

## Observations from Glasgow International 2016

### Jessie Bond

Glasgow is a city whose contemporary art scene continues to flourish. Running since 2005, Glasgow International is a two week long Biennale: a celebration of the spaces, atmospheres and histories the city has to offer to contemporary artists and their audiences. There are over 70 exhibitions programmed as part of Glasgow International this year, with those curated by director Sarah McCrory making up the Directors Programme; and plenty more forming a fringe of smaller, yet no less ambitious, projects, exhibitions and performances across the city.

As pointed out in the press release for the Director's Programme at Tramway 'Glasgow's cultural spaces exist predominantly as a result of its strong industrial legacy.' Historically the wealth of the city came from its position as a trading port and the shipbuilding, metal works and textiles industries. The subsequent decline of these industries left behind buildings for artists to inhabit, reclaim and transform. Tramway is one such institution, housed in a vast tram shed once home to the city's main tram terminus, depot and factory.

In the group show for the Director's Programme, the work of Lawrence Lek explicitly and playfully explores this link between the decline of industry and the rise of contemporary art. His 3D simulation *QE3* (2016) is set in a speculative future and tracks the final journey of the QE2 from its Dubai home to Glasgow, the site of its creation. In a knowing acknowledgement of the pervasive requisitioning and repurposing of industrial buildings, Lek proposes and visualises the transformation of the ship into a utopian art school. It is split in two and upended to form a triumphant arch, housing student accommodation and studio space. For Lek, who is based in London, perhaps this vision is a provocative reflection on what Glasgow currently offers – an abundance of cheap space for artists priced out of London – and a foreboding prediction of what may lie ahead for the city if property developers follow the exodus of artists.

The transformative power of art and the often murky link between labour and value are explored in *Squeeze* (2010) and *NoNoseKnows* (2015), two films by Mika Rottenberg, which were highlights of the show at Tramway. Both portray surreal production lines inhabited by mainly female protagonists. These mechanised sets resemble light industrial complexes, which feel familiar, yet are punctuated with beguiling details. The films are each played on a seamless loop; on entering the viewing space it is impossible to leave until the captivating narrative has entirely played through.

*NoNoseKnows* focuses on the cultured pearl industry in China, through which Rottenberg explores the poetic idea of the irritant. Women dissect tissue from dead oysters then insert it into living oysters using tools that queasily resemble dental instruments. In another shot a lone woman brutally cracks open the oyster shells, scooping out the gelatinous contents, harvesting handfuls of pearls. These documentary passages are interspersed and interlinked with fantastical scenes of a woman irritating and enlarging her nose, provoking colossal sneezes that produce plates of similarly gelatinous noodle dishes.

In Rottenberg's earlier work *Squeeze*, the production line is less clearly recognisable, more claustrophobic. The mechanised set of interconnecting spaces is in constant motion

to produce an artwork from crushed and compressed lettuce, blusher and latex. Women inhabit the production line, their bodies broken down into parts inserted through apertures: a row of arms is massaged, a line of bottoms sprayed with mist, an isolated tongue wriggles. One woman is squeezed and sprinkles of dust from her reddened face produce blusher. Again this is contrasted with footage of women harvesting raw 'natural' materials, on a lettuce farm in Arizona and a rubber plant in Kerala, India.

Rottenberg's fictional production lines may appear absurd, but when brought into proximity with the actual manipulations behind mass-produced or intensively farmed products, they become almost feasible. Her films are an uncomfortable reminder of our unavoidable implication in the global systems of consumerism that rely on the exploitation of natural resources and human labour. A niggling feeling that can't be forgotten.

Another venue used for the Director's programme is Kelvin Hall. Built in 1927 as an exhibition centre, over the years it has had many uses including a transport museum, sports venue and circus. Currently undergoing renovation, the front part of the building is the setting for *Bright Bodies*, a sculptural installation by Glasgow based artist Claire Barclay.

The room Barclay's installation inhabits is grand in dimension, yet has the seductive melancholy of a building caught mid-transformation. Each element of the installation has been crafted in response to the past uses of the space; from the materials Barclay uses – steel, rubber, machined metals, coal tar, engine grease, soot, cotton fabric – to the abstract forms she creates.

Pink lengths of rubber traversing the space are reminiscent of enlarged, elongated exercise mats. A shallow pool of coal tar forms a sleek black surface, reflecting the electric chandelier high above and filling the room with its pervasive odour. A large orange canvas pouch resembling a punching bag hangs within a skeletal metal drum; slits have been made in the neat fabric revealing an interior dusted with soot. Each element feels familiar yet somehow reduced to an essence. Barclay has filled the room with echoes of the building, and the city's, past incarnations.

On a much smaller scale *Pokey Hat*, a group exhibition curated by VERBureau at New Glasgow Society, explores the history of Glasgow through the nuanced angle of ice cream. The artists involved use Italian ice cream cafe culture, imported to Scotland in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a device through which to frame aspects of Glasgow's social history, addressing immigration, queer culture, and urban development.

The exhibition reveals an unexpected and refreshing narrative about the city and the research behind the works provides enlightening discoveries and facts. For example: the exhibition's name Pokey Hat, is traditional Glaswegian slang for an ice cream cone and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century ice cream cafes were considered propagators of bad habits and promiscuity.

*The 'Next "Invasive" is "Native"'* (2016) by Cooking Sections (Daniel Fernández Pascual and Alon Schwabe) is the stand out work. The duo has created a range of experimental ice cream flavours from plants considered invasive to the Scottish natural environment. Sold in collaboration with local cafes, the ice creams make use of plants otherwise considered a pest, or worse a threat, such as Japanese Knotweed. This playful provocation explores the idea of what it is to be native and what might happen if aliens were instead celebrated as propagators of cultural hybridisation.

As Glasgow International fills the city with visitors, the work also provides a neat reflection on the role contemporary art plays in urban regeneration. Artists are the most recent of Glasgow's invading species, with the associated threats, transformations and values they bring to the local environment still to be entirely played out.