

Double, Double, Toil and Trouble: Renee Vaughan Sutherland's *Waterhouse* at TAP Southend

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Just how did women become witches – to their neighbours, to
themselves?

Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History* (Purkiss 1996: 146)

Essex was always noted for its ducking stools and scolds' bridles,
and for 'witches', which is just another name for uncontrollable
women.

Germaine Greer, 'Long Live the Essex Girl' (Greer 2001)

I. Looking for Trouble

In Andrea Arnold's 2009 film *Fish Tank*, we meet a teenage girl called Mia. She lives with her mum and sister on an estate on the far eastern edgelands of London, and her wanderings take her through the wastelands and marshlands of Tilbury and Dagenham in Essex. Mia, it seems, is uncontrollable – head-butting girls and knocking back cider. Her mother has given up on her, telling a social worker: 'It's like she came out looking for trouble' (Arnold 2009). Yet Mia refuses to accept the assumptions of others. When faced with an audition to be a nightclub dancer that's depressingly predictable in its requirements – the owners want her in hot pants not tracksuit bottoms, and she is told to wear her hair down as it's 'a lot more feminine' – she walks away. *Fish Tank* is a film about cultural stereotypes, specifically those shaping our impressions of young women, and what it might take to break free. It's also a film that is prepared to look trouble in the eye.

From April to June 2015, the Temporary Arts Project (TAP) in Southend played host to *Waterhouse* (Figure 1) – an exhibition of three film installations and a performance with film by the Australian-born, London-based artist Renee Vaughan Sutherland. Like Andrea Arnold, Vaughan Sutherland is interested in how stereotypes take root, and the relationships between media, landscape and notions of gender. The show's title immediately indicates the many layers of historical, cultural and geographical meaning implicit in Vaughan Sutherland's work. TAP is based in a former waterworks, and the Victorian infrastructure and architecture are pivotal – literally, in some instances – to how the artist makes her own watery explorations (Sleigh-Johnson 2015). The wider hydrological history of the area, especially the expansive marshlands of the Thames Estuary, also play a role in the show, with the works partly emerging from Vaughan Sutherland's walks around the Essex coastline. Indeed, the way in which this landscape shifts over the course of just a few hours, as the tides retreat and return, seems to chime with *Waterhouse*'s fascination with changing patterns of representation.



Figure 1: Renee Vaughan Sutherland, *Waterhouse* (2015), exhibition view, TAP Southend

Yet, it is the title's allusion to Agnes Waterhouse that's most revealing of the exhibition's intentions. In 1566, Waterhouse became the first woman to be executed for witchcraft in England. She came from the Essex village of Hatfield Peverel and was hanged in Chelmsford, condemned largely because of the evidence offered by a twelve-year-old girl. This sorry tale is just one small part of the much larger story of witch hunts and trials in Essex, which were often led by the self-styled 'Witchfinder General', Matthew Hopkins (c.1620–1647).

Shakespeare's witches were 'saucy and overbold' – a description that echoes assumptions often attached to so-called 'Essex girls' in the present. Thus, throughout *Waterhouse*, Vaughan Sutherland brings together the history of witchcraft in Essex in the early modern era with contemporary stereotypes concerning the area's young women. These twin histories, double trouble for the county's women, are both examined via a particular focus on the gaze. Vaughan Sutherland is also prepared to look trouble in the eye – yet looking might be just where the trouble starts.

II. Prepare for a Dunking: *Evil Eye*

What power do we invest in looking? How might a glance shape the world? Is there a particular force in the female gaze?

These are some of the questions posed by *Evil Eye*, the work that greeted visitors to *Waterhouse* (Figure 2). It consists of two 16mm film projections displayed on white wooden boards on opposing walls in one of the gallery's vaulted chambers, spaces which are ideal for displaying moving image works. The whirling mechanical projectors, which provide the work's only audible sound, stare at each other across the

room in a spirit of competition or mutual suspicion. The films are composed of stark black and white images with the exception of a brief colour interlude that appears to show the set-up of the shoot itself – the real evil eye, perhaps.



Figure 2: Renee Vaughan Sutherland, *Evil Eye* (2015)

For the rest of their twelve minutes, the two projections focus on interactions between a group of five women (the artist plus four local residents) in twin films exploring how female identity is mediated. The women range in age and appearance – a prepubescent girl and a teenager, a blonde and a brunette, and an older woman who seems to oversee the action – in a way that suggests cross-generational concerns. They are presented plainly (the make-up, we might assume, was being saved for *Treatment*, of which more in a moment), dressed in thick-knitted jumpers and cardigans, and are shot in simple interiors and the windswept Essex landscape. There is a distinctly Scandinavian feel with the poise of the camera, the starkness of the monochrome imagery and the close-ups of female faces recalling an exulted cinematic lineage crowned by Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) and Bergman's *Persona* (1966). With shots of waves, wheat-fields and a beach, the films have a certain freshness, almost a wholesome feeling. Yet something else is occurring here, something wicked, perhaps: the strange objects, the dream-like atmosphere, the feeling of time somewhat out of joint – all of these hold distant but distinct echoes of Maya Deren's films, and evoke more uneasy sensations.

For it becomes clear that two of the women are being prepared – their nails clipped, their hair brushed – but prepared for what? These arrangements are accompanied by cozy cups of tea yet more sinister overtones begin to take shape: the clippings are placed on a small mirror, bowls and candles are brought out. There is a sense of ritual, as if these women, in performing the tiresome cultural commands of female

grooming, are actually enacting some kind of solemn ceremonial act. Things start to slide into the occult: a spell is being cast, a potion is brewing, a séance is taking place. The women, we realise, are being prepared for a dunking. Sure enough, their heads are plunged into watery immersion. If these are witches, they are not like the creepy sketches of Paulo Rego or the prosthetic hags created by Cindy Sherman. What can have caused this dunking?

An answer may be found in the pivotal moment when both projections display a close-up of an eye. At all other times, the two projections show different but related images from the same imaginative world, creating a looping, echoing, often disconcerting narrative, another kind of double trouble. When the two eyes appear, locked together across the room while the viewer watches on, there is a sense of judgment. Here, the female-to-female gaze is cast as the catalyst for paranoia, competition and insecurity – the malevolent aspect of the title fully realised. As Diane Purkiss points out in her history of witchcraft, ‘many, perhaps even most, witches were accused by women, and most cases depend at least partly on the evidence given by women witnesses’ (Purkiss 1996: 8). However, the colour interlude in *Evil Eye* that displays the apparatus of the film shoot reminds us – if we still need reminding – that film itself is also deeply implicated in this trial by looking.

III. The Matter of Film: *Treatment*

So, what is the matter with film? Or, what is the matter *of* film? More double trouble emerges with *Treatment*, in which two 16mm film projections investigate the materials that shape and condition female appearance (Figure 3). For this work, the images are projected next to each other on the same gallery wall but at slightly different heights, confirming a feeling, evoked throughout the whole show, of asymmetry. All the perspectives Vaughan Sutherland offers us are slightly askew – images are doubled or reversed, displayed upside down or visibly altered. It suggests a determination to unsettle fixed ideas, to mess with the way that we see the world, and to draw our attention to the mechanisms that create and support filmic representations. In *Treatment*, the film reels are themselves extended back on spools behind the projectors, emphasising their materiality as well as the sheer vulnerability of the medium. Underneath each looping reel is a small pile of organic matter, with dirt on one side and oyster shells on the other.

Treatment’s two films were shot in Southend and Leigh-on-Sea, but these landscapes are rendered strange, even cosmic at times, by the materials placed on the film. An array of natural and manufactured goods associated with witchcraft and the ‘Essex girl’ persona – toenails, eyelashes and urine combined with bleaching products, fake tan and nail polish – render the films a riot of purples, pinks, greens and yellows, and create spiraling roulette wheels and flashes of colour. This witch’s brew of distorted celluloid brings to mind the experiments of Stan Brakhage or Bill Morrison. The overall composition, encompassing the projections, the film reels and the organic piles, seems determined to trouble the line between artifice and nature.

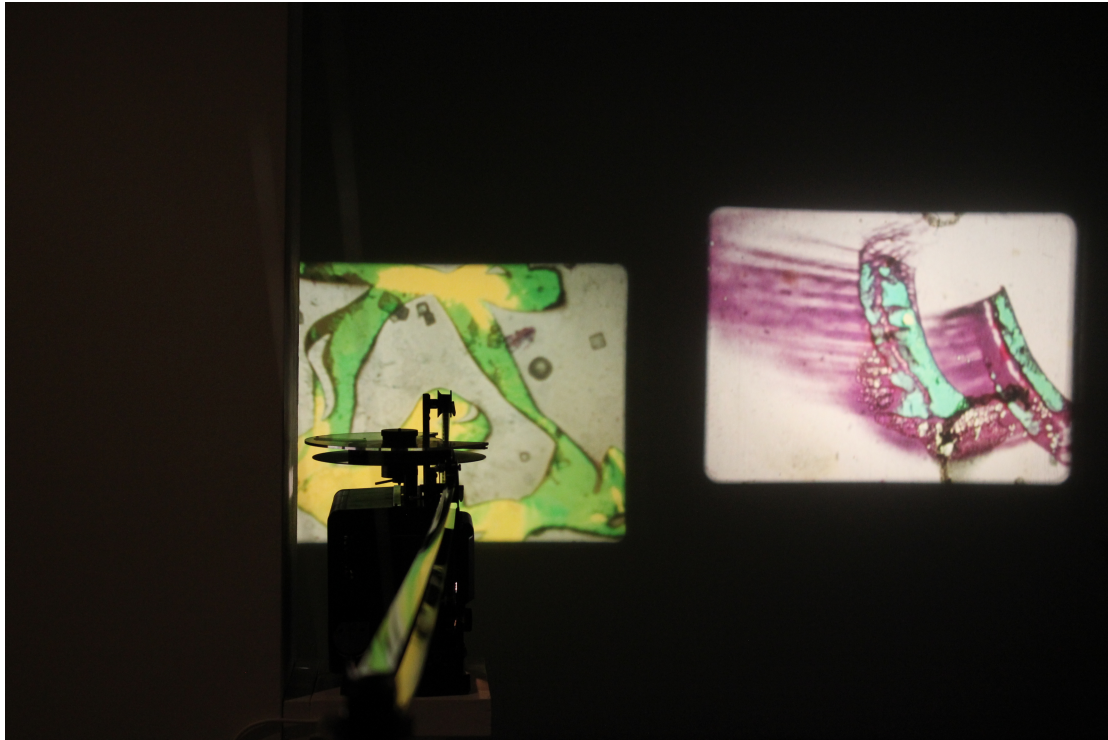


Figure 3: Renee Vaughan Sutherland, *In Treatment* (2015)

The title of the work holds additional connotations. It's suggestive of the beauty treatments undertaken for a night out, it recalls the processing of film, and it is what happens to water when we want to purify it and remove contaminations. These are all transformations of a kind and Vaughan Sutherland implies there is sorcery in how we re-make matter for our own purposes. At the same time, the psychological implications of *Treatment* are impossible to quell. Treatment is something dished out to people and it is something people need when they have been on the end of the world's violence. With our assumptions and stereotypes, how do we treat people? With its logic of framing and looking, how does film treat us? The notions of conditioning at play in *Treatment* move far beyond bottles of peroxide.

IV. In the Winch Room: *Waterhouse*

The intricate apparatus of *Treatment* is a precursor to the highly complex rigging and harnessing involved in *Waterhouse* – the work installed, aptly enough, in the Winch Room at TAP (Figure 4). In a brilliant technical feat, it features a projector suspended high up in the gallery space under wooden beams, with a thick supporting rope hooked onto a wall and its end gently coiled on the ground. The film reel runs down from the projector and through the gallery floor, as if measuring or mapping the entire space, delving into a dark subterranean area that lies above a capped well. The flickering images are displayed in a rounded projection on the floor where the attendant dirt and markings add further texture. Vaughan Sutherland's belief in the sculptural nature of film is especially evident here.



Figure 4: Renee Vaughan Sutherland, *Waterhouse* (2015)

In contrast to the more contemplative movements of *Evil Eye*, the images in *Waterhouse* move rapidly, a plunging, twisting sequence that again brings together the biological with the artificial. There are close-ups of an eye (evil or otherwise), a stone, a beach, a high-heeled shoe, a butterfly wrapped in cord, seaweed and oyster shells. They are presented like an odd set of medical slides, ingredients assembled, boiled and whirled into strange combinations. Water scrying – gazing into the depths to learn about the past or divine the future – was once associated with witches, and if we look closely at the images in *Waterhouse*, projected above a historic well of fathomless depth, there is also a sense of temporal disorientation. It takes a while to realise that the footage is often reversed: the tide patterns are going against their natural flow, the order of things is being disturbed, media and matter are moving against the grain.

The objects included in *Waterhouse*, the crustaceans in particular, may evoke certain strains of surrealism, while the presentation of the work firmly locates it with practices of expanded cinema. The film is also reminiscent of the work of Peter Strickland, whose *Berberian Sound Studio* (2012) and *The Duke of Burgundy* (2014) play on similar ideas involving repetition, replay and organic matter, with mashed vegetables and eerie butterflies to the fore. Strickland's films centre on sequences in which the work's very subjectivity comes into question, when what is controlling the mind of the movie becomes troubling or when a troubled mind takes control – though he is also a director who leads us out of confusion in a rather smooth fashion. *Waterhouse* pursues a similar logic, but pushes it further and without the same comforts: Vaughan Sutherland is happy for us to dwell in the maelstrom.

V. Exhausting the Familiar: *I'm in Essex Girl*

The final work in the show, a performance entitled *I'm in Essex Girl*, was delivered eight times during the exhibition's duration. Vaughan Sutherland has admitted she often felt depressed traveling on the train to Southend each Saturday to enact the work, and it is easy to see why – alongside the obvious physical demands, there is a weariness to the stereotypes it recounts.

The work involves the artist being hung upside down over a square pool of water, a rope tied around her feet and attached to the gallery wall – she is winched up just like the projector in *Waterhouse*, strung up like Agnes Waterhouse. Vaughan Sutherland's skirt comes down over her head to form a kind of screen onto which a film is projected (also upside down) via a projector hung from the ceiling. Both the artist and her apparatus are suspended in seemingly precarious states, and there is a sense of danger to the piece: are we about to witness a real-life dunking?

What follows is both more mundane and more affecting. While the artist remains silent, the film, which lasts around fifteen minutes, features seventeen local women telling clichéd 'Essex girl' 'jokes'. Their delivery is discernibly flat and they certainly do not laugh (neither did the audience during the performance I saw). The same gags appear again and again, the same punch-lines about stupidity and promiscuity and superficiality – a horrendous, exhausting litany of misogyny intertwined with class hatred. The jokes place an emphasis on the familiar in two respects: 'familiar' denotes something we know, while *a* familiar is also a partner for a witch in performing her spells. It is doubtful, however, that the spell cast by this work is one of re-

appropriation. These women do not appear interested in taking back the term ‘Essex girl’. Rather, the work seems to deaden any residue of truth or humour that may be attached to the label through a very physical demonstration of how tiresome it has become.

In this respect, the work opposes the kind of celebration offered by Germaine Greer in her 2001 article in *The Guardian* praising Essex girls:

The Essex girl is tough, loud, vulgar and unashamed. Her hair is badly dyed not because she can’t afford a hairdresser, but because she wants it to look brassy. Nobody makes her wear her ankle chain; she likes the message it sends. Nobody laughs harder at an Essex girl joke than she does: she is not ashamed to admit what she puts behind her ears to make her more attractive is her ankles. She is anarchy on stilts; when she and her mates descend upon Southend for a rave, even the bouncers grow pale.
(Greer 2001)

Rather, Vaughan Sutherland’s work stresses the debilitating experiences of being subject to stereotypical thinking on a daily basis. *I’m in Essex Girl* emerged from discussions with local women concerning the term ‘Essex girl’ and what it means to them. Some of the women confessed to the artist that they had changed their accent and or the way they dressed in a bid to avoid the label. It is notable that a range of ages and appearances are represented in the final film, as if to counter the narrowness of the stereotype. The title of the work is taken from a promotional video for the television series *The Only Way is Essex* which itself reworked the video for LMAFO’s 2008 hit ‘I’m in Miami Bitch’ – further indication of Vaughan Sutherland’s interest in how meaning is transformed through media. Indeed, for *I’m in Essex Girl*, the artist’s body becomes a strange hybrid combining a human form and technical apparatus. Here, the twin troubles burdening women in Essex are completely intertwined: projected onto the historical treatment of witches are the contemporary stereotypes recycled by the media.

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