

Janice Kerbel Dives Into The Surreal Art Of Synchronized Swimming

BY CHRIS SHARRATT
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In a Victorian-era baths in Glasgow, the artist stages her largest performance project to date, featuring a 24-woman swim team



Janice Kerbel is an artist who likes to find new uses for familiar and specific forms. She is, in her own words, 'always looking to see if there's a way to inhabit some kind of existing language'. For her Turner Prize-nominated mini opera, *DOUG* (2014), it was the language of classical music composition, used to voice the story of the eponymous accident-prone man; for 2011's *Kill the Workers!* she produced 'a play for stage lights', utilizing just that to recount a metaphorical day in the life of a spotlight in pursuit of its dream of freedom. *Sink*, her latest performance work and, like *DOUG*, commissioned by Glasgow's The Common Guild, continues her multilingual creative quest with a timely dive into the precise and physically demanding world of synchronized swimming. Timely as it forms part of Festival 2018, the cultural programme for the Glasgow 2018 European Championships, although Kerbel's interest in working with swimmers predates this work.

The actual synchronized swimming competition at the championships was held at a temporary, purpose-built pool in the west of the city at the Scotstoun Leisure Centre. *Sink*, by contrast, took place in Hillhead at the Western Baths Club, a private members' pool established in 1876. The small audience for each of the evening's four sold out performances viewed the event either from a first-floor balcony or poolside on wooden PE-style benches. While not integral to the work itself, the setting conveyed a certain sense of occasion and drama that a modern leisure centre would have lacked. And, just as the historic surroundings of poolside changing cubicles and ornate ironwork shifted the viewers' experience, Kerbel's choreography – in collaboration with Adele Carlsen and Lorena Randi – used the proscribed moves and rules of synchronized swimming to attempt to do something that this usually showy, ornamental form is not known or really intended for. With its beginnings in the world of entertainment – it was initially dubbed 'water acrobatics' and 'water ballet' and popularized in the 1940s via Esther Williams's extravagant Hollywood movies, only

becoming an Olympic sport in 1984 – synchronized swimming is not renowned for its subtlety. Kerbel’s approach, however, was coolly minimal and intensely focused on the swimmers’ tightly choreographed moves.



Janice Kerbel, *Sink*, 2018, routine for 24 women, performance documentation, The Western Baths Club, Glasgow. Courtesy: the artist and The Common Guild, Glasgow; photograph: © Alan Dimmick/The Common Guild

This stripped-back aesthetic was established straight away by the ‘music’ that accompanied the performance – a bleepy, electronic click track providing a basic eight-beat rhythm. With its subtitle, ‘Routine for 24 women’, Kerbel created an atmosphere of orderly enquiry – of routines formed, dissipated and then reformed again. Wearing matching black costumes, orange goggles and white caps, the women lined up on one side of the pool in two carefully arranged rows of 12, those at the front sitting with legs dangling in the water, the back row on benches and positioned three swimmers to the right. The effect was to produce an immediate sense of designed disquiet, a gentle nudge that seemed to suggest that this routine was malleable; that it could be bent if not broken.

In a more straightforward fashion and entirely different medium, Kerbel has previously interpreted the way that female synchronized swimmers embody and move through water in a series of double-sided silkscreen prints titled ‘Sync’ (2017). These starkly monochrome works on paper show a variety of formations, and watching *Sink* (particularly from the balcony; I also viewed it a second time sitting poolside) was a little like seeing minimal geometric design brought to life via gracefully energetic spins, tucks, twists and rotations. The swimmers gradually populated the pool, beginning with just two, then four, seven, 12 and finally all 24 as the second row of swimmers dropped in the water and joined the gathering mass. As bodies surfaced and disappeared beneath the water there was a developing sense of repetition and order edging closer to collapse – of things sinking beneath the surface only to be rescued by an elegantly thrown last-minute lifeline. The piece finished with the group dispersing to opposite ends of the baths, exiting the pool in two orderly lines.



Janice Kerbel, *Sink*, 2018, routine for 24 women, performance documentation, The Western Baths Club, Glasgow. Courtesy: the artist and The Common Guild, Glasgow; photograph: © Alan Dimmick/The Common Guild

Sink was a major undertaking for Kerbel, billed as her 'largest project to date'. Yet the physically demanding nature of synchronized swimming meant that despite the performance being twice as long as a usual competition routine it still only lasted for around eight minutes. Clearly this was intentional, another example of the artist working with the form's constraints. Similarly, it's no accident that, like the one-off Glasgow presentation of *DOUG* in 2014, this latest production won't exist as a film work, just a performance. Kerbel, with her desire to occupy new and unfamiliar landscapes, to be the outsider who knows just enough to pass as a local, has with *Sink* created something that, due to its brevity, can't help but feel like a fleeting, watery interlude in the routine of the audience's day.

Janice Kerbel: Sink was performed four times at Glasgow Western Baths Club on 3 August 2018, commissioned by The Common Guild.