

Borealis

Various venues, Bergen, Norway

There are strange sounds coming from the belly of the whale. Unlocatable howls and growls issue from 24 bone-coloured speakers concealed among its vast gaping skeleton. Something squeals, moans, a creaking sound like grains of rice sputtering against plastic. I can't be sure, but it seems to be trying to talk to me.

There are 19 fully assembled whale skeletons suspended from the ceiling of the Hvalsalen of Bergen's Universitetsmuseet. Artists Bjarne Kvinnsland, Trond Lossius and David Rothenberg spent two years researching cetacean ways of communicating in order to produce this installation combining field recordings, deftly spatialised sound, and – at the climax of the work – the introduction of Rothenberg's saxophone, singing back to the assembly of baleens and belugas in a florid drift of keening melodic runs.

Borealis 2020 opens with multiple overlapping concerts amid the Natural History collection of the Bergen museum. Choristers run shrieking through the halls and improvisors on sitars, trap kits and modular synths play face to face with the stuffed bodies of polar bears, weasels and wildebeests throughout the galleries. It forms a roving, cacophonous dialogue with death.

But the highlights of the first night are undoubtedly the premieres of two new works by the AACM's George E Lewis, played with military precision by the local navy band. *Kulokker* (2020), in particular, brings out the orchestra's animal side in a dense weave of bestial calls from woodwind and brass in a piece inspired by the mooing of cows. Though through-composed, there are hints of some sort of quasi-improvised past in the multiple extended techniques and freeflowing structure. The odd horn line might almost have been something Roscoe Mitchell could have played – if enlisted as a soloist in a work by Varèse.

The collaboration between Borealis and Bergen's Lydgalleriet is a longstanding one. This year, artists Beatrice Dillon and Keith Harrison fill the space with

an installation which at first glance recalls Steven Claydon's abiding fascination with the aesthetics of storage and warehousing. Stacks of food crates in brightly coloured food packing crates are bootstrapped into around a dozen upward-facing loudspeakers, almost entirely filling the space of the gallery. Behind her laptop and mixing desk at the far end of the room, Dillon sends fidgety bursts of crunch and scree while Harrison potters from stack to stack, pouring powders and clear, viscous fluids onto the speaker cones. The materials leap and quake in response to the music, shimmering into life and erupting into euphoric Chladni plate shapes in midair. It seems raw chemical substances also like to dance.

Having missed Elaine Mitchener's experimental music theatre piece *Sweet Tooth* during its UK run in 2018, I am pleased to catch it here at the century-old Bergen Internasjonale Kultursenter. Based on extensive research into the transatlantic slave trade, the horrors of the middle passage and the West Indian sugar trade, the work features, alongside Mitchener herself, a group consisting of British improvisors Sylvia Hallett, Mark Sanders and Jason Yarde. Given its personnel, I was expecting it to be accomplished. What I wasn't prepared for was how emotionally wrenching it is. As it comes to an end and the applause starts, I suddenly realise I haven't taken a breath in several minutes. With a harrowingly physical performance from Mitchener, tightly woven displays of virtuosity from the group, and little more than the highly evocative lighting to set the scene, it is like watching an exorcism: the demon cast out is history.

Across town, immediately afterwards, in the vast loft-like space at Køde 2, seven dancers from the Bergen based dance troupe Carte Blanche raise hell for the premiere of choreographer Ole Martin Meland's wild and uncanny *Øy* (Island), with music by brutalist chamber pop duo Smerz. Evoking a kind of millennial *Lord Of The Flies*, the work resembles at times Merce Cunningham being performed by drunk toddlers weaned on internet porn. Barbaric, virtuosic, and utterly captivating, *Øy* careens from listless twerking to a kind of tightly woven hooliganism, with

some frenzied power tool wielding thrown in for good measure. I absolutely love every minute of it – even if I am left somewhat baffled.

Saturday night in the bar of the Kunstshall brings a triptych of strange delights. The evening begins with a blistering set from Cairo based producer KZLK. The founder of Egypt's HIZZ label/art collective, KZLK takes up the raw and trashy urban sounds of electro chaabi, stuttering and slurring them into sharp slabs of noise. Voices become shattering glass, beats become woozy thunder. He is followed by the high energy punk rock of Newcastle's Blóm, a trio I probably wouldn't have particularly cared for if I'd first heard them on record, but there is something about the fierce intensity and tortured virtuosity of their set on Saturday that is simply undeniable. Finally, from Uganda's Nyege Nyege collective, Debmaster and MC Yallah roll on with a barrage of mutant dancehall, all juddering rhythms and rapid fire rhymes. Imperious and commanding, Yallah owns that stage, spitting Kiswahili and Lugandan lyrics in uncountable metres. "This house is soon gonna be on fire!" she tells the crowd, exultantly. She is not wrong.

But it's hard to sum up Borealis in just a few paragraphs. Most of the shows have a capacity of scarcely more than a couple of hundred, but the quality of productions and the calibre of international guests punch way above that weight. Alongside the main gigs, audiences can join a choir, a boxing club, or a listening session with local immigrant communities, all led by artist Jenny Moore and London's radical F*Choir. There are events for families and interventions into the more buttoned-up spaces of the city's major concert hall. Flyers are distributed everywhere announcing a Feminist Militia (modelled on Lizzie Borden's film *Born In Flames*), insisting on the festival's values of consent, accessibility and egalitarianism, while offering a "sober pal" to any gig goers who should feel the need. When I first came to Borealis five years ago it was still more or less an ordinary experimental music festival (albeit a very good one). Since then it has transformed into a laboratory for experimentation into the festival form itself. □



Carte Blanche performing Ole Martin Meland's *Øy*

Longstanding Norwegian festival **Borealis** expands its experimental programming to the limits of the festival form. By **Robert Barry**

Tale Hendres