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Sofija R. L. Sutton and Katie Wright

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Image: Third Blue Man shoot. September, 2015.

Image on Previous Page: Disposable camera kelp from Coll, Scotland. August, 2015.

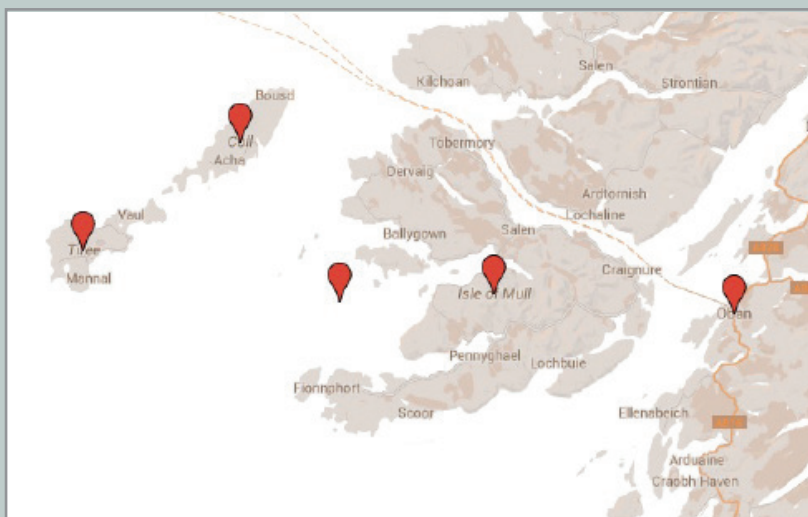
Introducing Wild Oban

Wild Oban is a split-screen video collaboration that draws inspiration from Scottish folklore and the ceaseless wandering of marine life to conduct visual storytelling. Through juxtaposition of the fantastic anthropomorphism of the sea found in folklore, with a segmented narrative of an employee stuck in a fictional tourism business, *Wild Oban* relates contemporary fears of discontentment and rootlessness to the tales from generations past.

Our project began in February 2015 when Sofija found a magazine clip about the basking sharks in Scotland. Not long after, she approached Katie about creating a video collaboration. From there it all went very quickly. A project was designed, proposed, and funded in the spring and by the summer we were knee deep in poetry, folklore, and shark facts. Before and after travelling to Scotland, we filmed character interpretations in Tynemouth, allowing the character to change with our ideas.

In August we conducted our trip to the Hebrides, examining the local wildlife and folklore of the region. Travelling from Newcastle upon Tyne, we journeyed up through Glasgow to Oban. We spent a day and a half in there before our island explorations with Basking Shark Scotland. Over the next three days we explored Coll (our base location), Tiree, Lunga, Staffa, Mull, and -naturally- the open water. This immersive learning and recording stage was a turning point in our video's outcome.





Map of Journey Points. March, 2015.

Folktales from the Minch include creatures called ‘Blue Men.’ The creatures would engage ship captains in poetic duels, wrecking the ships if the captains lost. *Wild Oban* combines this mythical creature with the metaphor of transformation, both in the fantastic sense of selkie women metamorphosing into seals, and with the introduction of a second character based in our own reality. The second character longs for the freedom of the sea, the ability to change her life. She speaks of adaptation and the evolving roles of stories – hinting that the blue men live on in more ways than fairy tales.

Inspired by the traditions of oral storytelling, the narrator at times performs for an unacknowledged audience. While, in other segments, remains self-reflective. Layering plays an important role as shots, sounds, and story elements all stack and merge. At times, a single clip may be seen, or simply a drip of water against black. As the emotion and metaphors grow, so do the layers, and the layers create an intense density through which the protagonists much navigate.

Wild Oban's screens create a visual narrative of a magical creature and a mysterious underwater world. It's soundscape works both as a sculptural medium, with undulating whispers from poetry and crashing waves, and as a storytelling device, giving us snippets of the fantastic and of reality. Our final video is a work exploring many ideas, which we aim to be relatable to all humans trying to find their place in life.

Our Collaboration

Wild Oban was a project of ambitious scale and duration for both Katie and Sofija. This long-term, funded collaboration took us out of our comfort zone and out of Newcastle, creating a platform to engage with folklore enthusiasts in Oban, film basking sharks in the Hebrides and perform as a Blue Man in Tynemouth. Our time together has been a merging of personalities and inspiration, and this is reflected in the style of the film. Through constantly discussing and building on the work, we have managed to create something that is an equal representation of both our efforts.

Throughout the past eight months, we have learned about each other and our own working processes. We have expanded our individual practices in medium and process. For Katie, this was her first time working with video and location. For Sofija, the depth of funding and social media was a new challenge. For both artists, it was their first time working on a long-term collaboration.

We have been excited, exhausted, amazed, seasick, painted blue. Now we are proud to present to you the product of much hard work and passion.

Shooting in Oban, Scotland (Sofija Sutton). August, 2015.





First Blue Man Shoot(Katie Wright). July, 2015.

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Basking Sharks

Capturing These Amazing Creatures on Camera



Basking Shark. August, 2015.

Basking sharks are the second-largest living fish after the whale shark. Adult sharks typically reach 20-26 feet in length. They are often referred to as 'bone sharks' due to the ribcage-like structure revealed when they open their mouths. Despite eating plankton, they still have hundreds of tiny teeth. These slow moving filter feeders are found throughout the world's coastal warm-temperate oceans but due to over hunting, throughout the world they are classified as endangered, critical, or have even completely disappeared. In the UK they are considered a protected vulnerable species.

Basking sharks are believed to be migratory and retreat to deep waters during winter. That means the only reliable time to see them is when they surface during the summer season. Due to water temperature fluctuations, a Scottish plankton boom in July and August draws the sharks to the Oban area as a shark hotspot. Over hunting, migration, and lack of long-term scientific research, means that the basking shark remains a relative mystery. These gentle giants spark the creative imagination with their unknown habits, their astounding size, and their tolerant nature.

The Town of Oban

Oban is a Scottish town roughly 100 miles northeast of Glasgow. The area, which overlooks the Inner Hebrides, has a rich history of intriguing folklore and abundant wildlife. While in pursuit of the basking sharks, we traveled hours by boat to the islands of Lunga, Staffa, Mull, and the Isle of Coll. Staying two nights on the Isle of Coll, we were able to observe an island community where the isolated landscape shapes everyday life.

On our travels we explored uninhabited islands, kelps beds, and the hexagonal columns of Fingal's Cave. We witnessed grey and common seals, common and bottlenose dolphins, golden eagles, sunfish, otters, jellyfish, plankton and other various marine birds and fish. The Inner Hebrides is stunning, but it was not exactly as we expected.

From our research and readings of magical tales, we were expecting a land of green and stormy fairies. What we found was a rainy area that was surprisingly built-up for tourism. The downtown was bustling with cafes, tourists, and shops that catered to outdoor explorations. This was an initial shock, as we had envisioned a town of the past. But while Oban was busier than expected, the islands we explored with Basking Shark Scotland had remained largely unaffected. And it was these places that left the most moving impressions.



Oban. August, 2015.



Oban Harbor. August, 2015.

// It rained so much that trains were called off

It rained so much that the train company provided us with a taxi from Edinburgh to Oban

It rained so much that the taxi broke down twice

It rained so much that we had to buy new shoes //

Folklore



For the duration of the project, folklore and storytelling played a prominent and consistent role in the research and creative process.

Selkies are people that can metamorphose into seals. A Selkie can be created when a person hears the cry of the seal, its lonely moaning song so heartbreakingly beautiful that transformative magic occurs.

The Blue Men of the Minch (*Sruth nam Fear Gorm*) feature in a story exclusive to the Hebrides. These magical creatures are fiercely protective of their habitat. The Minch is the body of water that runs between the west coast of Scotland and the Hebrides. Their faces are grey and their bodies blue, they command great storms to wreck the ships that try to sail across The Minch. They give the ship's crew a slim chance to avoid their watery graves by challenging the Captain to a lyrical duel. If the Captain outwits The Blue Men, the ship and her crew will be safe.

In *Wild Oban*, the role of folklore is contemplated. This is because the stories that we found resonated with contemporary ideas. The underlying meaning of the folktales speak of a fear of settling down, fears of the unknown and the desperate seeking of a world beyond our own.

Left: Fingal's Cave. August, 2015.

Right: A View from Oban. August, 2015.

Poetry

“ Sometimes I snap awake and feel a
humming in my skin
a drumming
something snapping
within ”

Rhythm and rhyme are powerful tools in creating captivating stories, and many folk tales feature poetry and song as a prominent aspect. In the stories of *The Blue Men*, blue-skinned creatures of the Hebridean waters challenge the ships that sail through their seas to poetic duels.

Wild Oban uses lines of poetry found through research into folk stories to create a layered soundscape. The combined sound of whispery tones evoke the undulating sounds of the sea, but if listened to closely, these songs and poems are telling stories of their own, an ancient understanding of their environment.

The poem spoken in *Wild Oban* is an original work. It uses the same devices as folkloric songs, with the sound of words used to alter the tempo and feel of the poem.

*Sometimes I snap awake and feel a
humming in my skin
a drumming
something snapping within
like I am to break.
The pressure grows I shake
There is no sound but I feel it howl
A gale confined to bones
My air clicks and spits
electricity ready to rip
Blinding white
And fracture the night sky
The heavens erupt
a rumbling, a roar
Abrupt the thrashing rain thuds
the shuddering earth
meek beneath its might.
Sometimes I snap awake
My storm absorbed
by the gauze of the dawn
the humming grows dim.
But there is power.
a howling in my bones
and something cracking within*

Character Development

Inspired by the mythical 'blue men,' we developed our own creature that combined elements of the blue man, selkies, and the basking shark

Our character was initially based on the descriptions of *blue men* found in some rare Hebridean folklore. Tales of men that floated at waist-height in the water, with blue bodies and grey faces. They were powerful enough to conjure great storms at will, yet could be defeated with words. We wanted to base our character on these creatures because of this respect for the power of words.

As the film continued however, we wanted the aesthetic of the creature to reflect our experience of learning about and swimming alongside the basking sharks. Every physical characteristic of a basking shark has an important function and makes them more adept for survival in their habitat. It often seems that humans do not have the same relationship between their being and their environment, making us physically or socially out-of-place. Our folklore character looks as if they could possibly transform into a basking shark, with adapted shark skin and markings over the face. Yet they are distinctly human, ever at the water's edge.

For generations, people have told stories of transformation, of finding a place where they truly belong. In our film, the feeling of entrapment is paralleled with the failure to adapt through a dialogue spoken





Blue Glare. September, 2015.

by the female narrator. The present day counterpart wishes that she could escape a dreary office. We wonder whether the folkloric creature is a realized imagination of the desk-shackled office worker, exploring her feelings of not belonging through means of inhabiting the mental space of a fantasy creature. The mythical character underpins the narrator's inability to physically transform herself into an ideal creature for her environment. Hence, both the narrator and our *blue man* remain together at the water's edge.

The Process -

A timeline of our journey together

MARCH 2015 After much discussion, coffee and cupcakes, Sofija and Katie decided to collaborate on a video project responding to basking sharks and the Inner Hebrides. Research ensued, and the area's unique folklore became part of the project.

2ND-30TH APRIL Kickstarter campaign titled *Wild Oban* was launched and was successful thanks to 54 backers!

20TH JULY First set of folklore-inspired filming. Most of this footage was eventually abandoned.

4TH JULY the *Wild Oban* website was launched:
www.wildoban.com

9TH JUNE The Newcastle University Alumni Association Student Initiative Fund awarded a grant for the exhibition costs of *Wild Oban*.

The Alumni Association 
of Newcastle University

10TH AUGUST Sofija and Katie arrived in Oban! A variety of recording equipment was taken along: GoPro HD cameras, a high-quality DSLR camera and disposable film cameras.

12TH AUGUST First day of fieldwork in the Hebrides. The artists captured footage of basking sharks first-hand as well as beautiful shots of kelp beds. The experience of the underwater world was different than imagined, and even the empty water was fascinating.

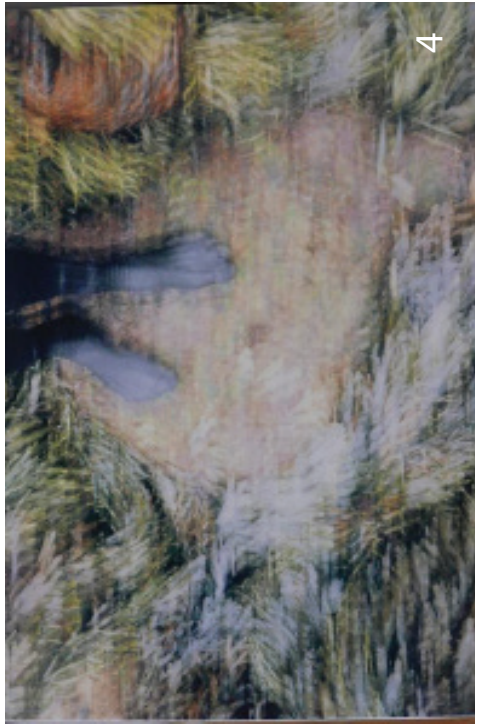
<p>Sofija and Katie conducted research continuously throughout the project. The research was centred around two subjects; History & folklore in The Hebrides and film and video art technique.</p>	<p>20TH AUGUST Sofija and Katie discovered half of their clips were beautiful and half were unusable. They began by putting clips together in a trial and error way until it took on a visual aesthetic that warranted further investigation.</p>	<p>10TH SEPTEMBER The initial steps towards organising the video were made by creating a storyboard then delegating sections and channels of video to work on. The background sounds and the option of using sound to layer narrative was discussed.</p>
<p>18TH NOVEMBER The first draft of the film was shown as a split screen video at Tyneside Cinema's Show and Tell for critique.</p>	<p>30TH SEPTEMBER A second folklore shoot, where Sofija baffled a taxi driver with a costume inspired by shark skin.</p>	<p>20TH SEPTEMBER A draft of the narration was written which drew aspects of the tourism found in Oban and themes of adaptation into the work.</p>
<p>OCTOBER/NOVEMBER Sofija and Katie worked intensely on editing the film. It was worked and reworked to give it a professional feel. The sound evolved into layered tracks of water sounds, poetry and incidental noise from our recording equipment.</p>	<p>11TH DECEMBER The final draft of the film was screened at B&D Studios in Newcastle, with plans to expand the project into an immersive video installation at a later date.</p>	



Photography

1. *Wrack and Tangle*. September, 2015.
2. *Disposable cameras Kelp Ground*. August, 2015.
3. *Shark in Plankton*. August, 2015.
4. *Disposable camera in Tynemouth*. July, 2015.
5. *Yellow Seaweed*. August, 2015.
6. *Shark Tail*. August, 2015.
7. *Floating from Above*. August, 2015.
8. *1st Day of Practice Shooting*. July, 2015.
9. *Submerge (detail)*. September, 2015.
10. *Basking Shark Gills*. August, 2015.

“ Green lies the dancing water/
Green, purple, barred with gold/brown wing'd my boat flies o'er her.../
white, the keal/
the curling wavelet tosses high, spraying round.../
as we sail o're the Minch to Skye ”









One of our initial decisions about the video was to display it work across two screens. We intended to use the screens to represent two aspects of a single story. We were also conscious of how our supporters were going to view the film, and needed a design that would work well large-scale and was also pleasant to watch on a computer screen, for all the people who could not attend the show. While the presentation design shifted, the necessity to include two screens in order to explore our ideas and metaphors did not.

The two screens play sequences that are at times independent, simultaneous or in counterpoint to one another to create an immersive visual story whilst remaining relevant to the audio storytelling. This creates a layered narrative that reflects our artistic process. We found the two-screen presentation allowed us to use slower shots and details while still allowing the narrative to progress.

Aims and Design



Split screen video still, November, 2015.

Later in the video we used the format to increase chaos and speed in pace with our audio, leading to flashes of color and movement often more dramatic than the original recordings.

The collaborative process was at first unfamiliar and continually challenging. The main lesson to learn was communicating with each other; constantly, clearly, and preferably in person. As we were often working independently on different parts of the film, we frequently exported our progress and reviewed it. We swapped what we were working with so that we both edited the same clips and sections of film until we were both happy. Sometimes we had no idea what to expect when we played our work side by side, which sometimes led to difficulties. It also sometimes resulted in a serendipitous muddle of clips that worked perfectly for our video.

Thank you to all of our supporters and friends throughout this project. Without your support, this project would not have happened.

Arnie Arnesen	Michael Farrell	Vikki Kerslake	Patricia Stanton
Helen Ashworth	Laura Fisher	Sara Ley	Barrie Sterling
Adam Bacon	Connor Flynn	Gary Malkin	Alan J Stuart
Dariel Bennett	Joanne Harris	Lakshya Malu	Bruce Sutton
Katy Bentham	Rachel Heep	Hannah Marsden	Donald Sutton
Kathryn Brame	Keith Henry	Brendan McCann	Lucy Sutton
Phillip Brown	Alice Hill	Ashwin Miriyala	Amy Vincent
Steven Browne	Daniel Howard	Ally Morton	Jonathan West
Linda Bulman	Russell Hughes	Grace Morton	Julie Wilkes
Laura Coulson	Soonwon Hwang	Sarah Percy	Sarah Wilkinson
Jennifer Crandall	Henna Javed	Megan Prudden	John Wright
Stacey Davidson	Sharmistha Kar	Que Singh	Cherry Yung

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**The Alumni
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of Newcastle University

Student Initiative Fund



With special thanks to:

Russell William Hale

Randy Hoffman

Mildred Kennedy-Stirling

Eric Stirling

Brian Thompson

& The team at Basking Shark Scotland

www.wildoban.com

The background of the entire page is a close-up photograph of a plant. It features long, narrow, green leaves that are slightly curved and have a textured surface. A small, white, spiky flower head is visible on the left side of the image. The lighting is soft, creating a natural and organic feel.

Wild Oban

A Video Artwork by

Sofija R. L. Sutton
&
Katie Wright