

FILM

Berwick Film and Media Art Festival

In a vital programme that tackled contemporary political urgencies, the 14th Berwick Film and Media Art Festival, one of the best venues for artists' films in the UK, exulted in a spirited play of contrasts and harmonies in genre, scale and form. Featuring probing, provocative moving-image work by female artists, people of colour and queer artists, as well as films originating from indigenous, diasporic or hyphenate cultures, BFMAF's strength lies in a heterogeneity that contests dogmatism of all kinds. This year's areas of focus included East and South-East Asian makers, such as Shireen Seno and John Torres/Los Otros, as well as ecological works in a 'Screening the Forest' series. There were also profiles of works by artists, such as Sophia Al-Maria, and exhibitions in local sites by Lucy Clout, Patrick Staff, Kevin Jerome Everson and Carolyn Lazard, amongst others.

This bracing sensibility was evident from the opening film *Empty Metal* by New York-based Adam Khalil (Ojibway) and Bailey Sweitzer. Evoking the punkiness and dialectics of Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames*, this experimental fiction feature fabulates an intersectional insurrection against the violence of state terror. The film's narration announces that the apocalypse has already taken place – what seems a present metastasis is merely the latest stage in a settler-colonialist and climate-annihilating order. Its protagonists, twentysomething bandmates, are alienated and wearied by a claustrophobic surveillance state. Sweitzer and Khalil use footage of Native American protests and police violence as well as ominous digital news animations to mark this speculative present-day historicity. Once recruited by a trio of otherworldly, telepathic revolutionaries – a Native American activist, a European soothsayer and a Rastafarian – the bandmates question the impact of music alone, as they are enlisted to assassinate authoritarian murderers. With its pulsing, anthemic montage, the film diagnoses a desire for alternative kinships and affiliations. As retributive fantasy born of a rage against the capitalist machine and neocolonial power structures, *Empty Metal* figures how the dispossessed might bend historical time.

Another unruly paragon of disruption stood out in the 'Essential Cinema' section (which also included Djibril Diop Mambéty's restored *Hyenas*, 1992): a rarity of New German Cinema,



Tales of the Dumpster Kid, 1971, by Edgar Reitz and Ula Stöckl, a 208-minute film meant to be screened pub-style in the order of the audience's choice, from a 'menu' of 22 recombinant episodes. The recalcitrant Dumpster Kid, smited by her world, looks both forward and back to the fatefully doomed feminist heroines, trapped in a narrative architecture of patriarchal design. Located somewhere between the anarchic refusal of Vera Chytilová's *Daisies*, the beatitude of *Joan of Arc* and the smudged grace of Nana in *Vivre sa Vie*, the Dumpster Kid, dipped in head-to-toe red, is a rediscovered shard of revolutionary critique of the misogyny of capitalism suited to our splintered political times.

A new strand, 'Propositions', developed hybrid presentations, combining screening, performance and audience dialogue. The section was programmed by Native American filmmaker Sky Hopinka (Ho-Chunk/Pechanga), who won the Berwick New Cinema Prize last year for his *Dislocation Blues*, 2017, which reflected on protesters' experiences at Standing Rock. Hopinka's hypnotic, diaphanous films perambulate around the conjunctions of language, place and indigenous identity. His most recent, *Fainting Spells*, was exhibited in Coxon's Tower along the fortified walls of Berwick-upon-Tweed as an installation; it invents a myth around the *Xawjiska*, an Indian Pipe plant used to bring back to consciousness Ho-Chunk who have fainted. The film proffers a memory or hallucinated passage through the spirit world, scrolling across the image, crisscrossing

latitudes and longitudes. Landscapes saturated with painterly colour are superimposed on the horizontal and vertical axes, clouds appear upside down, there are vertiginous walks through smoking hills, where scale-defying textures of desert sand, near and far, mark the multiplicity of place, sphere of interior and hypnagogic wandering. Hopinka presented his films interspersed with spoken passages from his book of essays and calligrams, *Around the Edge of Encircling Lake*, using a headlamp to sustain the film theatre darkness. The screening/reading grafted distinct zones, aerating the space between cinema's audiovisual phantasmagorias and the temporalities of writing.

The poetic writing of such 'outside belongings' was redolent in two notable yet distinct films, Helena Wittman's *Ada Kaleh* and Beatrice Gibson's *I Hope I'm Loud When I'm Dead*. How to take care of a fragile world – that central task of social reproduction – each asks in its own way. *Ada Kaleh*, by German filmmaker Wittman, poses this question through a delicate observational study of a shared Berlin apartment, tracing the space that holds in it intimacy, difference, distance. The film's title refers to an island, a Turkish Ottoman territory, a contested site on the Danube in modern Romania that was submerged in water by the construction of a power plant in 1970. This sense of a sunken territory at the centre of things animates an ineffable presence in the film's images. With opening shots tracing the cracks of a densely painted, ruined wall,



clockwise from left
Edgar Reitz and Ula Stöckl
Tales of the Dumpster Kid
 1971

**Adam Khalil and
 Bailey Sweitzer**
Empty Metal 2017

Sky Hopinka reads from his
 book *Around the Edge of
 Encircling Lake* during the
 'Propositions' screening

Beatrice Gibson
*I Hope I'm Loud When I'm
 Dead* 2018

ACROSS DIVERSE OFFERINGS, THE PLEASURE OF THE PROGRAMMING AT BFAF LIES IN ITS EMBRACE OF THE FERAL AND THE HERETICAL, THE INTIMATE AND THE INSURRECTIONARY.

a Chinese-speaking voice recounts a parable about a group of friends that imagines community, desiring a place to go; the lyrics of Marcos Valle's 'Samba Fatal' appear: 'He woke up between the magical and the mystical / The practical and the political,' as the narrator relays, 'they didn't trust the dichotomies, but still, they could find themselves between the lines.' The camera begins panning slowly left and right through corridors and doorways, its young occupants eating, smoking, dreaming, sleeping. Something tremulous occurs in these revolutions, collating times between life's eventfulness. A breeze animates hanging blouses, plants bend towards air, light refracts through dusty tear-stained window panes, the momentary capture of the fleeting feeling of togetherness and loss, buzzing amid the sounds of ambient, outdoor noise, bidding a world beyond that vibrates with sounds of cheering crowds and reverberations of prayer song. The shimmering light swells into a breathing fullness in the image, as if

seen through an effulgent prism – a collective dreaming of that other place 'between the lines'.

Gibson's *I Hope I'm Loud When I'm Dead* takes up the poetic as a practice of survival, radically mixing aural and visual textures, combining a complex montage of low-res news footage of protest, refugee crises and mediated catastrophes with diaristic scenes of home life and sequences of ludic abandon. Initially intended as a portrait of two queer poets, CA Conrad and Eileen Myles, it becomes a shape-shifting, at once tender and detonating prism, a treatise on the quandary of life lived in the accelerated panic of a ruptured now. Conrad's and Myles's presence centres the work, their conversation and reading of their poetry salon-style is shot in intimate close-up. 'Fuck the real American up the ass with the fake one, let it all be done I said,' reads Conrad, directly addressing the camera. Between tender domestic time and daily play with her child, Gibson's slow transfiguration takes shape, as she dresses ritually, we soon discover,

for a re-enactment of the final ecstatic scene from Claire Denis' 1997 film *Beau Travail*. Inhabiting the fantasy space of that indefinable performance of breakdown, originally acted by Denis Lavant, Gibson's paroxysmal dancer is joined by her son, in a glittery wrestling mask, as Corona's infectious 'Rhythm of the Night' pumps up the volume in beats of emphatic joy. Gibson recasts the masculine malaise of Lavant's death throes into a case for the coextensiveness of *jouissance* with care.

Across diverse offerings, the pleasure of the programming at BFAF lies in its embrace of the feral and the heretical, the intimate and the insurrectionary. As if to answer the question 'what can moving images be and do in this disquieting moment?', BFAF suggests they can be time machines, maps, love letters, poems, ghosts, fever dreams, missives, manifestos. They can also explode. ■

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