

'Those Deep Approaches', Sarah Pucill for the Lux

By Cherry Smyth

'I defy you to find those deep approaches
Where no ordinary air is.
The tough wound plucks itself.'

from 'Swimming in Circles in Copenhagen', Anne Carson (1)

Sarah Pucill has been building a body of extraordinary experimental work for over two decades. Often working with a minimal crew and her home as studio, Pucill has managed to create striking and profound films that ring with her own distinctive signature, exploring the self-portrait and also the aesthetic dialogue between still photography and live action film. In her early short films, she delights in staging the little catastrophes of intimacy that often go unnoticed or unacknowledged: the emotional tremor behind the spilt milk, the broken wineglass. The monotony of the everyday can fragment into the staccato of grabbing hands and disjointed gazes as in 'You Be Mother', 1990. The props of the kitchen table provide potent signifiers for the gendered female roles of housewife and mother which the films both question and undermine, while never overtly invoking the often essentialist feminist iconography current at that time. Milk, for example, may have been used to suggest the overwhelming power of mother-nurture, but it is also celebrated for its monochromatic materiality in 'Milk and Glass', 1993, just as fresh, slippery liver represents not only the tongue and sensuality, but the visceral rawness of the interior of the human body. Animation techniques are used to bold and hilarious effect in 'Backcomb', 1995, in which the seductive-repulsive tresses of invasive human hair suggests a majestic and mad protagonist whose unruly sexual desires will run rampant through English cultural (and sexual) traditions.

Pucill has successfully established a powerful, poetic visual language for the rituals, repetitions, rewards and regrets of inter-relatedness. Food is offered and rejected; crockery, mirrors, lips and mouths as if consumed by them; and the screech and scrape of cutlery suggest the tense, abbreviated dialogue of a family meal. In 'Stages of Mourning', 2004, she hones these skills and techniques to create a remarkably restrained yet emotionally wrenching portrait of her and her late partner, the film-maker, Sandra Lahire, who died in 2001. Pucill describes it as 'a document from work and from life', and it becomes clear that the recently shot photographs and film footage of the lovers that she re-considers were not intended to become a meditative memorial. As if to re-interpret the past and negotiate some kind of present,

Pucill caresses the photographs, mimics the scenes they stage, pushes her living face against them as if she could will them into animation. Can she impose herself on the past the way death has imposed itself on her and their life together?

A Celtic whistle emits long, trembling notes, like a night bird calling in vain for its mate. With immense elegance and grace, Pucill navigates the four stages of mourning: denial, anger, guilt and acceptance through four enacted scenes. She moves between stills and live action film, between colour and black and white footage to investigate the enduring conundrums of life and death, love and loss, the present and the past, closeness and distance.

The film-maker's attempt in the first stage to insert herself into the photographs of them as a couple, amplifies the loss, not only of her partner, but of their partnership. Without her lover as a frame of reference, as context, Pucill has to layer the visual plane, superimposing herself onto past footage, to find a way to continue to exist. She enacts the dreadful inertia and lack of appetite grief brings in scenes at the set table, haunted by the missing lover. The camera feels insistent, intrusive as though it too is company she doesn't really want. The dinner table becomes the place where the body is sacrificed instead of nurtured. When she handles and scrutinises the spool of film itself, she hopes to touch her lover in its grain. This physical location of pain conveys the mute terror of bereavement and its all-encompassing void. 'I put you together to put myself together', writes Pucill in the prologue to the film. It succeeds in putting us in touch with their love and its loss in such a way that is beautiful, simple and quietly sad.

The final stage allows Pucill to replay footage of Sandra speaking with unbearable prescience to camera about 'the breaking of a boundary: a rupture or dis-rupture.' Here, Pucill underlines the abruptness of Sandra's death as well as the ethical questions of making such a film without her muse and collaborator present. The superimposition that Pucill has used since early work like 'You Be Mother', 1990, is poignantly employed here. She projects film of Sandra dancing on a beach and stands in front of it, absorbing it and her, until the life-size figure becomes reduced, able to fit between her shoulder blades, like wings perhaps. The final transformation is represented by Pucill opening the curtains (which also act as a screen), opening the window, allowing daylight and fresh air to enter. Healing is underway, resolution and reintegration with the outside world, a possibility.

What I've long admired about Pucill's work are not only her stark and lucid images, but her ability to suggest philosophical and psychological truths without resorting to heavy-handed rhetorical discourse. 'Taking My Skin', 2006, is one of the strongest and most moving films exploring the mother-

daughter relationship that I have ever seen. In an improvised, tentative and touching set-up, mother and daughter film each other separately and then simultaneously. It is impossible to view Pucill's films with her frequent use of mirrors and the camera as a mirror without thinking of Lacan's concept of the 'mirror stage' in which the mirror image provides the child with its model for its future identifications. But, he goes on to point out, the smoothness and apparent totality of the mirror are false and give us an image which is a misrecognition, a fantasy. As Pucill suggests, we are more mobile, uncontainable and fragmented than the mirror allows. In fact, Lacan also argues that the mirror image is incomplete without the presence and look of the mother who guarantees its reality and meaning for the child. 'The mother does not mirror the child to itself; she grants an image to the child, which her presence instantly deflects. Holding the child is, therefore, to be understood not only as containing, but as a process of referring, which fractures the unity it seems to offer.' (3)

In 'Taking My Skin', these theories are subtly re-enacted and investigated between mother and daughter. The scene is in a front room. She prepares it by pushing back the furniture and installing a black backdrop. But as in all of Pucill's work, the ready-made qualities only act to enhance the intensity of the viewing experience. She lets show the artifice of the 'studio' to mirror the elements of artifice between mother and daughter. They are cautious with each other. Polite. The camera becomes both shield and weapon, in much the same way as words can be. It can love, pierce, betray, distort, preserve or honour. Pucill focuses in on her mother's eye and cheekbone, then explains what she is doing. The mother asks: 'Why do you want to film me so close, come in so close?' The daughter replies: 'I want to see what happens.' To which the mother unexpectedly responds: 'You'll get burnt.'

The mother is then instructed to hold an oval mirror to her belly while Pucill sits in its reflection as if to put herself back inside the womb. 'Were you here before I was pregnant with you?' asks her mother, almost to herself. The paradoxes and perplexities of this great love and its failure are played out with delightful and disturbing innuendo, without any sense that the postmodern daughter has entrapped her unsuspecting mother for filmed analysis. It's remarkable that, although Pucill is in control, she appears to be able to give it up and to empower her mother. In this act, they re-frame each other, begin to see each other anew and know and trust each other in another, deeper context. At one moment, the mother is heard to exclaim with joy and wonder, 'God!' as she sees through the lens and takes charge of the focus. This whole moving procedure resembles Pucill birthing the mother, giving her creativity

back to her through art. It's a marvellous study of vulnerability and desire, an exchange of maternal procreativity for the childless daughter's creativity.

Feminist psychotherapists have long argued that women's psychic pain is rooted in the wound of inadequate separation of the mother and daughter which can result in a merged attachment. Some have suggested that lesbian desire emerges from this state. By asking questions about the emotional ambivalence of separation and mothering of the mother while she is distracted by being the object making a film and the subject of it, is a clever way to begin to reveal and undo the dynamic between the two. 'How long does it take for a child to become separate?' asks the daughter. 'It's a gradual process,' replies the mother. 'You have to keep looking and holding and feeding – it's going on most of the day.' (Much like holding a camera and its directorial requirements!) Then, later, 'How can it be separate when it's always part of you?' asks her mother. 'You feel I'm always part of you?' asks the uncertain daughter. There is a long pause. 'Yes.' By the end of the film, the mother is being taught to name things, frame things, such as a flower, cow, through the lens, beyond the window, recalling how she must have taught these things to Pucill as an infant. The reversal is delicate, underplayed.

In acknowledging that her mother has 'given' her skin and Pucill has 'taken' it, literally and metaphorically through the filming, they can begin to examine together what's been called the gender-specific 'connectedness between replica and replica'. (3) As in 'Stages of Mourning', the film's ending is marked by the outdoors representing an emotional change, a moment of understated transcendence. Both mother and daughter film each other walking apart down a sunlit, leafy lane until the mother has almost merged with nature in the pale distance. In 'Taking My Skin', Pucill is able to say goodbye to a loved one before she has lost her. This is an act of great reciprocal gratitude and love.

One of the most enduring film-makers of the British avant-garde, Pucill paints emotional states that are very rarely seen. In her slow choreography of intimacy, the props of revelation and concealment – the curtains, the backdrops, the mirrors, the camera itself – articulate a language of absence and presence that takes tremendous courage and resilience to speak.

- 1) Carson, Anne , 'Decreation', Jonathan Cape, London, 2006
- 2) Rose, Jacqueline, 'Sexuality in the Field of Vision', Verso, London, 1986
- 3) Herman, Nini, 'Too Long A Child: The Mother-Daughter Dyad', Free Association Books, London, 1989