

This essay accompanies the exhibition Christine Negus: *you can't spell slaughter without laughter*  
January 19 to February 18, 2012

**Gallery TPW** gallerytpw.ca

## Christine Negus - you can't spell slaughter without laughter

by Jon Davies

Christine Negus is a young artist based in London, Ontario. Her first major video work, the 17-minute *bluewater* (2007), begins with her stating, "I was masturbating while my grandmother was dying..." It tricks you into thinking it's a diaristic, episodic video about trauma and loss, but every time you start to trust or believe in the narrator's voice, the terrain shifts, revealing something far stranger. While orbiting around the death of the narrator's grandmother, which is conveyed through first-person voiceover and calm shots of what we presume to be the grandmother's home and neighbourhood, the piece also includes vignettes purportedly shot by students of their high school, a news item about a town's spectacular Christmas decorations, and the narrator's striking story of the domestic appearance of a mysterious insect. From these uncomfortable fragments, Negus' voice as an artist emerges as difficult and troubling, sensitive to opening fissures in what we think we know about ourselves and others – animal, vegetable or mineral.

Since *bluewater's* potent Ontario Gothic attracted acclaim, winning Negus the National Film Board of Canada's Best Emerging Video/Filmmaker award at the 2008 Images Festival, she has been working with shorter-form videos of just a few minutes in length that are modular in structure: they can be viewed independently or compiled into longer anthologies that intersperse different kinds of work (often scripted, animated pieces by the artist next to lightly reworked edits of videos found on YouTube). Negus' suite of video and sculptural works at Gallery TPW spatialize the episodic format of her moving images to span the architecture of the gallery, taking shape as projected and monitor-based videos, a neon piece that condenses the exhibition title to the word "slaughter" with the "s" blinking on and off, and other perversely "decorative" sculptures. The works on view, which span from 2009-2012, extend the distinctive and perhaps even extreme voice she developed in *bluewater* and refract it through a range of surrogates, many of them animated, all of them speaking. Regardless of the timbre of the voice Negus' characters use, they are always still "her" in every possible way. (In her works, the "I" of the narrator is always confronting



Video still from *bluewater*, 2007.



Video still from *bluewater*, 2007.

the “you” of the viewer.) Negus’ worldview is arguably a paranoid one where everyone and everything that isn’t “me” is conspiring against “me.” Darkly absurdist, she gives voice to these antagonizing forces, animating a cosmology of self-doubt and humiliation that confuses the boundaries between inside and outside, emotional microcosm and metaphysical macrocosm, endangering our idea of ourselves as stable, coherent subjects in the process.

Negus left London to study with the influential Canadian video artist Steve Reinke at Northwestern University in Chicago from 2008-2010, the period that birthed many of the works in this exhibition. While it goes without saying the Negus’ practice is uniquely her own, it is unabashedly marked by Reinke’s influence, and further evinces parallels to the moving-image work of Emily Vey Duke & Cooper Battersby and Jean-Paul Kelly (a slightly more senior generation of artists who also studied under Reinke). Confidently plumbing the darkest depths of irony and finding laughter where none should rightly exist, the works of Reinke, Negus and their kin have evolved a sensibility that is tinged by cruelty and flirts with negation. Critically – almost pathologically – detached from the comforts of representational conventions, they act as surgeon’s scalpels, removing the tumours of sloppy and self-deluding thinking. Cutting us deliriously and deeply, they open our hearts to the simultaneous, inextricable joy and tragedy of being alive. We are left bleeding, but with a more nuanced and dazzlingly clear view of the precarious world around us.



Video still from *we can't see their shape from this far away, but we can hear them*, 2009.

In Negus’ own writings on her work for her MFA thesis, she frequently describes an unfulfilling and uneasy nostalgia, a melancholic “longing for something lost, passed or never there,” something diffuse and unspecified. She writes, “Exiled nostalgia reflects on the condition of the current digital climate, where things are infinitely kept, archived... remembered... [There is an] inability [to experience] loss at a time when remembering is prolific. There is a longing for loss itself, nostalgia for nostalgia.” Holding on to the past is always futile, and our acquisitive being will therefore always be haunted by a feeling of lack: “As we fear forgetting, while stockpiling all we can, we are losing the ability to lose.” Negus’ videos act as a kind of shock to the system, meeting our melancholia with violence to snap us out of the stupor of post-everything ennui.

Arguably a form of colonization and consumption, the practice of anthropomorphism is a selfish game; we talk to our pets, look for recognizable forms among the clouds and wish upon the stars, objectifying



Video still from *stillborns*, 2010.



Video still from *secret galaxy*, 2009.

the world around us and taking advantage of the presumed voicelessness of the non-human and their inability to refuse us. We allow these things agency as long as they take the shapes we give them, playing their roles as projections of our desires and blank listeners to our confessions, doubts and fears. But what if they were not so passive and benevolent? What if, instead, they talked back and registered their true feelings? In Negus' work, they say, "Fuck you," "You're going to die," and they sing disturbing ditties destined to haunt our dreams. She engages in a form of animism, investing a life-force of negativity into children and animals, clouds and stars, and gives them menacing intentions. The violence in Negus' work originates within us – we project it outwards because it's easier to fear the other than to fear ourselves. As someone who has suffered a degree of social anxiety where I was nagged with the belief that everyone was sitting in judgment of me (the most apt way of describing it would be a state of perpetual embarrassment at merely being alive), I find Negus' universe simultaneously terrifying and compelling.

In the video *we can't see their shape from this far away, but we can hear them* (2009), the night sky (a recurring backdrop in Negusland) is gradually populated by stars. When they are all in position, they practice a few bars to get the tune right and then launch into their creepy harmony, which is aimed at us humans down below:

the darkness creeps / into the light / and covers up  
 all that is bright / when darkness falls / over the land  
 we'll still be here / to take your hand  
 we're always here / up in the sky / we watch you piss  
 we see you cry / you cannot hide / away from us  
 we never face / we're tireless



Video still from *secret galaxy*, 2009.

Negus is fascinated by the vastness of the cosmos and she pointedly plays with the difference in scale between our personal, everyday traumas and the ungraspable enormity of galaxies and the universe. Her surreptitiously outstanding video *secret galaxy* (2009) takes memories and materializes them in the specks of dust, hair and crumbs found under her computer's keyboard. Or rather, this is what Negus' voiceover does. The succession of images, however, visualizes these fragmentary remembrances of things past as planets in a diorama, not mere flecks of dirt. Provocatively, the moment her Grade 8 teacher rubbed his penis on her back is represented by Earth. From decades of therapeutic media culture in the form of Oprah and her ilk, we have become intimately familiar with the convention of the scene of sexual abuse taking on the magnitude of the whole world, and Negus boldly prods this hyperbole. Her plainspoken delivery and crusty foam representation of Earth emphasize how crudely



Video still from *the only light*, 2010.



Video still from *bloodbath*, 2012.

sensationalized abuse experiences become when confessed on camera. The memories' arrangement into a diorama of a solar system suggests that while we each like to think of our traumas as definitional and unique, they are actually part of a grand design that is bigger than, and somehow beyond, the individual. Whether this is comforting or akin to a screaming into the silent vacuum of outer space is up to the viewer.

In Negus' exhibition, the smallness that stands in juxtaposition to the vastness of the cosmos is incarnated in the bodies of cartoon children – malleable pieces of clay doomed to be moulded by day-to-day traumas and indignities into the callous and damaged adults of tomorrow. Negus' children are typically naïve and often ruthless. The girl in *the only light* (2010) sings an awkward, stilted version of the song “Stand By Me,” which describes terrifying apocalyptic scenarios—skies tumbling and falling, mountains crumbling to the sea—only to suggest that if “you” stand by “me,” “I” will be ok. Apparently drawn from an image on a child-bride website, the girl on-screen stands nervously in white formal dress, cradling a bouquet. However, the “you” – the true love she is ostensibly addressing – is nowhere in sight and the ominous night sky dominates, with the moon being “the only light we see.” In *stillborns* (2010), by contrast, the kids appear sweet and innocent (one's speech impediment causes him to pronounce “grave” as, endearingly, “gwave”), but their precociously nihilistic rhetoric reaches heights of delirious abjection and vitriol, all while their faces remain dispassionate and unmoved by their own venomous narration. In the shocking *bloodbath* (2012), Negus' most recent video, a smiling young boy viscerally channels a narrative of wounding, with his identity literally split between innocent and monstrous.

*Hope/alone* (2010) acts as a kind of punctuation mark to the other five videos on view, a found-footage video paired with the refrain from the Jack Johnson song “Hope,” warning you to “better hope you're not alone.” The song morphs from Johnson's solo version into an unsettling, somewhat villainous-sounding chorus of voices, as if every character in Negus' show has gathered together for one final, ominous warning to you, the viewer. All you are left with, however, is the possibility of hope, and nothing more than that.



Video still from *hope/alone*, 2010.

Based in London, Ontario, **Christine Negus** has an MFA from Northwestern University in Chicago, Illinois. She has exhibited her work internationally, with notable exhibitions and screenings including the Montreal Underground Film Festival, Cambridge Galleries, The Art Gallery of York University, Xspace Cultural Centre and the Images Festival where, in 2008, she won the National Film Board of Canada's Best Emerging Video/Filmmaker.

**Jon Davies** is a writer and curator based in Toronto. In 2009, Arsenal Pulp Press published his book on Paul Morrissey's film *Trash* (1970). He has curated a number of screenings and exhibitions including the traveling retrospective *People Like Us: The Gossip of Colin Campbell* (2008) and *Coming After* (2011-2012) at The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, where he is Assistant Curator.

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