

and then, a harrowing

Wysing Arts Centre, Bourn
18 October to 5 December

Entering 'and then, a harrowing' is like being transported to another world: an alternate-universe England where the folk culture is techno-apocalypse, not sweet and pastoral. But this is Wysing Arts Centre in Cambridgeshire, and the apocalypse conjured by Wysing's 2020 residents Carl Gent, Kelechi Anucha and Linda Stupart is here and now, not on some alien planet.

In the main gallery, strange armatures of scaffold, chicken wire, cloth, sticks and obsolete electricals sprawl across the walls and onto the dirt floor. Reel projectors and old television monitors crowd the rest of the space: parodies of Pathé newsreels sit alongside police footage and documentation of performances. Together, the objects look like abandoned remnants: evidence of a world and its downfall. Yet these technologies are not innocent ruins, but rather agents of their own destruction. Like the bridles, which appear in intervals, tucked in and tied to the fabric structures, these are tools of cultivation.

This irony is extended in *after the ice, the deluge*, one of the films shown in the Amphis. The work contains a karaoke interlude: an eerily cheerful rendition of *Seasons in the Sun* plays, before being taken up by a lone voice singing a cappella. Like the closing number of a show, *Seasons* plays the planet out – the pop song becoming a lament that echoes the sombre mood of the soundtrack in the main gallery.

This durational audio piece (by Gent and Anucha and mixed and produced by Kyle Acab) is a sonic collage that weaves together field recordings, live performances in Wysing's grounds and new versions of traditional folk songs. The work's title, a paragraph which begins *Be a Gardener. Dig a ditch. Toil and sweat. And turn the earth upside down*, nods to the rich musical history of English radicalism, and in doing so connects the labours of the (working-class) body to the treatment of the land: both ill-used by landowners but capable of being reclaimed through collective effort.

Parallels of enclosure and control of the deviant body is gestured to via a quotation from the 17th-century ballad *The World Turned Upside Down*, which protested a Parliamentary decree forbidding traditional and bawdy celebrations of Christmas. The event is echoed in a video (also in the main gallery) of the police shutting down an 'illegal' rave. The unlawful body is that which refuses to produce and instead engages in wasteful leisure.

Apparently pointless activity is part of the rituals of art-making. Much of 'and then, a harrowing' documents mysterious actions whose meaning is unclear, except as a gesture towards world-building. *Uncoating. translation.hasel-nutt* consists of a television monitor perched on a glass coffee table, playing a video in which Carl Gent marks that same table with strange symbols



'and then, a harrowing', installation view

and diagrams. In the second film in the Amphis, *The Grey Cock*, Gent is seen lubing up a series of cardboard tubes with flour paste. Their suggestive gestures and pink crop top are the most explicitly queer moments in an exhibition that, while making use of the aesthetics of waste and trash that have become common among queer artists, is much less explicit than some of Gent and Stupart's other collaborations, notably their performance *All Us Girls Have Been Dead For So Long*, commissioned by the ICA in 2019.

The traumatised body and the ruined world overlap; it is unclear which is an analogy for the other. The language and the tools of agricultural harrowing produce an obvious pun with the acute distress of trauma, but is the wounding of the land a cipher for the wounding of the body, and is this wounding also a renewal, or just a raising of ghosts?

Although 'and then, a harrowing' seeks to reclaim the origins of popular radicalism, folkish aesthetics are also implicated in the violence of the nation. This culture has long been invoked by those wishing to conjure an ethnic base for the English (or Scottish or Welsh) nation: a Celtic ancestry that is racialised as white and provides justification for exclusionary projects of nation-building. Gent, Anucha and Stupart sidestep the troubling logic that supports the right to land (and by extension other resources) only for those who are 'of' that land, positing instead that the relationship between body and land is one of collective trauma rather than the ownership that is encoded in 'property' or 'heritage'. This is the story of the English landscape proposed by 'and then, a harrowing': land as a durational field constantly overturned rather than the fixed origin of the nation.

Frances Whorrall-Campbell is an artist, writer and archivist based in London.

John
Hansard
Gallery

Matterlurgy: Hydromancy

Derek Jarman's Modern Nature

Niamh O'Malley

1 November 2021 to 31 January 2022

27 November 2021 to 26 February 2022

27 November 2021 to 26 February 2022

www.jhg.art

UNIVERSITY OF
Southampton

Supported by
ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND