

reproductions of his drawings of wing structures and studies of patterns and pigmentation. The exhibition mimics the dilatory, velveteen inkblots of such a wing, with elements repeating, such as Marie Lund's *The Falling*, 2020: amplified copper door-hinge sculptures whose scale allows their interstitial utility to truly bloom. This structure pulls attention back into the frame as something diagrammatic, but in this externalising it is also bodily, prehensile like a ligament. For instance, Becky Beasley's silver print, *Literary Green*, 2009, depicts a folding partition created by Beasley in reference to Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, 1853. The form is an obstruction for Bartleby, denying him access to fellow workers. The opaque, minimalist screen is bisected, hung behind a glass and steel table, which extends the partition's photographed contours, blending impenetrability, doubling, and the ricochet between real and imagined space.

Of the somatic and biomorphic, Nairy Baghramian's *Gorge (double bend)*, 2017, serves crumpled aluminium as unruly organs, provocatively compressed and bracketed away from the wall in a perfect steel cube - it becomes strangely orthodontic, clinical, monstrous. Of warmer tones are Renee So's *Figures and Vessels*, 2019, which reimagines pre-Columbian funerary vessels, creating stoneware of tripod women; their capacious forms become a source for something supra-sensible yet knowingly essential.

Similar to So, the object as a compound, a site and a talisman is evoked in Theaster Gates's *Sound Cube*, 2019. Setting a Hammond B3 organ within a thick, square frame of azobe wood, the instrument plays a single note - the last performed by the blues and gospel band The Black Monks. The Hammond electronic organ, I come to understand, served as a cheaper alternative to the wind-driven pipe organ, becoming a staple among black congregational gatherings. The note's wavering is its very constancy; void of mechanical drone, it dissipates and accumulates in service to the specific collective history it summons. Of more pulverulent delicacy is Kerry Tribe's film *Parnassius Mnemosyne*, 2010, a satiny projection of the innate fallibility of memory and subjectivity. The 16mm film, twisted into a Möbius strip, scrutinises the glassy wing of the Clouded Apollo butterfly. The glamour of its lustre renders its surface mammalian, think armadillo or metallic artichoke, its wings made into lambent contours of miniscule armour plating.

It is hard to ascribe properties to language as well as objects without simultaneously noticing the fall back to anthropomorphism. 'Transparent Things' gives pause to unfurl and attempt to decentre that inescapable consequence. It fills up that space as things becoming; a filmy construction that thrums with the rhythm of parataxis - the construction of text that is defined by the lack of coordinating junctions, dismissing the 'proper' order of past, present and future. The show demonstrates, however slight, the *paratactical* pleasure of linguistic unmooring. It leads to a place of distraction - an image of experience in process - as Nabokov concludes: 'Thus the entire little drama, from crystallised carbon and felled pine to this humble implement, to this transparent thing, unfolds in a twinkle.'

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## Film

### Helen Cammock: They Call It Idlewild

Helen Cammock's film *They Call It Idlewild*, a new commission as part of Wysing Arts Centre's 30th anniversary in 2019, could be said to be a portrait of the centre and its site. The film comprises predominantly static camera shots of varying durations, their minimal, unpeopled simplicity overlaid by Cammock's voice-over whose internal rhythm derives from the sequential structure of her text which, though parsed by poetic word strings and syntactical fragments, as well as numerous citations, is read at a steady resounding pace.

While not strictly speaking an 'essay film', *They Call It Idlewild* resonates with Jean-Pierre Gorin's characterisation of that form as the 'meandering of an intelligence that tries to multiply the entries and the exits into the material it has elected (or by which it has been elected)'. Continuing to address ongoing concerns around 'blackness, womanhood, wealth, power, poverty and vulnerability', and being 'elected' to reactivate Wysing's archive, Cammock's film essay weaves together a number of otherwise mutually exclusive strands to reframe the social and cultural meanings of 'idleness' and its stake in creative work.

While Cammock's citational references to art/poetry are specific - James Joyce, Mary Oliver and Audre Lorde - I was reminded of other 20th-century texts by John Dewey and Marion Milner that were once popular and perhaps foundational to how art was 'taught' and thought about as a process underpinned by attentive waiting and reverie. Citing Oliver, Cammock voices that 'its concern is the edge, and the making of the form out of the formlessness that is beyond the edge'. An active doing nothing is necessary to this work, which, citing Joyce, Cammock implies is also part of the viewer's creative labour. Underscoring this, the commission also includes two outdoor billboards that arrest the viewer's attention on entering and exiting the centre. Against a green colour field, the text on one billboard reads: 'Can you remember when you last did nothing?' The other, against a maroon background, reads: 'When you last did nothing / Can you remember how it felt?'; the questions inviting the recollection of sensibility that lies deep within for anyone who can choose, or who has no choice but to go there.

As the film moves through its 'meandering intelligence', idleness becomes interlaced with the ideological frameworks of race and class relations: both historically in relation to the plantation and contemporaneously in relation to precarious labour in neoliberal capitalism, Cammock linking these forms of slavery and exploitation without losing either the distinctions between them or the poetic register of an expansive state of mind. This expansiveness is partly aided by the images and how they hold things within them that are analogous to the voice-over. Even when Cammock sings the Johnny Mercer depression-era song 'Lazy Bones', the viewer is lulled into a state of receptive attention that allows for the underlying bite of her words to get in under the skin.

A static image of a field with David Blandy's *Shack*, 2009 - a previous artists' residency - in long shot accompanies Cammock's recounting of the other side of Mercer's naive celebration of the lazy worker in the

southern plantation: 'heat stroke snake bite whip no sleep gnawing hunger plantation to farm hand to dust bowl disaster project to projects, the space for the irresponsible black person never fades'. Albeit tinged with sadness, the film advocates the 'activeness of doing nothing' as a space of song, a resistance, perhaps, to the 'passiveness in working without question' in survivalist and low-paid jobs.

The film is a plea, not an answer to how that space can be honed by those who are prevented from accessing it by dominant power's projection of laziness onto them, another technique of keeping communities enslaved. Cammock's film poetically asks for a transvaluation of idleness in which its potential creativity is maintained in the world at large, as well in the field of making art. In the current post-Fordist economy, the space of idleness shrinks, becoming an endangered species that many are glad to see die. Instead we have 'the creation of the sleepless soldier' - Cammock refers to Jonathan Crary's *24/7* - who is always on call whether online or on shift work.

The lines that resonate most for me are: 'Sequence unsequential unknown slide is unremembered moment. Day, movement, drawer, painting. We are all forgotten one day'. While generally the archival objects being referred to by the voice-over - slides, files, papers - are not shown in the film's images, these lines are interspersed by close-ups of children's drawings and collages, poignantly suggesting that to fade and not to speak is the tragedy. *They Call it Idlewild* is also a homage to Wysing Arts Centre's work, which gives artists the space and time to germinate ideas that may, as Lorde says, 'become a safehouse for that difference so necessary to change' rather than be subject to economic or performance indicators. Yes, it is romantic, but true romance, like idleness, becomes a necessity in an era which tries to commodify everything.

Helen Cammock's *They Call it Idlewild* is at Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge to 3 May.

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Helen Cammock, *They Call it Idlewild*, 2020, video

## Leslie Thornton: Ground

*Ground* is the title of Leslie Thornton's latest work commissioned by Kunstverein Nürnberg, a 12-minute video produced from material shot during residencies at CERN and Caltech. The exhibition itself is dispersed across four rooms. The first three present selected video works on monitors (Hantarex perched on square tables for the 16mm videos dating back to the 1980s, flatscreen for the more recent HD of 2018), thereby proposing a retrospective with the projected *Ground* in the final room constituting something of a cinematic finale. And grounded in the home of cinema it is - the lower third of much of the video shows a solarised vista of the cookie-cutter skyscraper horizon of downtown Los Angeles. In the foreground we see lines of trucks parked outside low-rise warehouses and a sign outside one that reads 'DC Stages', indicating the entrance to a movie studio providing readymade sets for film shoots. Superimposed - god-like - in the sky above this is handheld camera footage of a nameless scientist giving something like a tour of CERN, whilst also performing his life's work to the camera. This footage is rendered in fine white lines that resemble the ground levels of an Ordnance Survey map, with contours bending and wobbling as the scientist moves, as if he is but a kink in the fabric of a world his research is attempting to elucidate.

The collision of CERN with LA speaks to a duo of the science of discovery and the theatrically performative which pervades *Ground*. Its lineage can be traced throughout Thornton's works on show here. *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, 1983-2016, loosely presents the activities of two children (Thornton's former neighbours) as they try to make sense of a post-apocalyptic planet. Cryptically revealed at the end, it transpires that a form of artificial intelligence has been presenting the catastrophes of the 20th century to them as a stimulus in some bizarre experiment to observe their behaviour. Consequently, as Thornton has explained, 'they think they are on TV and they perform'. In *Jennifer, Where Are You?*, 1981, a young girl applies smears of lipstick to her face and gazes at herself in a blue-rimmed handheld mirror, intermittently mesmerised by the mechanics of a flame edging down a matchstick, as if discovering fire for the first time. *Strange Space*, 1993, and *The Last Time I Saw Ron*, 1994, are presented on the same monitor; both depict Thornton's friend, the deceased actor Ron Vawter (1948-1994). The former offers a narrated ultrasound Doppler scan of the venous system of the actor's leg in the hunt for a DVT. This leg recurs in the latter in footage taken for his last role in the play *Philoktetes Variations* in Brussels, the leg this time discoloured by the AIDS-defining illness Kaposi's sarcoma. Bitten by a snake, and suffering from a wound that will not heal, Philoctetes himself was abandoned to perish by Odysseus on the island of Lemnos. As Thornton's voice-over explains, Vawter 'wanted the play to be perfect, because if it was perfect, it might cure him'. He died shortly after it opened.

As for Ron Vawter playing Philoctetes, Thornton's works often speak to a hyper-involved sense of the personal in the collective constitution of history. This is reflected in her practice: over the years, she has amassed an archive of material, sourced from both personal footage and public archives, drawing little distinction between the two. The mechanics of their collisions often constitute her work, and these confrontations are elaborated in the individuals she casts as