

A FILM BY MERILYN FAIRSKYE

BIRDS

Radioactive pigeons, two pairs of twins, and a massacre...

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Credits

A photograph of two women standing on a beach at sunset. The woman on the left is older with short grey hair, wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt. The woman on the right is younger with long wavy brown hair, also wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt. They are both looking directly at the camera. The background shows the ocean and a bright, hazy sunset sky.

**We're ankle-deep in blood,
and all because we ate the birds,
we ate them a long time ago,
when we still had the power to say no.**

— Margaret Atwood

LOGLINE

Radioactive pigeons, two pairs of twins and a massacre bring chaos to a sleepy seaside village. A tale of life and death in the nuclear age.

BRIEF SYNOPSIS

BIRDS is a tale of radioactive pigeons, two pairs of twins and a massacre, set in a seaside village in the shadow of a decrepit nuclear plant. In this blighted environment all is entangled — birds, humans, plutonium — and nothing will be spared.



SYNOPSIS

Radioactive pigeons, two pairs of twins and a massacre bring chaos to a sleepy seaside village. In this environment everything is entangled—including birds, humans and plutonium—and nothing is spared.

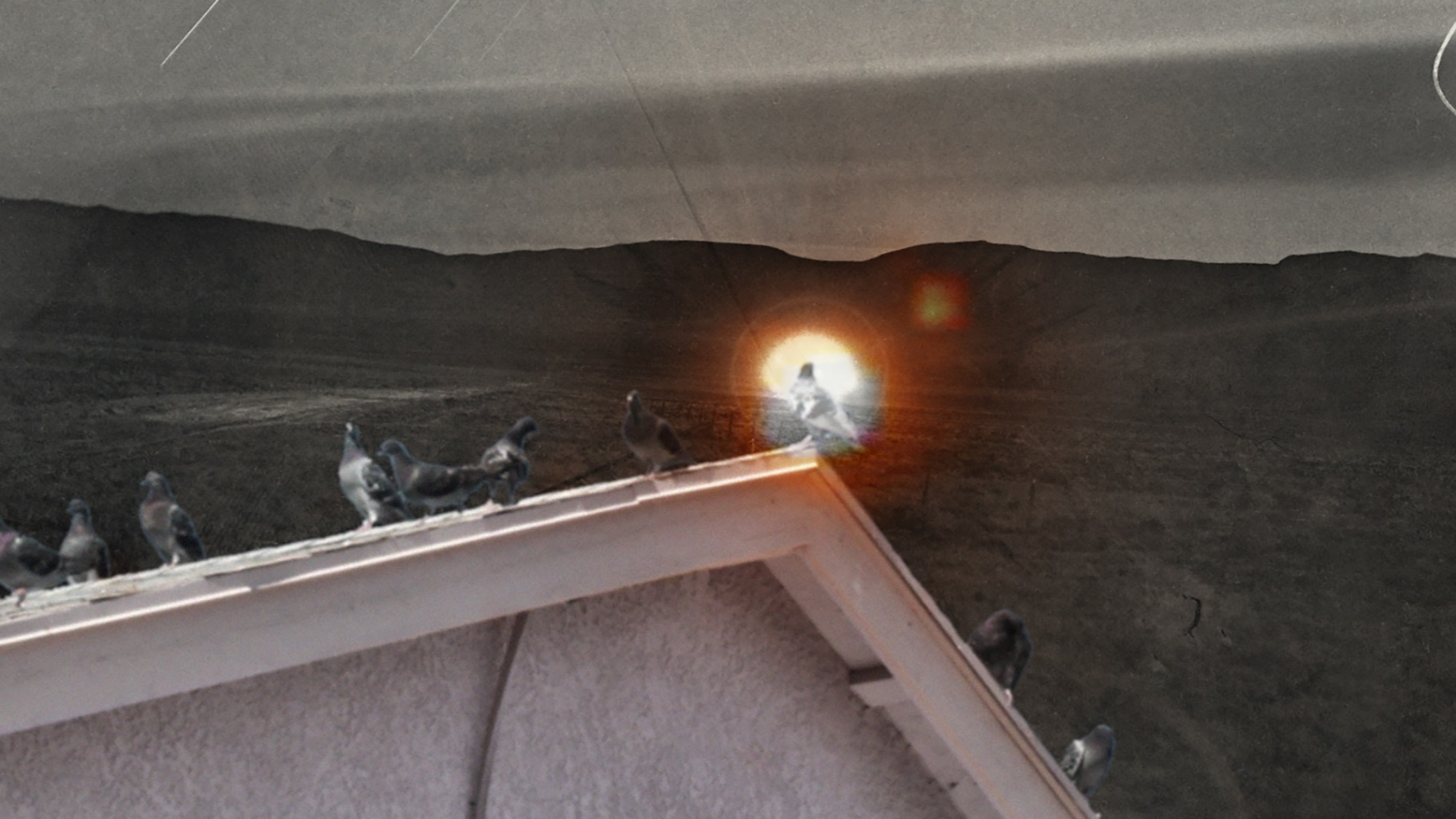
There's a decrepit nuclear plant down one end of the beach and a nuclear waste dump up the other. People walk their dogs on the sand but no one swims in the sea. Every day thousands of pigeons congregate on the roof of a pink house. A middle-aged woman Ava lives there with her twin sister Birdie. The house is a pigeon sanctuary where they tend to sick birds.

Every night the pigeons fly back to the nuclear plant to roost. They are radioactive. Migratory swallows and seagulls fly into the nuclear plant and swim on the ponds. The birds are tested and traces of plutonium found. Sharpshooters are hired. The flocks are wiped out, the corpses buried in lead containers at the dump.

When the dump is full, carcasses pile up in a huge deep freezer at the plant. A small submarine cruises around the bottom of the ponds gathering samples. No one knows what's buried there. As birds are killed, more appear.

Deryn lives in the next village. He lost his job at the nuclear plant and now drives a taxi. He blames the plant and his more successful twin brother Robin for his escalating problems. Ava and Deryn's paths cross when Deryn sets off on a wild shooting spree, killing twelve people, his brother the first victim, Ava, the last.

If Ava evokes a latter day Francis of Assisi, Deryn is more J. Robert Oppenheimer's Destroyer of Worlds. The birds, evolutionary survivors from the age of dinosaurs, are harbingers of a nuclear future—in a world turned upside down.



ABOUT BIRDS

BIRDS is an artist film, the latest in a series of photographic and screen works by Marilyn Fairskye that explore the contemporary realities of nuclear sites and their legacies. With an aesthetic approach that emphasises the act of creation and construction over a passive recording and reconstruction of the world, BIRDS humanises the connections between the nuclear and the everyday at a time of great environmental threat and nuclear uncertainty.

BIRDS is inspired by real events that took place between 1998-2010 in the area around Sellafield, the large nuclear reprocessing site in Cumbria, UK. Martin Forwood, a long-time anti-nuclear campaigner (1947-2019), was Marilyn Fairskye's guide when she visited Sellafield and Seascale, the neighbouring village, in 2016. On the way out of the village, they stopped in front of a pink house overlooking the sea. Martin related a story about the former occupants involving radioactive pigeons, two sets of twins, and a massacre. After several false starts, BIRDS is the result.

The real-life events behind this work, if related factually, could appear merely sensational and bizarre, and the larger resonances would be lost. BIRDS enters imaginary territory to shape a more nuanced context for these events in order to draw out what Kristine Stiles has called 'the ever-present haunting of the nuclear age'.

Actors present different accounts as they were recorded in the media at the time. The imagery builds around the pink house, seaside and nuclear plant and accumulates and dissipates in different ways to create a sense of a volatile environment where all forms of life are entangled. The over-arching motif is the environment that the nuclear plant seeps into — land, sea and air — metamorphosing and mutating because of human actions and now, beyond human control.

The birds are the constant presence, and unstoppable.



*Image: the two surviving descendants of the radioactive pigeons rescued by Martin Forwood and Janine Allis-Smith from the 1998 pigeon cull
(Photo: Janine Allis-Smith)*

THE SOUNDTRACK

The actors' voices are woven through a soundscape that gives a voice to the birds and to the environment. It was created by Meg Travers on a unique instrument she built, a 21st century version of the Trautonium. The original Trautonium, a 1920s German synthesizer, was used by German composer and electronic music pioneer, Oskar Sala, to create the non-musical soundtrack for Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 film *The Birds*. The Trautonium was also the poster child for the 'atomic age' before it fell from favour in the seventies and was largely relegated to museum display. Meg Travers, a musician and archivist who lives in Perth, on the west coast of Australia, is one of only two people in the world who compose for and play the Trautonium.



ABOUT MERILYN FAIRSKYE



Marilyn Fairskye is an Australian artist who makes artist films, video installations and photographic series through her production company, PLUS & MINUS PRODUCTIONS. For the past decade, she has visited nuclear sites to create striking visual explorations of the connections between the nuclear and the everyday – including Chernobyl, Sellafield, The Polygon Test Site in Kazakhstan, along with other sites in the UK, USA, Russia and Australia. She lives in Sydney.

Her art videos and artist films have screened in film and video festivals around the world including the International Film Festival Rotterdam; Videobrasil; Oberhausen Film Festival; Al Jazeera International Documentary Film Festival; the Sydney Film Festival and in art museums including the Tate Modern London; the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, & the National Palace Museum, Taipei. Major moving image works include *Connected* (2004), *Stati d'Animo* (2007), and *Precarious* (2011).





TECHNICAL SPECS

Total Run Time:
28:27 (PAL)

Production; Australia | UK

Aspect ratio:
16:9 | 1.78

Shot on:
HDV 1080/25fps
16mm film
Dashcam
Digital SLR stills photography

Exhibition formats:

- ProRes with stereo audio
- DCP (PAL) with stereo audio
- Blu-Ray with stereo audio

Dialogue/languages:
English/Japanese

Completed: January 2020



LINKS

TRAILER

BACKGROUND

MEG TRAVERS

www.plusandminus.net

www.fairskye.com



FAQ

Did these events really happen?

BIRDS is inspired by real events that took place in Cumbria, UK between 1998-2010, but doesn't claim to be an accurate account of them.

Why do you call this an artist film?

Because artist films, like BIRDS, are image-driven, quite abstract at times, and don't follow a traditional narrative arc. They are usually made by people who identify as visual artists. BIRDS combines the aesthetics of experimental cinema with the spatial and temporal dynamics of performance and video art.

How long did it take to make BIRDS?

Research and development took place intermittently over two years, and production took a further 12 months.

What about the sound?

The soundtrack comprises a soundscape, created by musician Meg Travers on a 21st century version of the Trautonium. The original Trautonium, a 1920s German synthesizer, was used by German electronic music pioneer, Oskar Sala, to create the non-musical soundtrack for Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 film The Birds. The Trautonium was also the poster child for the 'atomic age' before it fell from favour in the seventies and was largely relegated to museum display. Meg Travers, a musician and archivist who lives on the west coast of Australia, is one of only two people in the world who compose for and play the Trautonium.

Where did the footage come from?

BIRDS was constructed from material captured on location in Cumbria, and Dungeness in the UK, and in Europe and Australia; from Google Earth; stock footage; and green screen studio footage with actors.



CREDITS

executive producer **OGNIAN PISHEV**
direction, editing, camera **MERILYN FAIRSKYE**
soundscape composition & performance **MEG TRAVERS**
with guitar **SKOT MCDONALD**
dramaturg/assistant director **GREG GIESEKAM**
sound mix **ROBERT HINDLEY**
online editor, title design and grading production **GREG FERRIS**
assistance **TONY TWIGG**

CAST

ava/birdie **MONETTE LEE**
robin/deryn **DANE CARSON**
official **MAYU IWASAKI**
announcer **MICHIEL DOLK**
additional voices **SONJA BENNETTO, GREG GIESEKAM, DYLAN MCKIMMIE**
LUCY MCKIMMIE, MEG TRAVERS, TONY TWIGG
additional UK photography **NICK SHIMMIN, CLIVE PARKINSON**



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