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Mirror Lands

Glasgow City Arts interviews one of Glasgow's most diverse and creative Multimedia artists Mark Lyken about his fascinating collaboration with filmmaker Emma Dove called Mirror Lands

Could you briefly describe in your own words what Mirror Lands is about?

Mirror Lands is a film and sound installation that explores different perceptions and relationships to the Black Isle in the Highlands of Scotland.

The work is a collaboration between myself and artist filmmaker Emma Dove with invaluable assistance from Aberdeen University Ecologists based at the Lighthouse Field Station in Cromarty.

Our original idea was to look at the conventions of Natural History filmmaking, the narration, the dynamic camerawork and pacing and invert those conventions - not as a critique but as an interesting stylistic starting point to then reveal contrasting impressions of the same small geographical stretch. At its heart it's a simple portrait of people and place as we encountered them during our short stay - it's by no means a definitive portrait but hopefully an interesting window into the day to day goings on that might not necessarily be evident if you were visiting or indeed if you had lived in the area your whole life. Emma is originally from the Black Isle and learnt things about her immediate neighbours professions and interests that she had no idea about even in quite a tight knit community.

The work sits somewhere between art film and documentary, we wanted it to be more akin to the act of observing, as if you'd opened your back door and were watching events slowly unfold in front of you.

What challenges were you and Emma were faced with when creating this project?

The main challenges were budget and access. We had a small budget, most of which was spent on some very well researched pieces of kit which was also informed by the fact we had to be able to fit all of the equipment on our backs as generally we were cycling from location to location or accessing tricky terrain on foot or by boat. It turned out to be a blessing in disguise that we weren't driving from place to place as more often than we encountered more interesting things en route to a location than when we finally arrived there!

If we hadn't been under pedal power we would have simply missed a lot of material. We could have done with a few more pieces of kit but then that's always the case and it made us use the equipment we had in creative way.

Aside from those the main challenge was what to shoot because there was no script and we were allowing things to develop organically it was sometimes difficult to know if we were barking up the wrong tree! The film is a combination of interview audio and land, sea and arial footage of the area, however the footage doesn't necessarily

illustrate what is being described so it was a case of instinctively gathering shots that felt right. As part of our “inverse of conventions” idea we never moved the camera but kept it locked off and to allow things to unfold at their own pace which I think it gives the film a stylistic consistency.

If we were to make a similar style of film in future I think we would relax a little and trust our instincts as they served us pretty well in the end.

Do you feel you achieved what you set out to do or did the project evolve into anything different as your creative journey unraveled?

It had been very positively reviewed and received so far so we are delighted. We know a feature length “visual poem” as it’s been described is a big ask of an audience and we know it won’t be everyone’s cup of tea but we believe we have made something that remained true to our original vision and something that we feel does justice to the recollections and thoughts the Black Isle residents generously shared with us. There is always a question of how present the film maker should be in the work and for us even though it filled every waking hour of our lives for eight months to the exclusion of everything else, oddly it feels as if someone else made it! It’s become this entity that exists separately from us and we don’t really recognise ourselves in it at all. We are assuming this is a good thing!

It definitely did grow positive arms and legs because as soon as you talk to one person they recommend you talk to so and so and before you know it you have twenty or so interviews in the bag and hours of material to pair down. Initially we envisaged the film being around twenty five minutes long and we had budgeted accordingly but it became clear very early on that if we wanted to maintain the slow pace that the footage was setting and be able to include more than two or three interview sections it would have to be a lot longer. In the end the material itself dictated the length and the film is exactly as long as it needs to be but this did leave us in the tricky situation of knowing there was no chance of finishing the film without doing some further fund raising.

So we sold off a bunch of stuff, held an auction of original artworks and even made lunches at the Village hall where we were based and eventually raised the post production budget. The main concern with the change in length was how would a gallery audience for the installation incarnation of the project react to a sixty seven minute piece but in the end we filled the space with floor cushions and people simply tapped in and out of the work as they saw fit. We opened with the Glasgow based Art House “Cryptic” at the CCA in March where we even had some people sit through the work twice which was lovely!

The film challenges the audiences preconceived ideas of Highland life and successfully does so throughout. However i'm curious to know how much your preconceptions have changed considering you are submerged in the project far more and for far longer than the audience is?

Emma is originally from the Black Isle and I was artist in residence at the Lighthouse Field Station in 2012 for a project called "Sublime" so we are both familiar with the area but prior to that; shamefully; I had never been that far North. Before I arrived I had expected to find a sleepy sea side town and even though I knew there would be industry and tourism in evidence I had no idea to what extent or how they might exist in relation to each other.

Even for Emma who was raised there because her own focus had shifted she realised she had been tuning out certain things simply because they were so familiar, for instance a Cruise Liner with three thousand passengers berthed across the bay or a huge Oil Rig being towed passed toward the dry dock for refit - these might seem impossible things to ignore but if they are part of the furniture they recede into the background, It was interesting watching the film with a home crowd during its run at Inverness Museum for that very reason. Sometimes it takes pointing a camera at it or putting a microphone to it to reveal (or remind) people of what is already there.

There is a deep water channel running through the Cromarty Firth so it's an important area for shipping, the oil industry and tourism as well as it being home to a large colony of Bottlenose Dolphins and a variety of other wildlife so you have all these different elements coexisting in this one stretch which makes it a good place to assess impacts from these industries as there is this convergence.

My own preconceptions prior to arrival were how terrible this must all be for the animals but of course it's never quite as black and white as that. For instance in discussions with Prof. Paul Thompson at the Field Station he remarked "But what is natural to an animal in the sea? Do they differentiate between a cliff and the harbour wall? and that was a real eye opener. We were very careful while interviewing not to let any of our own bias come across and to make sure we didn't lead the conversations in any way. There is no hiding from the fact documentaries are a construct and artfully shape reality but neither of us had any agenda and approached the whole project from a neutral standpoint.

Although our film is specific to an area of the Highlands I think some of the concerns translate and are probably familiar to anyone from a small community, we are looking forward to it playing at International Film festivals and Galleries outside of Scotland to find out if it does indeed translate.

Sound is a major aspect of Mirror Lands, can you explain the relationship between the audio and visual aspects of the film?

We had been looking to a lot of artists who work with sound creatively for inspiration, people like Cathy Lane, Chris Watson and Yannick Dauby and we were lucky enough to have both Cathy and Chris join us as guest speakers on the opening night, which to have two of our inspirations lend their support to the project was a really big deal for us. This project really allowed us to explore this interest in sound and delve into how sound and music affect image.

We went to great lengths to record and include as much of the actual environmental "sync" sound as possible, this goes back to the conventions of Natural History

Filmmaking where traditionally much of this would be dubbed on later, sometimes from completely different sources but we felt the sounds we were hearing as we were shooting were just so interesting in their own right that we wanted to include these as much as possible. One of the reasons why the film is made up of such lingering shots is to allow you time to tune into these soundscapes.

When the DVD is released there will be an opportunity to experience this further as there is an option to watch the film without music and narration which shows just how much music (in particular) changes the overall experience. There will also be an option to download an audio only version of the film. Our intention from the beginning was to compose the sound in such a way that it would function as a standalone piece in its own right.

There is an element of playfulness to it all, we were keen to avoid being too literal so the things people are describing might not necessarily be matched on screen with the expected image and similarly there are some subtle and playful sonic moments spread throughout.

One of the few things we didn't do ourselves on this project was master the final audio. We worked with a real "artist" sound engineer called Jos Smolders from EarLabs Studio in the Netherlands, he really made the final audio sparkle in all the right places and even though we had recored and mixed things to the best of our abilities the mastering really lifted it significantly.

Were the visual aspects of the film ever inspired by the music or is the music always written after the filming?

In this case the music was written during the edit. We shot on the Black Isle for 4 months and then spent a further four editing and writing the soundtrack back in Glasgow. It was a fairly fluid process and although we weren't scoring scenes in a traditional sense the music was written very much with the footage in mind. Not that we are adverse to starting with the music and editing but it would probably be harder to avoid "cutting to the beat" so to speak. We wrote a lot more music than made it into the final film and had to be careful not to try and shoehorn it in for the sake of it as the idea was always to underscore the film rather than try and dazzle. We also had the luxury of knowing anything that didn't make it in could always go on the soundtrack album and have a life of it's own. We are both great believers in listening to the work itself, it generally lets you know if there is anything else it needs. Our artist friend Steven Hurrel has a phrase he uses which is "cake on cake", it's a great verbal quick check to see if you have been unnecessarily adding things when the job is already done!

You mentioned that projects like Mirror Lands are taking you out of your comfort zone, in a good way. Could you explain what your comfort zone is and how far away from it are you willing to go?

I guess my comfort zone is mural painting and small scale canvas works for gallery exhibition - certainly work that is created away from the public. If I'm left to my own devices I'll happily lock myself away and create with little or no interaction with the

outside world at all!

The last few years I've been gradually making a shift into making work that is the end result of artist residencies where I have been part of an unfamiliar environment or community for an extended period of time. Being part of a community and having to engage and interact is not something that comes easy to me at all so it's been a struggle to overcome my natural hermit instinct! The truth is I simply couldn't have made these works without getting to know and gaining the trust of the local community, be that the ecologists from the Lighthouse Field Station or the local residents we interviewed. Because Mirror Lands was essentially a two person show Emma and I were flailing around outside of our respective comfort zones for almost every second of production as we had to take on and learn so many different things on the fly!

Finally could you tell us about any up and coming projects we can look out for?

My Next project is called "Oscillon Response" a new audio/visual piece based on the work of Ben F Laposky in collaboration with Sanford Museum in Cherokee, Iowa. Laposky was an artist and mathematician who was among the first to create electronic artworks back in the 1950's.

He created a series of incredible photographic based images he dubbed "Oscillons" using a variety of electronic equipment and an Oscilloscope. I find the Oscillons utterly captivating, they have a particular quality about them that is hard to place, they seem both nostalgic and futuristic at the same time. It's still in the early stages of development but at it's heart I'll be creating new compositions based on a selection of eight Oscillons.

These compositions will be a combination of material generated using the Oscillons themselves as a graphical score and straight forward interpretations using a modular synthesiser. It's very exciting and as talked about earlier very nerve racking particularly as you are dealing with someones legacy.

No pressure there then!