

BALLON ROUGE

Helen Anna Flanagan
A Room with a View
December 14, 2023 – February 17, 2024

Ballon Rouge presents “A Room with a View,” a solo exhibition by Helen Anna Flanagan. The works in this exhibition exist in a constellation centered around the idea of vacation - as an entrance point (and a form of escape) to hallucinate and dive deeper into alternative worlds and landscapes. Extending from the photographic cliche of the holiday snapshot and the tourist postcard, the exhibition reflects on the processes involved in image-making, representation, projection and interpretation. The works use the motif of water and sun, alongside saturated color and texture so that the gallery becomes an island, a removed and contained space to be inhabited at a leisurely pace. The exhibition premieres her new video *The Gap* (2023), as well as her video *Deeply, Madly* (2022), and several new analogue photographs and prints *Splish, Splash, Splosh* (2023).

The Gap (2023) was born out of a series of workshops held with students during a residency at Instituto Buena Vista on the island of Curacao. The film involves two queer protagonists, Jane and Rey, who find a message in a bottle on the beach. “A room with a view, the gap in your head.” They read the message and try to decipher its meaning. The conversation leads them towards personal reflections and associative places when they decide to pen something back. The two close friends slowly explore the island whilst reflecting on the intricate nuances of looking, the subjective nature of framing reality and the imaginative power of language to shape understanding.

The workshops that Flanagan held involved a set of activities and introduced new playful techniques to ignite the imagination and help create new and unexpected content, using experience and language as malleable tools. These exercises helped the students and the artist to experiment with language in both public and private space and to explore the friction between interior and exterior worlds. The activities were centered around the role of fiction to challenge and disrupt narratives to create alternative realities, and to investigate physical spaces, as well as inner and imaginary spaces. As such, the island itself became an environment to both reflect and project. Flanagan was drawn to how the island occupies a significant space in literature and how they are more than just scenic locations; they are literary devices whose natural boundaries help shape and contain narratives. Stories play a role in affecting our own identities, kinships, and the communities and societies we're a part of; throughout the residency she got to

understand the context of Curacao through an alternative lens, away from but aware of the tourist representation of the place.

Splash, Splash, Splosh (2023) is a set of analogue photographs that present leisurely landscapes and fluid surfaces – oceanic currents and bodily movement are captured through a prism lens filter. The analogue photographs were a way for Flanagan to physically interrogate and explore her surroundings, especially the many bodies that carelessly float, dunk and dive into bodies of water. She was interested in this aquatic mass – of multiplicity, repetition and altered perspectives such as reflection, submersion and photographic distortion. The photographs become an abstracted sequence, almost painterly, and experiment with light, color and refraction through the notion of the 'holiday snapshot'. The bold coloured frames and passepartout are paired with text based screen prints that playfully punctuate the space with watery sounds as represented in the images. This series, alongside the video The Gap was a way for Flanagan to revisit her background in photography and could be considered a love-letter to her youth, an important and revelatory phase in her life that ignited a desire to engage with the world around her and would encourage encounters with the experiential. The camera was used as an extension, an apparatus to explore technically, formally and emotionally the relationship that oneself has to an image with regards to memory, place and time.

Deeply, Madly (2022) is a short film exploring shifting characterisation and alternating perspectives. The film revolves around the main protagonist Sheila, who is burdened by an irrational fear of being pushed onto the metro tracks when she commutes to her job in a night shop in Charlois, Rotterdam. She often muses on what it is to 'fall.' To fall flat, heavily in love, deep into sleep, or into a holiday pool that time on a faraway Greek Island at 2am. Within the film, bodies alternate from the darkness of late winter in a local nightshop, to an outdoor swimming pool on one of the hottest days during the summer. Bodies become abstracted floating forms that bob quietly up-and-down. Young excitable shapes suddenly jolt and splash from diving boards like bombs. The ocean from afar rolls in on itself and dances back-and-forth with tidal compulsion. Ice-cubes melt in tall glasses and merge with their watery surroundings in forced camaraderie. A tear-duct encourages a wet eye to burst, leaving a small snail trail of relief on a sunburnt cheek. Deeply, Madly is an unhealthy obsession with bodies and emotions, all that succumb to gravitational forces. The script for Deeply, Madly was partly inspired by Werner Fassbinder's movie Beware of a Holy Whore (1961) and Zadie Smith's short story The Lazy River (2017). Both of which use the holiday resort as a site to reflect on human relationships and the inertia produced by events. The holiday resort is a space of leisure, inactivity, idleness, boredom and suspension — of trying to avoid thinking about the horrors of the world. This prolonged stasis was a springboard to explore the dynamics of the characters and their latent reflections and relations.

Flanagan often uses observed human incidents as the starting point for her work. She combines real events and experiences into fictitious narratives to produce video, installation and performance. By constructing and imagining scenarios, often making use of the category of the absurd, she looks to investigate social structures and the political

subtext of the everyday, focusing on affects and emotions, labor and the body. Flanagan's videos are often informed by the environments that she is temporarily situated within, interested in the systems through which social experience is presented, transformed and consumed. Flanagan has previously worked in different environments in order to examine the ways in which different cultural, socio-political, and geographical contexts informs her output as an artist and to explore a range of psychosocial phenomena, such as group formation and dissolution; the role of affects and language; social inclusion and exclusion; labor and leisure; and conflict as an integrating process. How we take our place and act as social beings is underpinned by how we construct and articulate our understanding of ourselves and others, both privately and collectively, and in her work she examines conflicting power relations, anxieties, desires and fantasies.

Flanagan considers the spaces that she films in as edited-spaces — stages where different behaviors are embodied and performed. The works themselves rely on the notion of the edit as a formal structure, with aspects of the work meticulously planned, considered and constructed with a focus on arrangement, sequencing and rhythmic sensibility. The films always employ a visual and symbolic language — objects, bodies and environments often merge to suggest something else. The figure of the fly, for instance, has been a recurring motif that returns. The fly references the fly on the wall documentary genre from 1970's Britain, a documentary strategy that captured 'real' behavior by allowing the camera to continuously run. In a way then, we, the viewer, become the fly on the wall in this "Room With A View."

Helen Anna Flanagan (b. Birmingham, UK) is an artist working in video, performance and installation. A selection of solo exhibitions includes IKOB Museum of Contemporary Art, CENTRALE I lab, Atelier Arthur Rogiers, V2_ Lab for Unstable Media and bb15. Her work has been presented in group exhibitions including Museum M, Focal Point Gallery, WIELS Centre for Contemporary Art, Aspex Gallery, Kunsthall Gent, Netwerk Aalst, IMAI – inter media art institute, M HKA, CAMPO Victoria, MOMA Odessa, among others. Her films have been presented at a number of festivals including International Film Festival Rotterdam (NL), Aesthetica Film Festival (UK), Sharjah Film Platform (AE), Lo Schermo Dell'arte Film Festival (IT), Proyector Plataforma de Videoarte (SP), Go Short International Film Festival (NL), November Film Festival (UK), among others. Her work was awarded the IKOB Feminist Art Prize (2019), the VISIO Young Talent Acquisition Prize (2020), a fellowship with Needcompany (2021) and the second prize of Art Contest Brussels (2021)