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Jen Clarke (Robert Gordon University)

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Audio version: <https://soundcloud.com/lux-moving-image-503964893/jen-clarke-on-phoebe-banks-girl-in-a-pub-toilet>

Introduction

We commissioned anthropologist, artist, and curator Jen Clarke to respond to Phoebe Banks' work 'Girl in a Pub Toilet' (2024). 'Girl in a Pub Toilet' was presented on the LUX Scotland website from March – April 2024 followed by an online discussion event with Phoebe. The work was commissioned as part of LUX Scotland's Aberdeen programme which offered an emerging artist working with moving image the opportunity to develop a new work with support from LUX Scotland. You can read or listen to Jen read the text below.

Dr. Jennifer (Jen) Clarke is an Aberdeen based anthropologist, artist, and curator. An Associate Professor at Gray's School of Art, her interdisciplinary background spans art, anthropology, and artistic research, with degrees from Glasgow, Goldsmiths, Aberdeen, and Sint Lucas School of Art, Antwerp. Jen's art practice currently involves transmodal forms, montaging words and images across languages, producing performative moving image works and installations. Areas of specialisation in her artistic research include the integration of visual art and social practices as responses to (and interventions in) environmental politics and related academic knowledge production, emphasising interdisciplinarity through collaborative and speculative approaches. She also collaborates on and leads transnational socially engaged art projects in the UK and Japan, where, in 2022, she held a Visiting Professorial Research Fellowship, to develop her project Feminist Hospitalities. Jen co-convoked ANTART, the European Association of Social Anthropologists 'Anthropology and the Arts' Network (2020–22) and has been Chair of the Scottish Sculpture Workshop (SSW) since 2018.

Notes on "Girl in a Pub Toilet" by Phoebe Banks

'Girl in a Pub Toilet' is a moving image artwork that explores grief, and the fleeting intimacies of stranger-friendships, with humour, garish lighting, and a unique visual approach. The narrative, voiced by the artist,

is the backbone of the work, a poetic but predictable anecdote, the story guiding viewers through this remembering of her encounter with "the girl". It resonates with me, and many, I'd imagine, bringing to mind those moments where the guardedness of everyday life becomes suspended, usually at night, and often when we're "suitably steaming".

The decision to use the artist's own voice might have been partly practical, but it enhances the work's authenticity, in the sense of being emotionally appropriate, and bringing humour, echoing her earlier work. This voice, like the carefully crafted language, is casual, yet visceral, as well as self-deprecating; and, like much down-the-pub storytelling, really about the teller. From the very beginning, there is tactility, references to touch, suggesting a shared vulnerability, and creating an opening to our own memory and imagination: from brushing past "the girl" to holding hands, in red-faced, snotty, drunken, shared, competitive, grief.

This is a liminal space, evoking both discomfort and familiarity in me. The warmth of her voice, what we're hearing, does a couple of things simultaneously: First, it contrasts sharply with what we are shown — a sticky-floored (in my imagination), harshly lit-haze of a pub bathroom, images from which I can almost hear the buzz of the fluorescent lighting. On second thought, though, it's complementary: The voice, is playful, if not facetious, matter of fact, down to earth, a self-deprecating humour of the sort often identified as 'Scottish', noting her own sense of competition in grief. Who's loss wins? The voice is a good listener, too; viewers can put themselves in her shoes, in that space of piecing together slanted memories, witness to sorrows filtered through their own, in a way that produces an echo of loss. Again, it's not really about 'the girl'. Here, half submerged in our own recollections, we might find the guardedness of everyday life, suspended; a reminder of moments where vulnerability is expressed, not-quite- in public.

Bringing our imagination is important, since the visuals offer only, and something other, than context, or detail. Visually, the film shifts, for the first few minutes, between still lifes — not nature-morts, fruit and flowers, but instead toilets and sinks, tiled walls, glass, steel and stone, some pink, bruised black, American whites; a version of sterility, oddly interrupted by the edge of a leather sofa (after all, this is a place of safety, temporary encounter, and various stickinesses; this is the 'ladies' toilet after all — though this qualifier is not explicit, it's obvious). It is also arguably coded as 'working-class' — which could be subject of another, different, essay. But at the least, yes, it is meant 'for everyone'.

But these extended frames mainly emphasise the partial nature of our view (any view), what we are being invited to look at, here, from an angle. It makes us take pause. These still shots evoke particular smells, too — for me, soap, dampness, clashing perfumes and cleaning products — and maybe a sense of a lack of control and the barriers alcohol helps us cross. This rather oblique geometry perhaps tells us something rather about

memory, about how we might remember, in fragmented glimpses. It feels to me like a forensic deconstruction of memory, and serves as a way of opening ourselves up to someone else's grief, our gaze fixed on something beyond the immediate.

Towards the end, what we see transitions, the static pauses and weird geometries of empty bathroom element begin to be blurred, as we move to a more surreal fish tank scene, perhaps marking a shift from memory to a peculiar kind of shame. There is something gentle, of course, about the underwater imagery, the flickering yellow and black of a single fish exploring the tank. This ending, while visually captivating, for me introduces another kind of suspension, a poignant departure from the earlier intimacy brought by our own imaginations, to a quiet sense of disappointment and critique, mirroring the narrator's own feelings. This transition perhaps reflects the complexity and self-doubt that often accompany our attempts to understand ourselves, our own grief.

Both this use of still frames and the narrator's voice give the work a raw quality.

This work blends the tactile with the surreal, offering a nuanced, poetic exploration of grief, friendship, and the spaces we inhabit, crossing thresholds into different emotional times and spaces, fragmented glimpses into memory from odd angles.