

ARTISTS' FILM INTERNATIONAL REVIEW INTENSE IMPRESSIONS FROM ELSEWHERE

By Tim Adams – August 27, 2017



A recurring image from *Serpent Rain* at the Artists' Film International
Photograph: Whitechapel Art Gallery

A decade ago, in September 2007, the Whitechapel Gallery closed its doors for two years to expand and renovate its exhibition space. While its physical walls were stripped bare, however, the gallery persisted in spirit by embarking on a unique collaborative programme to establish Artists' Film International, with partners in cities in 15 countries, from Kabul to Tromsø to Buenos Aires. The goal of this collective was to share and extend the craft of film as an artistic medium, and to bring challenging work from around the world to a gallery audience. In years since, the resultant short films, each suggested by one or other of the partner organisations, have been a fixture in the gallery's programme, like vivid messages in a bottle washing up on Whitechapel Road. The films that have been featured – each year has a theme and a pair of films is shown each month – could hardly have been more diverse, but they share an invitation for a certain kind of looking. We are used to our knowledge of the

foreign coming in the 30-second packages of TV news, or in extended fact-heavy documentary. The Whitechapel films champion a different kind of storytelling; intense impressions from elsewhere.

The current pairing of films – each responding to the annual theme of “collaboration” – are representative of the kinds of experience that the collective has explored. They are shown on a loop, and in turn they circle around their themes. The first, *Invocation* (2015), is the work of two Indian artists, Sonal Jain and Mriganka Madhukailya, who work together under the ambitious moniker of the Desire Machine Collective. *Invocation* was made in response to the motifs on a particular devotional textile, sacred to a Krishna cult of the 16th century, woven in silk. Like all the Whitechapel films it asks a question of the gallery goer: can you give yourself up to these arresting images on the screen that don't quite resolve into a story for a quarter



*Field of dreams:
from Invocation*

the Desire Machine Collective
Photograph: Courtesy of the
artists and Project 88, Mumbai

of an hour on this busy London morning? Many viewers step in and drift away. But the film repays attention. It was made on a misty river island on the Brahmaputra river and enacts half-forgotten rituals; men in eagle masks and wearing boar's heads invade the screen in an irregular pageant, summoned apparently by a devotee at prayer. From the surface of the river butterflies and moths emerge and flicker into translucent life, and then hover apparently ecstatically over a brilliant yellow field of rapeseed. If you have ever wondered "What's it like to be a moth?", this film offers some persuasive insights.

In many ways, the film that follows, *Serpent Rain* (2016), makes a perfect double bill with *Invocation*. Again it requires a suspension not of disbelief, but of documentary expectation. A collaboration between the artist Arjuna Neuman and the philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva, it takes its impulse from the discovery of a sunken slave ship, and obliquely examines the margins of life and commerce, the ways that ecosystems feed capitalism. To this end the film dwells for longer than seems comfortable on a series of images – an oil refinery, a forest, a frozen waterfall, the troubled surface of a JMW Turner sea, an estranging underwater seaweed jungle – forcing you to look, and to

make what connections you will, while from time to time the camera returns to a pair of black hands shuffling a tarot deck, and offers phrases of a commentary about the interfaces between geology and organic matter. We are used to seeing arresting images on a loop, gifs that keep on giving, but we expect punchlines and payoffs. *Serpent Rain* doesn't deliver on that front, but it might get under your skin – you may find yourself hearing the drip, drip of doom in the melting ice, or feel yourself "full fathom five" among the weeds of the ocean, or you may not.

The Whitechapel keeps no figures for the attention time given to these films. My guess would be it is quite short. However hard we resist, most of us are in thrall to the seduction of narrative, of beginnings, middles and ends. In September there will be a special celebration of 10 years of the collective, a greatest hits of films, one selected by each of the 15 partners. Highlights will include the Afghani Yama Rahimi's work, in which a sculptor chips away obsessively at tombstones, and Tran Luong's hypnotic self-flagellation with a red flag. At their best such images can be retained on the retina in a way that news footage rarely is. And next year, after "collaboration", the collective will be meditating on an equally timely global theme: truth.