

I FELT LIKE THE SOUND OF A HARP

AN ESSAY BY LIZZIE LLOYD

On my first meeting with Laura Phillips she invites me to her studio in the centre of Bristol, her hometown. She has set up a little table and chair for us in the low-lit main room of the Brunswick Club – an artist run space which holds studios, workshops, film screenings and gigs – that Phillips helps run. Its décor harks back to its former life as a working man’s club: floral wallpaper, dark velour bench-seating around its perimeter, its flooring part fake wood linoleum, part deep floral burgundy carpeting.

She projects the latest version of a film made for her first solo exhibition, *I felt like the sound of a harp*, at Plymouth College of Art. While it runs she tells me about how the idea for the film developed, who her influences are, the importance of artist communities, her band (Viridian), her interest in Second Wave Feminism, local history, psychological states of dissociation, Punk culture... the list goes on. She covers much ground, bouncing excitedly from one topic to the next so that I struggle, at times, to keep up with her but her passion and zeal carry me along regardless.

As with her conversation so with her work, its focus roves. The specked and scratched film footage of her three-channel video work, *Autoscopic Pneumatic Therapy* (2018) flickers in a sensual overload. Its grey tones are offset by a bilious yellow, melancholy viridian green, brilliant ultramarine, and the occasional outburst of brassy magenta. Enigmatic motifs amass, repeat and are overlaid one on top of the other: moiré patterns flicker, optical illusions swim, balloons tremor, a statue with caverns for eyes ‘stares’, a colour wheel spins, the number six recurs, and the X-Ray-like silhouette of a pair of open scissors spins. These motifs feel significant, but also veiled in mystery.

The pace of the film is equally meandering, its nonlinear narrative sometimes unfurls with intent, at others it drifts. Sometimes shots linger purposelessly or

meaningfully (it’s not always clear) – a house dwelled on, an elderly hand held, a crowd joined – casting us in the role of detached onlookers. At other times it mounts a visual onslaught. Close-up geometric abstractions, for example, jump-cut, skittishly, hypnotically. The film’s shifts in tempo between a dream-like wash and intense enveloping are deliberately disorientating, an effect that is heightened by Phillips’s decision to have it play out on three monitors arranged separately around the gallery; it makes you feel at once a part of and detached from the film.

A loosely structured audio track accompanies the film’s installation, playing a key role in establishing its tone. Rich in muted sonic texture, the track feels improvisatory, itself adrift: words are spoken and intoned, whined and hummed; voices laugh; bodies breathe and sigh. A sorrowful female voice, pitched high, wavers in the background, as if at a distance. Sounds rumble and whirr and buzz and tick. Glassy tones are held, stretched, burred, synthetically distorted. They quiver, reverberating wraith-like around the space of both the film and the gallery, building an atmosphere of quiet and unspecified lamentation.

Our experience of the film is further multiplied, disjointed and entangled by the interrelation that Phillips sets up between its audio and visual elements. This is partly due to its exhibition: three differently edited versions of the same film footage alongside a soundtrack. The audio and visual run parallel, rather than being tightly in-sync, which magnifies their disconnects. The words of Barbara, a Bristolian pensioner, for example, might be heard alongside footage of an elderly hand holding a deflated balloon, or a rave in full swing, or black and white images from an archive of sci-fi zines. Divorcing the visual from the audio in this way creates unexpected encounters. But even more importantly it heightens the instability of our sense perceptions, creating a synaesthetic confusion to which the exhibition’s title, *I felt like the sound of a harp*, also alludes.

These destabilising effects relate to Phillips's ongoing interest in dissociation, a psychological state in which a person experiences a sense of detachment or disconnect from their environment. But she also alludes to dissociation through the symbolic associations of her subject matter. Laughing gas, for example – the recreational drug of choice on the club scene, favoured for its hallucinogenic, euphoric and dissociative effects – is hinted at through recurring images of balloons and raves. It is also referenced through footage of The Pneumatic Institution (number 6 Dowry Square Bristol, the house to which Barbara refers), a centre which undertook research into the effects of nitrous oxide (laughing gas) on the human brain, in part through self-experimentation between 1799–1802.

Phillips's use of colour is equally symbolically loaded. The menacing yellow that seeps into her film is a subtle acknowledgement of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892), a short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. It recalls the 'smouldering unclean yellow' with 'a sickly sulphur tint' of Gilman's story in which an unnamed narrator suffers from what would have been called hysteria or madness and is locked away in a room to convalesce. During this time she begins to hallucinate. She sees figures moving around the wallpaper of her bedroom, the patterning of which she describes as 'a florid arabesque' stretching out in 'waves of optic horror'.¹ Equivalent motifs appear in Phillips's film too: optical illusions disorientate and the recurring black and white damask-style patterns morph into sinister-looking faces.

Phillips amplifies this atmosphere of uncertainty by making use of the particular visual tones and effects inherent to her media, film and photography. She builds-up unstable, uneven, layers of images that are generated through various means: cyanotypes, photograms, 16 mm analogue and digital film. Each of these procedures throws up distinct qualities which in combination produce the effect of an idiosyncratic accumulation of visual matter. Photograms create crude shadow-images that emerge when objects are laid directly onto a photosensitive surface. Coarse grain footage, veiled in heavy image noise, comes about through her use of deliberately cheap analogue film stock. And she uses body cameras pinned to her torso, to gather shaky, low-resolution digital footage that documents without regard for the aesthetic sensibilities of the mediating eye. All of these approaches champion unpolished imperfection and a do-it-yourself sensibility but also, crucially, an experimental serendipity.

A series of fabric banners suspended through the gallery make use of a similar array of image-making techniques. These architectural interruptions combine digital printing, screen printing, hand-dyeing and, again, cyanotypes. Each banner is broken up into vertical patterned panels in which motifs such as creased netting, Isaac Newton's colour wheel, and acanthus wallpaper design cross over from the films to the banners. The fabric is also exposed to more abstract textural effects: colours bleed, inks merge, silhouettes of patterns appear to crosshatch. At 1.5 metres long, the banners are hung at intervals, ceiling to floor, and susceptible to further discolouration and fading due to their deliberate exposure to afternoon sunlight from the gallery's west-facing glass wall.

Phillips opens her work up to this kind of degradation. It is all part of the way that she wants her work to absorb – and reflect back – the serendipitous effects of time, fragmented perception and imperfect recollection: Barbara forgets the name of the 'very prominent man' in her story (Humphry Davy, the leading researcher of The Pneumatic Institution), film stocks deteriorate, are bleached, reused or re-exposed. Phillips preserves and intensifies the visual interferences such as distortion, noise, and moiré patterning which evidence the various processes to which she has submitted her materials. These artifacts form a living patina, evidence of the natural effects of time and technological processing. In Phillips's hands they generate a haze of visual depth through, paradoxically, her sustained attention to surface. Phillips sees that these impressions surface; they collide, enmesh and, most importantly, linger like memories (or after-images) cut, pasted and tacked together to form their own unstable history.

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1. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'The Yellow Wall Paper' (1892), <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/theliteratureofprescription/exhibitionAssets/digitalDocs/The-Yellow-Wall-Paper.pdf> [accessed July 18, 2018], pp. 653 and 648.