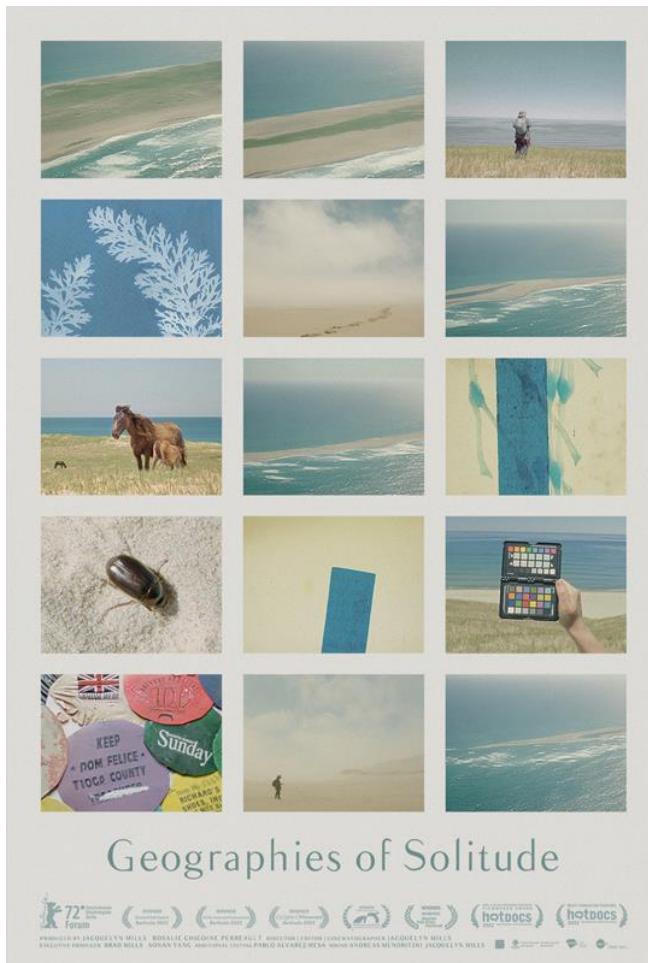


a Cinema Guild release



Geographies of Solitude

72nd

PRODUCED BY JACQUELYN MILLS / RODALLE CHISOLM PEREGRIN / DIRECTOR / WRITER / PRODUCER JACQUELYN MILLS

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER BRAD MILLS / ADRIAN YANG / ADDITIONAL EDITING PABLO ALVAREZ MESA / MUSIC ANDREAS MENDITZAS / JACQUELYN MILLS

Opens at Anthology Film Archive on Jan 25, Feb 10 in select theaters
2022 / 103 min / 1.85:1 / 16mm / Color

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Synopsis

An immersion into the rich ecosystem of Sable Island, a remote sliver of land in the Northwest Atlantic, *Geographies of Solitude* follows Zoe Lucas, a naturalist and environmentalist who has lived there for over 40 years collecting, cleaning and documenting marine litter that persistently washes up on the island's shores. Shot on 16mm and created using eco-friendly filmmaking techniques, *Geographies of Solitude* is a playful and reverent collaboration with the natural world filled with arresting images and made with an activist spirit.

Director's Statement

This film began when I was four years old, watching the news with my grandmother. There was a story of a woman who lived on a remote island in the Northwest Atlantic. Sable Island was described as a crescent-shaped strip of sand, home to seals, wild horses and shipwrecks. This legend stayed with me and 30 years later I met Zoe Lucas. It was the mythology that brought me to her but it was everything else that captivated me and led to the making of this film.

I made three trips to the island by private charter plane, shooting on 16mm film. My first trip, as a one-person team, was in winter 2017. Sand entered every crevice of gear, winds were so fierce I leaned my weight into them, and a few hundred thousand seals littered the beach. My hands were raw from operating the camera in the exposed winter weather while I carried heavy film gear through the sand by foot. As Zoe guided me across the land, these physical challenges seemed irrelevant in the face of such a full reality.

The island itself was like no place I have ever encountered. The animals endure extreme elements yet seem to thrive on their island paradise. Lifecycles are uniquely visible, bodies naturally melt back into the land and birth often happens within reach of death. This place appears to be a wild sanctuary, with its caretaker who has devoted over 40 years to studying and tending to its nethermost detail. Yet it is being invaded.

Marine litter of all sizes persistently washes up on the shores of Sable Island. Zoe diligently collects, cleans, sorts and catalogs her findings in her long-term study of pollution trends in the Northwest Atlantic. I was shocked and disturbed by Zoe's discoveries. In between my trips I searched for ways I could cinematically underline the fragility of our environment.

Throughout three artist residencies in Iceland (2018, 2019, 2020), I created a series of eco-friendly experiments using specimens from Zoe's Institute. I hand-processed film in plants, exposed film with moonlight and starlight, painted film with non-toxic emulsion, and spliced marine litter and organic matter to film.

My explorations expanded into the realm of sound. Of all the elements I experienced on this journey, it was the sounds of Sable Island that haunted me the most. Using homemade, non-toxic contact microphones, underwater hydrophones and electrodes that translated the frequencies of organics to musical patterns, I created a soundscape that was almost entirely recorded with and within the island.

At a time when our environmental crisis has never been more urgent, I wholeheartedly believe cinema can facilitate our healing process with the natural world. I have devoted my work to this notion. While filming *Geographies of Solitude*, I had tucked in my back pocket this beloved quote from Thomas Merton: "We will never love nor save what we do not experience as sacred."

Interview with Jacquelyn Mills

By Antoine Thirion

Where is Sable Island?

Sable Island is a sandbar in the Northwest Atlantic Ocean over 100km from Nova Scotia. It is 40km long, 2km wide at its widest, and perched at the edge of the continental shelf.

How did you first come across Sable Island?

I was four years old when I saw Zoe Lucas on the news. She was portrayed as living on a sand bar in the Northwest Atlantic, a naturalist researcher studying wild horses and seals. It's a very vivid memory that captured my imagination, and that story stayed with me. When I finished *In the Waves*, my last documentary, my first instinct was to approach Zoe about making a film with her. I knew in advance that she was not easy to meet as she spends most of her time on the island, but it turned out we had a mutual friend who sent her *In the Waves*. After watching my film and meeting together, Zoe agreed to participate. A few months later I was on Sable Island.

When did you go?

To make *Geographies of Solitude*, I made three trips. The first trip was December 2017. The second one was in September 2018, and the third in June of 2019.

What was it like getting to Sable Island to make this film?

The island is reachable by a small private charter plane that lands on the beach. Weather plays a big part in the scheduling of each flight. Wind, fog, hurricanes, blizzards. There's a chance you could miss your trip completely or end up storm-stayed on the island due to the weather. That's part of the risk. I was mostly a one-person team, shooting on 16mm film, so there were many logistics to contend with. Being sure I had back-ups of back-ups in case anything failed. With film, there are many small pieces that need to work for it to all go smoothly. Small pieces that were easily invaded by sand! So, preparing for all that was crucial to ensure a successful shoot each time. The charter flight had a weight restriction, so there was an added layer of only taking what was absolutely necessary, while also trying to be as prepared as possible.

What gear did you use?

I worked with three cameras. Aaton XTR, a heavier film camera which allows for sync sound. A bolex which is a lighter 16mm option. I used this more for explorations and visual haiku moments that didn't call for sync sound. In case anything went wrong with the film – say all of the film stock became compromised for some reason – I brought an A7S digital camera. This camera also has the capacity to shoot at night. I ended up using that one much more than I expected, as Sable Island at night is phenomenal. The stars would draw me out no matter how tired I was from the day's filming.

You picked different seasons each time?

I knew I couldn't be there for entire seasons but I wanted to convey a passage of time. How the island and its inhabitants appeared and adapted in all conditions. Winter had an exposed and raw quality to it. That's also the time of year that the grey seals give birth. Their colony can reach around 400,000 in winter. They sing together like a strange choir. Their sounds were imprinted on me and I tried to play with that in the film. The island also surprised me how peaceful and mild it could feel in winter. Especially if you're between dunes and it's a calm, sunny day. I had a nap or two, I have to admit.

In my eyes, each season on the island changed so dramatically. The next shoot was in early autumn. It was remarkable to see the marram grass in its fullness, waving like water in the wind. Sable Island has such a thriving variety of plants. Heathlands of juniper, cranberry and bayberry.

Fields of twinkling Starry False Solomon's Seal. The final trip was in late spring. There were many nesting seabirds at this time of year. Including a large colony of nesting terns, which were quite aggressive and seemed to enjoy dive bombing my camera. Similar to the seal sounds, the terns make this persistent and pervasive clicking sound that marked this time sonically.

Your initial desire to make a film about Zoe and the island seems to come from a fascination about solitude. How did it collide with your experience of it?

You're right. It was certainly the idea of solitude that drew me to making this film. Solitude, in the sense of a woman dedicating her life to the natural world and environmental work. I admire and respect that very deeply.

How did you try to convey the idea of solitude through filming?

I only had about ten minutes of film rolls a day that I could use, so I would spend a good part of my time observing, with the film gear ready for when the right moment appeared. I was open to receive what was around me. I was not as interested in the fantasy of the island, like the majestic horses and the colony of seals and the shipwrecks. From meeting Zoe, I felt like there was so much more to the island than that. Life cycles are obvious there. Birth and death are often in proximity to one another. Then, the objects we use in our daily life, like containers, energy drinks, balloons and micro plastics are all invading the shores. So, it feels very confronting. Sometimes in my daily life I can feel that I'm just in a routine or in a trance. There, time and place feels very vivid.

Can you elaborate on your use of sound?

The soundscape to this film was a labor of love. I find sound to be one the most enjoyable parts of filmmaking, especially with this project. It's such a sensorial experience to be on the island. How do you make something feel like you're on the sand bar in the Atlantic? For me, that's with sound. I ended up getting non-toxic contact microphones made, so I could record within objects, within wood, waves and sand. Insects would sometimes land on these microphones so I could capture their individual footsteps, movements and sounds. I had hydrophones so I could record in the ponds, in the ocean, and in the containers of water that Zoe used to clean marine litter. I had electrodes that I could touch to organics, record their living frequencies, and then translate that into a musical pattern. I wanted the soundscape to be created almost entirely with the island on every level.

It's the same logic as the camera-less experiments that you have in the film. Did you make them directly onsite?

The experiments began with a search for how this film's process could reflect Zoe's environmental commitment. On the first trip, I shot 8mm and developed it in cranberry and seaweed. A great experimental filmmaker, Terra Long, opened my eyes to the world of natural hand-processing and eco-friendly techniques. She was there with me for that first experiment. Seeing the results opened up a whole realm of possibilities. Most of these experiments happened off island using specimens that Zoe had sent me from Sable Island Institute. When I was not on the island, I was focusing on that. With these techniques, you have just one chance. If you mess up the process, the footage or experiment is lost. Which just became like another ritual in the film's journey.

There's also that relation between solitude and totality. It's quite fascinating to see how many aspects of life on the island Zoe's been keeping track of. It's not often that an artist has the ability to be in an enclosed space that is also a world, with modest proportions but total openness, and with so many aspects to document. The film really has this aspect of reaching something total about art making and about experience in general. Were you interested as

an artist to be approaching this idea of totality?

It's really interesting because there is so much you could film on Sable Island. Sometimes that would feel immobilizing. I would remind myself to let go and experience the place. That was crucial. I would observe the way the light moved, the sounds, the way the animals existed, the way Zoe appeared. That's when I could see it all. Putting down the camera was the best thing I did on that film. Sometimes I missed capturing some incredible images by doing this, but those were just for me.

The A-Frame seems to have importance in the film, in the past archival footage and the present. Could you expand on that?

Zoe gave me 16mm archives from the 1970's that appear early in the film. I was struck by the energy you could feel from the crew Zoe was part of back then. In the archive, the A-Frame is alive, there's a fireplace, people cooking, living and working in there. I was moved that this team of people built and lived in this place in such a natural way. Made only with wood, even with pieces of driftwood that came from the beach. Nested in between the dunes. When Zoe brought me to the A-Frame, it took my breath away to see it sinking into the dunes. To me the A-Frame is the life cycle of another period of time, a life cycle of a significant place to certain people. In that way, it was just like a horse that melts into the land, a center point that's now buried in sand, that had its life and purpose. Another mirror the island reflects so clearly.

Could you talk about how the film took shape, structurally?

It was very intuitive, similar to the shoot. Elements to the structure were in part guided by Zoe, where she would point me toward and what she would share; and in part by instinct, being drawn to certain places and ideas. After each shoot, I would catalogue what I had captured, and what I thought would be an important thread in the film. Each time I would go back, I would follow up on that thread. They weren't linear ones, but more based on feelings, discoveries, patterns, or simply something that struck me. So, I was quite organized about something that was completely intangible. Then a lot of finding the form was in the edit. I didn't have that much 16mm footage, only ten or twelve hours. That's not a lot for a feature documentary. I pieced together moments and ideas that I felt were important, and did a rough intuitive structure. I finished the edit with Pablo Alvarez-Mesa, my first consulting editor.

Regarding the marine litter, it felt like you wanted to say something there in terms of what belongs to today's struggles.

Absolutely. I don't know what the solution is to our environmental crisis, and I don't necessarily consider myself a political filmmaker. But it breaks my heart that the world is in the state it's in environmentally. If we can experience what is sacred in nature, and the wonder of the natural world, I believe we would have "less taste for destruction", as Rachel Carson would say. That's why I made this film. To work with our current reality. Can we honor places? Can that inspire us to treat them with reverence?

It's interesting to think of the film as just a message sent back, like how Zoe's reaching out to people who sent the balloons individually.

As soon as I finished the film, I felt that it was like a message in a bottle. Now let's see where it lands.

Crew

Director, Cinematographer, Editor: Jacquelyn Mills
Made in collaboration with Zoe Lucas
Producers: Rosalie Chicoine Perreault, Jacquelyn Mills
Executive Producers: Brad Mills, Aonan Yang
Additional Camera, Collaborator: Scott Moore
Additional Editing, Consulting: Pablo Alvarez-mesa
Producer Consultant: Selin Murat
Creative Consultants: Kathleen Broyles, Sofia Bohdanowicz
Sound: Andreas Mendritzki, Jacquelyn Mills
Plant and bug music: Sable Island
Contributing Composers: Emily Millard, Mark Boudreau
Colorist: Eric Gaudry

Director Bio

Jacquelyn Mills is a filmmaker based in Montréal. Her works are immersive and sensorial, often exploring an intimate and healing connection to the natural world. Her award-winning documentary *In the Waves* (60', 2017) premiered at Visions du Réel. Her most recent work *Geographies of Solitude* (103', 2022) premiered at the Berlinale Forum winning three awards, and has since garnered 19 awards including Best Canadian Feature Film at Hot Docs and Grand Jury Prize at Jeonju. Jacquelyn is a Sundance Alumni and an IDA Documentary Award nominee. She has also worked as editor, sound designer and cinematographer on many internationally acclaimed films.

Co-Producer Bio

After studying cultural production at UQAM and finishing a specialized graduate diploma in management at HEC, Rosalie Chicoine Perreault began her career in cinema. In 2019, she began working at Metafilms, a Montréal based production company owned by renowned producers Sylvain Corbeil and Nancy Grant. She now also focuses on developing her own projects as an emerging producer. She searches for projects and filmmakers with a unique vision that stand out from the current cinematographic landscape, both in fiction and documentary. Amongst her most recent projects, *Geographies of Solitude* (Jacquelyn Mills, 2022), her first feature documentary, had its world premiere at the 72nd Berlinale, and was awarded three prizes in the Forum section of the festival.

Jacquelyn Mills Filmography

For Wendy, 16mm, 10 min, 2008
Leaves, 35mm, 5 min, 2013
In the Waves, HD, 59min, 2017
Geographies of Solitude, 16mm, 103 min, 2022

Select Festivals & Awards

WINNER - Caligari Film Prize, Berlinale 2022
WINNER - CICAE Art House Cinema Award, Berlinale 2022
WINNER - Ecumenical Award, Berlinale Forum 2022
WINNER - Best Canadian Feature Film, Hot Docs 2022
WINNER - Earl A. Glick Best Emerging Director, Hot Docs 2022
WINNER - Grand Jury Prize in International Competition, Jeonju International Film Festival 2022
WINNER - CIMA Award for Best Film, Las Palmas International Film Festival 2022
WINNER - Best Canadian Feature Film, Gimli International Film Festival 2022
WINNER - Best Cinematography, Cervino Cinemountain Fest 2022
WINNER - Best Canadian Documentary, Vancouver International Film Festival 2022
WINNER - Best Canadian Feature, Eco Hero Award, Zoe Lucas, Planet in Focus IFF 2022
WINNER - Special Jury Prize for the Spirit of the Documentary, Calgary IFF 2022
WINNER - Jury Prize for Best Feature, San Francisco Green Film Festival 2022
WINNER - Best Feature Film - Altered States, Mar Del Plata International Film Festival 2022
WINNER - Best International Feature Film, L'Alternativa Independent Film Festival 2022
WINNER - Student Jury Prize, RIDM 2022
WINNER - Best of the Fest, IDFA 2022
NOMINEE - Best Cinematography, IDA Documentary Awards 2022
SPECIAL MENTION - New Horizons Competition, Black Canvas IFF 2022
Official Selection - Art of the Real 2022
Official Selection - BFI 2022
Official Selection - AFI 2022
Official Selection - Centre Pompidou 2022
Official Selection - Camerimage 2022
Official Selection - Doc Aviv 2022
Official Selection - Camden International Film Festival 2022
Official Selection - Viennale 2022