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Glasgow International

by Catherine Spencer • 24.06.2020

The theme of Glasgow International 2020 was 'attention'. When the festival was postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the organisers created an online edition featuring sound and moving-image works by seven artists who would have exhibited in the much larger physical iteration: Liv Fontaine, Sarah Forrest, Yuko Mohri, Georgina Starr, Urara Tsuchiya, Alberta Whittle and Jenkin van Zyl. In a podcast created to contextualise this alternative presentation, the director, Richard Parry, the writers, Brian Dillon and Orit Gat, and the curator, Stefanie Hessler, thoughtfully parsed out how their focus had intensified due to the current crisis: what do we choose to pay attention to? What might we be missing? These questions resonated with both the work included in the digital programme and the form of internet presentation, which sharply contrasted with the biannual experience of navigating the festival in person and criss-crossing the city to discover exhibitions and live performances in diverse venues, from swimming pools to libraries and shopping centres, as well as museums and galleries. In particular, the works by Mohri, Tsuchiya, Whittle and Van Zyl focused closely on issues of occupation, specifically on how the experience of occupying a body, and occupying an environment with that body, are frequently circumscribed by hostile forces, while providing opportunities for resistance and liberation.

Building on an earlier 2016 work from the *Everything Flows* series, Mohri's *Everything Flows - distance* (2020) sutures together all the shots without people from Yasujirō Ozu's classic *Tokyo Story* (1953). Ozu's black-and-white film, which follows an elderly couple visiting their uncaring children in Tokyo, is forlorn and melancholic, an atmosphere amplified in Mohri's edit. Empty room follows empty room , interspersed with factory chimneys silently belching smoke, a train cutting through an eerily stilled landscape and a moth beating its body relentlessly against a lamp. People are still peripherally present: we glimpse their shadows flitting across walls, and occasionally see them from a distance. But they seem hidden, or in hiding, suggesting retreat not just from an inhospitable outside environment but from all forms of commonality.



Fig. 1 Still from *Everything Flows - distance*, by Yuko Mohri. 2020. 7 minutes 31 seconds. (Courtesy the artist).

In van Zyl's three-channel short *In Vitro (all the love mix)* (2020), the landscape is more overtly hostile, as the camera swoops over a dramatic icy tundra ringed with snowy mountains, before dipping into claustrophobic tunnels and subterranean bunkers. Taken from a longer film that would have occupied the heart of a labyrinthine installation, this tantalising remix of extra footage shows a group of masked figures engaging in role-play and re-enchantment to overcome adverse circumstances. Brief shots of ping-pong balls rolling into holes for some kind of obscure lottery indicate the workings of inequality and oppression, yet the characters resist with wry humour and extravagance; one, clad in bondage-style gear and thigh-high boots, strides out onto the ice and takes possession of the terrain through dance **FIG. 2**.



Fig. 2 Still from *In Vitro (all the love mix)*, by Jenkin Van Zyl. 2020. 4 minutes

44 seconds. (Courtesy the artist).

Tsuchiya's *Give us a Meow* (2019), although not made specifically for the digital programme, nonetheless gels seamlessly both with Mohri's exploration of domestic space as both prison and refuge, and van Zyl's magical thinking. The protagonist **FIG. 3** – played by Tsuchiya – arrives at a secluded countryside cottage, heavy with a feeling of Airbnb abandonment, and lets herself in through a window. Wearing a rotating wardrobe of skin-tight, brightly coloured clothing featuring a good measure of zebra print, she dances to increasingly frenetic music, takes selfies and half-heartedly performs domestic tasks such as ironing or foraging for food in the denuded cupboards. It is unclear whether this isolation is willed or imposed; an escape, retreat or a sanctuary; a space for uninhibited expression or for its containment, conveying how difficult it might be to distinguish between these states. Towards the end, the artist moves outside, walking through the sunset in a glorious frothy pink creation, teetering across a cattle grid in high heels and dancing at the side of a road as the occasional car zips past unheedingly. Although this section feels like an anarchic release, the roadside signals danger and it is uncertain whether the surrounding landscape recognises or resists this resilient gesture.



Fig. 3 Still from *Give us a meow*, by Urara Tsuchiya. 2019. 9 minutes 3 seconds. (Courtesy the artist).

But it is Whittle's *business as usual: hostile environment* (2020) that trenchantly joins the dots between COVID-19, the disproportionate deaths of people of colour, racism, the legacies of colonialism, anti-immigration politics and legislation, the creation of the Welfare State and healthcare in Britain, specifically the vital role played in the NHS by workers who migrated to the UK in the post-war period from the Caribbean and Africa. Originally co-commissioned by Glasgow Sculpture Studios and EventScotland for the Year of Coasts and Waters 2020, the project takes Glasgow's Forth and Clyde canal as a starting point to explore

migration and diaspora. For the festival's digital programme, Whittle urgently reworked this film in response to the pandemic. The result incisively interlaces shots of water with archival material showing ships, including the RMS *Ascania* docking in Britain from the Caribbean, and footage of Black British nurses **FIG. 4**, with documentation of a protest against chartered deportation flights and a computer simulation, in which healthcare avatars unpack how current immigration laws adversely impact the lives of so many NHS staff **FIG. 5**. Intertitles relay reports on the Windrush scandal, which began to unfold in 2018, whereby British citizens have been cruelly stripped of all rights including access to the very state care that the Windrush generation built, detailing how it resulted from the government's deliberate, deeply racialised creation of a 'hostile environment', linked in turn to Britain's shameful refusal to address its colonial history and its role in the slave trade.



Fig. 4 Still from *business as usual: hostile environment*, by Alberta Whittle. 2020. 16 minutes 4 seconds. (Courtesy the artist).

business as usual: hostile environment has antecedents in the political montages of the Black Audio Film Collective, notably *Handsworth Songs*, directed by John Akomfrah (1986). It eloquently and astutely lays out how Britain's colonial past – and what the academic Nadine El-Enany stresses needs to be understood as its contemporary coloniality – shape the state-sanctioned destruction of Black lives, through the denial of sufficient Personal Protective Equipment to key workers, police brutality and a racist immigration system. Whittle's film is richly textured with historical insight. It is also an expression of profound thanks to key workers, and, as the bookending voiceovers and title cards assert, a testament to the survival of people of colour in the face of racist hostility and white supremacy.

Business in COVID-19 Britain is very much as usual. The Glasgow International digital programme demanded close attention to this hostile environment.



Fig. 5 Still from *business as usual: hostile environment*, by Alberta Whittle. 2020. 16 minutes 4 seconds. (Courtesy the artist).

Exhibitions details Glasgow International
24th April-10th May 2020 (to be restaged
with dates to be announced)
Various locations

Footnotes

- 1** The Glasgow International digital programme was available online from 23rd April-10th May 2020, the dates when the original festival, which has been postponed to 2021, was due to take place.
- 2** For an in-depth examination of the hostile environment policies that led to the Windrush scandal, and their deep roots in colonialism, see M. Goodfellow: *Hostile Environment: How Immigrants Became Scapegoats*, London 2019.

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