

BROADWAY

In the Project Room:

Abbey Williams

Natural Sound

September 6 - October 19, 2024

A single-channel pedestal mounted video, ***Natural Sound***, montages imagery—both still and moving, found and original—outlining an abstract narrative of maternal and collective mourning.

Here, grief and trauma are expressed by proxy. Viral news webpages of a mother orca who remained with her deceased calf for weeks act as a stand-in for the artist's personal stillbirth experience. The narrative extends from the whale in distress to a parrot keeping vigil over its human companion, to a gorilla behind glass yearning to hold a human baby. This journey transforms specific grief into a collective cultural lamentation.

By laying the screen flat, Williams invites viewers to stand over the image and engage with it from different vantage points. Utilizing split- and multi- screen techniques, the imagery accretes meaning in anxious clusters. The computer desktop doom-scrolling is intercut with hands leafing through books of landscapes, shot from above, the hands trace the edge of a cliff and mountain crevasses— what is 2D becomes tactile. Frequently a passing black rectangle interrupts the image, either flattening the depth of field or deepening it as in one moment when it reveals itself to be the window of a car being washed. Williams' continued use of redaction in her work as a mechanism for abstraction is also an insistence of the black space being content, not void, creating new considerations of the image. In this work, one could see it as representing the persistence of Black trauma considering the current shocking statistics of US Black infant mortality.

The sound is either barely perceptible or cacophonous. The drone of brown noise and the sound effect of mic-clipping wind blows through the piece. Along with the titular ambient sound of the artist's studio, featuring snippets of songs by Chance the Rapper, Nine Inch Nails, and a triumphant but anachronous rendition of Joy Division by steel drums. These disparate genres add to the sense of general dissonance, as does a disembodied panicked voice saying “I can't see! I can't see!” set against footage of a darkened cave. This lesser-known sound bite from the film “A Cry in the Dark” returns pathos to the more frequently used punchline “A dingo stole my baby!” from the same film.

Characteristic of Williams' work is what is explicit and what is withheld are often in tension. As the artist's hands and fingers continue leafing, pawing, and tracing the book's horizon lines (retracing steps is a frequent result of PTSD), the material is *handled*, even

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desecrated with increasing agitation. The book pages turn quickly to images of recognizable “mother and child” from popular horror films, operating as a rupture and denouement of the piece. Suddenly the pages are smeared and obscured with poured black paint which in extreme closeup become a portal. Williams’ disembodied hands become lead actors, physically manifesting and processing what can only be felt but is left undescribed.