

Squat stone benches, curved in anticipation of an ornamental pond, sit awkwardly on the gallery floor. Within these poured concrete brackets a ring of fake rocks and shocks of grasses lend an edge to a puddle that's all surface, all screen. This is the theatre-in-the-round of London-based artist Hazel Brill's film and installation *We gathered round the puddle, smiling patiently*, selected for the show by Matt Stokes. It comes near the end of Survey, Jerwood Arts' touring exhibition of early-career artists, for which Bluecoat is the third host. The exhibition is a thicket of different practices from which Brill's piece seems to offer respite – like a fountain discreetly placed in a garden, or the municipal serenity of a duck pond. The work exudes a benevolent charm which draws viewers in and enchants.

*I stop at the waters' edge with a watery gaze. Underfoot the ground is spongy, compacted soil jellied at the shore. I feel myself sinking slightly in this liminal ground but I'm entranced by how the water shimmers in my crystal pool eyes. I slide into a liquid attention; not tensile enough to hold its own shape.*

The film that plays across the puddles' surface muses on the mesmeric affect of bodies of water. From Las Vegas's spectacular fountains to a duck pond that came to the nameless narrator in a dream, the film both explores and enacts how water transforms the social life of a place. In one episode of the skittish narrative a puddle of piss is so reified it becomes a quasi-religious site. In Brill's world, both here and in her previous installations, water gathers crowds with the stupefying magnetism of screens.

*This fluid sensibility starts to tire out my body. My limbs feel sluggish and swampy. I wonder how amphibians cope with the twin pressures of living both aquatic and non-aquatic lives. I find that I would like to be held in the folds of my surroundings and rest.*

The work plays with a kind of mutant mythology. This is common to Brill's work; her 2014 *In Bardo* starred Hermes, the Greek god of transitions and boundaries. Here, metallic CGI narcissi grow limbs and swim across the puddle, invoking their mythical origin, Narcissus. Narcissus fell prey to water's fickle promise – that where there is water there is love and human intimacy. This is the same promise exploited in urban design, an interest of Brill's, where a fountain is a quick-fix in an inhuman cityscape.

*As I stand the liquidy film of my eyes grows thicker, wetter, as if the water of which my body is built is revolting, returning to its source. It drips and drips, making small rivulets in my joints. I begin to look like a wetland and I find this quite natural.*

However, myths like Narcissus' arc smoothly into a crisp moral. Brill's narrative, instead, bounces around a cast of characters – Chewbacca, a cat, an ornamental stone dragon – refusing to settle. It is a kind of liquid narrative; an indeterminate form taking on the shape of the viewers' imagination. It becomes tiring to try and follow the fractured stories, made more difficult by the driving music and weird aphorisms of the voiceover. A kind of detached or roaming spectatorship is established. Rather than the wired distraction that obsesses many commentators on 'networked society', however, this suspended attention feels valuable, like the lulling hypnotism of rolling waves.

The work resonates with other pieces in *Survey*. There is a fascination with bodily processes and fluids, and the relation between the ecstatic and the profane. In Brill's work this plays out through episodes in which the body's creations take on bizarre agencies – kidney stones that tell the future, arm hairs that stand on end before flying off. Elsewhere in the show, Rae-Yen Song's *Happy Happy Leaf* hangs, a totem to an imagined religion with attendant chamber pot. Emma Cousin's *Song Drapes* is a glorious burst of a painting. A ring of women suck and grab and pinch one another in a kind of queer, dancing eco-system. There are nods throughout the exhibition to contemporary art's fascination with the Anthropocene, and how bodies are entangled in the world, with others, and with material. Chris Alton's work stresses how high the stakes of this discussion are, raising the spectre of the impending climate disaster we are rushing towards.

*I've stopped seeing things and instead sort of cascade over them. I cascade over my feet.*

Brill's work is as enigmatic materially as it is conceptually. The construction has the grammar of garden design, the concrete enclosure and civilising of nature, with the energy of the fake flora of fish tanks. This performs a strange kind of nature, and the planes of the moving image mean fish swim in profile. Brill is not alone in constructing this kind of viewing-scape. Timur Si-Qin's 2016 *A Reflected Landscape*,

*The dripping of my eyes has run them dry but by now there's no stopping the flood. Bits of my body calve off, top first working downwards. They slump into the water with a sigh. I'm becoming pleasingly torrential and I wonder if I make a nice waterfall. Maybe people could gather in my spray and cast in their wishes?*

for example, places screens in and amongst a fabricated wooded scene. Laure Prouvost also uses large leaved plants as sculptural devices in her viewing spaces. Brill, however, also has a cheeky fascination with more prosaic material interventions in nature: a 'serene traffic island' or ornamental garden features.

*The waters' edge rises to greet me. It washes away my footprints.*

*We gathered round the puddle, smiling patiently* is a slippery work somewhere between a dreamscape and psychogeography. It is tantalisingly thick with stories, only tips of which tease its surface. Brill sinks the viewer into her eerie aquatic world. They leave the gallery almost dripping in it.

*Light shivers across my surface.*

*A vague memory of arm  
hairs standing on end  
dissolves away.*