



The Modernist Review

The Month in Modernism



Review: Crone Music by Beatrice Gibson



'This is the rhythm of my life / My life / Oh yeah / The rhythm of my life.'

Jade Elizabeth French, Queen Mary University of London

Can you help but move to a pure piece of 90s disco? That's a question that is surprisingly thrown up at the end of Beatrice Gibson's video piece *I Hope I'm Loud When I'm Dead*. On the screen, a woman and masked child stand in a hall of mirrors, throwing their bodies around the room as Corona's classic plays. As it starts up, a sofa big enough for three begins to wobble with foot tapping and, in my case, full on shoulder rolling. This moment turns what could have been building up to a potentially clichéd art house moment – a woman applying and smearing red lipstick, a masked figure dancing in the dark – into a suddenly playful, poignant and fun ending. Mother and son throw themselves about the mirrored room with such silliness and abandon that the film's exploration of fear ends with a triumphant kick on the side of life.

One-part joyous and one-part angst ridden, *I Hope I'm Loud When I'm Dead* is the stand out piece at Gibson's exhibition *Crone Music* (Camden Arts Centre 18th January – 31st March 2019). Inspired by Pauline Oliveros' album of the same name, *Crone Music* is a solo show with multiple voices, including prominent cameos from New York avant-garde stalwarts Eileen Myles and CAConrad. This collaborative approach is unsurprising considering the exhibition calls on the 'crone' as the female archetype most likely to engender conversation, reflection, and dialogue. Etymologically speaking, the crone has been a way to describe (and denigrate) older women since the 14th century. But the crone, as the wall text explains, can be both magical and malicious as well as 'a figure of fascination, derision, power and fear'. Recast for the art world, the archetype reflects Gibson's attempt to find 'an explicitly feminist lineage through which to recast the syncretic, collective and participatory nature of her practice'.

In *I Hope I'm Loud When I'm Dead*, the performances by CAConrad and Eileen Myles take us into an alternate realm where poetry *is* power. They are positioned as two contemporary crones – sipping tea, reading tarot, presenting their poems. Conrad's cosmic purple nail varnish twinkles as they gesture and the two poets act out a ritual that is supposed to become an alternative news cycle. Their faces fill the screen with a gaze that sometimes falls into the lens to bring the viewer closer to their message of, if not hope, then a way of vocalising pain to diminish its influence. As Myles intones: 'I'm the ice that cracks / I'm really feeling it now'. In keeping the camera trained on their faces – older faces – powerful faces – the poetry communicates with the camera. This part of the film with Myles and Conrad was taken on the evening of the 45th Presidential election. It can often seem like everyone needs to reference Trump as a shorthand to comment on 'The Modern World'. However, this film isn't only about larger forces operating in the world but also the fear we feel when we watch our families grow up or our support networks move away. This undercurrent of uncomfortable change is helped by Oliveros's experimental electro score, which heightens moments of distress. The burst of relief as the pop song plays at the end is palpable.

The second piece of video art *Deux Soeurs Qui Ne Sont Pas Soeurs* [*Two Sisters Who Are Not Sisters*] takes Gertrude Stein's screenplay of the same name, written in 1929, and recreates it in modern day Paris. The viewer walks into an expansive space; chairs are placed in a circle, as if a ritual were about to take place. The floor-to-ceiling screen makes intimate work of the various close-ups on faces and asks the viewer to focus their attention solely on the film. We follow a series of characters including a beauty queen, a couple of inquisitive poodles, and the two sisters of the title, in order to explore how cycles of behaviour leave each one in uncertain states. Gibson aims to make connections between the rise of European fascism in the twentieth century and the unrest felt in today's world, which doesn't feel as fully realised as it might. Instead, the moments that stand out are the surreal stories shared between characters, such as when one woman tells of a dream where her daughter turned into a fried egg, which she looked at intently before eating her up.

Calling upon the avant-gardes of the 1920s, 1970s and now does succeed in tracing the creative crone through a queer and feminist genealogy. Yet, it also begs the question: is experimental poetry quite the right tool to combat the growing, gnawing anxieties we are faced with in the modern day? In a way, this exhibition answers both 'yes' and 'no'. CAConrad's readings, in particular, give way to some irony: 'You said too much poetry / I said too much war'. What saves the exhibition from feeling too esoteric is the gesture towards dialogue and collaboration that extends throughout. This is best realised in one of the larger rooms, where Gibson has curated a film series featuring the likes of Chantal Akerman, Basma Alsharif, Laida Lertxundi and Ana Vaz. This is also the site for a programme of talks, workshops and meetings including 'Personalized (Soma)tic Poetry Rituals' with CAConrad and experimental concerts with Laurence Crane. It is these gestures that make the exhibition feel the most alive in offering diverse points of view. The traces of these events provide an important context to the viewer of *I Hope I'm Loud When I'm Dead* and *Deux Soeurs Qui Ne Sont Pas Soeurs*, which otherwise might feel too centred around Gibson's vision for an exhibition that purports to do otherwise. In extending an open invitation to the public to attend free events and to absorb work by other artists, the croning of Camden Arts Centre turns the lens outwards and offers an eclectic programme that goes beyond the films on display.

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