Here's a man walking along a beach, his metal-detector swaying gently from side to side following an invisible current, pulling him this way and that across sandy saltwater rivulets. He's talking about eels. They come from Sargasso Sea. The eels travel over 3,000 miles to get to Europe, where they begin their transmutation from saltwater to freshwater fish. They change colour from glass-clear
The works that root the Biennale in its seaside location offer a firm (if eccentric) ground upon which the festival can continue a rhizomic exploration of a theme that reaches out towards other lands and other cultures.

Island (2015), a film by Becca Voelcker, presents the everyday life of a family on the remote sub-tropical Japanese island of Ishigaki, Okinawa Prefecture, following children’s pageants, traditional dance classes and tea ceremonies. These scenes show a different culture, but one that shares a common sentiment: that of belonging to something, to somewhere.

Ideas of tradition, history, change and uncertainty come together in Sarah Wood’s Boat People (2016), an essay film in ten parts. Wood uses the form of moving image to explore the movement and migration, of humans, where the perception of what is near or far away can be manipulated by the digital image. While you sit on a low wooden box in a dark shed, staring into a screen, a voice says to you, “Welcome.” It says, “Sea monsters flail and snarl… the sea goes still. That was then.” And continues, “We set the table, we open the doors to our home… Revelation comes from the generosity of a welcome. Welcome.”

In recent years, Kent County Council has seen more than 1,500 unaccompanied child refugees reach its shores having fled countries razed by conflict, just 40 of whom were temporarily housed in Whitstable’s former Ladesfield Care Home in 2015. The home closed in January this year. Whitstable Biennale’s approach towards the current
issues of migration is handled sensitively (both for refugees escaping conflict and Kent residents) by presenting works that evoke varying senses of homeliness and comfort, loneliness and displacement.

Whitstable Biennale continues through 12 June 2016.

8 June 2016

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