansson3/press-release) (<http://www.luhringaugustine.com/exhibitions/ragnar-kjartansson3/press-release>) gallery in New York. Of course they are entirely unremarkable, as paintings, until you learn that they depict houses built by Jewish colonizers on the Palestinian West Bank.

They seem to me to be part of a larger experiment that Kjartansson is working through in which he takes the remarkable and tries to normalize it.

In the rear gallery of [Luhring Augustine](http://www.artnet.com/galleries/luhring-augustine/) (<http://www.artnet.com/galleries/luhring-augustine/>) he does that via a pleasant little video of an attractive couple having sex, rendered strangely unerotic just because of its new status as a work of gallery art. Something similar goes on with the house paintings, whose politics get dissolved once they've been filtered through the banalities of plein-air painting.

Now that I think of it, I wonder if the same thing is at stake in [my favorite older piece by Kjartansson](http://blakegopnik.com/post/104268279603) (<http://blakegopnik.com/post/104268279603>), in which he got The National to play a single one of their pop songs for hour after hour after hour. Sheer repetition turned a remarkable song into something close to a drone.

Human perception is forever turning most of experience into background noise, the better to pick out any new and salient signals that impinge on us. It feels as though Kjartansson is seeing what it feels like to give it a hand. It

could also be that he's playing with the idea that, after a while and with enough familiarity, all art – even his – will also start to fade from view.