

Aug – Nov

2017

Projection Series #7

First as fiction, then as myth





At the heart of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery/ Len Lye Centre's cinematic programme is the Projection Series, our regular film programme surveying the landscape of historical and contemporary fine art filmmaking.

The seventh instalment of the Projection Series moves out of the Len Lye Centre's state-of-the-art 62 seat cinema and into the space of the gallery for the first time. With its three recently made video works, *Projection Series #7: First as fiction, then as myth* plays with the logics of cinema flat projections by presenting a mix of single- and multi-channel works.

Above: Oscar Enberg *Red Beryl and crocodile, Opal (Irrational Exuberance in the White Man's Hole)* 2016-2017, film still, single-channel 4K to HD video, stereo sound, 22.22min. Courtesy of the artist and Hopkinson Mossman

Red Beryl and crocodile, Opal (Irrational Exuberance in the White Man's Hole) was filmed in Coober Pedy, South Australia and at the Kanku - Breakaways Conservation Park with the kind permission of the Antakirinja Matu - Yankunytjatjara Aboriginal Corporation on behalf of the Aboriginal traditional owners, the District Council of Coober Pedy and the Board of the Kanku - Breakaways.

The production of *Red Beryl and crocodile, Opal (Irrational Exuberance in the White Man's Hole)* was made possible with generous support from: Chartwell Trust, Sir James Wallace, Interrogate, Tara Riddell, Artspace Sydney, and Hopkinson Mossman.

Cover: Ursula Mayer *Atom Spirit* 2017, film still, three-channel video, 16mm to HD, 17.03min. Courtesy of the artist

First as fiction, then as myth

Curated by Tendai John Mutambu and Sophie O'Brien
Texts by Tendai John Mutambu

Ursula Mayer *Atom Spirit* 2017

Ursula Mayer's newly commissioned three-channel video *Atom Spirit* (2017) expands upon an earlier single-channel film of the same name. In all its multitudinous glory, this new film moves across four different settings – the forest, the laboratory, the beach and the club – as sites in which dissolving boundaries between biological life and techno-scientific worlds takes place. The work offers a poetics for the Anthropocene, the era of human made ecological crisis in which we live. *Atom Spirit* is a speculative narrative that enmeshes the actual and the virtual within a richly associative world of spoken word poetry, music, vernacular speech, animation and movement.

Many indigenous societies have approached objects, humans and non-human animals as interconnected strands of the same complex ecological fabric. Here in Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori ways of being have upheld a political ecology rooted in relationality, in *whakapapa* (genealogical lines of connection), without separating human life from its surrounding environment and its histories. Consequently, the non-human has been afforded an agency that human-centred world-views deny.¹

It is from provocations akin to these, championed by contemporary scholars such as Rosi Braidotti, Jane Bennett and Donna Haraway, that *Atom Spirit* gains its impetus. At the heart of the work is the story of an evolutionary geneticist (played by the transgender actress Valentin de Hingh), whose international team of scientists is tasked with collecting DNA from all forms of life in Trinidad and Tobago's verdant jungles in preparation for their impending extinction. Through a series of overlapping and interconnected moments we watch this group as it travels through dense foliage and secluded lagoons, antiquated labs and illegal, underground hangouts for queer communities.

In its mimicry of biotech laboratory life, the work reminds us how, historically, the lab has been used to produce scientific 'Truths'. (Think of the litany of atrocities committed not only with recourse to science but in the name of scientific enquiry itself.) The term 'colony' – as an occupied

state, a community of animal or plant life, and a set of lab-grown microbes – provides us with something of a tool for connecting the forces at play here. Mayer and her collaborators transform what was once a haven for the privileged production of colonial forms of knowledge (the lab) by opening it up to the people and biodiversity of Trinidad and Tobago (a former settler-colony). In the film, science, history, fiction and myth mutate and re-materialise in an evocative assemblage of sounds, textures and sights.

Central to this kinship of the organic, the environmental and the scientific, are animated scenes, images from scanning electron microscopes (SEMs) and shots of coral and rainforests. Their constant shifts in scale and register become a *leitmotif* that reinforces how our world is connected across its varying orders of magnitude. The filmic medium itself, in its mixing of the virtual and the actual, dismantles a number of binaries and boundaries, re-imagining affinities across histories and temporalities.



1. Aotearoa New Zealand made headlines recently following the decision to grant legal personhood to a former national park and the Whanganui River. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/14/world/what-in-the-world/in-new-zealand-lands-and-rivers-can-be-people-legally-speaking.html>

Ursula Mayer *Atom Spirit* 2017, film still, three-channel video, 16mm to HD, 17.03min. Courtesy of the artist

Oscar Enberg

Red Beryl and crocodile, Opal (Irrational Exuberance in the White Man's Hole)

2016-2017

Oscar Enberg's elaborate universe churns with enigmatic élan. Blending the surrealism of Jean Arp's absurdist poetry with excerpts from critical theory his debut film – described as 'a tragicomedy in five acts'¹ – is populated by a small but motley cast of characters. Enberg's work has always leapt between the historical and the apocryphal and here he capably weaves cinéma vérité, absurdist theatre and social realism into a charged yet finely-tuned maelstrom. This newly-adopted filmic medium presents an altogether novel mode of conveying Enberg's 'narrative compressions',² formerly confined to the worlds of his drawing and sculpture.

His 'narrative compressions' (along with the narrative inversions referred to by writer Hamish Win) threaten to keel over under the burdensome weight of obscure historical references, only to be leavened by the work's wit and formal elegance.³ *Red Beryl and crocodile, Opal (Irrational Exuberance in the White Man's Hole)* (2016-2017) is no exception. Set in the opal-mining town of Coober Pedy⁴ in South Australia, the film is a fitting progression in the artist's ongoing examination of the 'boom and bust logic of speculative industry'.⁵ What could be more boom and bust than the history of mineral extraction?

In this case the industriously proprietorial settler-colonial mission – a mission both violent and perverse – also finds a fitting parallel in 'Hollywood's simulacra machine' which has used Coober Pedy's alien desert landscape as the setting for several of its productions from *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985) to Wim Wenders' *Until the End of the World* (1991) and *Pitch Black* (2000).⁶ *Red Beryl* begins with an indigenous Umoona woman once cast in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* shot in 1994. She delivers an automatic poem by the German-French surrealist Jean Arp, against the backdrop of a disused film prop: a large metallic space-ship. It makes for a perplexing opener – one that anticipates the uncannily Brechtian nature of the rest of Enberg's film.

What follows is a search by the titular Red Beryl – a voyaging, navigator figure – for the town's most infamous resident, Crocodile Harry. The supposed Nazi sympathising Latvian baron was said to have fled Europe post-World War II, and is a character who reads as something of a colonial archetype plucked straight out of a Joseph Conrad novel.

Crocodile Harry's former dugout (call it lair, if you will) comes to play a central part in Enberg's film. A major tourist attraction, it is full of sexualised bric-a-brac and graffiti as a monument to his ribaldry. Enberg does more than revel in its prurience, finding in Harry's pleasure palace an analogue for the Roman Emperor Nero's own palatial grotto, the *Domus Aurea* (or Golden House). In the shots of Crocodile Harry's dugout, Enberg's sculptural sensibility finds its way into this new medium, in material vestiges and historical sites treated as theatrical props and stage sets for yet another inversion of history's narratives. If, as Marx suggested, history is doomed to repeat itself, 'first as tragedy, then as farce,' we might say that biography is consigned to being repeated 'first as fiction, then as myth'.

1. Oscar Enberg, *Red Beryl and crocodile, Opal (Irrational Exuberance in the White Man's Hole)*, 2016-2017, Hopkinson Mossman, Art Basel Statements 2017 (press release).

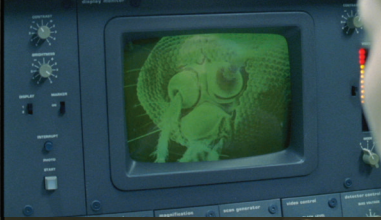
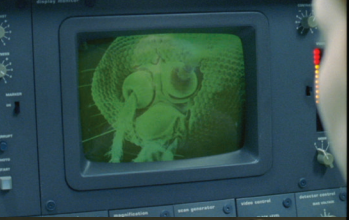
2. Ibid

3. Hamish Win, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are still dead!" in *Red Beryl and crocodile, Opal (Irrational Exuberance in the White Man's Hole)* (Auckland: Hopkinson Mossman, Berlin: Kunsterhaus Bethanien, 2017), 10.

4. Coober Pedy is a transliteration of 'kupa piti', the indigenous name for the area, which translates to 'white man in hole'.

5. Art Basel Statements 2017 (press release).

6. Hamish Win, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are still dead!" 25.



WHAT IS OPRAH'S FAVORITE SITCOM



Ursula Mayer Atom Spirit 2017,
film stills, three-channel
video, 16mm to HD, 17.03min.
Courtesy of the artist

Oscar Enberg Red Beryl and crocodile, Opal
(Irrational Exuberance in the White Man's
Hole) 2016-2017, film still, single-channel
4K to HD video, stereo sound, 22.22min.
Courtesy of the artist and Hopkinson Mossman

Martine Syms A Pilot For A Show About Nowhere
2015, film still, two-channel video, colour,
sound, 24.29 min.
Courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, NY

Martine Syms

A Pilot for A Show About Nowhere 2015

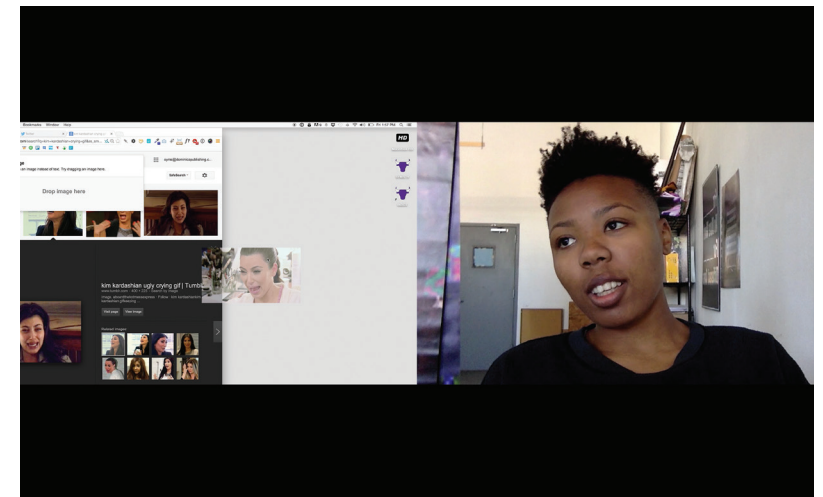
'SHE MAD' is the title of a fictitious television show – a sitcom whose pilot is encountered in *A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere*. But beneath its bursts of canned laughter, the artist performs several understated dissections of the televisual medium, producing – in this 20-something minute video – a cacophonous visual essay. Martine Syms, an artist, designer, and self-described 'conceptual entrepreneur', is a cultural remixer whose interests and sympathies extend beyond the rarefied aesthetics of the art-world.¹ And so, unsurprisingly, Syms's video installations are steeped in the stuff of popular culture – movies, sitcoms, chat shows, memes.

A Pilot For A Show About Nowhere is a two-channel video by the Los Angeles-based artist that unsettles the self-righteousness of mass culture's detractors and the naïveté of its most unwitting enthusiasts. Formally, the work revels in the imagery of mainstream, largely African-American, television shows of yesteryear (*The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *The Cosby Show*, *Amos 'n' Andy*) and the interfaces of today's networked online culture, all the while revealing the workings of mass media as a commodity form that refracts and exploits distinctions in gender, race and class. At this stage, most in the first world will be aware that purveyors of contemporary culture furiously monitor, collect – and greatly manipulate – our habits of consumption.

Syms's work further reminds us that there is a distinction between what we watch and what we see. The work begins with a split screen. On one side the artist looks towards us, but without watching us. She cleans her Inbox, which sits on the other side of the screen. She occasionally speaks to someone off-camera. And throughout the work, images and clips are of varying 'quality' – lo-res clips and footage are cut, spliced, distorted. (The source material is important but its provenance less so.) As a counter to these lo-fi images, a voice-over (the artist's) draws from film theory and literary scholarship, narrated with declarative calm, forming a well-calibrated tension between the work's two registers: one, more scholarly and, the other, more vernacular. Regularly interspersed in amongst

A Pilot's oscillations from personal to collective, singular to multiple, is a separate body of work, *Lessons*, comprising a series of quasi-commercial advertisements which have also been exhibited as a stand-alone project.

If the mediation of contemporary black life serves as a cornerstone in this visual essay by Syms, perhaps 'America' (used imperiously to refer to the United States), is its precariously unstable foundation. That television and images of 'the American dream' are two of the nation's greatest and most ideology-laden exports should come as no surprise. In light of this, the rise of Donald Trump – a former reality television star who trades on the specious narrative of meritocracy – feels predictable, if not altogether inevitable.



1. Eliza Anyangwe, "Martine Syms at the ICA: 'people act like art is a white thing'" *The Guardian*, May 9, 2016. Syms began using the term 'conceptual entrepreneur' to accommodate the versatility of her practice as an artist, writer, publisher and designer. The artist admits to feeling somewhat ambivalent about this title since the rise of tech industries and their often aggressively neoliberal agendas.

Martine Syms *A Pilot For A Show About Nowhere* 2015, film still, two-channel video, colour, sound, 24.29 min. Courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, NY



Atom Spirit 2017
Ursula Mayer

17.03 min., 16 mm to HD video, sound
Screening: Sat 26 Aug - Mon 18 Sep

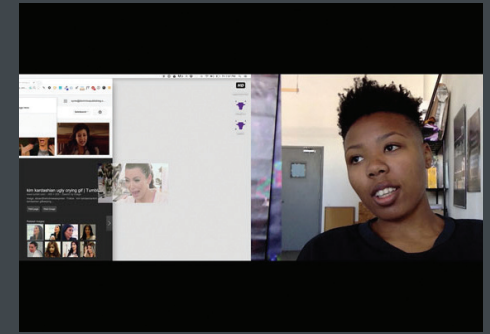
Atom Spirit is a speculative narrative set in a near future of increasing biomedical innovation. Partly shot in Trinidad and Tobago, it follows the work of evolutionary geneticists collecting DNA from all forms of life to create a cryogenically frozen Ark. Through blending science and mythology the film ruminates on the effects of biological technologies on future iterations of humanity and the environment.



Red Beryl and crocodile, Opal (Irrational Exuberance in the White Man's Hole) 2011
Oscar Enberg

22.22 min., 4K to HD video, sound
Screening: Fri 22 Sep - Sun 15 Oct

The film is a tragicomedy in five acts, assembling traditional linear narrative, cinéma vérité, documentary, absurdist theatre, and social realism. Its protagonist, Red Beryl, traverses the South Australian opal-mining town of Coober Pedy in search of its most notorious resident, Crocodile Harry – a Nazi-sympathising Latvian baron who fled after WWII. Enberg combines his abiding interest in the boom and bust logic of speculative industries with the collapsing of history, fiction and myth.



A Pilot For A Show About Nowhere 2015
Martine Syms

24.29 min., digital video, sound
Screening: Thu 19 Oct - Sun 12 Nov

A Pilot for a Show about Nowhere presents a pilot for the fictional sitcom, SHE MAD. Beneath its canned laughter are dissections of the televisual medium, steeped in the stuff of popular culture: sitcoms, chat shows, online videos. Imagery of mainstream African-American television shows of yesteryear intersects with today's virtual interfaces to reveal mass media's distortions and refractions of gender, race and class.

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Curated by Tendai John Mutambu and Sophie O'Brien
Texts by Tendai John Mutambu
Projection Series coordinated by Paul Brobbel

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Projection Series #7: First as fiction, then as myth

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Govett-Brewster
Art Gallery
Private Bag 2025
New Plymouth 4342
Aotearoa New Zealand

govettbrewster.com

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