

# Helen Cammock

## *They Call It Idlewild*

28 January – 13 May 2023

Oakville Galleries at Centennial Square

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## OAKVILLE GALLERIES

Gairloch Gardens | 1306 Lakeshore Road East, Oakville ON L6J 1L6  
Centennial Square | 120 Navy Street, Oakville ON L6J 2Z4

### WINTER OPERATING HOURS

Tuesday – Saturday: 10:00 AM – 5:00 PM

Closed Sundays and statutory holidays

Monday (available by appointment)

*Admission is always free*

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The nature of work—how, where, and why we do it—has been profoundly transformed over the past few years. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated changes that have long been in play, opening up for some the chance to take a step back, change direction, pause and draw strength from quietness, while also bringing for many financial precariousness, overwork, and exhaustion. How we have encountered these experiences will inevitably have been shaped by structural forces at play, in particular those relating to race, gender, and class.

This exhibition of work by British artist Helen Cammock examines the politics of labour through a sustained meditation on its counterpart, idleness. Created just before the pandemic, the exhibition considers the potential of idleness as a profoundly generative space of care, creativity and sustenance. At the same time, it also draws attention to the political misuses, structural power plays, and racial stereotyping that continue to surround it.

At the core of the exhibition is a film entitled *They Call It Idlewild* (2020). This was created while Cammock was in residency at Wysing Arts Centre, an organisation in rural Cambridgeshire in the UK, which provides artists with a unique opportunity to spend time conducting research away from the pressure to produce. Cammock's film responds to this context as both a site and as an idea.

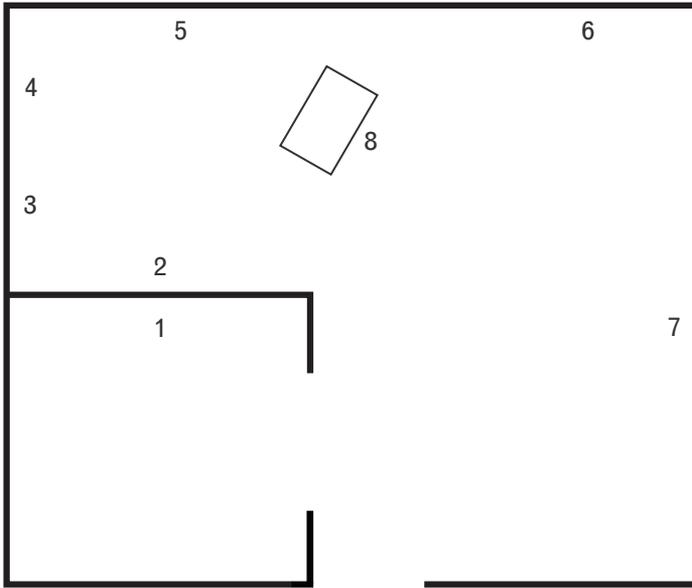
Over layered photographs and footage taken in the archives and surroundings of Wysing—November grasses, pebbles, a damp road, a pottery wheel spun forwards and backwards—we hear the artist's voice in a highly poetic, meandering monologue. This cites a raft of literary sources, ranging from the poet Audre Lorde's essay "Poetry is not a luxury" to Jonathan Crary's insights on the migratory sleeplessness of the white-crowned sparrow, as researched by the US military.

Cammock, who worked for many years as a social worker, has created a number of prior works that have centred on the political power of the voice and sought to uncover marginalised voices. Specifically music and singing have played an important role in her work to date, for example in the film *Che si può fare* (2019), which took its title from a pre-operatic lament written by a little-known seventeenth-century female composer. In *They Call It Idlewild*, we hear the artist singing Johnny Mercer's "Lazy Bones" from 1933. The artist's rendition of this song and her subsequent musings on the significance of its lyrics and reception in popular culture draw attention to the hypocrisies and damaging racial stereotyping around the notions of "laziness," which persist to this day.

Alongside this film is a large-scale banner bearing the words “I Decided I Want to Walk.” Using the visual language of political demonstrations and protest movements, it suggests moving at a slower pace (the ambulatory, the itinerant) might be an act of defiance, a gesture against the status quo.

Also included in the exhibition are a set of watercolour paintings, produced by the artist during lockdown, and a number of silk screen prints with text written by Cammock. “Can you remember when you last did nothing?” one of them asks. “When you last did nothing Can you remember how it felt?” These questions prompt a different kind of thinking about our relationship to work, one not based on mindless 24-hour production and consumption, but instead on care, protection, and solace.

This exhibition makes the case for working differently, for turning around how, why, and for whom we work. Amid the unrelenting pressures of hyper productivity, the struggle to maintain livelihoods, and the persistence of colonial and class-based power structures that allow some to live from the labour of others, it insists on the right to idleness for all.



1 *They Call It Idlewild*, 2020  
HD Digital Video  
18 minutes, 57 seconds

2 *Thought (Diptych)*, 2020  
Screenprint on paper

3 *Line*, 2020  
Screenprint on paper

4 *Song*, 2020  
Screenprint on paper

5 *Crying is never enough*, 2020  
Screenprint on paper

6 *I decided I want to walk*, 2020  
Canvas, cotton, drill, wool

7 *Billboards from the project  
'They Call It Idlewild'*, 2020  
Screenprint on paper

8 *Watercolour Drawing 1, 2, 3*, 2020  
Watercolour on paper

*All works courtesy the artist and Kate MacGarry*

Oakville Galleries is located on Treaty Lands and Territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat and the Haudenosaunee. The treaty lands are covered by the Upper Canada Treaties, namely the Head of the Lake, Treaty No. 14 (1806) and Treaty No. 22. At the same time, Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens and at Centennial Square is uniquely situated along the shoreline of Lake Ontario and Sixteen Mile Creek. These waterways are unceded territory and the Mississaugas have unextinguished aboriginal title to all water, beds of water, and floodplains contained therein. As an institution, Oakville Galleries recognizes the importance of establishing and maintaining meaningful and respectful relationships with the original inhabitants and keepers of the land, and we are grateful for the opportunity to operate on this territory.

Oakville Galleries would like to thank the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation for the open conversation around truth and reconciliation.

