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Glasgow International (Part II)

by Catherine Spencer • 09.07.2021

Returning to a room that you have not entered for a while can prompt a jolt of defamiliarisation and displacement, which in turn allows for critical distance and reassessment. Throughout the physical version of Glasgow International (GI) 2021 there was a sense of return that was not one of settling back but rather of refocused and enhanced scrutiny of the surroundings and their underpinning infrastructures. Equally, although the in-person elements of GI lasted only for two weeks in June, its postponement and the creation of an online iteration in 2020¹ – which was relaunched as an enhanced digital platform in June 2021 – meant that the festival has, in some respects, lasted longer than it normally would. This variegated presence across virtual and tangible spaces underscored the need for the designated curatorial theme of ‘attention’, while speaking specifically to a consistent concern with sustained looking, thinking and reflection across many of the works and exhibitions.

These processes were especially apparent in the works by artists who also participated in the 2020 online programme, and who subsequently developed and deepened the themes, ideas and forms presented earlier. For the 2020 digital platform, Yuko Mohri created a radical edit of Yasujiro Ozu’s 1953 classic film *Tokyo Story*, emptying it of all sections featuring people. Her installation *Piano Solo* [FIG. 1](#) at the Pipe Factory continued this concern with absent presence, feeding sounds from three video monitors into microphones connected to a player piano. A recording of waves rolling gently and rhythmically onto shore at the liminal, hazy hour of sunrise or sunset triggered frenetic jangles of notes, clamouring from the eerily moving keys. Ostensibly meditative sounds and scenes were transmuted into tumult, readily invoking the clashing sensations of stasis and anxiety that have characterised the past year.

There is a menace to the way in which seemingly small sounds – a tap dripping, a leaf rustling – gather force and momentum in Mohri’s work. This resonates with Alberta Whittle’s treatment of the pandemic as one eruption among many of multiple longstanding structures of violence and oppression. A film that she first showed online last year has been developed into a new version as part of *business as usual: hostile environment (A REMIX)*, which also includes two sound pieces that can be downloaded and listened to while walking along the Forth and Clyde Canal to Glasgow Sculpture Studios. The discussions on the audio between Whittle

and artists, writers and community leaders, including Councillor Graham Campbell and Adebunola Ramsay, form a rich and vital contrast to the complicit silences of the tourist signs along this stretch of waterway. These conversations articulate instead how the Forth and Clyde connects to interlacing histories of imperialism and colonialism, notably Scotland's role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the colonisation of the Caribbean. This further enhances Whittle's searing filmic analysis of the deep links between COVID-19, the National Health Service, racism and more than a century of racialised immigration law in Britain. The new edit, bookended with footage of the Maryhill Integration Network Joyous Choir singing together in a boat, offers a Black Atlanticist act of simultaneous memorialisation and uplifting reclamation.

Many other works for GI 2021 have taken place across both online and gallery spaces, such as susan pui san lok's *seven x seven*, an extension of the artist's research into witchcraft in the East of England – the subject of her solo exhibition *A Coven A Grove A Stand* at Firstsite, Norwich, in 2019. Sound, text and installation works that are shown across two sites, along with a digital video reflecting on the project, provided pui san lok with the opportunity to incorporate material from Scotland. There is a haunted and haunting quality to pui san lok's investigations, most present in the spine-tingling audio work *Cruel Mothers/Fine Flowers* (2021) at South Block, in which recordings of women singing folk songs from different time periods overlapped with uncanny harmony. Two wallpapered lists of first names and surnames, *Ascendants Descendent / Descendants Ascendant* and *Descendants Ascendant / Ascendant Descendants* (both 2021) offered, as their titles suggest, a mirrored memorial across South Block and the Briggait to the woman (and some men) who were accused of being witches. The ensuing sense of lives ruthlessly shattered and scattered by patriarchal capitalism was underscored in *Witches Rise* FIG. 2, also a split installation of around four thousand horseshoes – one for each person persecuted for witchcraft in Scotland. The horseshoes gathered for GI were potent symbols of precarious luck and fate, but they also had an intensely bodily quality, reminiscent of shed fingernails or hair.

Taking time to sit with the histories preserved in archives as well as those that either expand beyond this site or that have been neglected by hegemonic institutions is an approach shared between pui san lok and Ingrid Pollard. *No Cover Up* at the Glasgow Women's Library (until the end of July) results from Pollard's research into the Lesbian Archive FIG. 3, which is interwoven with documentation relating to histories of protests including those against the United States invasion of Grenada in 1983 FIG. 4, while the show's title is taken from photographs of placards at a demonstration against the Stoke Newington police, who denied having killed Colin Roach, a young Black man, the same year. *No Cover Up*'s energising narratives of Black queer feminist activism

from the 1980s through to the present day are writ large in a glorious banner of printed photographs showing anti-racist and decolonial activism and are given physical voice through a series of engrossing recorded interviews. These are played on speakers embedded among the bookshelves, with artists and activists including Claudette Johnson, Femi Otitoju and Pam Isherwood reflecting movingly on photographs of themselves from the 1980s.

The processes of revision in GI 2021 are as visual as much as they are textual, as Pollard and pui san lok's multimedia exhibitions demonstrate. There was also an echo between Mohri's edit of *Tokyo Story* for the 2020 online iteration and Carol Rhodes's drawings and paintings at Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery in the first retrospective since the artist's death in 2017. Similarly empty of human presence, these works are nonetheless about human effects on the environment **FIG. 5**. Their preserve is what the title of one drawing – *Activities* (2008) – adroitly identifies as the often anonymous and overlooked enterprises that generate bypasses and airports as if overnight, encasing the earth in concrete and tarmac. Rhodes's rendering of the world is infused with a strong ecocritical conscience, presenting an understanding of 'landscape' as formed from fossil capitalism's central operations of extraction and obliteration. The environments in her paintings and drawings are moulded through drainage and mining, overlaid with bypasses and flyovers. Made almost entirely from an elevated, aerial viewpoint, they constitute 'anti-maps', which gradually erode any sense of security in orientation on the part of the viewer.

Rhodes's linear vision has the ability to get under the retina, reconfiguring perception and attuning the eye to despoilation and pollution. Kate Davis's drawings refocus in a comparable way, but at the opposite end of the scale. As part of a group exhibition with Charlie Hammond and Hayley Tompkins entitled *Termite Tapeworm Fungus Moss* at the Centre for Contemporary Arts (CCA), Davis showed new studies of almost infinitesimal pieces of dirt on the back of junk mail envelopes. An MOT reminder letter becomes the support for careful accounting of small pellets comprising whorls of hair, dust and blades of grass – the kind of trodden-down non-things or things-in-transformation that you pick out of a carpet. The intensity of the gaze in these works is world-reorienting, building on the artist's previous explorations of how ideas about labour and care are gendered.

Downstairs at CCA in the main gallery, the collaborative film *Soot Breath // Corpus Infinitum* by Denise Ferreira da Silva and Arjuna Neuman, together with an installation and the creation of an archive of texts and interviews, also explores the idea of proximity, contrasting it with the devastating abstractions of mining, enslavement and border control. Against the violence of these regimes – represented in footage of forests immolated by wildfires and trucks of coal relentlessly screeching along railway tracks – a

voiceover proposes that ‘intimacy is a way of living in the world that starts with empathy’. The radical potential of intimate embodiment is also shared by the photographs presented by Sekai Machache and Awuor Onyango at Street Level Photoworks in *Body of Land*, which use distinct aesthetics to explore the construction of Black diasporic selfhood and subjectivity. Machache’s dramatic studies of figures holding symbolic tokens, such as a blood-red swathe of cloth or an illuminated lamp **FIG. 6**, complemented Onyango’s kaleidoscopically metamorphic portraits of women bearing flowers or the orb of the moon **FIG. 7**. Machache and Onyango’s inhabitation of body and place to create spaces for ritual, reflection and healing exemplified the concerted acts of place and space claiming, and the attendant creation of arenas for questioning, deconstruction and reformulation, which recurred across the physical and online spaces of GI 2021.



Fig. 7 From the series *Memoritual*, by Awuor Onyango. 2021. (Courtesy Glasgow International; photograph Eoin Carey; exh. Street Level Photoworks, Glasgow).

Exhibitions details Glasgow International
11th–27th June 2021
Various locations

Footnotes

- 1 See C. Spencer: Review of 'Glasgow International', *Burlington Contemporary*, 24th June 2020, available at <https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/glasgow-international>, accessed 6th July 2021.

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