

Satellites Programme

Alison Scott

She surfs a sea of glue

A response to Holly McLean's *If you get the knees right the rest should follow* (Satellites Programme 2020, Collective) by Satellites participant Alison Scott.

She stands next to a car, on a shoreline, donning her neoprene skin. It must be stretched, furling up her body in a sequence of well practiced movements which she narrates. She is chatty, funny and at ease with a friend. There is a haze, a dim glow of early morning winter light that hangs over the sea. She enters the water, she skims over it. She flounders following moments of flight, makes waves in the waves. Her body is tough, is agile: she is not bear, more pig, hairy dolphin, shark.

Holly McLean's *If you get the knees right the rest should follow* shows works in collage and film: the titular film opens with the artist accompanying Alice, its focus, to the beach where she surfs. Holly stays on shore, very slightly apart, but is present in space and speech throughout the film. Together they make journeys from the sea, to car, to home, to caravan.

The film allows us to witness a utopia that is summoned as friends enact the freedom that comes with proximity, where their boundaries might buck those of a wider unseen society. This utopia is a place in which surfing, childcare, discussions of your mental-health, experiences of postnatal depression, the state of your caravan or your hairy legs have an equality of importance, and can be treated with both gravity and levity. To say: a utopia is not necessarily located *elsewhere*—off world, off screen—but can be exposed on film and located in relationships: worlds made and held by bodies.

Where invoking the often historically macho idea of utopia¹ might feel crude, glib, or patronising toward traumatic lived experience, I use it here instead as the

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feeling of a work which both evidences and creates a feminist space that cares, that recognises, and that remembers. To find such imaginaries we might—as Holly and I have both—look to the wealth of Science-Fiction and time-travel literature of the 1970s by writers such as Octavia Butler, Ursula K. Le Guin, or Joanna Russ. This kind of utopia offers imaginative space for a body that might suffer because of gender, race, class—where these strata are reconfigured, empowered, or ultimately abolished. In Marge Piercy's classic novel *Woman on the edge of time*² the central character Connie—who experiences harm at the hands of the particular societal stratigraphy of the US of the 1970s—is confronted with a future utopia where babies are gestated in the architecture of a 'brooder'; mental-health is a communal concern; care for ecological life is entangled with care for the human; and the nuclear family does not exist. Connie is frustrated that her new friends in this future do not experience and so cannot fully comprehend her pain, though ultimately her consciousness of and participation in this society acts in part to process and find moments of release from her trauma. The strength of Piercy's Sci-Fi is to show a utopian world that acts as a space of empathy, emancipation and resistance, without negating the material conditions of the present day.

The relationship and influence of feminist Sci-Fi to *If you get the knees right the rest should follow* may appear latent in the quotidian scenes of the film and the casual, humorous approach. The landscapes and spaces of the film are tinged with otherworldliness as the camera gently moves Alice's daily activity into the fictive realm of storytelling: a filmic version of a life. For Donna Haraway, 'SF is storytelling and fact telling.'³ With the matter-of-fact perspective we see through Holly's lens, Alice is inspiring, she is powerful, she is a wonder, her courage made clear in daily acts.

Pamela Sargent gives insight into the capacity of storytelling such as it is at play in Holly's work, to make the extraordinary appear as ordinary, and vice versa. She says that Sci-Fi 'can show us women in entirely new or strange surroundings... It can show us the remarkable woman as normal where past literature shows her as the exception.'⁴

Sargent's idea of Sci-Fi's ability to perform a spatial, temporal transposition of bodies—pasting a somewhat familiar looking body into unfamiliar circumstances—for me holds the notion of montage, or collage. A detachment and reattachment that allows the body to be seen out of usual bounds, the restrictions of social tradition. Collage is a small violence—the cut, the rip, the forging of new adjoinments—and a careful re-making, a medium that allows new worlds made out of old ones to be visible. To me Holly's collage works appear to follow artists like Linder Sterling and Nancy Spero, where punk aesthetics reproduce and transplant images through glue-stuck temporalities—or the kind of thick plasticity of Jutta Koether's painterly assemblages, where art history and persistent images of 'type' are subverted, their visceral and material qualities at the fore.

In recent collages, backed on perspex, are familiar portrayals of women in historical painting and stained glass windows—often in the genre of 'Madonna and child': immaculate visions of fertility—printed and adjoined to bubbles of kelp and swathes of stock-image seaweed, photocopies of snaps taken of shorelines, fires, nipples, midriffs, Alice breastfeeding her twins as babies, or their heads bobbing in a sea of gluey kelp. In the way that Haraway uses to describe more-than-human interconnections and radical family making, here the sea and its organisms act—as in the opening scene of the film—like a fluid attachment site or sticky contact zone for kinship, between the artist, the people she makes work with, and the matter that envelops them⁵.

Overlapping, mirroring, and juxtaposition are used to disturb hierarchies of being and representation: reproduction and fertility are seen here in a broad spectrum with an equality of value between experiences—how

fertility might surface in different bodies, species, organisms; where it 'works' and where it falters. Displacing the idea of fertility and reproduction from the sole confines of the female body: in Holly's work we see it as a latent force in seaweed and animal life; the gluey goo which we live among, emerge from, and create.

NOTES

1. China Miéville writes on pg8 of their introduction to Thomas More's, *UTOPIA*, Verso (2016) 'utopias of the powerful have levelled many landscapes'; in her essay *A Non-Euclidian View of California as a Cold Place to Be* included in the same book Ursula K. Le Guin asserts: 'Utopia has been Euclidean, it has European, and it has been masculine.' pg 177
2. Marge Piercy, *Woman On The Edge of Time*, The Women's Press (1976)
3. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble, Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press (2016) pg 31
4. Pamela Sargent in Anne Cranny Francis' essay 'Feminist Futures', within Annette Kuhn, *Alien Zone*, Verso (1990) pg 221
5. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble, Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press (2016)

Alison Scott is a Glasgow-based artist and writer who often works with other artists. Her work is research-led and driven by interests in expanded performance and writing practices, and speculative approaches to knowledge production. Alison recently completed the MLitt in Art Writing at Glasgow School of Art. Recent presentations and residencies have taken place at Glasgow Women's Library (2019), The Poetry Club (2019), Glasgow Project Room (2018), Inverness Museum and Art Gallery (2017), Timespan (2017), Edinburgh Art Festival (2017).

Satellites Programme is is Collective's development programme for emergent artists and producers based in Scotland. The 2020 participants are Alison Scott, Kirsty Hendry, Sulaïman Majali, Holly McLean and Becky Šik.