



LOUISA BUCK ART

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ART

Whitstable Biennale: art beside the seaside

This year's Whitstable Biennale showcases radical live and moving artworks in the most unexpected of places, writes Louisa Buck



BY LOUISA BUCK

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The Kentish seaside town of Whitstable is best known for its oysters and as a popular bolt hole for weary urbanites in need of a blast of briny. But for the next week or so it is also a repository for the latest in contemporary art, courtesy of the [Whitstable Biennale](#), which specialises in film and performance and this year is presenting the work of some 45 artists – much of which has been commissioned especially for this festival. Now in its seventh edition, this year's Biennale builds on its reputation of showing some of the most radical live and moving image artworks in the most unexpected of places, opening up the parts of Whitstable that day trippers rarely reach. For as even the most hardened art aficionado will agree, one of the best things about this Biennale is not only the art itself but also tracking it down in the less familiar corners of town.

Some of the new homes for art seem deliberately at odds with Whitstable's picturesque pastel-tinted image

Some of these new homes for art seem deliberately at odds with Whitstable's picturesque pastel-tinted image, where the shadow of [Cath Kidston](#) looms large. Inside a shipping container at the ominously named Dead Man's Corner (so called because it is apparently where everything that falls into the

harbour gets washed up), [Laura Wilson](#)'s film pays homage to the quayside drama of epic unloadings, shovellings, shiftings and haulage that is the daily business of the nearby Brett Aggregates factory, a stark industrial edifice that dominates the surrounding waterfront. Meanwhile, in the town and tucked down a side street in the Whitstable Umbrella Community Centre Café – which supports those with loneliness and mental health issues – is an audio book by Whitstable-based [Rosa Ainley](#), chronicling workers' memories of Viagra-producing, pharmaceutical giant Pfizer's sprawling complex outside Sandwich which was a major local employer until its closure in 2012. Listening down individual headphones to the montaged voices of former employees revisiting their lost working lives whilst surrounded by the convivial clink and clatter of a



working community café is an unexpectedly intimate and moving experience.



Jeremy Millar, XDO XOL

There is another evocative – and elegiac – homage to local surroundings and the less sugary realities of life on the South coast inside the empty former Royal Mail delivery office (which controversially closed last year).

[Jeremy Millar](#), another Whitstable resident who is well known throughout the art world, has constructed a tented viewing chamber from draped grey blankets in which to show

XDO XOL, an atmospheric and utterly beautiful 45 minute film shot on the nearby marshes. In this windy, watery primeval setting nothing much happens, but it is compelling viewing: water trickles, mud cracks, mist rises and skylarks sing. A frog peeps through the brackish water, a solitary man crouches in a mouldering World War 2 pillbox and carves a pipe from a bone, while time stands still.

Other works infuse the tourist trail and present it anew. At the very back of the [Whitstable Museum and Gallery](#), beyond the cases of mammoth tusks, maritime memorabilia and a particularly splendid display devoted to the late actor and much loved Whitstable resident Peter Cushing (including the slippers he wore in



Louisa Fairclough, Absolute Pitch

Star Wars), is Louisa Fairclough's 16mm film installation which is underpinned by memory and loss. The film itself forms a crucial sculptural element as five film strips criss-cross the width and height of the room, looping through their five projectors and forming a three dimensional echo of a tiny five line monoprint taken from Fairclough's late sister's sketchbook. On each strip a single note sung by a chorister is accompanied by a flare of corresponding colour, precisely selected by each singer who – in an exercise in sense-

blending synaesthesia – were each told to imagine a colour as they sang.

On the Biennale's opening night Fairclough used these same choristers to sing out a specially composed piece as they processed at dusk along the line of an ancient shingle spit that stretches a mile out to sea at low tide. This was just one of a packed programme of often one-off performances that accompany the Biennale's ongoing film and video works. The choristers may have been and gone, but there's still plenty more to come; including a foghorn blasting [Richard Wilson](#)'s waterborne ship opera to mark the summer solstice on June 21 and, over the next two weekends, one of the Biennale's livelier live events courtesy of [John Walter](#) who will be holding court in a beach hut way down on the waterfront.

Resplendent in an outrageously flamboyant costume, John Walter will be dispensing locally made gypsy tarts and pouring gin and tonics whilst a puppet and a CGI head berate each other in 1950s Polari

Here, way down the coastal path, surrounded by his custom made fluorescent wallpaper and resplendent in an outrageously flamboyant Day-Glo costume that is a performance in itself, this most hospitable of artists will be dispensing locally made gypsy tarts and pouring gin and tonics whilst presiding over Turn My Oyster Up, a two screen installation in which a puppet and a CGI head berate each other in 1950s Polari gay-speak. In this super-camp version of Punch and Judy, the language

of Kenneth Williams comes infused with a hefty dose of 21 century Grindr and there's not a Cath Kidston print in sight. It's never been a better time to be beside the seaside.

Whitstable Biennale 31 May – 15 June, with Richard Wilson's ship opera Whitstable Sounding viewable from the shoreline at 8.30pm on June 21

