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Whitstable Biennale 2016

Kent's festival of art has grown up, but it hasn't lost its spark

by [Mark Sheerin](#) | Thursday, 09 June 2016



Dirty postcard: Marcia Farquhar combines installation, performance, and a new ice cream flavour

© Marcia Farquhar

As if to signal a coming of age, this year's Whitstable Biennale has a theme: *The Faraway Nearby*. And so for the first time artists have a guiding idea with which to post-rationalise their work. Until now, the 10-day festival of visual art has staked out broad territory with performance, film and emerging talent. So perhaps an equally broad theme was needed to ensure that works comprised of fan letters, a lecture tour in a car park and a new flavour of ice cream could cohere as a successful biennale. And as we gear up for a referendum about our place in Europe and consider the ongoing refugee crisis, the geographical leap promised by the eighth edition of Whitstable Biennale is a timely one.

If one work hits the nail most squarely on the head, it is Sarah Wood's 20-minute film essay *Boat People* (pictured below). This compares the Vietnamese exodus of the late 1970s with the refugees of today, taking their chances in the Med. What results is an exhaustive history of British seafaring and migration, suggesting that, thanks to [our island status](#), we should look outward rather than inward. Wood's film was staged in a cosily hospitable beach hut on the harbour.



“ A tablet the size of a saucy postcard replays a seaside scenario in which one holidaymaker cleans ice cream from the crotch of another ”

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But while *Boat People* cast its net wide for found footage and well-researched fact, another film in this year's biennale found inspiration much closer to home. The *Isle of Grain* is the industrialised tip of a peninsula in Medway, Kent. It has a small, falling population and a demographic which inspired artist Mikhail Karakis to work with half a dozen local teenagers to produce a contemporary art rap video. Remote UK villages are a world away from South Central LA or Staten Island and so the gangster mannerisms fail to convince. That is, however, largely the point of Karakis's demonstration that in the digital age, for all the rustic beauty of Grain, the youthful imagination is an urban one.

One might say that the digital age also produces creeped-out claustrophobia. In the town's lecture theatre, Webb Ellis have borrowed YouTube footage of films designed to give you ASMR (an Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response). These clips feature intimate, softly spoken monologues, which will either make you tingle or run for the hills. And if these weren't spooky enough, the film conjured the 3,000-mile journey of eels between the Sargasso Sea to the River Esk, plus the dystopian screen-filled parlours found in [Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*](#). Installed along with two red velvet armchairs and a lone Siamese fighting fish in a tubular tank, the diverse elements of this work might make most sense if you've recently read Bradbury's novel.

Whitstable Museum houses a film with a much tighter range of subjects. *Lossy Ecology* by Louisa Martin is a looping, impressionistic black and white film with ambient sound design. Like the ASMR videos quoted by Webb Ellis, it calls forth a strong, irrational response. Martin has approximated the experience of [autism](#) with an atmospheric piece, as intriguing as it is disturbing. Without narrative or narrator, we are left to contemplate fuzzy snatches of traffic noise and a floral arrangement filmed in negative. It offers what one imagines to be real neurological insight into a frightening condition.



Another disorientation piece, in another beach hut, is a sound piece by Trish Scott. Scott has been to a pair of psychics to ask for predictions about her forthcoming work. And while in actual fact this work turned out to be this 15-minute field recording on two channels, the two psychics fall over one another to offer readings that are as contradictory as they are ridiculous.

We are by now at some remove from "the faraway nearby", but one traditional way of bridging distances is to write a letter. Artist and writer Alice Butler overcomes social separation by writing fan letters to personal heroes. These include fellow writers Kathy Acker and Cookie Mueller, plus a notorious [Victorian](#) kleptomaniac. The result is a set of four artist books which are available for perusal and, it is said, stealing, on the High Street, at Whitknits craft shop and Clarke's florists (**pictured above right**).

Marcia Farquhar has meanwhile travelled back in time to bring a film installation, performance and a piece of relational art to Sundae Sundae ice cream parlour. Her installation is on a tablet the size of a saucy postcard and replays a seaside scenario, drawing on family history, in which one holidaymaker cleans ice cream from the crotch of another (**main picture**). Meanwhile the store itself is stocking a new root beer ice cream flavour, while Farquhar is on hand to relate her family history to the history of prohibition.



Off-the-wall performance is never in short supply at the Whitstable Biennale, but in a town of just over 30,000, venues for art are scarce. My personal highlight from 2016 was a performance which manages to unearth the history of an unremarkable car park and transmute it into weird and wonderful

gold (**pictured above left**). Richard Layzell's performative lecture situates us in a former reservoir, not far from the destination of the first ever combustion engine, and within a story of the elements according to Empedocles. It culminates in a tirade against anthropomorphism and a chance to launch soft toys from a custom-made catapult.

Although Layzell has completed a beautiful excavation of an arbitrary tract of land, his piece is right at home in a biennale that maintains both an experimental approach and a refreshingly light touch. The grand new theme might be a sign that Whitstable has grown up, but it hasn't lost its playfulness, and for that we should be

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