

# Magnetic Earth

JOANNE LAWS INTERVIEWS ARTIST CLARE LANGAN ABOUT THE THEMES AND INFLUENCES IN HER FILMS.

**Joanne Laws:** The most immediately striking aspect across your films is the tension between interior and exterior realms. Vast, timeless, almost biblical landscapes are contrasted with abandoned domestic spaces that have somehow been taken over by nature. Are these barren landscapes a metaphor for human struggle?

**Clare Langan:** My earlier work is very much about this kind of tension between mankind and nature. The human figure is always represented as being really small, in comparison to these huge inhospitable landscapes. The interiors represent our imprint on the landscape and how nature is taking back the interventions we've made. In later work this is even more pronounced. For example, *The Floating World* goes from the remote and extreme landscape of the Skellig [Islands], to Dubai's futuristic cityscape in the sky, to Montserrat, a modern-day Pompeii with completely devoured interiors.

**JL:** Your films also seem to grapple with environmental issues using the Classic elements – fire, water, wind and earth. Are there any formal or symbolic reasons behind this?

**CL:** The trilogy, *Forty Below*, was very much about those symbolic elements and in every aspect, they were pronounced. In *Glass Hour* there are elements of Dante's *Inferno*, creating quite disturbing representations of hell on earth. Quite a lot of works use water; for me, there's something symbolic about water. It's also an instinctive thing, as it relates to the underworld and to the dream world. It is a life force, but it can also devour us. *River* was created for the new digital hub at NUI Maynooth, and I really wanted to bring nature into the building in the most simplistic way, to remind students that creativity is all around us. *River* was filmed in a very slow-motion, painterly, almost meditative way, to draw the viewer in and have a calming influence. A ten-metre-high photograph of a waterfall is also installed in the stairwell. The wind has a certain life force within my work as well. One of the sequences for *The Winter of 13 Storms* came about when I was driving behind a truck on a really windy day and all of the leaves were blowing upwards. I was mesmerised by these upwardly floating leaves and was thinking how I might recreate the scene indoors. In the semi-derelect hotel with the flowery wallpaper, we were trying to recreate claustrophobia, suffocation and a feeling of entrapment. In *The Winter of 13 Storms* the performers were asked to treat the air as if it were liquid. In the final scene, when they were trying to get up off the sand, the instruction was that the ground was magnetic, so they couldn't get up, no matter how they tried.

**JL:** Perhaps this sits in contrast to the buoyancy happening in other films. *Flight from the City* is a very moving film. Was there an intention from the outset to harness emotion?

**CL:** Yes, we did initially talk about ideas of love and connection, letting go and transition. *Flight from the City* was filmed in Iceland and features my friend Tristan, who was previously a performer and is now a meditation teacher. Tristan's father had recently passed away, so she was still trying to come to terms with that. Her daughter, Leila, was only seven, but she's a natural performer and she understood exactly what I was asking her to do. The film is about love and the connection between mother and daughter, but it's mainly about something more universal. We were all children at some stage, and we all have parents or relationships – it's a film about humanity. It's the only film of mine that's fully online, because that was the arrangement I made with [the Icelandic composer] Jóhann [Jóhannsson]. Jóhann had developed the music for *The Floating World* and, in exchange, I made *Flight from the City* for him, to accompany his music for a new album he was making, which was *Orphée*. So that film for me is a collision of three things: there's Tristan and Leila's story; Jóhann's music and his story; and there's my story as an artist and director. I also did the editing on that film myself. It's still shown widely in galleries – that was part of the deal I had written into the contract. My gallery in Germany first showed it at an

art fair in Canada and people were standing there watching it and crying. The film was groundbreaking for me, because I had my guard down. It wasn't made for the art world, it was made for Jóhann, but it encouraged me to work more with performers and to be brave about working with emotion.

**JL:** You previously stated that your films resonate more with cinema than video. Can you say something about the cinematic sensibility in your work, perhaps in relation to elements such as narrative, dream sequences, musical scores and Science Fiction?

**CL:** I am influenced by video art nowadays, but I wasn't when I first started making films. However, I was very drawn to cinema – I was looking intensively at Tarkovsky in particular, and other Russian filmmakers like Sokurov. So, all those things you mention are in there – the sound, the narrative, the cinematography and so on. I also worked in the industry for several years, on feature films and a few Hollywood movies. It's the best education you can get really, because you're on set and you begin to see cinema as a complex multidisciplinary thing of moving parts, with everything working together. Sometimes I found the solo nature of being an artist very frustrating, so I began working more collaboratively. Working with performers or choreographers is really interesting, because you're discussing things as they evolve. I'll go and look at what I've shot, and we'll assess what is really working and take it to the next level. I'm standing there with the camera and they're trying different things and suddenly something works. It's not unplanned – that's part of the collaborative process.

I think the Sci-Fi element is something that became more present in my films from around 2013 onward. For the earlier work, I definitely would've looked at a lot of dream sequences – Tarkovsky would've been a big influence there as well. What you see onscreen is not always what you are going to hear, so that already places them in an unreal, dreamlike setting. I'm not so much looking at that now, but definitely in the beginning, dreamscapes were an important influence. I suppose now, I'm more concerned with the world of Speculative Fiction. What fascinates me is looking at something that doesn't necessarily look real but *could* be real. The earlier works weren't altered in post-production – they were always shot in places that actually existed. But it's how you edit it together, to create the narrative that becomes a form of fiction. I wouldn't be interested in things that are too 'fantastical'.

**JL:** As well as cinema, some of your films also seem to have strong art historical resonance. For example, the strikingly beautiful sequences of *The Human Flock* call to mind nineteenth-century paintings, such as Millais's *Opheelia*, or Géricault's *Raft of Medusa*. Other films use intense spotlighting, echoing the high drama of Baroque.

**CL:** Yes certainly. The black and white interior scenes of *Too Dark for the Night* reference Dutch interior painting and great masters like Vermeer. *The Human Flock* features figures emerging out of the composition, in the style of a Caravaggio painting. I acknowledge that there is something almost biblical or religious about some of my films, especially my use of the triptych or trilogy format, but this is not something I strive to do. I'm interested in the spiritual aspect of things, not any particular religion. I think there's reference to the marble sculptures of Rodin in *The Human Flock* and *Flight from the City*, but I only see this retrospectively. I look at a broad range of things for inspiration, including things like *Blue Planet* and painters like Gerhard Richter, but I'm never trying to emulate anyone or anything. These references often come afterwards, and from other people's interpretations of the work.

**Clare Langan is a film artist based in County Cork.**

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Clare Langan, *Flight from the City*, 2015, HDV, 6 mins; film still © Clare Langan



Clare Langan, *The Floating World*, 2015, HDV, 15 mins; film still © Clare Langan



Clare Langan, *The Floating World*, 2015, HDV, 15 mins; film still © Clare Langan



Clare Langan, *Flight from the City*, 2015, HDV, 6 mins; film still © Clare Langan