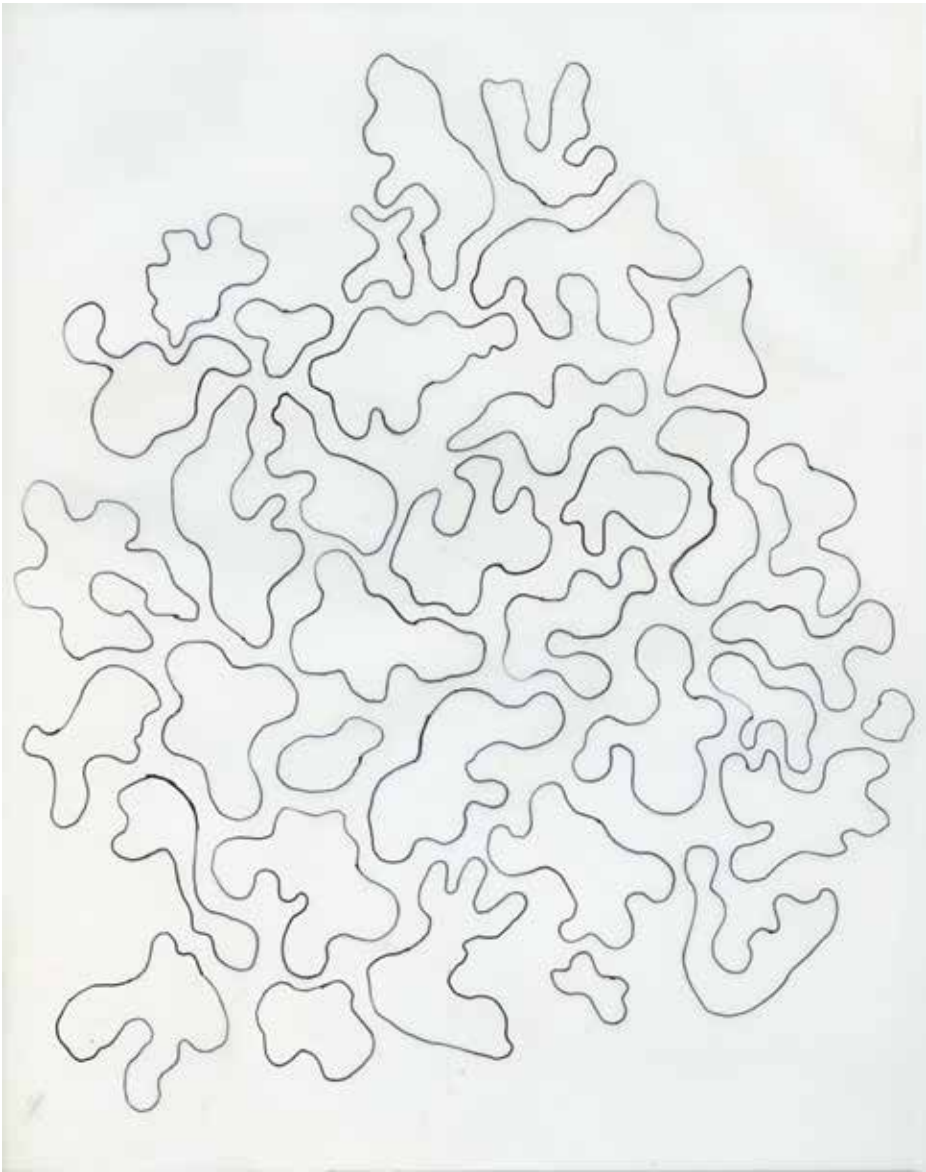




One New Work

**Nicole Kelly
Westman**



Above: Nicole Kelly Westman, *scanned process drawing*, 2017

One New Work

Nicole Kelly Westman

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The Cuculoris and the Curtain in Nicole Kelly Westman's Films

by Nancy Tousley

The juxtaposition of two films in Nicole Kelly Westman's installation *Pastoral | Calamity* (2019) creates a visual and aural tone poem⁽¹⁾ on the intermittent stages of grief and mourning. Projected into the cocoon-like darkness of a gallery, *for every sunset, we haven't seen* (2019) and *for nights bathed in sodium vapour* (2019) write their poetry with light and sound. A fluctuating stream of moving images held in a seemingly back-lit rectangle plays across the soft folds of a large curtain. Sounds from outside and life on the street fill the soundtracks. The room has a domestic feel. Two chairs are offered to viewers who want to sit down and take it in. The camera's point of view is the artist's point of view and, in a second doubling of vision, the camera's point of view becomes the viewer's point of view as the seer becomes absorbed by the work. It's as if the viewer is looking out a window through the artist's eyes.

Westman's films, at seven and 12 minutes, are short and made with the Super-8 system, one that is closely associated with both amateurs and artists. Among artists her work finds kinship with Canadian experimental filmmakers such as Ellie Epp and the multimedia artists Julia Feyrer and Tamara Henderson, all based in Vancouver, and Montreal filmmaker Caroline Monnet. Westman's images are set in place of music to evocative scores of sounds collected in field recordings — wind, motorcycle,

train, helicopter, rain, thunder, the clacking heels of a person running — composed by her frequent collaborator Kurtis Denne.

The *modus operandi* of experimental or Avant-garde filmmaking is to overrule the mechanisms of the camera eye in favour of expressive vision.⁽²⁾ Most often, in addition to working with 8 mm or 16 mm film, this involves using the camera and its materials and processes against their specifications. Techniques of this kind might include holding and moving the camera by hand; speeding up the motor or slowing it down while recording; over- or under-exposing the film; photographing through fog, rain, gels, unbalanced lights; using daylight film at night or vice versa and filming in low-key light.

Dawn and dusk are the indistinct hours of half-light in which the senses and perceptions of time and place are prone to confusion. In *for every sunset, we haven't seen* (2019) or *for nights bathed in sodium vapour* (2019), which are looped together here for the first time, day and night merge into a dreamlike atmosphere in which time is suspended in not-day and not-night. No narrative, no character, no plot intervenes or explains. The sun seen through a gel looks most like the moon. The moon becomes indistinguishable from a sodium vapour streetlamp. It is taken as given that montage makes legible the visual poetry of these images



Nicole Kelly Westman, *for every sunset we haven't seen* (still), 2019, 8mm digitally transferred film, 7:15 minutes

and that loss is a condition universally felt. What sense these films make is existential and emotional; it is also resonantly personal.

Westman films through the lens of subjectivity. Although her subject is intangible, un-filmable except by substitution, she frames it in a setting based on her own physical and psychic space. Landscape as a mirror of the human psyche is a Romantic trope and no stranger to later art histories. Throughout her films, Westman immerses the viewer in what she sees, offering us aesthetic correlatives of her feelings: repeating images of light falling through tree branches, sheer-curtained windows, tinted images of trees, expanses of foliage, opaque red curtains, shadow play, glowing orbs and rocks amid water.

"I know now that my mourning will be *chaotic*," Roland Barthes writes in *The Mourning Diaries*,⁽³⁾ on the seventh day following his mother's death. The chaos arises from within the mourner who experiences an "indeterminacy of the senses."⁽⁴⁾ Westman also feels and portrays this sensory confusion of day and night, up and down, vertical and horizontal, stable and unsteady, real and unreal, which makes one's new place in the world hard to navigate. The opening shots of *for every sunset, we haven't seen*, the most meditative of the two films, are dreamy pools of trembling light. From a moment of calm, a jump cut to the window presages a storm that comes up quickly, gains intensity, climaxes and subsides to restored calm. The more turbulent *for nights bathed in sodium vapour* begins with looking up into the



Nicole Kelly Westman, *for nights bathed in sodium vapour* (stills), 2019, 8mm digitally transferred film, 12:02 minutes

windblown canopy of a tree in a shot that swings more than 180 degrees to throw the world off balance. Then a tumult of images ensues like a fevered dream.

Westman uses a number of effects, some already mentioned, both to evoke feeling and to give rich visual texture to the film, in tandem with motions that mirror the “jerks and surges” of unhappiness that Barthes describes.⁽⁹⁾ She speeds up and slows down the film, executes dizzying vertical pans, holds gels in front of the lens, switches colour from hot to cool to dark as night, double exposes the film, jump cuts, photographs in low-key light, leaves in the scratches, dust and light flares, and along with tilting and swinging the hand-held camera, runs with it bobbing in her hands. Within the restless montage, a lone plane flies upward into a dark cloudy sky and a tumbleweed skittles and spins at the mercy of the wind. The soundtrack builds to an anxiety-producing tension that, like grief, doesn't end. The film itself doesn't end so much as stop when the spooled celluloid runs off the reel.

The curtain functions both as an object, a screen for the projection, and a metaphorical image that repeats in the films. Slices of reality, uncovered and in focus, appear sporadically through

narrow vertical openings in the filmed image of a curtain. It is a veil whose presence registers the separation between the real world on the outside of the room and the subjective responses of the aggrieved projected onto it from inside. Made from a photographer's printed muslin backdrop, the curtain also makes a direct reference to photography and film that reveals these supposedly indexical mediums to be the magical and duplicitous agents of fictions. When the curtain is blown aside or slightly open, reality rushes in, but for Westman this is just another of the perceptual conceits that film and photography perform.

In its essence every film is a special effect of still photography, animated by projection at 24 frames per second, which contains many other special effects. One of the partially revealed images to appear through separated curtains in *for nights bathed in sodium vapour* is a cuculoris. A simple device used in lighting for theatre, film and still photography, the cuculoris is basically a stencil that shapes light and shadow. The stencil is cut into a stiff material that simultaneously casts a shadow and allows light to pass through it in a pattern. Film noir cinematographers favoured the effect to create shadow silhouettes, venetian blind shadows and the effects of sunlight or

moonlight passing through tree branches and windows. For the cuculorises she uses in the films Westman makes tracings of light, cast by sunlight or sodium vapour streetlamps, which she cuts out of plywood, zebrawood or cedar to create the natural effects of dappled light shining through leaves. Moving images of illumination found in the world, they parallel to the moving images made by light shining through projected celluloid film.

One might say that for Westman the cuculorises and the curtain present the crux of the poetics of film, the projections of its illusions, and their interplay of fiction and reality. The cuculorise was the inspiration for the films in *Pastoral | Calamity* even where the device is not put to its intended use. The quivering pools of light at the beginning of for every sunset we haven't seen were made by light falling through a window that was reflected by a mirror into the lens of the camera. Westman made her first cuculorise for the installation, *Rose, Dear* (2016), in the Walter Phillips Gallery Satellite Space at the Banff Centre. This cuculorise fronted a lightbox and had a poem inscribed on the wood — “it smells of sage out here like an old friend.” A film was screened on a nearby monitor and fir trees outside cast long shadows across the floor through coloured gel that

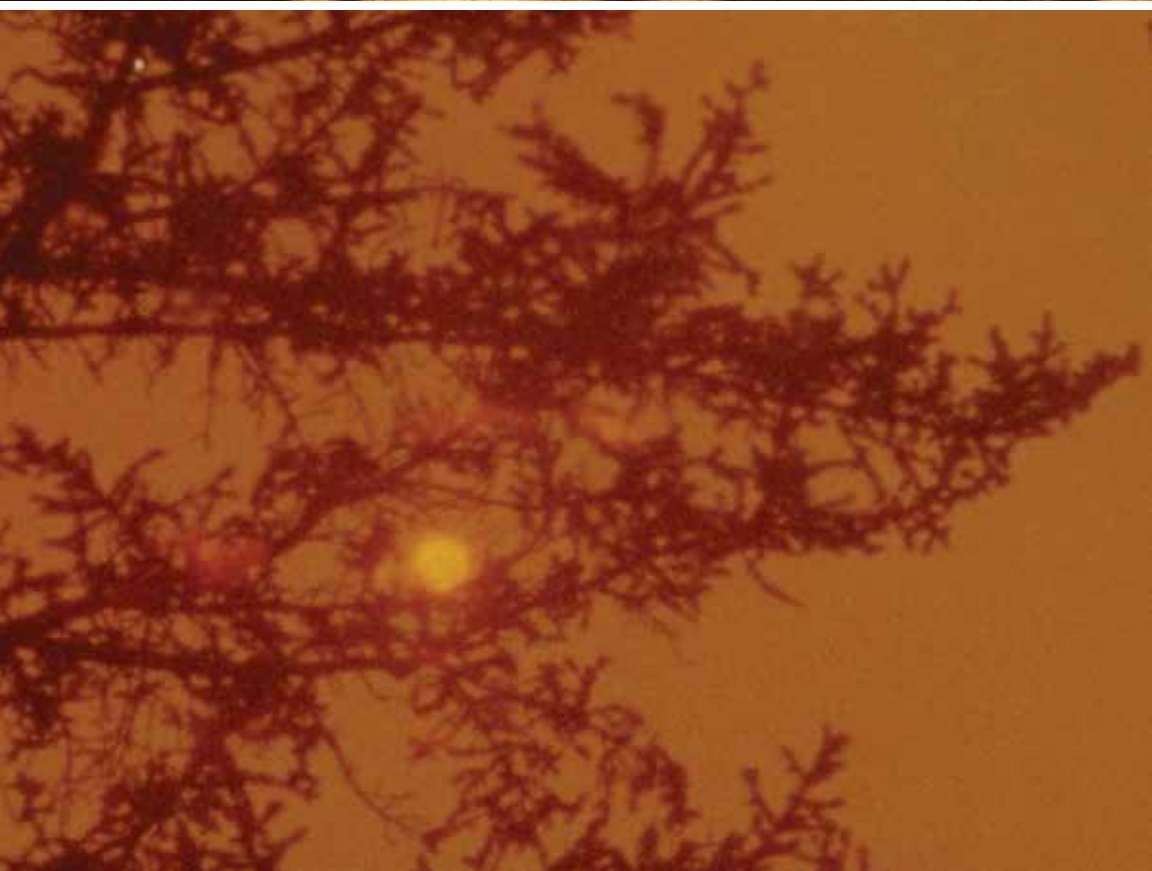
covered large windows, an architectural curtain of glass extending from floor to ceiling. The various effects of light and shadow in the installation, elements of works that follow, united the place that Westman invoked in the film with the site of the installation, adding a layer of the real world to the world conjured by photography and memory.

faux light falling on drawn drapes (2018), shown in the exhibition *Fulhame's Map* at the Nanaimo Art Gallery in British Columbia, fused the effects of mottled light created with a cuculorise and the object upon which they were projected to produce a shimmering light-filled illusion. Technically it is a still image, rather than a film, but its matrix, a pale-pink satin/silk curtain, is a fluid material that embodies movement. To make the illusion, Westman set up a “hot light” on each side of the camera. In front of each light she mounted a cuculorise and in front of each cuculorise a coloured gel. Photographing the light projected through two sets of cuculorises and a rotation of Rosco coloured gels, she completed seven rolls of medium-format film from which came the images she had printed digitally on eight silk curtains.

Following *faux light falling on drawn drapes*, a curtain becomes the surface on which Westman projects the films

Nicole Kelly Westman, *for nights bathed in sodium vapour* (stills), 2019, 8mm digitally transferred film, 12:02 minutes





in a series of installations that appeared in rapid succession: *for every sunset, we haven't seen* at the Dunlop Gallery, Regina, Sask. (March, 2019) and the Critical Distance Gallery, Images Festival, Toronto (April, 2019), and *for nights bathed in sodium vapour* at Western Front, Vancouver (May, 2019), in the installation *cuculoris*, a time machine for shadows. In the Naniamo exhibition faux light falling on drawn drapes were hung in doorways, with an opening in the centre, to welcome viewers across two thresholds in the gallery. At Western Front it was seen as one long continuous curtain.

The installation *Pastoral | Calamity* includes two films, two mirror-and-gel backed cuculorises, two cuculoris drawings on yellow tracing paper, the photographer's backdrop curtain and replicas of two modernist chairs. Westman made the tracings in the light falling through a lilac tree in Calgary. The drawings make a direct connection to place. The films are direct impressions of personal loss. Although they are rooted in the memory of what the grieving subject undergoes, they appear as if the feelings were fresh, happening in real time. This immediacy is the illusion of motion pictures and indexical photography, whose reality and artificiality are the installation's context. Darkness and light filtered through moving images dissemble in favour of the illumination, both actual and conceptual, that turns them into poetry. Kaja Silverman writes

that "the human psyche is another of the places where the photographic image develops."⁶ The psyche's grief can be developed in discontinuous images that flow past as if in a stream of consciousness; moving images can be read visually and shared as *if they were happening*. In a well-wrought poem, and in Westman's *Pastoral | Calamity*, a work whose subject is photography as much as grief, the means and the message are inseparably bound.

Notes

1. "Tone poem" most often refers to an orchestral composition inspired by an extra-musical idea, story or mood to which the title alludes. As a non-narrative film style, it was pioneered in feature-length films by Godfrey Reggio who directed the *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982), scored by Philip Glass.
2. A forerunner in the use of celluloid film as an expressive artistic material was the American Stan Brakhage (1933–2003), who is regarded by film historians as one of the most important experimental filmmakers of the 1950s and 60s. His classic theoretical statement *Metaphors on Vision*, originally written in 1960, was reissued by Anthology Film Archives/Light Industry in 2017.
3. Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010): 15.
4. *Ibid.*, 14.
5. *Ibid.*, 40.
6. Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy or The History of Photography, Part 1* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University, 2015): 65.

Top left: Nicole Kelly Westman, installation view, *Rose, Dear*, 2016. Commissioned by Walter Phillips Gallery, The Banff Centre. Photo by Jessica Wittman.

Bottom left: Nicole Kelly Westman, *for every sunset, we haven't seen* (still), 2019, 8mm digitally transferred film, 7:15 minutes

List of Works

not many sodium lamps left 'round here,
2019
graphite on two sheets of overlaid tracing
paper
71.12 x 35.58 cm
Collection of the Artist

for every sunset, we haven't seen,
2019
Super-8 film transferred to digital: 7"
Collection of the Artist

for nights bathed in sodium vapour,
2019
Super-8 film transferred to digital: 12"
Collection of the Artist

cuculoris, a time machine for shadows,
2019
two objects: cut and stained plywood
with sodium vapour gel and mirror
backing
101.6 x 100.33 cm
Collection of the Artist

Bios

Nicole Kelly Westman is a visual artist of Métis and Icelandic descent who recognizes, with an indebted gratitude, the artists who came before her and strenuously forged space, the curators that place care at the fore of their labour, the communities that foster confidence in her practice, and the institutions and organizations that implement policies prefacing relations of trust. As an artist she enjoys practices of listening, watching, hosting, poeticizing, foraging and sharing. Westman was previously the director of Stride Art Gallery, holds a BFA from Emily Carr University (2012), and is currently rolling through regions like a tumbleweed. Her writing has been published in *C Magazine*, *Inuit Art Quarterly*, *Instudio Magazine*, and *Luma Quarterly*.

Nancy Tousley, winner of the Governor General's Award for significant contributions in the arts, is a nationally known senior art critic, arts journalist and independent curator. A graduate of Vassar College, she was art critic of the *Calgary Herald* for more than 30 years and the first Critic-in-Residence at the Alberta College of Art + Design. Her writing has appeared in art magazines in Canada and the United States since the early 1970s, and in more than 40 public art gallery and museum catalogues and books. *Nicole Kelly Westman: Pastoral | Calamity* is the tenth exhibition in the *One New Work* series and the twelfth exhibition she has curated for Glenbow.

One New Work

One New Work is an ongoing series of small, focused exhibitions, curated by Nancy Tousley, which began at Glenbow in 2016.

Each exhibition features a new work by an artist shown with other works or objects that were selected to set the new artwork within a context. This can take many different directions. It might be provided by an artist's earlier, related works; preparatory sketches or maquettes for the new artwork; art, artifacts or archival material from Glenbow's collection; art or artifacts from the artist's collection; and so on. At times, it will simply be one new work that illuminates a new direction in an artist's practice.

Nicole Kelly Westman: Pastoral | Calamity is on view in the *One New Work* gallery from October 19, 2019 to January 5, 2020 and is the tenth exhibition in the series.



Nicole Kelly Westman, process photograph, 2017, medium-format film scan



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