

Film

Michael John Whelan: Primary Organs

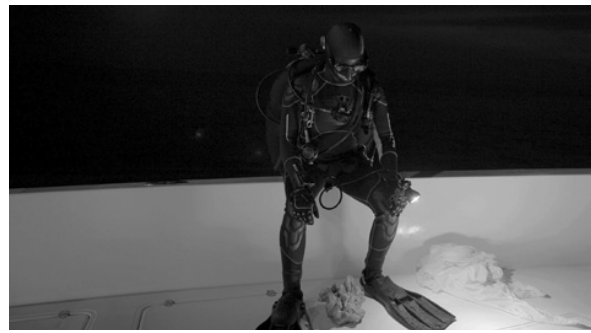
There is something uncannily pertinent to the times we are living through in Michael John Whelan's film *Primary Organs*, 2020. If one senses the building urgency to conversations which have otherwise been on hold in these precarious days, it is felt in Whelan's exhaustive project. His commitment to the subject is evident from the numerous collaborations he undertook, such as with local dive teams, archaeological departments and marine biologists. Supported by the Arts Council of Ireland, Culture Ireland, the Alserkal Arts Foundation and Grey Noise in Dubai, the film took two years to complete and was scheduled to be screened during Dubai Artweek in March – the busiest time of the UAE art calendar – alongside Whelan's solo exhibition 'Nocturnes' at Grey Noise. Days before it was set to open, the Covid-19 lockdown put a stop to it.

Primary Organs, in its most basic interpretation, is an elegy to the lungs of the Arabian Gulf – specifically, the coral reef that lines the shores of the UAE, and its fate after the discovery of oil off the coast of Abu Dhabi. The film examines the many narratives of individuals and communities inextricably tied to the sea: the heritage and old-world economies of pearl diving; fishermen colonies and their now endangered livelihoods and traditional songs; archaeological explorations of abandoned coral architecture; marine biology research programmes – all anchored in the film by the explorations of naval explorer Jacques Cousteau who, during his 1954 British Petroleum-sponsored Gulf survey for oil, ended up changing the fate of this region.

There is a popular generic view of the Gulf region as 'fake', 'built on oil money' and with 'no history', while important conversations around historical settlements, loss of native traditions, climate change and environmental stress are overshadowed or ignored. Without being didactic, this film avoids such tropes and offers a glimpse into what neo-colonialism has meant for those who have lived directly under its conditions: the locals, who are rarely listened to.

Whelan's practice scales through photo, film, sound, drawing, sculpture and research, but it is his fascination with the fragility of nature and the passage of time – and its markers: non-human life, light and dark – that are consistently returned to in his works, and which resonate throughout this film and define its aesthetic. Narrated solely in Arabic (with English subtitles), the film sews together the withered old voices of retired fishermen who break from stories into song, and the timbre of a younger, determined marine biologist, Noura Al Mansoori, who lays bare her despair at the rapid destruction of the coral reefs. These scenes are interlaced with black-and-white footage of Cousteau digging into the seabed of the Persian Gulf from the film *STATION 307*, 1955, and scenes of modern-day exploration of an abandoned archeological site in Ras al Khaimah: Jazirat Al Hamra (The Red Island), which is estimated to have used over 12 million coral heads for the construction of homes.

There is a powerful moment in the film where the numerous narrative threads come together in a poignant night-time scene. It starts anti-climatically with a diver sitting at the edge of a boat bobbing on the open sea, adjusting her gear. She picks a piece of coral and clutches it against her body before tipping backwards



Michael John Whelan, *Primary Organs*, 2020, video

into the deep dark silence of the sea. The viewer follows her, watching a performance that is both theatrical and celestial in its silent choreography. A single speck of light, dwarfed by the blackness around it, falls down slowly in the wide expanse like a falling star, the silence only broken by underwater bubbling. As the camera moves closer, the diver reaches the seabed and gently returns the coral to the floor – a bleached relic returning home. The torch shines on it, illuminating it with an otherworldly glow, before the diver, camera and viewer withdraw from this requiem for the dead.

The film and its score are quietly haunting and deliberately measured, and the scenes open up unhurriedly. Sequences are by turns bathed in colour – acidic purple for the lab water tanks and warm ochre tones for the fishermen – or reduced to the monochromatic darkness of the night dives. As the film closes, a man in traditional dress, standing on the roof of a modern house and facing the road, sings an old fishing song. In the background, people drive by in big SUVs propelled by the fuel that came from the shores. Whelan doesn't offer either simplistic hope or reductive homage, but instead a melancholic reminder of the tense relationship between progress and erasure.

'Nocturnes' continues at Grey Noise, Dubai to 31 July.

Saira Ansari is a researcher and writer based in Sharjah.

Willie Doherty: Endless

Endless, 2020, is a single-screen video by Willie Doherty presented in the online viewing room of Dublin's Kerlin Gallery in collaboration with Alexander and Bonin, New York and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich. Shot in austere black and white, just before the Covid-19 lockdown, it features the British actor Christopher Eccleston as an unnamed individual burdened by his past. He, a white, middle-aged man inhabiting a whitewashed stage-like