

## Film

### Berwick Film and Media Arts Festival

The 21st Berwick Film and Media Arts Festival (BFMAF) programme opened with Shari Frilot's 1995 documentary *Black Nations/Queer Nations?* about the landmark conference held in New York on gay and lesbian sexualities in the African diaspora. In an early scene, M. Jacqui Alexander welcomes attendees to a 'partnership of energy, building, thinking, working, loving, laughing and struggling' - the emphasis being on 'work'. Later in the same film, Barbara Smith, channelling Audre Lorde, reframes this as a collective challenge: 'If you're not dealing with the collective realities and daily life conditions of your brothers and sisters on this planet, then you're not doing your work.'

This film set up an interesting framework about labour, not least how it might be read in the context of an arts festival. Similar concerns of who does 'the work' were also evident in the wonderfully unhinged *Q-LoXXX*, 2026, by Nika Sorzano and *All Good Medicine / Kon-a-wai Kloshe La-mes-tin*, 1993, by T'uy't'tanat Cease Wyss. These were part of a 'Queer Care' strand, curated by Cannach MacBride, Conal McStravick and Mikiki, which centred community care, self-care and palliative care, and extended beyond the screening room through several workshops and relaxed drop-in sessions.

Jenny Brady's *The Glass Booth*, 2025, highlighted the hidden labour of interpreters. Opening with repurposed footage of a meeting in 1985 between US and Russian presidents Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, we see tightly cropped images track furrowed brows and hands gripping chairs; anxious disembodied voices reveal the tension inherent in the highwire act of simultaneous translation. Brady's film was paired with work-in-progress *COMMS FAIL* by Roy Claire Potter, a performed text that combined autistic perspectives with global communication networks - gaps, slippages, interrupted transmissions. Here, too, there was an opportunity to scrutinise another technology of interpretation: the audio-transcription on the screen behind Potter repeatedly skipped back on itself, self-deleting and digging back into the performed text, muddying the 'clean' extraction of meaning.

Friday concluded with a clutch of films from the 'New Cinema' strand. Rehana Zaman's elegantly layered *Soft Fruit*, 2026, drew attention to the differently structured invisible labour of seasonal migrant workers on Scotland's berry farms (Interview AM494). *No Irish Need Apply*, 2025,



Lesley Loksi Chan, Lloyd Wong, *Unfinished*, 2025, film

by Marianne Koating and *Carceral Jigs*, 2025, by Eoghan Ryan, showed two sides of the same toxic coin: respectively, the horrific treatment of Irish migrants to the UK in the 1960s and 1970s, followed by rising anti-migrant sentiment among right-wing nationalists in present day Ireland. An examination of the 'nation' as a unifying concept thus emerged as a key theme of the festival - the sometime failure of liberation movements to connect to intersectional or pan-national interests (as with the original Queer Nation protests in the US, problematised in Frilot's documentary), or, as is the case in Ryan's film, its potential to devolve into hostile and exclusionary 'nationalisms'.

Three 'Focus' mini programmes paired Naeem Mohaiemen (Interview AM490) and Bangladeshi filmmaker Molla Sagar. Sagar's unflinching *Siren*, 2012, provided a potted history of jute production in Bangladesh, from the colonial boom through to post-independence nationalisation and, finally, mill closures in the mid 2000s. The effect of these closures in Khalishpur was unimaginably desperate: footage of dispossession and starvation culminated in images of 'suicide protests', police hosing bottles of poison from protesters' hands - it became almost unbearable to watch.

The emotion of the film stayed with me for the duration of Mohaiemen's *Abu Ammar is Coming*, a contemplation of failed internationalist dreams provoked by a found photograph of PLO-affiliated Bangladeshi fighters, and was only partially ameliorated by Sagar's gorgeous film-poem *Ganga Buri*, a love letter to the Ganges. This was followed by a pair of delicately elegiac films by Mohaiemen, *Rankin Street, 1953*, 2013, and *Wooster Street*, 2022, which respectively explored the artist's father's childhood home and Judith Blum's memories of Fluxus House. These careful archival constructions were again somewhat steamrolled by the direct anger of Sagar's *Doodh Koila* (Coal Milk) sandwiched in between, which bore witness to another community facing down inhuman extractive-capitalist forces, this time mining corporations.

Next came Jordan Lord's experimental films, which were conceptually primed by a talk by academic Tom Campbell, 'Disablement in the Age of Ambivalence'. Lord's *An All-Around Feel Good*, 2024, examined the politics of captioning and transcription work, and the use of disabled labour in fundraising activities for charitable organisations such as Veterans of Foreign Wars. The piece also meticulously interleaved audio descriptions of footage, which were selected as jumping-off points for these examinations - images of television screens on the back of aeroplane seats, the US national anthem sung on horseback at a rodeo and military drills in a park. The tight script often gave the sense that the audio descriptions were, in fact, creating the visuals. This is 'access provision' turned into a canny formal device, where Jordan's authorial control deftly implicates the audience.

Second and third instalments of 'Focus: Sagar + Mohaiemen' offered more comfortable pairings. The first of these included films that chased fugitive traces of legendary Bengali filmmakers: Sagar pounding the Dhaka streets in search of Ritwik Ghatak's old home; Mohaiemen pursuing rumours of an unfinished work by Zahir Rathan said to have been hidden in a jar of flour before the filmmaker's

disappearance in 1971. The following day, Sagar's centenarian life-model Momin Ali Mridha, preceded Mohaiemen's stunning 2024 work *Grace*, a film about Karen Wentworth, a person with terminal cancer who has managed to legally secure medicine to ease her end-of-life process. As Wentworth talks to Mohaiemen through her treatment, the stillness of the camera held the space to reflect on a life well lived; we see her leaf through her scrapbook at home, or in a museum store selecting artworks for an exhibition she is helping curate. The agency and dignity on display demonstrated what is often missing in end-of-life care.

The 'Queer Care' strand concluded with a palliative care workshop led by Mikiki, followed by Lesley Loksi Chan's 2025 film *Lloyd Wong, Unfinished*. Chan brought to life a box of old tapes that record long-lost footage of the artist Lloyd Wong and which explore his experiences of living with HIV, the work paying respect to his deep-felt anger about his impending death. It also, as with Mohaiemen's films, offered a meditation on the impossibility of neatly resolving such stories, carefully unpicking the ethics of working with historical footage and archival material.

The final film in the festival was an unfinished documentary about Scottish funk singer-songwriter Jesse Rae, perhaps included on a slightly underdeveloped Scottish nationalist angle. A madcap Q&A afterwards saw monologuing of the sort not often seen at the BFMAF: Rae - dressed head-to-toe as a blue-green tartan warrior, complete with helmet

and 5ft claymore - railed, good-humouredly, against everything from short-sighted music executives to an instinctively identified demographic known to Rae as the 'unfunky'. Whatever else, it resituated us firmly in the Borders and sent us out into the chilly Northumberland night jangling with a strange energy.

This year's BFMAF advertised itself as a slightly reduced affair due to decreased funding and its main partner venue undergoing much-needed renovations. Yet there were gains; the festival focused our attention on a single programme of films in a single venue, meaning ticket holders were (in theory) able to see every film. This arguably allowed for a more collective experience and a more closely directed weaving of thematic resonances. By the end of the weekend, I found my senses sharpened, reflecting that the world will always need the careful framing that BFMAF offers.

The 21st Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival took place in Berwick-upon-Tweed, 20-22 March.

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