

Huw Davies Gallery  
2 - 26 February 2017

***Finlandia Hymn***  
**Anja Loughhead**



Image: Anja Loughhead, *Finlandia Hymn*, 2017, still from video, duration: 2:00

*Finlandia Hymn*, written by composer Jean Sibelius in 1899-1990, is a symphonic piece of music that is of upmost importance to the nation of Finland. It is instantly recognisable to most audiences, with a stirring and evocative strength that belongs to religious or spiritual places like a cathedral. The stark contrast of this to Anja Loughhead's raw acoustic version of the hymn encapsulates the chasm of difference between an idealized perception of a country, and the attempt at embodying the cultural characteristics of a place from a distance.

Loughhead's Finnish heritage is a recurring theme in her practice, one that she uses to frame ideas such as global migration and national identity through a distinctly personal lens. Her new exhibition *Finlandia Hymn* (2017) continues along this trajectory.

In her video work Loughhead appears under studio lighting and against a painted background, performing common Finnish pastimes such as outdoor sports including fishing and skiing. More than simply imitating, she acts them out with an intent and concentration that goes beyond a natural inclination to participate in these hobbies. Rather, she is trying to create a bond with the country's culture; an almost desperate ambition to prove her connection to Finland's traditional activities.

In the accompanying sound piece, lyrics from the hymn such as 'This is my song, O God of all the nations, a song of peace for lands so far away', are spiritual and angelic – the opposite to Loughhead's blatant interpretation. In both the video and sound, this tension between origin and impersonation plays with a sense of identity that has become distant and distorted through the passage of time. Over three generations, her Finnish identity has become stretched to an idealised version of what Finland represents, drawn from cultural artefacts such as photographs, music, and archival material.

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But the connection to her grandparents' home is still important, and this brings to the work a huge set of politics concerned with the personal journey of migrating to Australia, not only for migrants themselves but also for generations to come. Loughhead explores the sociological effects of living in a current multicultural climate where some nationalities cling to old ideas about their culture, and questions what impact this may have on the broader community.

Loughhead's work often contains a dark sense of humour. Her videos draw on her endurance to make the work – for example, recording herself doing six shots of vodka in a previous work *Highway to Wilderness* (2016) – but also the endurance of viewers in watching her performances unfold. With this pace, and with the sense of seriousness in which she performs these somewhat amusing tasks, she skilfully plays with the distinction between funny and awkward, deliberately putting the viewer into the uncomfortable position of not knowing whether to laugh or cry.

It is in this position that the viewer finds themselves when Loughhead's work really hits home. Australia is a land of migrants, of people caught in this awkward space between their heritage and contemporary identities, attempting to move into the future while maintaining a connection to their past. Loughhead locates photography as playing a major role in this process of identity forming. But when relying on reproduced material, the boundaries become blurred: what is real and what is an idealized projection, acted out for us to re-perform?

With dry humour and tongue in cheek re-enactments, Loughhead's work asks how we personally navigate this relationship, which in turn questions the identity of Australia as a relatively new nation, where we might all be doing this collectively.

Anna Madeleine, January 2017

*Anna Madeleine is an artist and freelance arts writer*

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## Anja Loughhead | Artist statement

*Finlandia Hymn* is a new body of work comprising a series of documented performance pieces examining the photographic representation of Finland's cultural identity and the deep-seated relationship to the landscape. Outdoor activities such as skiing, fishing and eating sausages are captured in a photographic studio in an attempt to maintain a personal connection to my cultural identity. Accompanied by an interpretation of Sibelius' choral component of *Finlandia Hymn* this exhibition presents a tongue in cheek reflection on the role of photography and its global influence on our understanding of place and its people.

## Anja Loughhead | About the artist

Anja Loughhead is an emerging multi-disciplinary artist based in Queanbeyan, working with photography, drawing, video and installation. A diverse artistic practice, Loughhead explores the public representation of nationhood and the implications these pose upon personal identity. Through the re-purposing of archive material and the manipulation of everyday items she reveals new narratives by combining imagery, material and text. As the grandchild of Finnish migrants Loughhead uses these methods to explore the construction of national identity by reflecting upon the self and the feeling of cultural diaspora which follows. Straddling a line between truth and fiction, and humour and trauma, her work locates the personal within the national. Loughhead holds a Bachelor of Visual Arts (Honours) from the Australian National University School of Art & Design (ANU SOA&D), and is currently undertaking a Master of Art History and Curatorial Studies at the ANU SOA&D.

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## Work

Anja Loughhead, *Finlandia Hymn*, 2017, single channel video, duration: 2:00, edition of 3, \$250

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## Public program

Join Anja Loughhead and David Flanagan for an artists in conversation event on Sunday 26 February at 2pm in the Huw Davies Gallery. Free event. All welcome.