

OWAIN TRAIN MCGILVARY

I'm finally using my body for
what I feel like it's made to do

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Dim Iaith

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Mewn rhyfeddod, rwyf ti'n canfod bod gen ti ddim iaith.

Britney Spears' 'Piece of Me', like all of its parent album, **Blackout** (2007), emerged from a moment of centre-not-holding ruin from which celebrity culture has arguably yet to recover. (I need not repeat the cascading torrent of unfortunate conditions and corrupt decisions which led to that blackout moment, nor the saga that followed; though that ongoing narrative involves themes not irrelevant to the film I am about to spend this text discussing: patriarchal authority, collective organising, hiraeth for a more just world.)

Britney's discography is filled with narratives of imprisonment and impossible escapes, of frustration at having simply no choice but to be a body under the unrelenting watch of the world every second of every day. But 'Piece of Me' is perhaps the most savagely specific of them all. Its chorus, which is almost a duet with co-writer Robyn, presents the singer as finding a twisted empowerment in the meat-marketification of her body and life. Here is a song about being a body (and being a cis woman) when that body (and gender) has been beaten down by the structures of a heightened everyday which is doing all it can not to let you live. Most people will never know the extremity of living life the way Britney Spears lived it then, and so we can barely begin to scratch the surface of questioning how it might feel to try to articulate how it **felt**. There is a certain kind of darkroom-ready, mid-noughties electropop which can speak to this kind of dissolution in ways that make a seedy kind of sense. What other cultural forms, aesthetic and narrative modes might be able to break through the confines of ordinary language

in this way, to illustrate what it feels like to break free from the confines set out for you by societal conditions; what it feels like to live?

Tinny echoes of 'Piece of Me', as they reverberate against the walls of a half-identifiable, semi-public space, are among the first sounds we hear in Owain Train McGilvary's new film, a culmination of the artist's longest-term and most intensely collaborative process to date. The film's title, which stems from a direct-to-camera utterance by one of its collaborator-subjects, Raven Struthers, (paraphrasing a line of dialogue from the Netflix comedy-drama **Glow**.) declares its speculative, near-utopian approach to its themes of bodily empowerment and gender euphoria: 'I'm finally using my body for what I feel like it's made to do'. Although we hear only a few isolated seconds of the song in the background of the film's narrative, the furious fuck-it energy of 'Piece of Me' is an apt introduction to a film which is intimately engaged with questions of where the personal meets the public, how camp and artifice can express otherwise inarticulable truths, and where hyper-performativity becomes a means of liberation.

[Incidentally, poetic observations on the voice of Britney Spears, which has defined the sound of our young century as much as any other, figured prominently in *Speakable Things* (2018), Freya Dooley's film also shown at Chapter. Dooley's film appropriated 'The Gender of Sound', an essay by Anne Carson, similarly to how McGilvary's brings Kathy Acker's 'Against Ordinary Language: The Language of The Body' into dialogue with its own mode of documentary group portraiture].

Mewn syndod, mae modd ffeindio dy hun heb iaith.

Physicality, collectivism, escape, and the desires that bind them together: here are just some of the lines of inquiry at the heart of McGilvary's film, an almost-half-hour video portrait of The Renegades, a group of women and non-binary amateur wrestlers based in the Southside of Glasgow, where the artist also lives. To call the film 'lovingly crafted' would be to understate its intimately collaborative and democratic ethos. 'I'm finally using my body...' centres the perspectives and lived realities of the members of the group themselves, in a sequence of to-camera interviews in which the wrestlers' ease in the company of the filmmaker is abundantly clear. The fact of this privileging of the collaborators in itself offers an insight into the workings of this inquisitive and generous young artist, who seems to recontextualise his core thematic concerns – often around forms of queer togetherness and performativity, and the linguistic and architectural regimes which underpin them – with new aesthetic parameters with every new piece of work, including new paintings exhibited in Chapter's café bar.

What does [would, could] it mean to be **without (a) language**, heb iaith? McGilvary's film inquires into what it means to have [to be] a breathing-feeling human body and to demand more than what the languages of the mind, tongue and soul might be able to offer. Words nonetheless figure prominently in the film's visual vocabulary; both original pieces of text by the artist and quotations from Acker's essay are featured as punctuative moments. And indeed in watching the film, the vocabulary of wrestling, foreign to me, is a ubiquitous presence, nodding indirectly to the importance of collective vocabulary-making (and queer vernacular) for under-privileged groups. Where Acker's text explores the grammars and lexicons of the human body by drawing from the author's experiences of entering into the world of bodybuilding, McGilvary's

film is more gently suggestive, using text only to offer some new potentialities which emerge from The Renegades' close-knit character. What pure bodily sensation, in concert with those around you, could communicate that language could not, emerges as one of the film's key questions.

[I am reminded of a moment in T Fleischmann's 'Time is the Thing a Body Moves Through', in which an acquaintance of the narrator makes an off-the-cuff remark about how being with other people connects us to our own emotional landscapes. This sparks reflections in our narrator on what kind of company language itself can provide: **Can you be alone with language? What a dream that would be, what a nightmare.**]

Together with Glasgow-based queer punk group Comfort's pulsating original score, these moments of text-based digression provide the film's lo-fi, conversational tone with an air of momentousness, of a dialogue with something much greater than the sum of its parts. Although the gender and sexual identities of the characters on screen are not part of the film's surface exploration, the way McGilvary and his collaborators layer references and quotations provide their viewer with a generously queer garden of forking paths. The film ultimately emerges as part of an ongoing conversation with networks of queer and feminist performance which stretch far, far beyond Glasgow's Southside.

Mewn dieithrwch, dwi'n ffeindio fy hun heb iaith i'w siarad.

In 'I Can Only Dream of Reaching', an essay McGilvary wrote for the fourth issue of Amgueddfa Cymru's Cynfas last year, he moves between English and Welsh to write sensitively of how language and cultural codes were an innate part of his own queer becoming: **"To be queer for me is to embody resilience. You already know how to read the set of codes and signifiers that appeal to**

your desires. A queer focused archive is how vocabularies are refined, made clearer, to know that your eyes aren't deceiving you." In that essay, he quotes from Susan Sontag to supplement his own autobiographical wanderings around formative experiences of existing in queer spaces, piling up personal observations and drawing from artistic, photographic and literary sources not dissimilarly to how 'I'm finally using my body...' gradually weaves its web around a core set of characters and thematic threads.

McGilvary's film has a(nother) precursor in Sherri (2021), a short performance-film he showed at Chapter last year as part of Experimentica festival. For that film, he collaborated closely with Lily Ross-Millard, a performance artist and peer in Glasgow, to create a raucously tragi-comic ode to Sensational Sherri, the iconic wrestler who ultimately fell victim to both the misogynistic culture of the field and to the US' prescription-drug epidemic. In both films, which are in some sense companion pieces despite their extremely different affective and stylistic toolkits, McGilvary assembles a cluster of dispersed references and observations around the wrestling world, and its relationship to everyday performances of gender, physicality and freedom. An ethically sound documentary aesthetic, which prizes gentle appropriation only as another form of collaboration, makes itself clear in both films, as well as in McGilvary's works beyond the moving image. You finish watching 'I'm finally using my body...' feeling eager to journey down some of the many paths it has gently presented you with; perhaps to get in touch with some acquaintance you've long lost contact with, whose cadence or character that of someone in the film sparked reminisces of; or, perhaps, you finish watching it eager to hang up your work clothes and join some wrestling group or other community-led gathering

somewhere – not far, just down the road – to spend time being conscious of being one more body among many, appreciating all the things that bodies do.

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