

Gail Prentice 'Margaret Salmon: Company',  
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Margaret Salmon  
installation view

than printed, something you only gradually appreciate when you realise that although the armorial device scroll with which it is embellished has obviously been hand-drawn, mysteriously, it somehow manages to obliterate the lines beneath.

The Latin motto on this scroll in a kind of Coney Island tattoo-parlour version of Bodoni that Macari has developed for himself can be translated as 'No Day Without Lines'. In the context this is neat and appropriate. It is also quite a good way of summing up Macari's work in general in as much as it hints at the almost childlike, earnest-but-playful way he uses drawing to take on some of the really big questions of our existence. ■

PAUL USHERWOOD is an artist and critic based in Newcastle.

## Margaret Salmon: Company

Void Derry 12 April to 13 May

While walking the streets of Derry near the Void gallery, American artist Margaret Salmon happened upon a tourist information board telling the story of John Newton's visit to the city. During his visit it is reported that he experienced a gunshot through his hat. This near-death experience, as the story goes, inspired him to write one of his most renowned works, the hymn *Amazing Grace*. This happenstance is particularly apt as it is this hymn that is heard repeatedly in *Peggy*, 2003, a complex orchestration of sound and image in black and white, filmed using a hand-cranked Bolex. The work *Peggy* was recorded in Salmon's home town of Suffern, upstate New York, and takes us on a journey through the daily tasks and rituals of an elderly woman. Her awakening, washing, taking the dogs out, picking fruit while singing the hymn over and over in frail, rasping tones alternatively suggest a sense of strength and a feeling of isolation.

*Peggy* shares the space with three other works made around the same time *P.S.*, 2002, *Ramapo Central*, 2003, and *Ninna*

*Nanna*, 2006. These films draw on the traditions of various cinematic movements, including the documentary filmmaking style of *Cinéma Vérité*, the experimental filmmaking of the European Avant Garde, particularly involving artists working in isolation, and Italian Neo-Realism. *P.S.* shows a portrait of a middle-aged man once again carrying out everyday tasks, this time accompanied with the background sounds of presumably himself and his partner in heated discussion. The work reveals the intimacy of the breakdown of their relationship. *Ramapo Central*, 2003, depicts the life of a middle-aged female receptionist at work on the telephone as she guides job-seeking special needs teachers through an officious application process. Her gentle, good-humoured public face is contrasted by the default melancholic facial expression captured in the imagery of her private life as she bathes, shops, exercises and sunbathes.

*Ninna Nanna*, a triptych of films each set in a different region of Italy, records the experience of a mother at different stages of the first year of motherhood. It is filmed in each of the subject's domestic surroundings and has a soundtrack of the traditional Italian lullaby *Ninna Nanna*. Each film shows the daily rituals of a mother, highlighting contradictions between iconic imagery of the mother and baby and the reality of caring for a child. At the time Salmon made *Ninna Nanna*, she had recently become a mother herself, and in conversation she mentioned that, when making the work, she had referred to Mary Kelly's classic *Post-Partum Document* of 1973-79, a sprawling narrative installation documenting the mother-child relationship from her son's birth to age five, although Salmon's piece is gentler in approach.

These four pieces depict insights into the ordinary lives of personal acquaintances of non-actors, of willing subjects in what the artist describes as 'portraits of themselves'. The works share an interrogation of the common man, as explored in literature through such works as *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, whose character Willie Loman is at a similar crisis point in his life to that of the man featured in *P.S.*

The final and most recent work in the exhibition, *Times Square*, 2010, is shown in a room of its own as a large-scale projection. This work, in contrast to the others, no longer features a knowing subject. Gone also is the relationship between the visual image and the soundtrack. Instead the projection is stripped bare, silent, depicting fleeting moments from the everyday life of Times Square, New York, framed by the spectacle of bright lights and advertising signs relayed in real time. Salmon's approach to this work is still centred on the non-actor, however she now voyeuristically peers in on the private lives of passers-by. She offers a candid insight into the public posturing of the unknown subject as if choreographed, directed by another.

Ordinary lives are made extraordinary through Salmon's filmmaking. The exhibition's title 'Company' refers to a piece of prose of the same name by Samuel Beckett, and this is particularly relevant in reflecting on Salmon's works and on melancholic threads that weave throughout an exhibition which invites us to confront our own existence. ■

GAIL PRENTICE is a writer based in Belfast and the arts officer for North Down Borough Council.

## Janice Kerbel

Chisenhale London 1 April to 15 May

'Kill the Workers!' shouts the title of Janice Kerbel's new installation at Chisenhale, a cry that signals revolution. But there is little revolt to be found within the gallery, where Kerbel has rigged up four walls of stage lighting that project a silent show into the empty space at their centre. Among them is a spotlight, whose bright beam at times merges with the others in an extended illuminated dance, and occasionally shines alone, singular and dramatic within the darkened space.

The spotlight is, according to the info accompanying the show, at the centre of the mute performance Kerbel has written for the lights. The 'workers' of the title are not the proletarians one might imagine, but instead a reference to the theatrical lighting jargon used to describe the house lights that are manipulated to signal the beginning and end of a performance. In Kerbel's narrative, the spotlight is the central protagonist in the play, but longs to shed this uniqueness to be at one with the worker lights, to be lost within their 'open white'. Various scenes are enacted purely in light, depicting the spotlight's battle for anonymity.

It is easy to read a metaphor for society into Kerbel's tale, of the individual longing for conformity within the pack. Yet *Kill the Workers!* is equally an examination of the structures that lie within theatrical performance, and our understanding of these codes. As viewers, we recognise that the play has started when the house lights are dimmed: we know that this is the time to have a final cough before settling down to be absorbed in the action. In Kerbel's work, though, the house lights become part of the performance, and there is a confusing moment when they first come up, with the viewers left wondering if this is the end of the piece or just another section within it.

It is hard to shake off the anticipation that some kind of performance, with actors, might be about to take place under the lights too. The arrival of other viewers in the space, and the passing through of Chisenhale staff, all have a heightened



emphasis, as though they might suddenly break into song or take to the boards. Even our own place within the installation is self-conscious: most visitors stick to the edges of the scene outside the lights, as if entering the space where the lights are moving is disrespectful to their performance.

*Kill the Workers!* relates to earlier pieces by Kerbel in which she has unpicked genres familiar to us and then re-presented them in new forms. Another installation piece, *Ballgame*, 2009, previously shown at Greengrassi gallery, consisted of a single speaker displayed in the space from which played the commentary of a live baseball game. Despite the oddness of its setting, the narrative was convincing, with the commentator well-versed in the language of the game. Yet the piece was entirely fictional, created by the artist following rigorous study of baseball commentary.

Kerbel has applied a similar academic thoroughness to the creation of *Kill the Workers!* She studied lighting design before writing a script for the lights, which she describes as being one that 'only the lights themselves can speak'. In doing so, she focuses on an element of performance that is usually taken for granted. In both this work and in *Ballgame*, she has worked to remove any aspect of the events, sporting or theatrical, that might allow us to get lost within their stories.

In *Ballgame*, we are given no visual stimuli to help conjure up the game, and the commentary reveals a startlingly average performance by the players, with few moments of drama. The work is not about the highs and lows that can occur within the sport, but instead about the form and structure of its unique language. Similarly, instead of providing the full absorption of a theatrical performance, *Kill the Workers!* focuses entirely on the lights, an aspect of the theatre largely used to supplement the action, and to emphasise certain moments and moods. In doing so, Kerbel makes her audiences work hard. Viewers visit the theatre and go to ballgames largely to lose themselves, and be absorbed for a time in something separate from their own lives. Kerbel's artworks attempt the reverse of this: to place the viewers outside these systems so they can observe how they are constructed. What narrative that remains in the works is devised not to draw viewers in emotionally, but to prompt them to look at the performances from a new perspective. ■

Janice Kerbel  
*Kill the Workers!* 2011

ELIZA WILLIAMS is a writer and critic based in London.