



YOU BET YOUR LIFE

KELLEE NGAN ON SUNBEAMS

Installation view, *Casino Runner (Aztec Inn)*, Shannon Bool.
Photo: Blaine Campbell

People say of death, ‘There’s nothing to be frightened of.’ They say it quickly, casually. Now let’s say it again, slowly, with re-emphasis. ‘There’s NOTHING to be frightened of.’

- Julian Barnes¹

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I see it first through the street front windows, then through the open door of the gallery. Shannon Bool’s *Casino Runner (Aztec Inn)* (2011) draws me inside with its come-hither colours, its deliberate frenzy of shapes. It beckons. Begs a closer inspection.

I stand at the edge of the carpet, take a tentative step on to its surface. I run a foot over the plush pile. The fibres give but do not yield.

I place a hand down. Push the grain in different directions. Trace the arrows and lines that lead to the edges, to what should be the end.

I look up. The runner reaches to the back wall of the gallery then travels beyond. Harkens back to its histories. This is just the beginning.

There are thousands of threads in this twenty-foot-long carpet. As many stories as there are skeins of wool.

I want to hear more. I tilt an ear and listen. Imagine the reply.

Tell me, it would say, do you feel lucky?

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I am nineteen years old when I visit a casino for the first time. My gambling experience is limited to rounds of Whac-A-Mole at the Canadian National Exhibition and scratch lottery tickets left in my Christmas stocking next to balls of socks and underwear. I have much to learn.

The playing floor assaults my senses with a dizzying cacophony of voices, lights and caught breaths. I don’t know where to look or where to start. Seemingly endless rows of card tables, roulette wheels and betting machines clog the length of the room, each game offering me a chance to be a winner. It’s hard to know which to choose, if any will live up to their promise.

I study the gamblers. Some are hunched in chairs, defeated, all but dead. Some wear disguises—sunglasses, low-brimmed ball caps, scarves as balaclavas—and make what appear to be measured wagers. Others play recklessly, up the ante every time. The tactics are different but the aim is the same. No one is prepared to lose.

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On May 23, 2009, Patricia Demauro, a New Jersey grandmother, finds herself playing craps at the Borgata Hotel Casino and Spa in Atlantic City. Four hours and eighteen minutes later she runs a 154-roll lucky streak, breaking the world records for both the longest craps roll and the most successive dice rolls without “sevening out.”

The probability of Ms. Demauro’s streak is estimated at an unfathomable 1 in 1.56 trillion—less likely than getting struck by lightning (one in a million), being hit by an errant ball at a baseball game (one in 1.5 million) or winning the lottery (one in 100 million, depending on the game).²

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I bypass the poker tables and blackjack stands—I can’t count cards, read signs or call bluffs—and choose the slot machines for my baptism. The game is simple. Place your bet, pull the lever and resign your fate to chance.

I pick a fruit-themed machine that glows with possibility.

It feels friendly, benign, offers dozens of ways to win. I deposit a nickel and pull the arm to activate the reels. Lights flash encouragement and symbols blur across the display. I spy cherries, lemons and slices of watermelon. Glimpse a peach. Or is it a plum? On their own these glyphs mean little more than a shopping list. But strung together they spell out our fates: Jackpots and game overs, close calls and small victories.

I lose in short order. The machine guzzles coins with what appears to be no intent to regurgitate. Then a blip, a belch, provides a minor windfall of three dollars and seventy-five cents. It buys me a few more minutes of near misses. Buoys my waning enthusiasm but fleetingly.

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Fact: Slot machines are the easiest and most popular forms of gambling. They require no skill or strategy. As a result they are the hardest games to win. The odds never improve. Each spin is independent of all past spins. It makes no difference when the last jackpot was hit or how much the game paid out in the last hour, day, week or any period of time.³

The odds never improve. The only certainty is death, currently listed at 1 to 1.

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Time is measured differently within the confines of a casino. Playing rooms are purposefully built without windows to avoid the chance that a patron might look up and realize there is life outside. There is no daylight or dusk, no seconds, hours, or seasons. Instead one’s existence is slave to streaks and benders, to hot hands and lucky charms.

But everyone is here for the same reason: to beat the odds, to take a risk.

And everyone here is equal. On every turn there is the

potential to win, to break the code. On every turn, there is possibility.

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Whisper the rosary, rub a rabbit’s foot bald: We rely on ritual when all else fails. Find faith in repetition. The memory of each gesture cooks into the muscle and bone. Hands know and do without thinking, reach back to what we have done before. They weave, they knot, they pray. Thread together the past and present.

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The carpet on the casino floor has seen better days. I drop my last nickel on the ground. Feel the shape of a stain where it lands. Wonder if it’s a sign.

But I’m not around long enough to find out. Soon my plastic cup of change lightens then empties. I leave empty handed and walk out into what’s left of the daylight.

NOTES

¹ Barnes, Julian. *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2008.

² <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1901663,00.html>.

³ <http://wizardofodds.com/games/slots/>.

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