



# Turner Prize winner Charlotte Prodger on her Venice Biennale show: 'I want experiencing my work to feel like an altered state'

by  
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The artist's film in the Scottish pavilion is inspired by a rare lioness, hallucinogens and her own sexuality



SAF05 is a rare, maned lioness: one of five spotted in Botswana's Okavango delta earlier this decade. The subject of fascination in the scientific press and beyond, the lionesses were scrutinised for other masculine behavioural traits – scent marking, frequent roaring, mounting of other females – and seemed to satisfy requirements.

As always with such excitable analyses of animal behaviour, it's hard to discern how much human commentators are projecting their own prejudices and belief structures in relation to gender.

SAF05 is also the title of artist **Charlotte Prodger**'s new film work. The winner of last year's **Turner Prize** is representing Scotland at the **Venice Biennale** with a new commission that touches both on the emergence of her queer identity while growing up in rural Aberdeenshire, and formal questions about film-making, the way we look and see.

Footage shot on a variety of devices – from a drone to an iPhone to wildlife camera traps – is accompanied by Prodger's narration, describing moments of desire and grief, as well as sightings of SAF05.

"There's a lot of tension in this work," says Prodger. "I do think quite formally, but I have strong emotions – I'm a Pisces – I'm very interested in when the formal exists alongside the emotion."



Charlotte Prodger's SAF05 features drone footage of the Okavango delta. Courtesy of the artist; Koppe Astner, Glasgow and Hollybush Gardens, London

We're drinking mint tea in a little herb garden that the **Scotland + Venice** team have set up beside the canal skirting the dockyard in which Prodger's film is installed. Frazzled visitors to the **Biennale** can sit down and unwind before watching Prodger's film, which is intense: a weird, slow, startling experience.

Prodger writes beautifully. Much of the film is made up of small, deeply observed instances, whether in the text or on screen. Early on she describes the affectations of a group of teenagers from the neighbouring village: "The boys for teaching breakdancing are outside the Manse hall, smoking with their early moustaches. It's dusk, the eldest spits. It shoots out like a bar of soap from wet hands." They smoke with over-exacting deliberation too, performing their adopted maturity.

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"For me it's about a lot of those little observations: we forget huge swathes," she says, "but you remember the feeling of a hand on your hip. Those tiny little things – they're residues. I think that's why I write about those things because they stay with me."

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Prodger is unstinting with herself, drawing in moments of shame, too: unreciprocated gestures, intimate photographs shared by accident. Moments when, like an animal scrutinised by scientists, she felt dangerously 'seen' and exposed.

"I think for me this piece is about this rolling stratification of experiences, attachments, losses and desires that all of us have in our lives as we move forward," she says.

Prodger takes evident enjoyment in landscape. The two earlier films that form a trilogy with *SAF05 – BRIDGIT* (2016) and *Stonemollan Trail* (2014) – both took her out into the wilds and seascapes of Scotland and beyond. But she refuses to film according to romantic landscape conventions. Often she will subject a small camera to difficult conditions – filming with her phone out of the roof of a car on a gravel track, for example – so that the footage becomes warped and a little hallucinatory.

She has deliberately used corrupt and pixelated footage. There's none of the effortless, lush swoopy-ness of a slick BBC nature film.

Part of Prodger's unsentimental approach is rooted in the politics of her home country. "Vast swathes of the land in Scotland are owned by a tiny percentage of the population," she explains.

The awareness of this permeates her recollections. Various of the codenamed girlfriends are associated with the great Scottish estates: she meets BaF89 when both are working as cleaners at Balmoral. GaF93's father was head ranger at Glen Coe.

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Casting her mind back to 1985, when she would have been eleven years old, Prodger describes the housekeeper's daughter from the 'big house' excitedly telling the school bus that their mum was cooking the Laird a Baked Alaska for his birthday. "At the time I wasn't thinking of it as a power structure thing," she says. "But looking back, you start to realise."



Charlotte Prodger's SAF05, 2019. Courtesy of the artist; Koppe Astner, Glasgow and Hollybush Gardens, London

Proprietorial presence in the landscape isn't reserved for inherited wealth: during an artist residency on Loch Long she watches the passage of nuclear submarines to and from the local base. Their surfaces are so matt black that, like the Botswanan scrub seen in the beam of a passing searchlight, they're hard for the eye to get a grip on, to tell how large they are or how far away.

Altered perceptions of a more personal kind slip into each film in the trilogy: among them recollections of Prodger and her friends during acid and mushroom trips.

"I took a lot of hallucinogens around that time, those formative years of my life," says Prodger. "I think those two things have become entwined in my mind: I am very interested in the psychedelic experience as a lens."

The films also evoke anaesthesia, and the disorientating, wobbly headspace of long haul flights. "I guess I want experiencing my work to feel like an altered state," she says.

The tendency to personal revelations is quite new, and seems incongruous: Prodger in person does not seem like one of life's natural over-sharers. Until five years ago, her work tended to sculptural and formal in its concerns. Even when she used video, it appeared on monitors scattered around a brightly lit gallery.

The turning point was the Margaret Tait award – a Scottish prize for artist filmmakers – in 2014. With it came the opportunity to premiere a new film at Glasgow's GFT cinema. Prodger was surprised to find the experience of working on a single-channel film liberating.

"Somehow my work started to become more personal when I started to show in this way, in a dark space," she says. "It was a beginning of a new way of working."

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**Charlotte Prodger, SAF05, Scotland + Venice, 11 May to 24 November; 'SAF05' will be shown in seven art centres across Scotland's west coast, highlands and islands, 27 June – 21 November**