

19 Dec – 31 Jan

2015 – 2016

Projection Series #2

Six artists respond to the poetry of Joanna Margaret Paul



Projection Series 2: Six artists respond to the poetry of Joanna Margaret Paul
19 Dec 2015 – 31 Jan 2016
Screening Saturday and Sunday 1 pm
Approximate running time: 45 minutes

Curated by Solomon Nagler and Mark Williams
Commissioned and Distributed by CIRCUIT
Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand
with the support of Creative New Zealand
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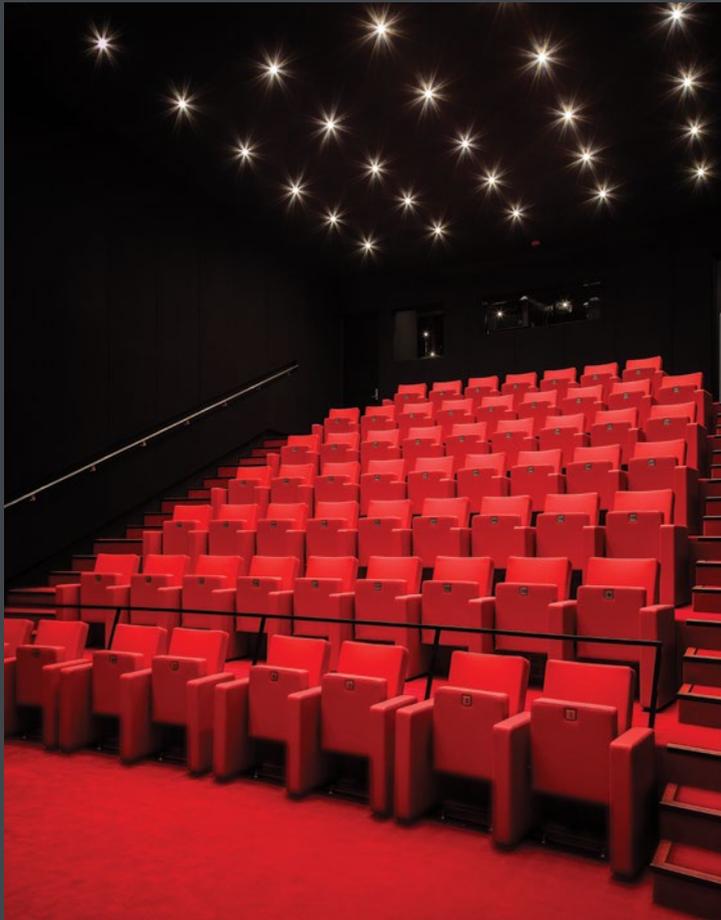


Programme Partners



Exhibition Partners





Cover: Nova Paul
Still Light 2015

Len Lye Centre Cinema
Photo: Patrick Reynolds

The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery/Len Lye Centre has launched a brand new state-of-the-art 62-seat cinema, for audiences to experience the films of Len Lye and the wider world of local and international cinema.

The cinema presents historical experimental film, contemporary artist's moving image and regular film festival programming. At the heart of the Len Lye Centre's cinema programme is the return of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery's 'Projection Series', a quarterly programme surveying a range of artists' moving image making from the 20th century and today.

Six artists respond to the poetry of Joanna Margaret Paul

Curated by Solomon Nagler
and Mark Williams

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Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand,
with the support of Creative New Zealand

Through the shaped spaces of the
bed's frame; through the flower
carved in wood & through the
window pane; through the pierced
verandah hood, the foliate rose I
see the straight & curved branches
parting of a tree.

Without the lens
heaven, /the heavens less understood.

The *throughness of things*, where objects once familiar, become strange, is a concept threaded throughout the multidisciplinary artwork of Joanna Margaret Paul. It is sketched in her restrained, abstract drawings of everyday objects; printed into her colour drenched photographs that fragment fleeting moments and cracks light into the sleepy surroundings of her rural domicile; in her poetry that is framed so sparsely that the spaces between letter pressed text reveal a graceful, emotional labyrinth; and in her remarkable body of experimental film work where gusts of wind and fleeting light can turn napkins hanging on a clothing line into a love song. What was once tactile becomes untouchable, transmuted with a lens into the shadows of a theatre. Everything becomes a frame, a distant open window that is persistently out of reach.

'Through the shaped spaces...' is the opening text in *Like Love Poems*, an anthology published shortly after her tragic, early death in 2003. The above poem expresses a dilemma. Without the lens of art,

there is unframed life, in all its wondrous absurdity. With the lens, be it a book, a camera frame or the blank canvas of a sketch pad, an artist can comprehend, transmute and touch this mystery. The interconnectedness of things expands through the interconnectedness of themes found throughout Paul's interdisciplinary practice. There is a sense of necessity and sacrifice throughout her work, as Paul avoided the trappings of careerism, and manoeuvred around the restrictions imposed by her poverty. There is a celebration and recontextualisation in her rural existence, a documentation of the emotional flux of light and time into art works that can stand still, be archived, replayed, or projected ad infinitum.

For this commission project we invited six artists to create new moving image works, providing a selection of Paul's poetry as a point of inspiration. As curators, we placed particular emphasis on work which was often seen as ancillary to her studio practice, as Paul was better known for her painting and drawing than her film or poetry. Recently however, her celluloid work is being celebrated and rediscovered by scholars, curators and artists from across the globe. Seemingly created in isolation from experimental film communities in the US and Europe, Paul's films have a paced, original poetic sensibility that was practically unknown outside of New Zealand. Paul's films bear a similarity to experimental 8mm first person works like Stan Brakhage's *Songs* cycle (1964-1969), yet lack the self-mythologising and epic undertones. Paul's *throughness of things*, is often articulated and filmed as a list, an index that in her films, like in her poetry, documents her surroundings; once familiar, now strange: meditations on blue

sudden spears of
Agapanthus open
blue on grey
Pohutukawa
with the violence of
love in a
quiet life

There is a similarity in form in Paul's celluloid work (often shot on 8mm film cameras for ease of access and affordability) and her poetry. Though much remains unpublished, the few works printed during her lifetime were collaborations with small printing houses who specialised in limited edition artist books. Within these book works, the typography printed using artisanal hand-operated letterpresses has a cinema-like resonance in their analogue textures. They were produced using hand-operated machines, clinking like the gears of a camera, or the rolling buzz

of a projector. The pages contain a weighted inertia, an embedded grain that recalls the fleeting, weathered textures of her (now faded) original reversal celluloid prints. It is also Paul's meticulous layout and design of the printed matter that resembles her films. The text arranged in her award winning, debut chapbook *Imogen* is sparse and fragmented, much like the quick in-camera edits and shadowed homespaces in *Napkins* (1975) and *Aberharts House* (1976). Her artist book *Unwrapping the Body* contains collages, drawings, photoworks and hand-written poems that suggest how Paul intended to combine the various facets of her multidisciplinary practice. The book has a hand-made, diaristic aesthetic. It contains a form of montage that mirrors her 16mm and 8mm sketches – unabashedly amateur, gestural, instinctual, and familiar. They frame the domestic as a space where mysticism can emerge from subtle, quiet reflection.

Celebrating a renewed interest in her rarely screened film works, we proposed to not restrict ourselves to presenting a retrospective screening, but rather, a conversation of sorts with contemporary New Zealand media artists. A new body of work was created, not as a homage, but to continue Paul's explorations that were tragically truncated with her untimely death. By providing each artist with a unique selection of poetry, a diverse set of films were consequently created, faithful to the creative trajectories in their individual practices, but also leaving a trace of the themes, motifs and emotions found in the text provided.

Rachel Shearer's *I am an open window* contains a stoic duration filmed in lush super 8mm textures. Tonal shifts are layered with text fragments gleaned from two of Paul's poems provided to the artist. A lens is locked onto a persistent gaze of an open doorway, a cracked window, perhaps referencing Paul's *Barry's Bay* photographic series, where the lush foliage beaming from an open window is shrouded in the darkness of the surrounding interior. The super 8mm film stock is painterly, fragile and heavily textured. The work reinvents the aesthetics and form of small gauge cine-poems.

Sonya Lacey's *By Sea*, literally uses language sculpted into an architectural form to create a remarkable dreamlike monochrome landscape. The film was shot inside a cast salt model of the letters that form *Par Mer*. Her voice-over follows an abstract narrative, whispered as a disembodied floating camera slides along mirrored surfaces. Referencing the inside/outside dichotomy repeated through much of Paul's work, Lacey appropriates field notes from NASA's Tektite, semi-autonomous underwater lab experiments to emphasize this either/or division of space. The film is interspersed with microscopic filming of salt crystals, pans of cracks, layered salt textures, and projected textural images. Lacey hints



Sonya Lacey
By Sea 2015

to the precariousness of living in a bubble, and the permeability that exists between intimate interiors, and the emotional breaches that can occur.

Nova Paul's *Still Light* is a fluid, patient use of duration and the camera frame. Everyday life is sculpted into fleeting shadowed moments in abandoned spaces that are without physical human presence. The soft 16mm celluloid colour palette is melancholic yet soothing, and presence is reflected, transformed into the silent gaze of inanimate objects. This beautifully paced film makes the silence sing, the objects and plant life that surround the frame come to life. It is at once a self-portrait and a homage to the mirror of contemplative cinema.

The collective Popular Production's *third revision* is an essay film shot over a decade in Warsaw, Berlin and New Zealand. A travelogue, diary film and philosophical treatise, the work pieces together a remarkable montage of personal notes, footage from prisons and public housing, drawings and animated sculptures. Filmed text is distributed throughout the work, in handwritten notes and scrolling down a computer monitor. Layers of ideas, video texture and experimental, concrete soundscapes present a playful conceptual wordplay that is in itself poetic.

Sky by Miranda Parkes uses the video camera as a drawing tool. The work, one of five created for the project by the artist, situates the camera in a bed of grass. The vision/drawing machine records light and sky; fleeting clouds turn the heavens into a quilted flat canvas of light and time.

Finally Shannon Te Ao's *Untitled (Epilogue)* gleans elements from Paul's past work, specifically, a collaboration with Noeline Arnott, in which Paul provided drawings for her short story *Relics from an ancient tomb* (1986). Reading from this text, Te Ao slides a camera past a series of darkly lit potted plants, taken from the Katherine Mansfield house in Wellington. Melancholic and meditative, the film embodies the restrained ache and duress found in some of these authors' writings. As the camera glides repeatedly past pots of domesticated foliage, tonal noise eventually overtakes the voiceover, an overflowing of wordless emotion, and a blissful abstraction that could reference the final blank page in a book of poetry.

All the commissioned works display a remarkable diversity in scope and form. By reframing Paul's cinema with new films, we hoped that an archive could be brought to life; speaking, breathing and collaborating to create new context for contemporary media arts practices. A new lens is formed, and a certain sense of poetic necessity emerges.

Solomon Nagler



Shannon Te Ao
Untitled 2015



Still Light 2015
Nova Paul

16mm transferred to HD Video

Sound, 6.35 mins.

Still Light references compositions found in Joanna Margaret Paul's archive of photographs and paintings, and responds to Paul's untitled poem that begins with the line *The room is close with mystery*.

Soundtrack composed and performed by Bic Runga.



I am an open window 2015
Rachel Shearer

Super 8mm transferred to HD Video

Sound, 5.42 mins.

Beginning in high saturation, *I am an open window* explores various amplifications of sensation; day passes to night, clouds hang in the sky like unexplained portents, nature brims with potential. A shudder of film in the gate subtly intimates the slippage between one state to another.



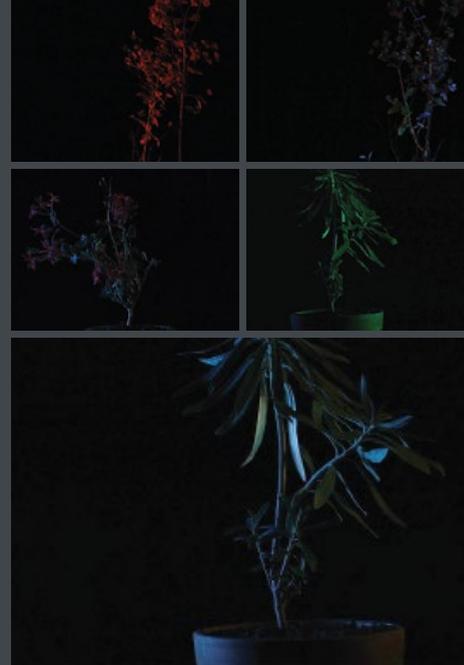
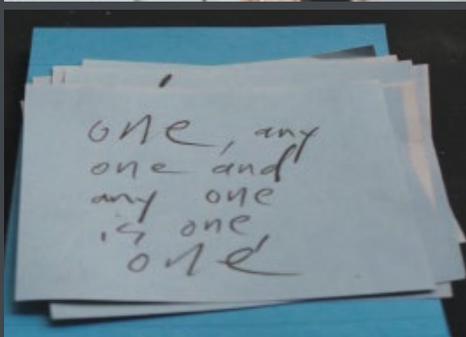
By Sea 2015
Sonya Lacey

Digital video

Sound, 9.42 mins.

Set in a block of fictional seaside apartments whose architecture is shaped to form the italicised words *Par Mer* (French for 'By Sea'), the subject of *By Sea* is language and its physical forms. Shot inside a cast salt model of the letterforms with a still camera and a microscope, Lacey's film captures close-ups of salt crystals and ink, while on the voiceover, a narrator describes an incident between guests and the buildings process of abrasion by salt and sea air.

Camerawork by Campbell Farquhar and Sonya Lacey. Narration by Fuyuko Akiyoshi
Music by Johnny Chang, 'folk music background' (excerpt).



third revision 2015 Popular Productions

8mm, Digital Video

Sound, 15.59 mins.

An experimental essay film shot in New Zealand, Berlin and Warsaw featuring material filmed at sites including Warsaw Archives and Pawiak Prison c. 2000. Featuring a collection of video and film footage, *third revision* openly fluctuates between blur and displacement of image and focus; often the images are re-filmed off the computer screen and are further 'corrupted/compromised'.

Audio: *Upright Piano* reworked from an electronic composition by Samuel Holloway and et al previously created for the exhibition *Parekowhai*, Holloway, Henis et al. Michael Lett, Auckland, 18 April - 25 May 2013.

Sky 2015 Miranda Parkes

Digital Video

Silent, 3.02 mins.

Sky uses the video camera as a drawing tool. The vision/drawing machine records light and sky, fleeting clouds turn the heavens into a quilted, flat canvas of light and time.

Untitled (Epilogue) 2015 Shannon Te Ao

Digital Video

Silent, 4.48 mins.

Slow, meditative and rhythmic, *Untitled (Epilogue)* pays homage to three New Zealand artists active in the 20th century. The text by Noeline Arnott was published in 1986 alongside paintings by Joanna Margaret Paul. As Te Ao was commissioned by CIRCUIT to respond to Paul's work, Paul herself was commissioned to make an artistic response to writer Katherine Mansfield's short story *Prelude*.

The plants in the footage are taken from Katherine Mansfield's house and are included here as not only a reflection of one of Paul's regular motifs but also as figurative manifestations of a tenuous social and bodily circumstance reflected

in various ways across the lives, material and narratives aforementioned.

Text excerpted from *Relics from an ancient tomb* by Noeline Arnott. Originally published in the *New Zealand Listener*, October 1986 with drawings by Joanna Margaret Paul.