

artists within a working landscape; the sea, the harbour, the oyster restaurants working in tandem within a micro-economy that has waxed and waned, but certainly for a long time has been in a state of change.

Each day of the Biennale begins with an hour's live reading of Rebecca Solnit's text 'The Faraway Nearby', hosted in a temporary café space in the Horsebridge Arts Centre. Volunteers read aloud, while other listeners sit around a large shared table. The reading is not reverential, while the room is hushed it is not silent, the café keeps functioning, conversations carry on, but it is a small moment of solemnity and ritual. The reading becomes almost a backdrop from which people can tune in and out when needed. The title of the text comes from Georgia O'Keefe's letter sign-offs, invoking the presence of those at a distance by foregrounding their absence. 'The Faraway Nearby' also forms the thematic, overarching title for the entire festival. For the first time in its history, the 8th Whitstable Biennale has a theme: The presence of absence.

Solnit opens her work of creative non-fiction by suggesting that "Stories are compasses and architecture". Stories are what we build ourselves on and how we navigate the "milky-way of experience", helping to bracket experience and connect with other stories to build wider narratives. Kent, a curious mixture of liberal, creative migrations and the front-line against a perceived European and refugee threat, is a pertinent place to hold a festival of thought in which the central theme is one of travelling through landscapes connecting the personal stories of the journey to the immediate political. And many of the works within the programme address travel, difference, instability, fantasy, threat from those nearby who are threatened by those from afar, fear and the root of fear - which if we understood at all we might find referendum consensus rather than division. This is a tension, a juxtaposition - understandably heightened by current political context - that the organisers have handled deftly and with care.

Their selection of films provides a rich context for the festival's manifesto. A reel of short films in the Arts Centre transports the viewer to different parts of the globe. Two films both called 'Island' examine communities in islands off South Korea and Japan and manage to be equally funny and moving in their quiet, contemplative shots. Another, 'The Blind Labourer' by Jessica Sarah Rinland draws links between whale hunting and tree logging from the perspective of those working at the centre of the trades. A third is shot from within an Oriental Silk importer in downtown LA, the silk seller, Kenneth Wong, linking his trade to the history of immigration, both personal and historical.

While the packed agenda - not to mention the concurrent rich fringe festival 'Whitstable Satellite' - means a uniform theme is impossible and undesirable, the works from the Biennale programme that I saw on a sunny, fresh Monday seemed to correspond coherently with one another and to their positioning within the town. 'Parlor Walls' is a film and sound installation by collaborators Webb-Ellis, held in the lecture hall of the public library whose original parquet floor and velvet covered armchairs contribute to a surreal Lynchian atmosphere. The screens show an abstract dance performance, the history of the eel and an unknown body drifting down a river, accompanied by a soundscape that takes the viewer to another moment in time while also retaining an awareness of the present, offering the experience of parallel moments all at once.

By the harbour are the works of Trish Scott and Sarah Wood, a sound and film installation respectively. The two installations both speak to the interior life we have when we think about others, and the sense of displacement that can be experienced when trying to locate our own story within a wider narrative. Wood's concern is with 21st century homelessness and traditions of seafaring. The notion of Britain as a lost island, possibly soon to be politically adrift, exists within our history and is something we should again be wary of. Are we making ourselves 'homeless' in the rush for independence? Trish Scott's haunting and funny work, meanwhile, retells predictions made by psychics who attempted to 'read' her future artwork, never guessing that they themselves were to become the materials at the heart of it. Sitting in a small, hot, dark cabin, the noises of the town blanked out, hearing every turn and inflection in Scott's voice, I thought about how we are constantly facing alienation from our own culture. The positioning of this contemporary art Biennale in Whitstable continues to disrupt the identity of the place. While the programme plays upon its inherent disparity, it makes it about more than just the tensions between classes and political views - it only makes it weirder.