

Unseen by my Open Eyes

A cursory account of the body of work produced by Kevin Gaffney over the past few years gives the inevitable impression of restless globe-trotting and compulsive diversity. While he works with photography on occasion, his principal achievement since 2014 has been to write and direct four films, varying in length from five and a half to a little under eighteen minutes, in four very different countries. That these far-flung locations are, in reverse order, Ireland, Iran, Korea and Taiwan, amplifies our appreciation of difference per se as a core concern. So, too, does the fact that the primary language used in each instance is either the native or prevalent tongue of the country in which the film was shot, using only local actors/participants as collaborators—Irish (Gaelic), Farsi, Korean and Mandarin—though all are subtitled in English. Gaffney is no casual exoticist. On the contrary, the cumulative import of these films is to suggest that the obstacles to empathy and mutual understanding thrown up by linguistic and cultural difference may reflect a more fundamental estrangement common to much, if not all, of humanity. This is in spite of the ever more elaborate forms of social organisation and identity production we have designed through the ages, partly in order to mask this distressing condition.

While Gaffney's earliest films prominently featured the artist himself in a variety of guises and situations, any notion of a unitary, autonomous subject has always been alien to the world view evinced by his work; an illusion not to be countenanced, much less an ideal to

be aspired to. The surreal scenarios and darkly perplexing tableaux presented to us in these early films are haunted by a succession of divided or fragmentary selves. More recently, the abstruse but purposive actions performed by these splintering avatars have given way to the speculative ruminations of an array of characters played by others. This further devolution of selfhood is complemented by an increased blurring of boundaries between a given subject and its myriad others, whose domain extends readily from humanity into the animal kingdom and beyond. Yet, at the same time, the psychological and social forces that circumscribe individual consciousness, immuring it in lonely isolation, remain all but inseparable.

In *The Mirror is Dark and Inky*, 2015, a young woman surveys Tehran from a distant height, is driven around the city in silence, or curls up in an armchair, remaining aloof from the group of friends who chatter sociably around a board game close by. The interior monologue we overhear, which may or may not be hers, tells a tale of awkward interspecies intimacy with a melancholic whale with whom the speaker shares a small tub in a triangular bathroom within the confines of her apartment. This testimony gradually gives way to that of an even more introspective young man, alone in secluded woodland, though a significant run over in the soundtrack obscures the distinction between their respective inner voices. He, too, speaks of nested enclosures (the figure of the Russian doll is invoked) and he, too, is a bundle of desire, guilt and sadness, as he imagines slowly dissolving into a morass in which the bounds between man and encompassing nature—the cockroach, mosquito and worm he speaks of in turn, or the clutch of leaves, grass and soil he holds in his open hand—no longer count for much.

A similar concern with transcending boundaries in *Our Stranded Friends in Distant Lands*, 2015, is more obviously inflected by local geopolitics, given its genesis in South Korea. Here, however, in lieu of the bewildering flux of “becoming-animal”, as famously outlined by

the French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari in response to the stories of Kafka, we have a more traditional tapping of the allegorical potential of the animal kingdom; a gambit familiar to readers of Western literature from Ovid to Orwell. The film's opening sequence notes that, in a divided land where the disparity between opposing perspectives and vantage points is crucial, the birds of the air pay a fatal price for making a mockery of national borders. This injustice, it is reported, has been denounced by "a spokesman" from "the Village of Migratory Birds" who adamantly professes his faith in the ultimate endurance of nature beyond nation. The disjointed meditations that follow are parcelled out among male and female human narrators in a patchwork of dramatic visual contrasts between spirited animation and discomfiting immobility, interior monologue and diegetic speech, open and closed eyes. Word and image, voice and vision are cautiously conjoined under the sign of reflection (in the senses of both thoughtful contemplation and automatic mirroring), a tentative reconciliation effected through a shifting series of visual rhymes and verbal references involving the full moon, the human eye, the telescopic (and, by implication, the camera's) lens.

In retrospect, these two short films from 2015 are effectively bookended by two longer films with a looser, more episodic structure. The earlier *Everything Disappears*, 2014, shot in Taipei and deliberately conceived as an exploration of fluid identities, revolves around four characters and the complex, sometimes quarrelsome relationships between them. It opens with the following lines: "Like a spider, I'm waiting. In a vacuum." Later on, different characters or voices will variously wonder about the interior life of a rat, express a preference for being treated like an object, and speculate on the possibility of reversing the flow of time. Meanwhile, the stream of imagery features sundry exertions, abuses and constraints visited upon the human body, while the central section of this seven-chapter film focuses on a young gay man's account of the psychological cost of avoiding compulsory service

in the Taiwanese military by submitting to the state's psychiatric services. (This real-life witness does not appear in the film and his testimony is voiced by an English-speaking actor. See p 54.)

Finally, to describe Gaffney's most recent, and arguably most spectacular film, *A Numbness in the Mouth*, 2016, shot on location in Shackleton's Mill on the outskirts of Dublin, as a homecoming would be to assume a degree of innate belonging, which his work has consistently disavowed. A nineteenth-century water-powered flour mill with a chequered history entwined with that of the emergent Irish Free State, Shackleton's Mill here becomes the stage for a fanciful fiction of an Ireland of the near future in which the bonds between individual and state are even more constricting and punitive than they have been in reality in the past. A garishly dressed, inordinately ebullient government mouthpiece informs us that, due to overproduction, all citizens are henceforth expected to consume at least five pounds of flour per day. She introduces herself as Gráinne, a common enough native name these days but also a pun on the Irish for "grain", and suggests various modes of consumption, which the citizenry might find to their taste.

Playing the biddable, put-upon sidekick to this officious spin doctor is the more Biblically named Lily, an innocent, mute throwback to the dark ages of a voiceless labour force. Gráinne is all talk whereas Lily is all action, their vaguely complementary routines having no manifest significance or appreciable effect. Their compulsiveness is symptomatic rather of an alienating, bureaucratic, militarised system that contrives to be both wasteful and self-consuming. In the context of the ongoing evolution of Kevin Gaffney's oeuvre, their fruitless endeavours are also emblematic of that tortuous discordance between language and the body, between the semantic and the somatic, which has been among his work's most persistent characteristics, both formally and thematically, from its beginnings less than a decade ago.