

# VALLEY OF THE DEER

Jillian McDonald

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## Valley of the Deer

A rainbow arcs through an overcast and leaden sky. A young woman wearing a patterned dress and the mask of a red deer walks gingerly through pasture and forest. Another figure, wearing a dark hooded robe holds a stag's head aloft. A marching band in full Highland regalia advances down a hillside. A radiant stag appears. Disguised figures walk amidst graveyards and ruins. Masked children dance.

These are a few of the strange creatures that appear in Jillian McDonald's *Valley of the Deer*. She has been making work in response to her cinematic influences since producing the widely screened 2005 video *Me and Billy Bob*. McDonald's projects have ranged from celebrity staring contests to orchestrated zombie walks, and her recent work focuses on the conventions of horror movies. Over the years, her productions have evolved into elaborate multi-channel video installations that require McDonald to juggle the roles of location scout, casting director, costume designer, and director of photography, demonstrating a profound dedication to her craft and subject matter.

Filed during her tenure as a 2012 Glenfiddich Artist In Residence—an international residency program established by the Glenfiddich Distillery located in Dufftown, Scotland—*Valley of the Deer* borrows its title from the Gaelic name of the distillery and its valley location.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by the region's picturesque natural surroundings and rich Celtic history, McDonald set out to make a horror movie that challenged genre expectations. Filmed entirely on location using local residents as cast and crew, *Valley of the Deer* is an evocative three-channel video accompanied by a haunting soundtrack based on the *Loch Tay Boat Song*, a traditional lament. The vocals were recorded unaccompanied in a centuries old farmhouse, with a drum and bagpipe arrangement added by the Dufftown & District Pipe Band, the same marching band that appears in the video.

*Valley of the Deer* is a difficult work to classify: an experimental horror-folk-fantasy. In this respect it is comparable to the 1973 British cult film *The Wicker Man*, also shot on location in rural Scotland. The plot focuses on a police sergeant from the mainland arriving on a remote Scottish isle looking for a missing girl, who soon discovers that the villagers still follow the old pagan ways. The film climaxes with the villagers—costumed and wearing animal masks—parading across the countryside as part of an elaborate and shocking harvest ritual.<sup>2</sup> Inspired by Celtic folklore, the film effectively illustrated the disconnection between modern (Christian) and traditional agrarian (Celtic) values.

*Valley of the Deer* parallels similar themes and also features an extraordinary gathering of masked figures. Forgoing linearity, McDonald splits her filmed sequences into three kaleidoscopic fragments. Filmed amidst picturesque local surroundings using volunteers wearing custom-made masks and costumes inspired by Highland attire, the artist populates her video with an uncanny menagerie of pigs, horses, sheep, owls, rabbits, frogs, foxes, and deer, effectively conjuring a phantasmagoria of Celtic mythology.

These masked figures evoke several Scottish legends: the Bean Nighe or "The Washer at the Ford", who washes the blood from the clothes of those about to be slaughtered; the Redcap, a malevolent murderous dwarf; Selkies, water creatures that can transform from seal to human; and the Brollachan, a terrifying Highland shapeshifter.<sup>3</sup> Shapeshifters are a recurring theme in traditional folklore and McDonald seizes upon these mystical creatures as inspiration for her human-animal hybrids.

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Unsurprisingly, deer feature prominently in the video. In Celtic tradition, deer have two aspects. The female red deer—*eilid* in Gaelic—symbolizes fertility, gentleness and grace. The deer was believed to call to men from the kingdom of faerie to free them from the trappings of the earthly world. The masculine element, the stag—or *damh*—represents independence, purification, and pride. The stag is also the king of the forest, and protector of its creatures.<sup>4</sup>

The macabre conclusion to *Valley of the Deer* presents a ritual sacrifice of the feminine aspect. The cinematography takes on a hallucinatory quality as the stag and the masked figures circle the deer. Stones held aloft, they strike her down and feast upon her flesh.<sup>5</sup> According to archeologist Miranda Green: “For the Celts, as for other peoples, a sacrifice had somehow to be destroyed in order for it to pass over into the Otherworld... Animals had to be killed in order to reinforce life. The life-force of a sacrifice could not be released into the supernatural world unless its links with this world were first severed... The idea seems to have been that a death released new life and force, the sacrifice establishing a channel of communication between this world and the realm of the supernatural.”<sup>6</sup>

Performed in sacred groves adjacent to streams and woodlands, the sacrifice of an animal was also believed to be a means of insuring a bountiful harvest and prosperity. With the rise of Christianity these rituals and hallowed places were denied or forcibly suppressed. Worshipers were chastised for being heretical. The Christian church considered Cernunnos, a stag-horned deity worshipped by the Celts, to be an expression of Satan.<sup>7</sup> Grasping the psychological potency of these repressed myths and symbols—as well as the promise of forests, graveyards, and ruins as ominous backdrops—horror cinema routinely appropriates these forms to arouse, surprise and shock us.

*Valley of the Deer* similarly seizes upon the latent power of Celtic myth. As a horror movie fan and filmmaker, McDonald shares our atavistic desire to gaze upon these mysterious beings as they perform their forbidden rituals in faraway places.

— Ivan Jurakic

1. <http://www.glenfiddich.com/ca/latest/artists-in-residence-canada>
2. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0070917>
3. Patrick Monaghan, *Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore*, Facts on File, Inc., New York, 2004
4. <http://www.faena.com/aleph/articles/notes-on-the-symbolism-of-deer>
5. The role of the sacrificial deer was played by the artist
6. Miranda Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, Routledge: New York and London, 1992, p. 94
7. Emilie Botteldoorn and Sabine Mäuserer, *The Wild Man and the tradition of Mask in Europe*, Musée international du Carnaval et du Masque, Binche, Belgium, 2012. Reprinted in *Wilder Mann: The Image Of The Savage*, Devi Lewis Publishing, UK, p. 246

#### Artist Biography

Jillian McDonald is a Canadian artist who has lived in Brooklyn, New York since 1996. She is an Associate Professor of Art at Pace University teaching performance art and video. She has exhibited widely across the United States, Canada and internationally. McDonald has received grants and commissions from the New York Foundation for the Arts, Canada Council for the Arts, Turbulence, Verizon Foundation, New York State Council on the Arts, Experimental Television Center, and Pace University. In 2012, she received the Glenfiddich Canadian Art Prize, and has attended residencies including The Headlands Center for the Arts in California, Lilith Performance Studio in Sweden, The Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Workspace in New York, and Banff Centre for the Arts in Alberta.

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#### Valley of the Deer, 2013

Directed by Jillian McDonald

Three-channel HD Video Installation with Sound  
21 Min. 37 Sec.

#### Cast

Grant Adam, Kati Anderson, Katya Bangerter, Neville Brook, Maggie Carroll, Steve Carroll, Emilie Chavel, Bruce Craig, Stanley Cranna, Mike Dawson, Rennie Dickson, Craig Dyer, Fraser Dyer, Andy Fairgrieve, Maureen Farquhar, Jed Gaine, Kieran Gaine, Luca Gaine, Tommy Gaine, Gail Goulding, David Henderson, Ginelle Hustrulid, Dongwan Kook, Jana Jacobsen, Jill Laidlaw, Dennis Mcbain, Louise Mcbain, Jillian Mcdonald, Susan Mcdonald, Violet Mcdonald, Kelly Mcintyre, Bob Milne, Jack Newling, Sheenah Moyes, Steven Paterson, Olivia Robertson, Trell Robertson, Hjalmar Zwinge Roinsson, Vicki Shaw, Fergus Simpson, Nicholas Stables, Elaine Stephen, Dave Stewart, Kate Teale, Kayleigh Thain, "Dragon" Wu Tung-Lung, Tina Wood, Daniel Zalkus

#### Sound

Voice: Ealeen Strathdee  
Soundtrack Composition: Dave Roberts  
Pipes / Drums: Dufftown & District Pipe Band

Video stills courtesy of the artist.

