

The Silver Wave

Michelle Williams Gamaker

This film by the acclaimed artist Michelle Williams Gamaker was commissioned by RAMM. It is inspired by objects from the Arctic region in the display cases nearby. *The Silver Wave* tells the story of Ada Blackjack, an Iñupiat woman from Nome, Alaska, who was the sole survivor of a doomed expedition to Russia's Wrangel Island, north of Siberia. Between 1921 and 1923 Ada survived in the Arctic's extreme conditions.

The explorers Lorne Knight, Milton Galle, Fred Maurer and Allan Crawford planned to claim Wrangel Island for the British Empire, and employed Ada as seamstress and cook on the expedition. Climatic conditions on the island were harsh and by January 1923 three of the men headed across the 700-mile frozen Chukchi Sea to Siberia for help and food, leaving Ada and the ailing Lorne Knight behind.

The words you hear are unedited extracts from Ada's diary, expressing her concern for her young son Bennet, who she reluctantly left behind in a care home. Ada was taught English by the Christian missionaries who raised her. Like many Indigenous people at that time, she was relocated and suffered the suppression of her native language along with an inadequate education. Ada may not have had a strong command of any language.

In the film, Ada is voiced by Carrie Ayagaduk Ojanen, an Iñupiat writer from the Ugiuvamiut tribe, who asks that, 'the listener hears the context of the broken language in the broken world'. Ada's was a world of cultural upheaval and colonial violence that Indigenous peoples were forced into.

The Silver Wave also includes Mexican rain gods, Thai dancer figurines and Indian tourist souvenirs currently kept in the museum's stores.

Michelle Williams Gamaker says of her new work, 'Ada's story is one of survival at all costs. Accompanying the explorers to Wrangel Island went against her better judgement, but she needed money to care for her son Bennet. It is clear from later interviews that the events on the island were very traumatic to her. Working with artefacts from RAMM's collection I take them on a journey to tell Ada's untold story. By using projected archival images, RAMM's objects, and lighting the museum to evoke the Arctic, a scene unfolds that is quite fantastical, reflecting Ada's emotions while on the island'.

Michelle Williams Gamaker is based in London. Her key focus is the development of 'fictional activism' in which, as she says, 'I restore marginalised brown characters as central figures to challenge historical fictional injustices'. She won the prestigious Film London Jarman Award 2020, which recognises the imagination and innovation of artist filmmakers in the UK.

Michelle Williams Gamaker, *The Silver Wave* (2020), 12'

The music score is created by award winning composer Aaron Cupples with sound design by Sara Pinheiro.

You can also view *The Silver Wave* online here
<http://bit.ly/MWG-TheSilverWave>