

# JACKY CONNOLLY THE GRASS IS ALWAYS GREENER

BY FIONA  
ALISON DUNCAN



For years I've been trying to come up with a way to describe the metallic ting of human voices on Skype. Not when we go robotic, this glitch is subtler. It sounds like chewing on aluminum foil might for the doer, a hearing that tastes irritating. The sound is similar to one that accompanies many effects in 27-year-old American artist Jacky Connolly's Sims-filmed videos, particularly the raking of leaves.

In one of Connolly's first videos, *Fawn's Leap* (2015), a young woman with pale skin and dark hair rakes autumn leaves in the rain. As the day darkens and the leaves come to be piled horse high, a young girl—she could be the sister of the woman, or an adolescently-had daughter, or the same individual, years prior—plays in these piles. She throws leaves up like confetti and jumps into their ideal mounds, all the while it sounds tinnily crinkly like Connolly did to me when we spoke over Skype; a wind whines in the background.

After Skyping with Connolly and re-watching her videos for days into night, I started to notice the sounds surrounding my home. Connolly makes her work by designing a Sims-world, playing in it, filming her play, then editing that footage to tell a story. Her soundtracks consist of ambient noise and action effects, often employing footsteps, crickets, and cushions of silence. *Relaxing Sounds*. 24 million views on YouTube.

Connolly's lo-fi effects attuned me to my life's own. Suddenly, there was my 22-year-old sister's stress droning through the walls. There were ice cream trucks and incessant tweety birds whose nests I couldn't place between all the high rises. And there were helicopters, whose surveillance I'd come, in 19 months of living in Los Angeles, to unconsciously mute.

They're so oppressive, it's banal to complain. LA's choppers beat louder than our traffic waves oceanic, and while you may learn to forget them, I guarantee: we register their threat regardless. Because attention is more diffuse than a surviving mind might have it. It's why we can have repressed memories, summoned by a smell. Or why, after spending two months in a rural cabin, then coming back to Manhattan, I felt the pavement shake from underground as if for the first time, and finally understood I'd been living with it for years. We can take our environments for granted until we experience difference. Like a computer neck crane. We may temporarily forget the awkward postures we take, but the body won't. If you're lucky, you'll ache later. If not, you won't even notice that you're in pain.

In Jacky Connolly's world—four of her five videos are set in the same world, a recreation of New York State's Hudson Valley region, where the artist grew up—most characters look like they're in pain. Their average expression is vacant, maybe it's boredom or depression: something is missing. These women and girls—they're mostly women and girls—wear forlorn faces with dim or squinting eyes. It's like a force, like gravity or some other given is oppressing them, and if they're resisting it, it's an inner struggle and part of the struggle is to keep it in.

*Anhedonia* is the title of Connolly's most recent video. Derived from Greek, the word means without (*an-*) pleasure (*hēdonē*). It's when you can't enjoy life's presents. Sunsets, shopping, sex, whatever your usual pleasure, it feels dull, inaccessible. Leaves might as well be colored pixels that tickle in their shitty sonic frequency.

The cast of *Anhedonia* live in eccentric homes designed, presumably, to reflect their





interiors. Their tapestries are heavy, their art is *woe is or save me* (spiritual), and their palettes consist of aged bruise, blood, and lint. Meanwhile, outside, God's light shines lens-flare bright. *Anhedonia's* women look dejected, or low key pissed. They look at tablets, phones, and computer screens. They spa, workout, and mill about their homes; tattooed, in clown shoes.

Connolly uses the money cheat, so none of her characters work. She custom designs almost all of her objects. Fall leaf print leggings. Angel wing mirrors. A pretzel couch. These furnishings are as fantastic as the nature in Connolly's simulation, where purple and apricot and heaven's gate blue skies reflect in ponds and pools and up windows and walls. Light dances. Stars! Rivers rush and waterfalls and there are palm trees where there shouldn't be. Mushrooms sprout around climbing trees like those in *Fern Gully*. Vines flower on monkey bars. A roller coaster loops in the woods. And there's a ice skating rink by grass still green.

Six words are presented as chapter titles throughout *Anhedonia*. After the first title-A, there's "Anemia," "Alexithymia," "Amygdala," "Anorexia," and finally "Amnesia." All gesture towards pathology. What's wrong with Jacky Connolly's world? Anemia, Amnesia, and Anorexia are lacks: of iron, memory, and appetite. Alexithymia refers to the inability to identify and describe emotions of the self; from the Greek: "no words for mood." While the amygdalae are two clusters in the brain associated with memory, decision making, emotional regulation, and fear conditioning (trauma).

In versions 3 and 4 of the Sims that Connolly uses to make her movies, you get to select five personality traits to define your characters', "quirks, intelligence, talents, and general dispositions," like, Connolly lists: "Genius, Hot-headed, Kleptomaniac, Brooding, Childish, Supernatural Fan, etc." What traits you select will determine your gameplay. Kleptos can "swipe" things, for e.g. Connolly tends to go for

Brooding Sims, who sigh and pout; Neurotic Sims, who suffer random anxiety meltdowns; Loner Sims, who become unhappy around too many people; and those that Love the Outdoors. Connolly says that she modeled her "protagonists insides after the 'traits' I found to be the most resonantly 'Hudson Valley.'" Her movies are based on real memories, her own, and those of friends, such as the late Gabrielle Tillman.

"Gabrielle Tillman was," Connolly explains, "my soul-mate and best friend who passed away after struggling with the onset of mental illness for about 6 months."

Tillman was an artist as well, 23 when she died. In 2014, she made an autumn leaf print quilt. She would photograph still lifes of food arranged within real life, like Sfogliatelle in sand, and rippled potato chips, pretzels, and a transparent toy spider on a cake titled *Demons of Noon 12am Midnight Cake*.

Jacky Connolly's *Tales From the Borscht Belt* (2016) is dedicated to the memory of Gabrielle Tillman. It's the only movie of hers with narration: "A delayed reaction to icicles / Smashing against the pavement," a monotonous voice recites lines lifted from an abandoned Livejournal. "They could cling to the roof no longer / I can cling to reality no longer."

Of all of Connolly's films, *Borscht Belt* depicts the most nonviolent togetherness. Hugs and girls sleeping over. Women gathered round a fire. A teen holds a toddler in her arms, given the kid looks like Chucky. Horror seasons Connolly's supernatural, where it is always, as per her Instagram handle, @permanentautumn. She sets everything then. Before the naked trees and white of winter, lored as death, or regeneration. (Is depression hibernation?)

"Set me free / And I'll come smashing down," it's Connolly reading—reticently, and I swear I hear humor: "And as I hit the ground / I'll wake up and start living."



Hudson Valley Ruins (video stills) Courtesy: Kimberly-Klark, New York (opposite page) Installation view, Shadows on the Hudson, Kimberly-Klark, New York, 2016  
Photo: Elliott Cost Courtesy: Kimberly-Klark, New York (p. 92) Anhedonia, 2017 (video stills) (pp. 94-95) Courtesy: the artist

