

Hanna Tuulikki: *Seals'kin*



SEALS'KIN

Single channel moving image and stereo sound, 19 mins 15 sec, 2022

Seals'kin (choreographic visual score), Flocking screenprint on somerset antique white, 90cm x 76cm, Edition of 9 with 3 APs, 2022



Commissioned for the Biennale of Sydney, Hanna Tuulikki's short film *Seals'kin* is a sonic and choreographic meditation on loss, longing, transformation and kinship, shot on location in coastal Aberdeenshire in Scotland. At the mouth of the river Ythan, where the freshwater meets the North Sea, hundreds of grey and common seals haul out on the estuary banks. Here, Tuulikki explores with her body what it might mean to become-with-seal, drawing on myths of human-seal hybridity and folkloric musical practices to offer alternative forms of mourning through sensuous identification with more-than-human kin.

For as long as we have inhabited the earth, humans have shared the seas, coasts and islands with seals – web-footed mammals adapted to life in the water. In places where people depend (or once depended) on the sea for their livelihood, seals are intricately entangled with peoples' beliefs. In Ancient Greek mythology, the eerie calls of grey seals carried on the wind were probably the original siren voices, luring unwitting sailors to their deaths on the rocks. Shape-shifting is a recurrent theme, and nowhere are there more tales of human-seal transformation than in Scotland.

In Scottish folklore, mythical seal people known as selkies are said to shed their sealskins and step from water as humans, until mysteriously disappearing back to sea. The sealskin is essential to the act of transformation and, on visiting the human world, if their skin is lost or stolen, a selkie may end up trapped on land in human form. In their watery domain, a selkie distressed by the slaughter of a fellow seal may seek revenge on a human seal hunter, capsizing a boat in retribution, while a benevolent selkie might take pity on a lost mariner caught in a storm, offering shelter in their kingdom under the sea. Selkie stories were passed down from generation to generation and, embedded within the folklore are a number of musical traditions that appear to blur the line between human and seal, including melodies which imitate their plaintive sounds, and haunting seal-calling songs sung to attract seals to the shore.



Perhaps these selkie stories of loss and longing helped to alleviate the feelings of sorrow brought on by a sudden death in the community, or from relatives lost at sea. Musical practices of singing to or with seals may have maintained a felt connection with the dead through the fostering of kinship with seals and selkies, thought by some to be the souls of the departed. But as folkloric coping mechanisms for grief, how might these stories and songs help us to come to terms with the collective and personal tragedies of the present pandemic? And furthermore, how might they help us to navigate the sorrow of ecological or climate grief?

By virtue of having a body, we are all vulnerable to loss, and the more intense the love was for a person, being, place or thing, the greater the grief. Our response to loss moves us, changing us in ways we could not imagine; it leaves us more open to other bodies, exposes our shared vulnerability and finitude, and fosters meaningful connections. The work of mourning then, is politically and ethically transformative, for it implies empathy, obligation and responsibility. By directing our attention to more-than-human beings and places that are often excluded from the realm of the grievable, we can begin to nurture new forms of kinship and rethink more hopeful futures.

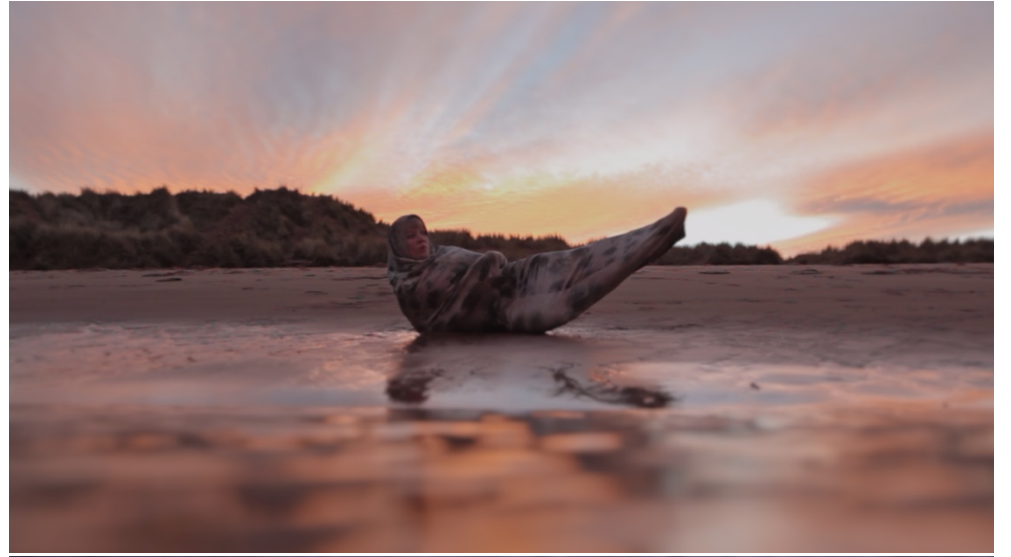
In *Seals'kin*, Tuulikki draws on her own recent experiences of loss to reimagine a contemporary mourning rite. Referencing traditional selkie tales as bereavement allegories and seal calling songs as practices of making kin, she adopts the sealskin as a powerful ritual object to explore how grief can open out new ways of knowing and being that stretch beyond human bodies into a visceral connection with the more-than-human world.

Link to film (PREVIEW to un-mastered stereo version):

<https://vimeo.com/684252463>

password: seal

Link to view full edition of visual scores: <https://bit.ly/3CRPitU>





"A haunting film of beautiful melodies, Seals'kin serves as a reminder that folklore need not be relegated to the past and that it can serve a vital purpose in the present when other tools fail us. It's a slow paced tale, in keeping with the traditions of the north, but Tuulikki successfully finds a point of balance. It doesn't drag but instead acquires a hypnotic quality, a stillness around which an ocean of grief might swirl yet do no harm" – ★★★★★ Jennie Kermode, Eye for Film

"The film is mesmerising: gently-paced, beautifully shot, and with a vocal score for human voice that responds to, and at times merges with, the seals' own singing."
– Dougie Strang, LESS – a journal of degrowth, radical sufficiency and decolonisation in Scotland.



Seals'kin: calling for the turning of the tide *participatory vocal improvisation, approx 30 minutes, 2022*

Seals'kin: calling for the turning of the tide is a site specific vocal improvisation based on fragments of traditional seal-calling songs performed by a scratch choir of local singers, facilitated by artist Hanna Tuulikki, alongside fellow performers Nic Green and Jude Williams.

Growing out of an introductory workshop rooted in Tuulikki's exploratory vocal practice, the participants are invited to perform an improvised lament to the water at high tide, calling the seals, inviting them to surface.

The workshop and performance are part of a larger body of work exploring myths of human-seal hybridity and folkloric musical practices to offer alternative forms of identification with more-than-human kin.

SEALS'KIN

Exhibition history:

- 2023 *Legends from the deep sitting peacefully on the waters*,
Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia
- 2022 *When Bodies Whisper*, Timespan, Sutherland, Scotland
- 2022 *Rivus*, The 23rd Biennale of Sydney, Australia

Performance history:

- 2022 British Art Show 9, Plymouth
- 2022 Galoshans Festival, Feral Arts, Greenock
- 2022 Full of Noises, South Walney Island, Cumbria
- 2022 *Rivus*, The 23rd Biennale of Sydney, Australia (*solo*)
- 2021 COP26, Glasgow

Film screening history:

- 2022 British Art Show 9, Plymouth
- 2022 Galoshans Festival, Feral Arts, Greenock
- 2022 Centre for Human Ecology, Glasgow
- 2022 *Making Oddkin*, film programme, GAMIS, Glasgow
- 2022 *Folk Film Gathering*, Edinburgh Filmhouse

Film Credits:

Performed and directed by Hanna Tuulikki
Produced by Glasgow Artist Moving Image Studios
Additional vocals: Nic Green and Judith Williams
Assistant director: Peter McMaster
Director of photography: Minttumaari Mäntynen
Music composer: Hanna Tuulikki
First camera: Minttumaari Mäntynen
Underwater camera and second camera: Lindsay Brown
Location sound: Pete Smith
Production coordination: Lydia Honeybone and Shireen Taylor
Costume design: Hanna Tuulikki
Sealskin costume textile: Liz Honeybone
Editor: Hanna Tuulikki
Sound design and mix: Pete Smith

Visual Score Credits:

Produced at Edinburgh Printmakers
with assistance from Master Printmaker Anupa Gardenr

Film and visual scores commissioned by the Biennale of Sydney; supported by Creative Scotland, the British Council, Frame Finland.