

Visual Art: A monkey's puzzle: the zoo or the theatre?



[Aidan Dunne](#)

Reports to an Academy – Ailbhe Ní Bhriain **RHA Gallagher Gallery, Dublin**

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's video installations typically pull the rug from under our feet. They often unfold across several screens, proceeding at a calm, even pace, and feature spaces that draw us in. But then, as we try to get a sense of what is going on, employing our fallback sense of superiority as jaded viewers, well used to reading all sorts of visual narratives, things don't go according to plan. Ní Bhriain will merge interiors with landscapes, water with land, sky with water, leaving us struggling to find our bearings.

The dream-like, in-between space that she creates recalls the eerie metaphysical paintings of Giorgio de Chirico in which the Italian piazza becomes a surreal, ambiguous arena, simultaneously both inside and out, stocked with resonantly symbolic motifs. Normal rules of scale and logic don't apply. Similarly, Ní Bhriain's invented world has the fluidity of a dream. Nothing is fixed, everything merges.

Reports to an Academy uses four screens and draws on four locations: the Natural History Museum on Merrion Square, the Aran Islands, plus deserted art school studios and library archives. There is often a stage-set quality to Ní Bhriain's settings, a sense of spaces being deconstructed and reconstructed before our eyes.

Animals, especially birds, turn up as watchful presences. In the past we might suddenly see fish swim by in what we had assumed to be a domestic interior. Here the screen is bisected by a tidal line, as though, like in JG Ballard's *The Drowned World*, the Earth has been overtaken by environmental disaster.

Ní Bhriain's title alludes to the Kafka story *A Report of an Academy*, in which an ape gives an account of his experience of becoming as human as possible to survive among humans. Weighing his options in captivity, he concludes: "I was quick to realise that there were two possibilities open to me: zoo or variety theatre. I didn't hesitate. I told myself: do everything in your power to get into the variety theatre."

Is the academy, the establishment and convention our variety theatre? Could we unmoor identity, set it adrift and see where we find ourselves? That seems to be where Ní Bhriain is leading us. Kafka's ape has a female companion, but: "By day, I have no desire to see her; she has the perplexity of the trained wild animal in her eye; I alone recognise that, and it is unbearable to me."

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