



Helen Cammock, *They Call It Idlewild*, 2020, HD video, color, sound, 18 minutes, 35 seconds.

— EMILY LA BARGE

“Attention equals Life, or is its only evidence,” wrote poet Frank O’Hara, and as I watched Helen Cammock’s new film *They Call It Idlewild* (all works cited, 2020), I believed him—fervently, longingly. Cammock made the film, originally commissioned by Wysing Arts Centre in rural South Cambridgeshire as part of its thirtieth-birthday program, while she was in residence at the institution during the autumn and winter of 2019–20, and it is full of the low, glancing light that characterizes British winters. Cammock’s lens catches this light as it pauses against bright-orange walls, lingers high in the branches of wind-whipped trees, drops low in the green grass, sinks into a deep-blue sky—the shots that are almost painterly, even abstract, with their striking swaths and blocks of color. “We must hunt like the tracker in search of the glade for that light shaft of nothingness in order for somethingness to scratch the back of the mind and tingle the senses,” the artist intones. “Then, whoever we are and whatever the hunger, something, something will come.”

Cammock was initially commissioned to explore Wysing’s archives, but while these are a presence in the work, the film is primarily a paean to the potential for reflection and creativity—“that light shaft of nothingness,” perhaps—provided by artist residencies, which are at the core of the institution’s history. The artist’s narration, an essayistic text that merges poetic description with philosophical meander and readerly quotation, draws on the work of Jonathan Crary, James Joyce, and Mary Oliver. Cammock quotes

Audre Lorde, who describes the investigation of feelings as “a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action.”

At the same time, Cammock confronts the perversion of this imaginative space by neoliberalism: the demand for more and new and, now, hyperproductivity as the ultimate, inexhaustible value. Is it possible any longer to know—constitutionally, existentially—idleness? CAN YOU REMEMBER WHEN YOU LAST DID NOTHING? and WHEN YOU LAST DID NOTHING CAN YOU REMEMBER HOW IT FELT? ask two large screen prints of billboards from the project, hunter green and currant red, that hung in the back room of the gallery. Are we aware of how labor and time are levied against marginalized communities to extract or assign value? Halfway through Cammock’s film, she softly croons Hoagy Carmichael and Johnny Mercer’s 1933 song “Lazy Bones,” which the artist links to the racial stereotype of the lazy black man who sleeps his day away, before powerfully highlighting the parasitism of those—“the plantation owner, the landowner, the person owner, the knighted, landed peer, the Tory MP with business interests”—who live off the impoverishment of others “through the projection of the lazy in all those who keep him or her there.” As Cammock, who was a social worker for ten years, has said, “I see it everywhere now—the people who are supposedly the scroungers, the people who are not contributing enough to society, they are still overwhelmingly black and brown people.”

Cammock’s works seem prescient after months of elected officials expressing disdain for workers, cautioning that the public will become “addicted” to the coronavirus furlough scheme if it goes on too long, that the public does not like to work, that the public—according to these public servants—is *lazy*. “Is it in the activeness of doing nothing, not the passiveness in working without question, that we should site our song?” Cammock asks in the film, as well as in white sans serif lettering against rich russet in *Song*, another of her simple screen prints. Nearby hung a large calico banner, *I Decided I Want to Walk*, declaring just that, beneath a schematic window pierced by rays of light. As we all should, as if there are no boundaries, singing the whole way.