

This is Tomorrow
Rowan Lear, 'Louisa Fairclough: A Song Cycle for the Ruins of a Psychiatric Unit'
14 December 2017

Louisa Fairclough: A Song Cycle for the Ruins of a Psychiatric Unit



Installation view by Oskar Proctor. Courtesy the artist and Danielle Arnaud.

Danielle Arnaud
18 November - 9 December 2017
Review by Rowan Lear

“It is like walking into the abandoned spaces once carnivalised by Raves and finding them returned to depopulated dereliction. Broken glass cracks underfoot. You see faces in the clouds and hear voices in the crackle. Snatches of plaintive vocal skitter through the tracks like fragments of abandoned love letters blowing through streets blighted by an unnamed catastrophe.” Mark Fisher

Unnamed psychic catastrophe is a constant shadow in the work of Louisa Fairclough. Her third solo exhibition at Danielle Arnaud is close and claustrophobic: a shuttered room, a dead fireplace, where daylight plays weakly through small cracks. A web of cables litter the floor, threatening entanglement, disaster, the threshold of the machine.

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In the half-light, dark ribbons of 16mm film shimmer, drawn out from ceiling to floor, from projector to butcher hook and back again. The film emits no image – it was recorded blank – but leaks extended vowels, like open-ended questions. 'FEAR LIFE DEATH HOPE' (2017) – words from the artist's deceased sister's notebook – is sung in glissandi on a sliding scale, increasing in volume and intensity. The room shudders. Is something trapped or trying to escape? Amid the omnipotent rattling of the projectors, relief comes only in the sudden snag of splicing tape.

On the floor above, it's cooler, and a little brighter. A record player and two subwoofers perch, an impromptu audience assembled for a back-projected 16mm film. 'A Rose' (2017) forms an elegy to the psychiatric hospital of the exhibition's title. Ivy, overgrown, dangles from the walls of a ruined building. Roof insulation hangs bedraggled. Former girders and walls are picked out by sunlight. The caged walls of a daylight room remain but window panes are cracked or missing. Loose wiring dangles: everything is suspended here. What once was architecture of restorative order is invaded by disorderly growth, with trailing creepers entering the building's orifices, taking root.

We witness repeated graffiti from more recent visitors: one inconsolable face weeps whitewash from a peeling wall. Ruins cannot be but mournful but the inclusion of footage of the artist's microphone, pushes this beyond mere document toward conversation with a space. From the vinyl dubplate, a voice sings – "lost" – it's somewhere between a high-pitched wail and a persistent lament. At the close of the record, the speakers shiver with unheard static.

Fairclough has long used film as a sculptural material but it is not only an aesthetic choice. The heady grain of the film and other frequent markers of the analogue are always combined with the intricate calibrations required to tension a projector wheel or vinyl turntable. Here is where the analogue and the alchemical meet, a melancholia that begs for transformation, and a process of recovery.

In his description of Burial's eponymous debut studio album in 2006, Mark Fisher recalls audio hallucinations of sampled voices and broken breakbeats: memories of raves. For him, these kinds of haunting "will not allow us to settle for a world governed by capitalist realism." There is something akin here, in Fairclough's vivid externalising of a wounded interior, the commoning of suffering – a refusal to give up the ghost.