

Profile: Helen Cammock

Chris Fite-Wassilak

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Helen Cammock, still from *There's a Hole in the Sky Part I*, 2016, digital video. Image courtesy the artist.

'A sea eagle screams from the rock, and my race began like the osprey, with that cry, that terrible vowel, that I,' a female narrator intones evenly over waves crashing against a rocky shore. It is the opening scene of Helen Cammock's short video *There's a Hole in the Sky Part I*, 2016; that 'I' invoked goes on over the course of the video to visit a sugar factory and a sugar cane plantation turned tourist destination in Barbados, musing all the while self-consciously about what she sees and is told, occasionally breaking into mournful song. The video carries many of the threads that run through Cammock's work, such as using photography and documentary film methods to explore the intimate bonds of history, often of colonialism, racism and cultural appropriation – in this case, tracing the slavery trade created to prop up the now-disappearing sugar production in the Caribbean – and first-person accounts of the disjointed experience of those 'subjects' who moved from the West Indies to the UK. The voice that narrates and binds these images shifts from spoken-word poetry-like litanies of evocative phrases to confessional anecdotes. When she asks at one point, 'What can I see when I look, and through whose gaze do I see?', the fact that this is not just one 'I' becomes clearer – it is an impossible 'I', a multiple 'I'. The voice is the

artist's, but the 'I' being spoken constantly changes, shifting from her own lines and a patchwork of quotations, such as the opening lines which come from the late Saint Lucian poet Derek Walcott's 'Names', 1976, and authors like Maya Angelou and Jamaica Kincaid. This fragmented narration underlines Cammock's videos, performances and installations – quoting, singing, ventriloquising, a procession of voices that successively inhabit the artist.

It is a particular pantheon that Cammock quietly assembles, one that we might piece together only after experiencing her work, after hearing her voice issue forth these words. Lines from old African-American spiritual songs and Caribbean folk songs rub up against words by Franz Fanon and Walter Benjamin; her most recent video, *Moveable Bridge*, 2017, made on a residency in Hull, draws together Nina Simone, Philip Larkin, Winifred Holtby and the Housemartins. Partly, Cammock reveals the way in which we construct our own personal collage of influences and reference points to establish our own sense of self, context and history. But through this, Cammock insists on a politics of influence: we are only able to be touched by something if we are able to encounter it in the first place. As she states in her performance *Song and Shiver*, 2016, 'there are so many we know who are rendered non-existent; when you dig you find, when you push you might learn, but this digging and pushing means they are non-existent in history and therefore their value is not contagious from one generation to the next.' In her videos and performances particularly, in bringing together examinations of place alongside such varied vocalisations, Cammock positions herself as a host to such contagions, and as such a means to pass on the 'infection' of quieter stories. Her historicised ventriloquisms are in part a historical corrective, but more so a set of intimate models of how that pushing, that digging might be enacted.



Helen Cammock, WHAT WILL SURVIVE OF US IS LOVE / EAT THE RICH THIS IS A FUCKING CLASS WAR, 2017, photograph from the publication *Moveable Bridge*, Book Works, 2017. Image courtesy the artist.

There's a Hole in the Sky Part II, 2016, follows the trail of sugar back over the Atlantic, where footage of the Tate & Lyle factory in east London is overlaid with an imagined conversation with

American writer James Baldwin. The latter half of the video features an extensive dance scene from the film *Stormy Weather*, 1943, one of the few Hollywood films of the time to feature black performers in lead roles. The scene is an impressive number performed by the Nicholas brothers, who, like Baldwin, fled to Paris to escape racism in their home country; they were innovators in dance, but after the end of the Second World War were relegated as behind-the-scenes choreographers for films, enabling performers like Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire to become known for their moves. Over the top of their dextrous performance, Cammock gives an extended musing on appropriation: 'Experience is constructed through action, feeling, intrusion, intervention, absorption, but how we make sense of these begins to build meaning. It's all about moving, but the machines are so loud we can't hear the voices of those we are taking from.' It's not simply, the artist suggests, a matter of giving credit where credit is due, but unpicking the hierarchies of how and why such credit is given in the first place.

Cammock's use of song brings this out most directly – we all understand the emotional potency of music, but also can feel that when someone does a cover version of a song, who they're covering and how they do it is hugely important. It is not simply pointing towards another band, writer or singer, but the tone in which it is invoked, transformed and conveyed. In an era where hypothetically everything is at our fingertips, from histories on Wikipedia to songs on Spotify, what's excluded becomes all the more urgent to recall into the present, but also recalled in a way which might give it new resonances. Cammock's work, embodying both herself and these writers, poets, musicians and those encountered in her travelogues, becomes a mixture of empathy and antagonism, a kaleidoscopic cover version.

Writing on the European mapping of the world in the 18th century and its subsequent and continuing influence, British-Australian academic Paul Carter notes how the experience of the body, of the journey itself, was excluded; accordingly, the question of how knowledge came to arrive in front of us was left out. He advocates what he calls 'dark writing' as an act of acknowledging an awareness in our constant participation in forming 'spatial historical consciousness', of recovering the body and the journey as part of making meaning. In Hull, for *Moveable Bridge* Cammock spoke to those who worked in the docks, as well as to refugees who arrived to a city that voted overwhelmingly to leave the EU, juxtaposing their stories with that of Pearson Park, a park created for the workers of Zachariah Pearson, a shipowner who in turn made his profits trading with the slave-driven plantations of the Confederate US, detailing a complex back and forth of industry and infrastructural racism that are still being actively played out as current politics make clear. 'I'm interested,' Cammock says calmly, 'in this opening up and closing down, this seeing and unseeing, this hearing and unhearing. Time doesn't matter.' Her works create a web of associations between particular voices and the wider frameworks in which they act, always aware of the poetics and physicality of the distances and barriers crossed in order to arrive here. 'This is what is consistent,' she asserts, 'this ebb and flow.' What becomes apparent through this journey is the fact that this isn't about correcting history, but about fundamentally altering the way in which history is told, made and received. All writing, Cammock suggests, is historiography; and the only response to the question of who creates history is a fractured chorus of voices all saying, 'I do'