

## THE OCEAN

In the era of yes/no votes, plebiscites and debates, comes a same-sex love story in celebration of love over fear, free from shame – *by Palina Barry*



A scene from Wallis Bird's 'The Ocean' music video - DOP Ashley Barron ACS

Finch company director Sinéad McDevitt tapped recently accredited cinematographer Ashley Barron ACS to lens a pure, beautiful, devotional love song by Irish singer-songwriter Wallis Bird for her recent single *The Ocean*.

The filmmakers prepared extensively with lengthy discussions about McDevitt's initial storyboards and choreography. Precision had to be taken with key moments in the song/choreography that needed to be punctuated alongside visual effects.

Barron shot the rehearsals on her Canon EOS 5D MkII, reviewing with the team on the spot to build on the choreography. McDevitt then ingested these shots into Adobe Premier to create a temp cut to the music, which was further built upon over hours of discussions with Barron.

*"We watched a lot of dance films and music videos that incorporated dance,"* recalls Barron.

*"We felt like they were mostly too observational; where the camera was fixed on a wide shot simply documenting the dance, and they often had no rhyme or reason to the coverage. We wanted, instead, for the audience to be immersed in the relationship, in the emotion of the*

*story, and in the connection between the dancers. Each shot needed to tell a story."*

The filmmakers considered the lyrics of the song as their script. This formed the basis for all visual decisions, from storyboarding, choreography and cinematography to the colour palette, wardrobe and art direction. The words *"you are the ocean and the moon that controls it,"* particularly informed the camera movement and lighting.

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*"We talked about how to reflect this metaphorical, physical and emotional gravitational pull in the camera work,"* recalls Barron. *"We also wanted the movement to feel like water, which is why we landed on Steadicam (operated by Jake Lesu) as the most appropriate tool for the job."*

Panavision Sydney, a team that Barron cites as pivotal in her career development, supported the project

with a Red Epic Dragon and a set of Ultra Speed PVintage prime lenses.

Director and cinematographer reviewed sculptures of various muses, including Terpsichore, Calliope and Sappho, as well as Salvador Dalí's painting 'The Madonna of Port Lligat'. The duo also analysed how queer love stories were lit in film; namely *Carol* (2015, cinematography by Ed Lachman ASC) and *Call Me by Your Name* (2017, cinematography by Sayombhoo Mukdeeprom).

The filmmakers could not look past the softness in their research. Drawn particularly to the porcelain and flowing nature of the sculptures, the quality of light and colour in Lachman's photography and the blues in Mukdeeprom's brush strokes, they landed on their lighting style.

*"In reality, the moon is a point source that creates very hard light with harsh shadows,"* notes Barron. *"When it comes to softness, I particularly love a quality of 'barely there' light. So we opted for a source that was very big, very soft and very low-key."*

A 20'x12' silk was hung under three 6K Space-Lights from the studio's grid, with the silk angled as much as possible to avoid it becoming a top-light. Four



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coop soft lights were hung along the diffusion frame to extend the wrap.

In the lyrics of the song Bird notes that looking at her lover was like looking out on an ocean of planetary stars. Interpreting this concept visually brought in visual effects stars, or orbs, added during post-production to ignite the connection between the lovers/dancers.

This called for interactive lighting on the set. The aforementioned fixtures, along with additional 5K and 2K Fresnels from the ground, were wired to a DMX board where Gaffer Gourav Knight activated dim-ups at precise timing for the 'ignition' of the orbs in the extreme wide shots.

Not having the luxury of height in the studio to fully achieve the softness that Barron wanted, the cinematographer knew that the grade would be one of her main tools in achieving the look. Enter colourist Caleb De Leon.

*"Sinéad and Barron both came in to the room with a really strong idea of the look they wanted to create,"* says De Long. *"We worked really hard to create these beautiful porcelain skin tones in contrast with a cyan – almost aqua – tone across the highlights and shadows for a magical, gentle, moonlight look."* The team chose to

colour grade the video before visual effects were added so that they could set the colours and tones that effects would then match to help ground them in the world.

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*"One challenge was keeping the soft, slightly lifted black levels consistent across the board. Because so much of the frame is black, this project was particularly unforgiving of any minor changes in levels from shot to shot,"* explains the colourist. De Leon considers the project a perfect experience as almost all of the conversations in the room being purely creative and about how to enhance the emotional arc of the story.

*"It really is a testament to how well it was shot and how in-sync Sinéad and Barron were."* McDevitt adds, *"Too often throughout history, the ignorant have attempted to soil homosexuality with shame. An obsession and preoccupation with the sexual aspect of queer relationships has created*

*disgust and fear where there should be none."*

*The Ocean* calls on the viewer to focus instead on the transcendent beauty of a pure, loving human connection that is to be celebrated. *"Bird and I made this for our younger selves who struggled with our sexuality growing up and as a gift for our LGBTQ+ family and allies everywhere,"* says McDevitt. *"Especially in the 72 countries where homosexuality is still illegal."*

Ashley Barron ACS is a multi-award winning cinematographer.

