

‘IT WAS VERY HARD TO SEE MYSELF AS A DIRECTOR’: THE AUSTRALIAN FILM-MAKER CHANGING THE DOCUMENTARY GENRE

Gabrielle Brady’s docufiction hybrids have earned international recognition even as her home country has been slow to catch up. For her latest, she worked with a Mongolian couple displaced from their farmland



“There are so many hang-ups in the documentary world about this idea of ultimate truth,” says Gabrielle Brady. “There’s only subjectivity in documentary. It’s all a construction.”

Ever since Louis Lumière filmed workers leaving his factory in 1895, documentary film has struggled with the idea of authenticity. Lumière’s 17-metre film is regarded as the first ever made yet even this modest document is a lie: it was filmed not on a work day but a Sunday. The ethnographer Robert Flaherty staged scenes in his 1922 documentary Nanook of the North, and it was Michael Moore’s crafty editing that made Roger and Me an emotive box office hit.

Brady’s 2018 breakthrough film Island of the Hungry Ghosts, and her latest, The Wolves Always Come at Night, invite audiences, festival programmers, critics, funding bodies and peers to contend with what is, for many, still a new format: the hybrid documentary. “I only use that word, hybrid, to signify an in-between space,” Brady says. “It doesn’t tell you how it was made. It just lets you know that it’s not entirely documentary, or that the film-maker may have used some fictional tools, which most documentaries have.”

To create her films, Brady works with the subjects to tell their story. Island of the Hungry Ghosts was shot on Christmas Island where Brady entwined spiritual ceremonies; the millennia-old migration cycle of the island’s famous crabs; and the daily life of Poh Lin Lee, a counsellor working with asylum seekers being held in indefinite detention.

unspoken. Naturalistic conversations take place between the family, scenes that feel inseparable from the story around them. In one particularly intimate moment, Davaa and Zaya lie in bed and contemplate their future. Davaa begins to cry before Zaya quietly scolds him, “Don’t cry in bed.” As Brady explains, moments like this were created collaboratively with the cast and crew.



“For that scene, Davaa and I discussed how the audience can understand the grief he is carrying. I had witnessed that a few times, the burden that he carried; the way he would discuss it was incredibly potent and just laden with this weight. I’d had this idea: what if you were to meet an older herder in the ger district and have this conversation? He said, ‘That would never happen. It has to be with Zaya and the kids can’t be there. It has to be dark, and it has to be quiet. This is [the only way] I would go to those places,’” she says. “Then we created that environment with no expectation of what would unfold.”

Brady’s connection to Mongolia began when she was a teenager. Growing up in the New South Wales Blue Mountains west of Sydney, she studied theatre media in Bathurst with aspirations of becoming an actor. After working as a producer on Sunrise and The Morning Show, Brady joined a volunteer program and spent a year in Mongolia where she produced and co-hosted a children’s television program, Voice Box, designed to help people learn English. Mentioning the show brings forth a burst of laughter. “Oh my God, it was so wonderfully cheesy. We’d travel around,

interview kids – like the school chess champion – and live with nomadic families. A lot of what was shown on TV then was imported from Russia or China, so the idea was to make something that was English, learning about Mongolian kids. Everything was handmade. It really looked like a 70s Australian TV set.”

Once back in Australia, Brady chased that feeling to Yuendumu, a remote community in the Northern Territory, where she helped other film-makers make their films. It was there she realised she wanted to become a director.



“The longer I stayed in Australia, the more I was being pushed to become a producer,” she says. “But I wanted to be a director, and [as a woman] it was very hard to see myself as one ... I wasn’t being held back, I [just] didn’t feel there was any opportunity. A lot of my favourite films were from Europe and South America, and I wanted to learn a different way of seeing the world, so I went and studied film in Cuba.”

In Cuba, Brady studied at Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión, a regional film-making school with no internet connection, where students are banned from using a camera for the first year of their three-year course. There, in a state of culture shock, Brady began again. “I burned everything I knew to the ground,” she says, “and rebuilt a vision for how I wanted to make films.” To graduate, she had to travel around the country, interviewing locals and collecting their stories.

“The study itself blurred the lines between docu-

Andy Hazel

“t was very hard to see myself as a director’: the Australian film-maker changing the documentary genre :

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2025/jun/29/gabrielle-brady-director-australian-film-documentary-maker>



forced to leave the countryside and move to the city. When she mentioned this to her friend, the producer Ariunaa Tserenpil, Tserenpil said it was the sort of story local film-makers would never tell.

“In Mongolia, we are so connected to nature and our animals but we are not looking into each other because we are shy,” Tserenpil says. “We feel more comfortable with nature and we don’t talk about our grief. Outside of the city, each family lives a very long distance from each other, and we do not have a sense of community because nomads are very independent people. But Gab put these people at the centre. This intimacy is very beautiful.”

Brady was “tentative and hesitant” about telling the story. “There’s a long legacy of foreign film-makers coming in and making a certain type of film in Mongolia particularly. But the idea grew on me,” she says. “We’re seeing two polarities. In one extreme, there’s this really extractionist way of film-making that’s very exploitative. But on the other side you end up saying, ‘Can you only make a film from the town you’re in?’ ‘Can you only make a film about a woman if you’re a woman?’ So, no. Let’s make something in between. An

insider-outsider film and see if we can find a new dialogue in that way of storytelling as well.”

While Brady’s work has earned widespread acclaim, it remains an anomaly in the documentary world. When she began making films in the 2010s, the ecosystem was at its critical and commercial zenith, with lauded film-makers including Laura Poitras, Alex Gibney and Errol Morris. Around the end of the decade came the rise of the streaming services and an insatiable demand for cheaply made nonfiction storytelling: formulaic true-crime exposés, sports films and celebrity profiles made with the approval of their participants. Documentaries that reach cinemas and awards circuits often centre on urgent modern catastrophes – the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the war in Gaza. Both trends make Brady’s work even more unusual.

“The documentary world is topical by nature, and those are the films that might get awards,” says Brady. “I see documentaries as much an art form as fiction, but I don’t think other people do.”

DOCUMENTARY MAGAZINE

Feature article

“Filming in Retrospect”: Gabrielle Brady Discusses ‘The Wolves Always Come at Night’



Working as a volunteer nearly two decades ago, Australian filmmaker Gabrielle Brady lived in and traveled all around Mongolia for 18 months. She returned to the country eight years later to visit some of the herder families that she had stayed with on her travels in the countryside, only to find out that many had moved to the ger districts on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar, having lost most, if not all, of their livestock and livelihoods to devastating climate disasters. Hearing their stories and seeing their new lives in the city planted a seed in Brady’s mind, one that eventually grew to become her second hybrid feature, *The Wolves Always Come at Night*.

A nation of herders without herds on a land without pasture. This is the heartrending view of contemporary Mongolia, some 30 percent of whose population still practice traditional herding, that is presented in *Wolves*. In the film, Brady has her finger firmly on the pulse of Mongolia’s troubles from anthropogenic climate change and rural-urban migration to economic coercion, all seen through the lived experience of one herder family: Davaa, Zaya, and their four daughters.

To understand her views and practices of hybrid filmmaking, Documentary caught up with Brady over a video call ahead of the film’s world premiere in the Platform competitive section at the TIFF on September 9. The film continues its fall festival run at BFI London and Ulaanbaatar International Film Festival. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

DOCUMENTARY: How important was it for the film to be a Mongolian co-production? There are many documentaries shot in Mongolia by people from elsewhere, but usually, there aren’t many Mongolians involved in the production at all, except for fixers, interpreters, and subtitle translators.

GABRIELLE BRADY: Absolutely important. I think there was so much cynicism because there weren’t meaningful roles or exchange but a very outside gaze. What’s interesting about the genesis of this film is that in a way I never set out to make a film in Mongolia. When people started to invite me back to come listen to their stories and start recording them, the first step was to go and visit Ariunaa [Tserenpil, the Mongolian producer] on my first research trip in 2018 out of five or six trips in total. She

was actually the first producer attached to the project, so I don’t think the film could be made without that. In our first conversations, I was saying, “This is a bit of a surprise. This is growing. I’m not sure if it’s a good idea. Does it make sense that I would do this?” I think having those real honest conversations and building an almost all-Mongolian crew around that felt like the first and most crucial step to the film.

D: I find thematic similarities between your two films: *Wolves* and *Island of the Hungry Ghosts* (2018). What intrigues you about these human-animal-land connections?

GB: That’s really perceptive. I also see so much unity between the two films. In a way, one’s almost an extension of the other. In my time living in Mongolia, I was spending time with people who had a very unfiltered type of connection with landscape and animals. That’s not even to romanticize or glorify it. For me, this was like a revelation. What I was witnessing was people that had no distance, animals that were family members, landscape that was inside of people in a way that I could never understand because I didn’t have that upbringing. I don’t have that connection, but I could observe it. We’re the closest to ourselves when we’re in nature. But I’m still trying to work out what that means. I live in the city. For me, both films weren’t meant to create a judgment. It’s not that the city’s bad and the countryside’s good. We don’t want this kind of neither interesting nor true dichotomy. But what I did want to look at in this microscope is what it actually feels like to transition away and when that distance closes until it’s forgotten. I wanted to create this film that makes a remembrance of closeness.

D: The title of the film is very intriguing because wolves don’t actually appear in the film. How did you come up with it?

GB: The title actually was part of the origin of the story. It kind of appeared through my writing and investigation, but really it was connected to the stories that I had been witnessing and hearing as a young person when I was staying with all those herder families. The sheer strength of mythology around the wolf: people can sit around for hours on end, discussing the time when they saw one, when one got away, the way they shot it. It appears to people in this kind of larger-than-life, mythologi-

cal way. And at the same time, wolves were a real danger to herds. But when I started thinking about this very unseen threat, like climate change, it’s so abstract and too big. People can’t even conjure an image. So, there’s this contrast between the mythology of this animal figure that has physicality and realness, but at the same time over the years, it’s been replaced with this other threat that doesn’t yet have a mythology, that doesn’t yet have stories around it. I’m very fascinated by the unseen, what we don’t see, what we feel, but how that manifests in a way as things that are present without having physical form. These were some of the ideas with the title.

D: The two protagonists of the film, Davaa and Zaya, are also given writers’ credits. How did the collaborative process take place between the three of you?

GB: It’s a hybrid film, which is really just a way to describe that it’s not one thing or the other. Of course, even in traditional docs everything’s constructed from the moment you decide what story you’re telling, how you involve people, or how you edit it. So, the hybrid film helps us to have a conversation about the way it was made. It’s such an incredibly exciting form for me. For this film, by the time we were having conversations with people, of course they had already moved to the ger districts. So, the first conversation was, “If we are to film somebody who has gone through this situation, how would we do that?” One option would be to go out in the countryside in storm season, wait for it to happen, then go there and film it. But the idea of approaching someone in the midst of what is probably one of the most traumatic and difficult moments brings up so many ethical complications and questions. The main one is: “Can somebody really give full consent to filming when they are inside of a traumatic moment or situation?” From the beginning, that was absolutely never on the cards.

When we met Davaa and Zaha, they had just moved to the city and straight away Davaa was like, “I want this story told.” We started filming observational material the next day of them moving to a closer part in the ger district. After three weeks of filming and getting to know each other, they made it clear that we needed to go back and film how life was. At that point, it became clear that we’d be filming in retrospect, which means filming after the event of something happening with the creative involvement of the people who witnessed the event.

So, we went back to their countryside to film the lead-up to them losing their animals, and that’s really where we started the co-scripting process. Every day we’d have conversations where they would generate ideas and materials. Our scripting was done verbally and nothing was scripted in terms of conversations or dialogue. This was the way we found the dramaturgical thread for the film.

D: Do you think it’s important that the audience be able to differentiate which are the observational parts and which are the constructed ones? Or do you think it doesn’t matter and that the film should be treated as an organic whole? How do you deal with audience expectations of what the form is like?

GB: I think that’s the biggest challenge. I studied at a film school in Cuba, and for the entire first year, there was no fiction or documentary. The idea behind this blurring of genres was that a film is a film. But I also know that audiences have so many different understandings and expectations. Having the word “hybrid” to define that you’ve used both is a kind of a note to the audience to say, “Yes, this is real, these are real people. But we also have used construction to get to these deep emotional moments.”

There are a lot of hybrid films that make visible their constructions and that’s really valid. But for us, it detracted from the story. The story isn’t how I made the film or me in conversation with Davaa and Zaya. The story is really them and this transition. We want to feel that in its full emotional, heightened sense. But also what’s so beautiful in this film is that even for me or for Davaa and Zaya, it was sometimes unclear what was observational or what was semi-constructed. For example, the scene with Davaa talking to his uncle just before they’re about to leave the countryside is, sure, officially filming in retrospect. But at the same time, that conversation is very real. This wasn’t a performance. It was an opportunity for them to say the words that they never got to when Davaa and Zaya actually first left and it was incredibly emotional for both of them. There’s a real blurring because that’s what we needed to get as close as we could to Davaa and Zaya’s experience.

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Amarsanaa Battulga

“Filming in Retrospect”: Gabrielle Brady Discusses ‘The Wolves Always Come at Night’ :

<https://www.documentary.org/online-feature/filming-retrospect-gabrie-elle-brady-discusses-wolves-always-come-night>

REVIEWS

‘The Wolves Always Come At Night’: London Review



Source: London Film Festival | ‘The Wolves Always Come At Night’

Dir. Gabrielle Brady. Australia/Mongolia/Germany. 2024. 96 mins

What is a herder without his animals? This question of identity permeates Gabrielle Brady’s docudrama *The Wolves Always Come at Night*, which follows a Mongolian family grappling with the seismic impacts of climate change. Although over 30 percent of Mongolia’s population still leads a pastoral existence dependent on livestock, this traditional culture is increasingly threatened by pressing environmental and socio-economic factors which have hastened migration to urban areas.

It was while researching this topic in the Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaatar that hybrid filmmaker Brady, whose last film was experimen-

tal Christmas Island doc *Island Of The Hungry Ghosts* (2018), encountered a family who had just relocated from the countryside. She set about not only documenting their adjustment to a stark new reality, but also accompanied them on a visit to the grasslands to recreate the lifestyle they reluctantly left behind. By blending documentary and fiction elements, Brady’s exploration of the profound trauma caused by physical displacement gets right to the heart of the matter.

The Wolves Always Come At Night plays London after premiering in Toronto’s Platform and audiences should respond to how Brady tempers a reverence for Mongolia’s splendidly rugged landscape with the realisation that unre-served human affection for the environment is

not always reciprocated. Specialty distributors with a theatrical profile should be interested in how Brady has clearly conveyed intertwined issues through striking visual storytelling and im-mersive sound design.

In Mongolia’s expansive Bayankhongor re-gion, herders Daava (Davaasuren Dagvasuren) and Zaya (Otgonzaya Dashzeveg) are happily raising their four children – until an incredibly harsh sandstorm wipes out half of their cattle. Accepting that herding is no longer financially viable, Daava and Zaya decide to follow in the footsteps of countless others by seeking em-ployment opportunities in the city.

Upon arriving in Ulaanbaatar, the family makes a new home in the Ger district. A shantytown settlement on the city’s outskirts where many former herders reside in yurts, the area is not only overpopulated but also heavy polluted because of the reliance on coal as its primary fuel source. Daava secures a job on a mining crew, but he struggles to assimilate to urban life, dreaming vividly of the rolling pastures and the beloved stallion he was forced to sell.

The film’s apparently menacing title refers to what was once the biggest worry for herders; the wild predatory animals that primarily sur-vive on a diet of grazing livestock. Such attacks are still a concern, but the title also evokes a yearning for a simpler time when pastoral work did not come with a litany of other issues or it was at least possible to anticipate certain haz-ards. Taking one family as a representation of a dwindling community, Brady illustrates how climate change is making their livelihood un-tenable. Fly on the wall footage from a town hall meeting raises concerns of desertification, whereby land becomes interfile due to drought, but it is the abrupt sandstorm which eradicates Daava and Zaya’s hopes in one fell swoop. Rec-reating their misfortune in similar conditions

prompts a visceral sense of helplessness in the face of extreme weather events.

Despite the risk of aggravating open wounds, the central couple bare their souls and shed light on the emotional and psychological fis-sures caused by migration. Daava in partic-ular struggles to reconcile aspects of his new profession (the excavation of untouched land) with his nomadic nature, and ends up singing along to a melancholic folk song in a bar after a long shift rather than returning to his fami-ly. It is possible to discern the staged scenar-ios that underline these points in the city-set second half. Yet incorporating scripted scenes does not detract from the overall verisimilitude, as they stem from the deeply felt experiences of its participants (who are credited as the film’s co-writers).

On the technical front, *The Wolves Always Come At Night* finds Bady reuniting with the team responsible for *Island Of The Hungry Ghosts*, which dealt with forms of migration around the Australian external territory of Christmas Island. Here, similar techniques are deployed with a greater emotional focus. Michael Latham’s tac-tile cinematography again captures the wonder of the natural world, with thrilling opening foot-age of Daava charging across the plains on his stallion setting the rhythm for the film’s evoca-tive first half. Aaron Cupples’ transfixing ambi-ent score takes its cue from Mongolia’s howling winds.

The film’s countryside/city juxtaposition is fa-miliar but nonetheless dispiriting. Wide shots foreground the limbo-like settlement against a smoggy backdrop with industrial noises creep-ing insidiously into the soundscape, although the film closes with a poignant flourish of mag-ical realism allows cautious optimism for the future.

John Berra

‘The Wolves Always Come At Night’: London Review :

<https://www.screendaily.com/reviews/the-wolves-always-come-at-night-london-review/5197943.article>

“By blending documentary and fiction elements, Brady’s ex-ploration of the profound trauma caused by physical dis-placement gets right to the heart of the matter.”

Adelaide Film Festival Review: The Wolves Always Come at Night



Documentarian Gabrielle Brady immerses herself in the act of collaborative storytelling, working alongside her subjects to bring their truth to life in an act of radical hybrid film-making. In her latest film, *The Wolves Always Come at Night*, we follow Davaa (Davaasuren Dagvasuren) and Zaya (Otgonzaya Daas-hzeveg), parents to four children who work as nomadic goat herders in the Bayankhongor region of Mongolia. Their land endures harsh winters and sharp summers, and as we witness in the film, receives the brunt of the impact of storms that roll in from the Gobi Desert. It's these increasing storm events that force Davaa to question whether he will have to engage in the culture-disconnecting act of relocating his family to the city for work.

As with her previous film, *The Island of the Hungry Ghosts*, *The Wolves Always Come at Night* sees Brady continue her exploration of individuals who are worn and weathered by a rapidly shifting world that inflicts change upon them, untethering them from the connection to land and culture that they have maintained for generations and setting them adrift from their communities, and most cruelly, their families.

Before this urban migration disconnection event takes place, Brady, alongside cinematographer Michael Latham, immerses us in the life of Davaa and Zaya as they tend to

their goat herd during birthing season. With a calming quiet tone, Davaa and his children observe from afar the goats as they graze on the land, reading their intentions by the way they move or the shifting blow of the wind. Editor Katharina Fiedler shifts us from one moment to the next in an act of gentle breathing, in and out, calmly from a scene of herd monitoring to a scene of Davaa providing birthing support to a crowning nanny.

An evolving storm forms the breaking point of Davaa's story, leading him to set free his herd of horses, while nature deals with dispersing his goats. After the winds settle, Davaa takes to scouting the land with a fellow herder. What follows is a sequence steeped in inevitability which sees Brady employ a layer of muted devastation. When Davaa stumbles upon the scattered carcasses of his lost herd, there is no immediate sense of grief or pain, but instead feel the grains of histories hour-glass spilling out once more, as if we're not just witnesses a cruel loss of animal life, but as if the way of life of nomadic herders is being blown away.

A Western eye may look at these moments and apply words like 'serene' or 'peaceful' to them, words that skew towards romanticising the lives of Davaa and Zaya. But, to call it a 'way of life' is to suggest that this is a choice that Davaa and Zaya have made. These are

not people seeking the 'wanderlust' of a farming life, to reconnect with nature and partake in clean living; no, these are people for whom nomadic herding is in their blood. What Brady, Davaa, and Zaya (who are co-credited as writers on the film) are asking audiences to bear witness to is the disintegration of a way of life, as if Davaa is part of the last cowboys of Mongolia who are on their to becoming part of history, a legend transformed into a song to be sung by lone karaoke singers crooning to a crowd of one as they reminisce about the past.

While a romantic notion about their herding practices can be gleaned by a less engaged viewer, the reality is that this is a life lived with worry and concern. After the days spent with Davaa and Zaya, we are invited to spend the night with them as well, where Davaa talks through his process with Zaya, seeking a form of council and support. Zaya's role with the herd is as integral as Davaa's, making her listening an active act of guidance that informs how they will live their lives. Equally so, as a young family, Davaa and Zaya are not alone on the plains, with fellow herders swaying into their communally focused daily practices.

It's in these private moments that Davaa voices his recognition that for the family to continue, he will need to move away from goat herding and into the city for work. A voiceless, nameless almost-acquaintance has promised Davaa work, and while he reluctantly has resigned himself to this fate, there is a level of apprehension and concern that he is about to step into a world of exploitation. As time is swept forward once more by the desert winds, we next see Davaa draped in high-vis attire, set to work on the blight of the modern world: a mining site.

In yet another moment of quiet grieving, Davaa is dwarfed by a pile of mined materials. A manager (a word that feels so distinctly American and manufactured when uttered in

these Mongolian cities) appears to check in on Davaa's stilted form, stuck in a depressed state. Davaa can't help but respond that this is land that should not be turned or disturbed, it is nature. We know that Davaa cannot be defiant in the face of these mining behemoths, after all, it is he who needs their work, and their terraforming titans will continue their acts of turning the past, present, and future into rubble.

The sub-genre of climate change documentaries has proliferated throughout the years, yet few filmmakers are assessing the intertwined complexity of the catastrophe in the way that Gabrielle Brady does with *The Wolves Always Come at Night*. Brady bookends the film with shots of Davaa riding his magnificent stallion, unkempt mane and all, across the plains, conjuring the sight of the shepherd of the land at flight, and in the process, this collaborative team hammers home the notion that this is yet another form of generational culture eking out of existence as a result of climate driven migration.

Brady never leans into the despair of the moment, but instead asks the audience to acknowledge the daily mourning that many of us endure as we are all pulled along a continued pilgrimage into our global climate catastrophe. At its quiet close, *The Wolves Always Come at Night* leaves you with a sombre feeling of helpless inevitability, and maybe this is the cruelest result of the film; previously a documentary like this would illicit a tortured response where audiences would say 'we simply must do something to stop this from happening', and while many may protest or feel their vote will change the world for the better, the reality is that we have each been forced into a state of inaction and servitude, reluctantly drawn into the creep of capitalism simply to keep the machine moving.

Powerful collaborative filmmaking like this is a rarity to be treasured.

Andrew F Peirce
Adelaide Film Festival Review: The Wolves Always Come at Night:

<https://www.thecurb.com.au/adelaide-film-festival-review-the-wolves-always-come-at-night/>

“Powerful collaborative filmmaking like this is a rarity to be treasured.”

Tribeca Award Winners Gabrielle Brady, Julia Niethammer on Mongolian-Set Climate Change Project



Credit: Gabrielle Brady

The Wolves Always Come at Night

The documentary filmmakers behind Tribeca Film Festival award winner “Island of the Hungry Ghosts” are hitting Visions du Réel film festival with a new project, examining urban migration and the rapid pace at which climate change has impacted the lives of one cattle-herding family.

“The Wolves Always Come at Night” (a working title), from Australian/U.K. director Gabrielle Brady, is one of the projects gaining buzz in the Nyon-based festival’s pitching section, which will feature in VdR’s Industry program next week.

The pitch will be presented online by Berlin-based duo Brady and her producing partner Julia Niethammer, working for Germany production company Chromosom Film.

The narrative focuses on a family of nomadic herders Anktuya and Dorji and their two daughters, who are forced to migrate to a cramped and polluted settlement in the city following the death of their cattle herd, which they discover frozen overnight, like ice sculptures, on the rural Mongolian landscape.

settlement in the city following

At first the family believe their cattle was taken by wolves – which play a huge role in Mongolian rural culture, according to Brady – and the film’s title acts as both a metaphorical and literal comment on the family’s plight.

Cut off from nature and given limited time to

find work by government officials, the film also intends to document the ruptures that begin to grow within the family.

According to Brady, the story was inspired by a nomadic farming community in Mongolia, which she had lived and worked with for two years over a decade earlier.

The director plans to use her contacts there to help her tell the story. The organizers of the Mongolian International Film Festival (MIFF) have also come on board as a co-producer.

Brady will deploy the same hybrid documentary format that she perfected in “Ghosts” – which blended documentary with magic realism to document the plight of refugees on Christmas Island and won the Buyens-Chagoll Prize at Visions du Réel and best documentary at Tribeca.

Niethammer emphasizes that the way they work with their subjects is a highly collaborative process. “They influence the narrative and bring their own ideas into it. It’s not just a film made about them – it’s a film made with them.”

Brady believes that building a narrative construct around what has happened to the herders can have a far greater impact on an audience than another story about climate change.

“It’s not about detail, context, or painting the whole picture of the consequences of climate

change, we are zooming in on this one family, this one community and this one virtual period of time to dissect the smaller details. In these small details and encounters we then get a sense of a much bigger picture,” she added.

And while “Ghosts” is as much about the red crabs that populate Christmas Island as it is about the immigrant community, according to Brady, natural history will also feature heavily in “Wolves.”

“I’m really interested in cross genres and we will dive into this natural world: Yaks being born and the loss of the animals and how this collides with the human experience,” she said.

Many of the same talents who worked on “Ghosts” are also attached to the “Wolves” project, including cinematographer Michael Latham and composer Aaron Cupples, who will be working in collaboration with an acclaimed Mongolian female throat singer.

At Visions du Reel, the project – which has an estimated total budget of 700,000 Euros – is looking for financing and distribution partners.

Almost 10% of this has been raised for the film’s development, with backers including the BBC’s “Storyville” strand, Screen Australia and FFA Germany. Niethammer is also in talks with German funders on a regional and national level as well as local broadcasters.

“Ghosts” is still running in festivals three years on from its initial release (and has also been released on Prime in the U.S. market) and Niethammer envisions a similar path for “Wolves” and is hopeful for a theatrical release in Germany, Australia and the U.K. – with Mongolia being another key territory.

Brady likes to spend time with her subjects before she starts filming and has already undertaken three research trips to Mongolia, with one more trip scheduled before a two-month shoot planned for April next year. The expected release date is February 2023.

“We have a family in mind; the plan is to go back and start filming with them. We weren’t able to go back last year because of border closures but with documentary you have to keep diving back into the world and checking that the elements are still there,” said Brady.

“While we have plenty of rich stories to explore, what I’m really interested is putting the family’s loss under a microscope and tracing it back and visiting what’s been left behind,” she added.

Anne Marie Covin

“Tribeca Award Winners Gabrielle Brady, Julia Niethammer on Mongolian-Set Climate Change Project :

<https://variety.com/2021/film/global/the-wolves-always-come-at-night-gabrielle-brady-1234953074/>

“The documentary filmmakers behind Tribeca Film Festival award winner “Island of the Hungry Ghosts” are hitting Visions du Réel film festival with a new project, examining urban migration and the rapid pace at which climate change has impacted the lives of one cattle-herding family. “The Wolves Always Come at Night” (a working title), from Australian/U.K. director Gabrielle Brady, is one of the projects gaining buzz in the Nyon-based festival’s pitching section, which will feature in VdR’s Industry program next week.”

Island of the Hungry Ghosts re-view – grim view of Australia’s Guantánamo



Gabrielle Brady’s powerful portrait of the lives of asylum seekers warehoused on Christmas Island is fierce and compassionate



Unquiet spirits ... Island of Hungry Ghosts



Film-maker Gabrielle Brady tells a powerful and moving story from inside Australia’s Guantánamo: Christmas Island, the country’s offshore territory near Java, where asylum seekers and boat people are warehoused in grim conditions that the authorities are in no hurry to conceal – because of the deterrent factor, an important part of the government’s anti-migrant crackdown since 2013. (The similar Manus Island facility has now been closed but the equally grisly Nauru is still in business.)

Poh Lin Lee is a torture and trauma counsel-

lor permitted to give therapy to detainees, who are terrifyingly scarred mentally. These sessions have been reconstructed as filming current detainees was not possible; conversations take place with migrants who have been released. Brady could perhaps have made that point clearer (there is a self-evidently imagined sequence at the beginning depicting an escape), but the pure emotional agony of their testimony is real enough, and the sequence where an Afghan man talks about how he was separated from his elderly mother is devastating: “It’s a kind of hell here

... Hell is where you see your family suffering and you can’t do anything.”

The awful truth is that the detainees are getting just as much trauma here as in the place they left or on their terrible sea journey. Lee’s patients often simply never show up for their sessions, having been moved to another prison camp, and Lee is told nothing. However brutal, this film is also unexpectedly beautiful, because of the almost dreamlike shots of the red crabs that swarm over the island, like the unquiet spirits of prisoners.

The title comes from the practice of the island’s Malay Chinese community, who pay homage to the souls of their forebears: indentured labourers brought over a century ago in comparably cruel circumstances. A fierce, valuable, compassionate film.

Peter Bradshaw -

Island of the Hungry Ghosts review – grim view of Australia’s Guantánamo’

4/5 stars

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/jan/10/island-hungry-ghosts-re-view-australia-guantanamo-gabrielle-brady>

“Film-maker Gabrielle Brady tells a powerful and moving story from inside Australia’s Guantánamo: Christmas Island, the country’s offshore territory near Java...

A fierce, valuable, compassionate film.”

CRITIC’S PICK

‘Island of the Hungry Ghosts’
Review: Migration and Trauma
on Christmas Island



Trailer: 'Island of the Hungry Ghosts'Credit...CreditHOMEmcr



Poh Lin Lee, right, with Poppy in "Island of the Hungry Ghosts."
Credit...Sentient Art Film

“Blessings to those in between,” a Chinese woman says near the end of Gabrielle Brady’s ethereal, intensely moving documentary, “Island of the Hungry Ghosts.” She’s speaking to her ancestors, brought to the Australian territory of Christmas Island over 100 years ago to work the mines and whose spirits are believed to haunt this wild, strangely forbidding place.

Her benediction, though, could just as easily be directed at the island’s other migrants: the hundreds of asylum seekers housed indefi-

nately in a gigantic detention center deep in the woods, and the millions of red crabs that make the perilous journey to the ocean each year to mate. Workers build makeshift bridges to help the crabs cross a roadside ditch, but our sole bridge to the detainees is Poh Lin Lee, a demoralized trauma counselor whose patients are slowly deteriorating.

Unfolding without narration or pushy musical cues, “Island of the Hungry Ghosts” (filmed from 2014-17) explores, with great delicacy,

the agony of living in limbo. As Poh Lin struggles to process the horrors and humiliations that necessitate her work, she also begins to question her complicity in an increasingly secretive system. Yet the movie doesn’t harangue, making its points with soft voices and often surreal imagery. Following Poh Lin and her young family as they explore the island, Michael Latham’s camera is alternately serene and agitated, thrusting through jungly undergrowth or gazing, bewitched, at a crimson carpet of crabs by a restless gray ocean.

The result is at once acutely distressing and quite lovely, transforming the island into something primitive and inscrutable. Interpreting island lore, Poh Lin’s partner, Arthur Floret, tells their children that the jagged coastal rocks were created by a dragon to protect the island from humans. He doesn’t add that they didn’t succeed.

Jeannette Catsoulis -

‘Island of the Hungry Ghosts’ Review: Migration and Trauma on Christmas Island.*Critics pick

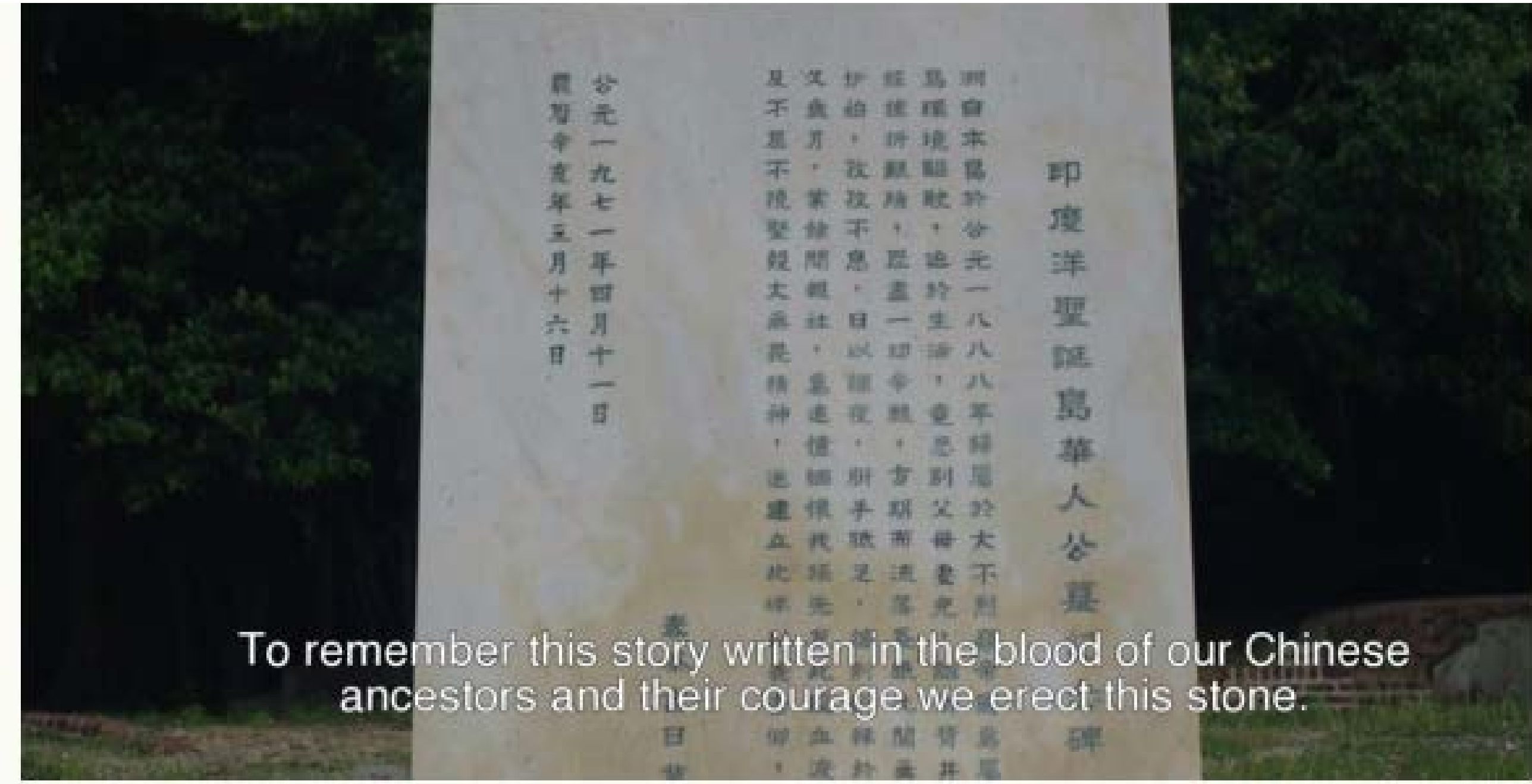
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/07/movies/island-of-the-hungry-ghosts-review.html>

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Liminal’s Top Picks — Prototype Festival

Gabrielle Brady’s *Remain*



If you saw Gabrielle Brady's debut feature documentary, the transcendent *Island of the Hungry Ghosts*, you knew you were seeing a filmmaker working on the edge of convention. Now based in Berlin, Gabrielle's specialty is making stories that fill in the negative spaces of official histories. Evocative and haunting, her new work for Prototype takes a sidelong view of the lost stories of Chinese and Malay indentured workers in Australia.

Remain is a fascinating counter-history of what remains of their lives in the mining industry on Christmas Island, revealing the island's layers of coerced settlement in the years traversing British annexation, Singaporean administration and its purchase by Australia.

‘Liminal top picks’

<https://www.liminalmag.com/blog/prototype>

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Gabrielle Brady’s ‘The Island of Hungry Ghosts’

This new hybrid documentary casts Christmas Island in a hypnotically strange light



The Island of Hungry Ghosts

Rarely do I see the work of a debut Australian filmmaker and think: “Yes, this person will go on to make a rich body of work.” Gabrielle Brady’s first feature documentary, *The Island of Hungry Ghosts* (2018), elicited that thought: it is a film fertile in ideas, symbolism and visual metaphor; it speaks profoundly to some essential quality of being alive in Australia right now, and points to a future of filmmaking for its creator.

Brady stakes her action in a distant field of terror: Christmas Island, which has housed asylum seekers for most of the past 18 years. A man hauls his body over a tall fence in the thick of night; running through an emerald jungle, he screams. Sometime later, while driving to work at the community hospital, a trauma counsellor, Poh Lin Lee, hears news of a body found at the base of the nearby cliffs. In an actual therapy session with an asylum seeker, Poh Lin uses a box filled with fine grains of white sand and figurines as a therapeutic tool, and her client arranges the contents as she talks through her despair. A cast of red crabs, on a mission to breed and deliver their eggs to the sea, are herded across the island by workers in hi-vis suits, who close down roads. And we learn of earlier unhappy waves of migration in the island’s fraught history.

“The first people who arrived on Christmas Island 100 years ago were not given a real burial,” says one of the island’s 1843 residents. “So we need to pray for them. They are in the world of humans. They are the ‘hungry ghosts’. If you are on the road and you see a white shadow crossing, it’s probably a wandering spirit moving through.”

Chinese-speaking citizens burn plates of rice and other offerings to make the island’s hungry ghosts happy, so that they might move on to some other, more serene realm. We slowly approach gravestones that poke out of wild jungle, etched with Chinese characters. They are tombstones without names. Visitors chant: “Blessings to everyone’s safety. Blessings to the spirits. May you all be reincarnated into a better life.”

Most of the world was unknown to Europeans for most of history, and Christmas Island was

not spotted by them until December 25, 1615. Terra pura, pure soil. The island’s first ongoing community of inhabitants was from China, Malaysia and Singapore, the hungry ghosts indentured as miners by the British Phosphate Commission and the United Kingdom Colonial Office at the close of the 19th century. In 1958, and with compensation provided to Singapore for loss of phosphorous commerce, the island become an Australian territory.

The Australian Border Deaths Database has marked 2017 deaths associated with Australia’s borders since January 1, 2000. Of those deaths, more than 600 occurred on or near Christmas Island, which since 2001 has held asylum seekers, who are mainly on their way from Indonesia, on Phosphate Hill, formerly the site of the mining lease. In that year, the Tampa controversy off the island’s craggy cliffs provided the template for Australia’s divide-and-rule political strategies ever since. In October 2018, Christmas Island Immigration Reception and Processing Centre was closed. In February 2019, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced his government’s plans to re-open it, a decision recently revised in the 2019–20 budget. The island’s community, mainly comprising those of Malay, Chinese and Anglo heritage, is uniquely marked by these shifts and abuses in migration, colonisation and mining.

The sequence of events that led Brady to make *The Island of Hungry Ghosts* began with a visit in 2014 to her friend Poh Lin, who had moved there to work two years earlier. Brady tells me over the phone that after two idyllic weeks swimming, diving and hiking together, Poh Lin said to her, “There’s something I need to show you.” They drove to the island’s lookout point, and waded into the jungle with a machete. An hour later, they arrived at a cliff, and below them was the dark, squat detention centre. The experience is recreated in the documentary, the buildings like a malevolent mirage.

“I don’t know how to describe it,” says Brady, “but it was a very shocking moment. There’d been nothing visual ... to remind me of what was happening in the detention centre. It was at the end of the island, on the other side

from where people live. I had the strong sensation it was built to be hidden and to keep these people and stories invisible.” This is how Brady came to make a documentary without access to the detention centre. She visited the island multiple times over the next two years. Still, Brady’s guiding question was, “Will there be enough to tell a visual story?” Brady, who lives in Berlin, says, “One of the intentions I held very strongly was to deviate from any image we’d ever seen before of asylum seekers on the island ... We’ve been bombarded with the same imagery – a person at sea, someone on a jetty being patted down, someone behind a fence from a distance. They’re very static, very dry, very cold, and they’re very distant images.”

Perhaps the richest quality of Brady’s documentary is the hypnotic strangeness with which the island’s self-contained ecosystem is shot. In cinematographer Michael Latham’s compositions, the monsoonal forest seems sentient, and we sense that it bears the grief of those who have unwillingly passed across it for the past century. Even in still shots, every leaf and branch of the island’s flora quakes slightly, and the natural world is an active, watchful force in the narrative. All the while, the red crabs – the island’s custodians – continue going on about their business.

For that reason, with its eerie shots of coastal mountains, *The Island of Hungry Ghosts* is more reminiscent of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* – a mystery alive with the mythical power of geology – than *Chasing Asylum* (2016), the most recent major documentary on Australia’s refugee abuses, made by filmmaker Eva Orner and featuring grainy, horror-like footage secretly recorded in offshore camps. Like Brady, Orner found that compassionate social workers had little power in the bureaucracy beyond calmly asking their clients to not kill themselves, as Anwen Crawford wrote upon that film’s release. But where *Chasing Asylum* critiqued the human costs of detention, *The Island of Hungry Ghosts* questions its psychic cost.

Brady’s film also sees cinema as a set of forms to be innovated and curved and moulded. It is made of delicately obtained permissions,

negotiated layers of access, and intermingling dimensions of drama and documentary in the rich tradition of hybrid non-fiction cinema. A rich tradition – but not in Australia, whose documentary culture is wrapped around the broadcast structures of the ABC and SBS. Aesthetics follow institutional forms.

Little surprise then, that Brady’s creation, transcending the conventions of reportage, has been overlooked, misunderstood in the country it is addressing. Critic David Stratton, writing for *The Australian*, complained that the film did not include enough explanation of its locations and other factual details. But talking heads and long verbal sequences are for journalism, and not necessarily for film. And just as documentary cinema is not a genre, realism may not be for our times. “I wanted to address it not journalistically,” says Brady, “because that’s only how we ever see the crisis. I wanted to rupture what we think we know of Christmas Island.”

From that mode of thinking, she avoided using archival footage, and made her own vision of a lonely, isolated place, with nature as her primary metaphor. The film’s hybridity is not its only singular quality. It is unusual, in Australia, to hear the language of politics and protest fuse with that of dreams, psychology and spirituality. Poh Lin seems at times more a mystic than a counsellor. Her job is to connect, sometimes through translators, to people who have been forced from the through lines of their lives and ancestral lineages. One detainee, imprisoned for the last 17 months, describes to Poh Lin a recurring childhood dream in which he was a kite or a bird, and flew untethered: “We are humans. We have to protest.”

Across these scenes, an expansive narrative emerges. Brady traces Poh Lin’s journey of hopelessness as she comes to realise the futility of her job in the community hospital. Fewer clients arrive each day for therapy; they are “transferred” without notice. “I love these people,” she says, “but I can’t be complicit.” One senses that progressive Australian people have come to think of their own opposition to successive governments’ inhumane detention policies as similarly futile.

Lauren Carroll Harris
“Gabrielle Brady’s Island of the Hungry Ghosts”.

<https://www.themonthly.com.au/blog/lauren-carroll-harris/2019/05/2019/1554430417/gabrielle-brady-s-island-hungry-ghosts>

“Rarely do I see the work of a debut Australian filmmaker and think: “Yes, this person will go on to make a rich body of work.” Gabrielle Brady’s first feature documentary, *The Island of Hungry Ghosts* (2018), elicited that thought: it is a film fertile in ideas, symbolism and visual metaphor; it speaks profoundly to some essential quality of being alive in Australia right now, and points to a future of filmmaking for its creator.”

Prototype returns with projects from Samantha Lang, Gabrielle Brady

Experimental film and video art platform Prototype has announced a new three-month season featuring nine new short works – including eight world premieres – by 10 international and Australian artists, film-makers and collectives.



First launched by writer and critic Lauren Carroll Harris in partnership with Arcadia Films back in 2019, Prototype's goal is to shake up how experimental screen art is commissioned and distributed, taking it outside of traditional spaces like galleries and film festivals.

For the third season, Prototype 2021, a new film will be released every Wednesday from April 28 to June 23, published online and via e-newsletter.

Curated by Carroll Harris, the latest program explores themes of the anthropocene, counter histories and diasporic storytelling in a diversity of languages.

"I've always believed that audiences should be able to have well-curated encounters with excellent art whether galleries, cinemas, festivals and museums are open or closed," she said.

"Our new program supports great artists and filmmakers to experiment, cross-

artistic borders and break creative boundaries, while allowing audiences to access new, cutting-edge, well-curated art, anywhere, anytime. Our artists are exploring a diversity of worldviews and artforms, from artist's films to hybrid investigative documentaries. Our new season expands the scope of collaborators to a number of respected long-time filmmakers and brilliant overseas artists, reaffirming Prototype as an internationally recognised platform for video art and experimental film of intellectual curiosity and discovery."

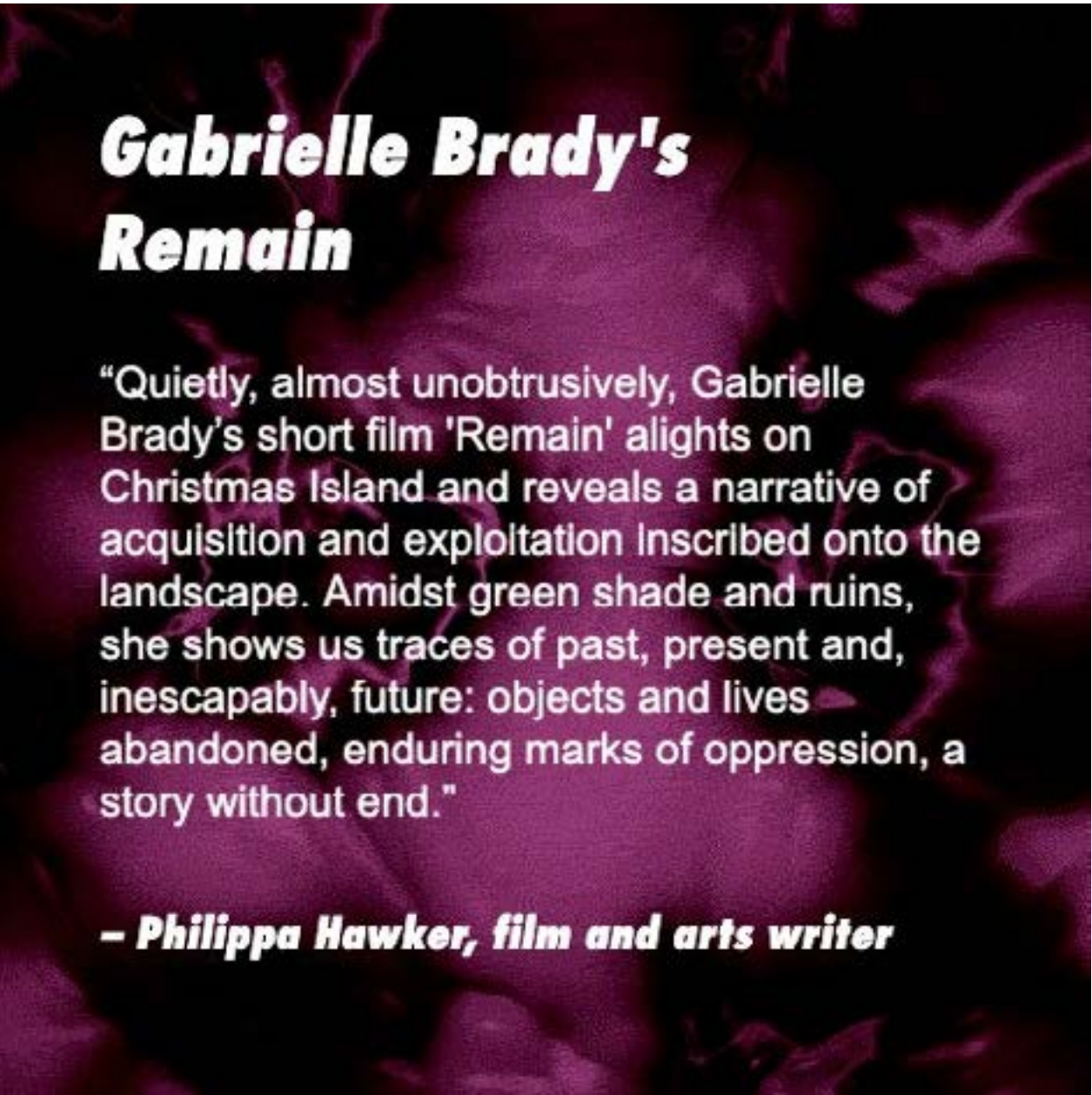
Alongside the core digital presentation, a number of in-person screenings of the newly released works will be presented at Melbourne's ACMI during the three-month season, including a Prototype 2021 April 27. A ticketed event, it will feature a panel discussion with Carroll Harris and Samantha Lang, alongside an exclusive in-person premiere screening of Lang's work Brown Lake and works from Prototype's archive by UK-based Sam Smith and Canberra documentary-maker Robert Nugent.

<https://if.com.au/prototype-returns-with-projects-from-samantha-lang-gabrielle-brady/>

PHILLIPA HAWKER SHORT REVIEW

Review

REMAIN GABRIELLE BRADY



Critic and journalist Philippa Hawker (@philippics) recommends the green shade and colonial ruins of Gabrielle Brady's mesmeric short film Remain.

<https://youaretheprototype.art/remain/>

https://twitter.com/Prototype_artTV/status/1422360371461906434



remember this story written in the blood of our ancestors and their courage we erect this stone

THE OBSERVER

Review

Island of the Hungry Ghosts re-view – timely study of refugees’ plight



A vivid sense of place mixes with mysticism in a moving documentary about Australia’s Christmas Island asylum camp



Trauma counsellor Poh Lin Lee with her daughter in The Island of Hungry Ghosts. Photograph: PR

Migration has always been a fact of life on Christmas Island. An Australian territory off the coast of Indonesia, it is famous for the yearly scuttle of red land crabs to the sea to mate. The early human settlers, migrants from China, have shaped the culture of the island. Folklore wafts through Gabrielle Brady’s lyrical documentary, like the smoke of the burnt offerings made to the “hungry ghosts”

of ancestors. But of late there has been a fresh influx of unquiet souls. The Australian government has constructed a huge, high-security detention centre where people seeking asylum are held for open-ended periods that can run into years. Viewed from the wooded hills above, it looks like a meat processing plant. And, from what we learn listening in on sessions with trauma counsellor Poh Lin Lee, the

inmates are treated little better than livestock.

With its vivid sense of place, and unblinking insight into the plight of refugees, the film has some kinship with Gianfranco Rosi’s Fire at Sea. But there’s also an intangible threat in the way Brady’s camera snakes through undergrowth thick with secrets. At times, it put me in mind of the matter-of-fact mysti-

cism of Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s Uncle Boonmee. It’s a potent, profoundly moving approach to an extensively covered subject. And it’s a timely reminder that a society must be judged by the way it treats the desperate and vulnerable.

Wendy Ide -
‘Timely study of refugees plight’

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/jan/13/island-of-the-hungry-ghosts-review-timely-documentary-australia-asylum-camp>

“With its vivid sense of place, and unblinking insight into the plight of refugees, the film has some kinship with Gianfranco Rosi’s Fire at Sea. But there’s also an intangible threat in the way Brady’s camera snakes through undergrowth thick with secrets. At times, it put me in mind of the matter-of-fact mysticism of Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s Uncle Boonmee. It’s a potent, profoundly moving approach to an extensively covered subject. And it’s a timely reminder that a society must be judged by the way it treats the desperate and vulnerable.”

Heading for Deep Water

INTERROGATING DETENTION IN GABRIELLE BRADY’S ISLAND OF THE HUNGRY GHOSTS



Red crab migration on Christmas Island

Juxtaposing contrasting images of movement on Christmas Island – millions of red crabs on a migratory march, the arrested passage of local souls to the spirit world and Australia’s indefinite detention of refugees – Island of the Hungry Ghosts takes an unconventional route in portraying ongoing injustices towards asylum seekers. In conversation with writer/director Gabrielle Brady, Anthony Carew unpacks the messages and stylistic interventions contained in this hybrid documentary.

There’s a developmental stage in toddler-

hood so universal that it’s essentially a comic trope. Moving from the primitivism of infancy towards higher brain functions, the small child is a sponge, soaking up everything they can about the world around them. And their research methods can be summed up in a single word: ‘Why?’ Though parents and carers can find these infinite inquiries maddening – and feel like this question–answer dynamic is a one-way street – this ‘why’ phase gets at the intellectual curiosity that’s a bedrock of humanity. And, in turn, the best ‘why’ questions can function as challenges to the

beaten-down adult’s acceptance of assumed truths or the status quo, causing the world to be looked at with the fresh eyes of a child.

This type of child–parent exchange occurs throughout Gabrielle Brady’s documentary Island of the Hungry Ghosts (2018). It’s a cine-portrait of Christmas Island, where its main (human) subject, Poh Lin Lee, works as a trauma therapist for those in indefinite detention. Lee also has two young girls, Poppy and Albertine, and their ‘why’ questions often echo the film’s own. If you’re wondering

where its poetic title comes from, it’s taken from a month-long local celebration during which offerings are given to the ‘lost’ spirits still on the island: those who’ve died, but have yet to pass through to the next realm. When asked – of course – why, Lee, in explanatory mother mode, offers: ‘They make these offerings so that the ghosts are happy, and the ghosts don’t go and bother other people.’

Anthony Carew -
‘Heading for deep water’

<https://metromagazine.com.au/heading-for-deep-water/>

“The reason there are offshore detention centres is so we are not faced with it...and the more distance we have from what’s going on, the easier it is to allow it to continue”.

Review: The Impressionistic Island of the Hungry Ghosts Is an Ode to Empathy

The film is a haunting portrait of the island as a purgatorial realm between the poles of isolation and liberation.

Score: ★★☆☆

Director: Gabrielle Brady

Screenwriter: Gabrielle Brady

Distributor: Sentient Art Film

Running Time: 98 min

Rating: NR

Year: 2018

Buy: Video



Photo: Sentient Art Film

Sometimes a metaphor is necessarily, unavoidably blunt. Case in point: the many shots in Gabrielle Brady’s documentary *Island of the Hungry Ghosts* that regard, from a measured distance, masses of migratory red crabs making their way toward the ocean across concrete roads. The setting is the Australian territory of Christmas Island, which has a population of just under 2,000 people and has become a haven for asylum seekers. Throughout the film, Brady stitches together images of the red crabs’ late-fall migration to the sea with snapshots of the life and work of trauma specialist Poh Lin Lee, offering up a haunting portrait of the island as a purgatorial realm between the poles of isolation and liberation.

The film begins with a man running and howl-

ing through the jungle, in a brief sequence that, while conspicuously staged, simply and urgently conveys the hauntedness of this place. The man’s distress is that of all “hungry ghosts,” spirits who must be appeased with various rituals, in accordance with the belief of islanders. And we get most of that in the abstract, through chants and mesmeric dolly shots through Christmas Island’s jungles. Brady withholds contextual information at almost every turn, about everything from the islanders’ beliefs to how their home became a desirable destination for refugees. Her caginess at times yields fastidiousness, but there’s no doubt that she doesn’t condescend to her audience, understanding that some things must speak for themselves or they’ll lose their totemic power.

There’s a mighty sense throughout *Island of the Hungry Ghosts* of how the people of Christmas Island are inextricably bound to the countless red crabs in their midst. In an early scene, national park rangers use fallen tree limbs as makeshift bridges, so that smaller crabs can more easily get out of the ditches that bound the island’s roads. Later, as Poh Lin and her family walk through a lightly forested area, her French husband encounters one of the crustaceans, which can live more than 70 years, and wonders if the hole in its back is the result of a skirmish with another crab. Poh Lin’s daughter may be distracted by the creature’s black eye, but the young girl, either guided by instinct or her father’s lead, maybe both, knows that to lightly nudge the creature to the side of the trail is to save it from further harm.

Brady then rhymes this act of kindness with Poh Lin’s almost ritualistic work with the migrants who are being held at a detention center that’s been plagued by various controversies over the last few years. Poh Lin uses a tableau of sand and small toy figures to help one woman process her trauma, poetically describing the grains of sand as mountains that have been reduced to their finest form, but mostly she just listens, and listens, and listens. She’s a willing sponge for their guilt, at one point moving over to sit next to and comfort the Syrian man who weeps as he remembers the various separations that have plagued his young life. It comes as no surprise to subsequently learn that Poh Lin is also in therapy.

Island of the Hungry Ghosts is braided together from seemingly countless threads, from the ubiquity of the English language as a vestige of colonialism to how the livelihood of migrants is at the mercy of unknowable decision-makers. But more than anything, it’s an uncanny articulation of how the surest route to empathy is letting oneself be haunted by a place. In the film’s most hypnotic shot, Michael Latham’s camera scales a craggy stretch of beach, in awe of all its textures, before a wave sends a massive splash of water into the air, its sound consuming the soundtrack. Then, Poh Lin’s husband is heard reading their daughter a story: “I’m going to fly around the island spitting water everywhere and the water is going to stay along the shore. It will burst out of rocks to protect Christmas Island from humans.” On this remote island, to be transfixed by legend is to withstand our oblivion for just a little while longer.

Ed Gonzales -

“The impressionistic *Island of the Hungry Ghosts* is an ode to empathy”.

<https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review-the-impressionistic-island-of-the-hungry-ghosts-is-an-ode-to-empathy/>

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