Interview with Ailbhe Ní Bhriain

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain is an Irish artist working with film, photography and installation. Using collage and computer-generated imagery (CGI), she transforms familiar images and locations into worlds of dream-like theatricality, drawing the viewer into an altered experience of time and place. Her work has been exhibited widely both nationally and internationally and regularly involves collaboration with musicians and composers. She holds a PhD by practice in Fine Art, Kingston University, UK (2008) and she is a lecturer in fine art at Crawford College of Art & Design, Cork, Ireland. Recent exhibitions include: Artists' Film International, Whitechapel Gallery, London and Istanbul Modern, Istanbul, 2020 (travelling); Inscriptions IV*, Domobaal Gallery, London, 2020; and* Great Good Places*, Crawford Art Gallery, Cork, 2019.*

Artist's website: https://ailbhenibhriain.com

Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith: Looking back, could you say something about the evolution of your relationship to the various media you have deployed over the years?

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain: My first specialism was printmaking and, while I never had a very precise or purist approach to it, I was always compelled by the processes involved. There is something visceral and slightly disorientating about the way images are arrived at in printmaking – the various inversions, reversals, separations, bitings, rubbings, pressings, etc. I loved setting this stuff in motion and overseeing the emerging image – but the problem was the end result; after all that alchemy and manipulation the final print always seemed strangely polite and underwhelming. I came to realize that it was somewhere in the process itself that the work lay for me – a point of motion or in-between-ness.

My first experiments in film played with this idea. Works like *Immergence* and *Vanishing Point* (fig. 1-2)[1], both 2004, belong to a series in which a recognizable image is gradually undone by the introduction of a material process – observed as it is injected with ink-plumes or immersed in bleach solutions. This represented a kind of working backwards – taking the "finished" image back to this threshold of material uncertainty and possibility. The filming and editing of these early pieces were defined by a fidelity to the unfolding material process, capturing the real-time duration of the image being obscured or dissolved. This was a self-imposed restriction but an important one, I think, in figuring out how to work with this new element of time.

1. All images courtesy the artist and Domobaal Gallery, London.

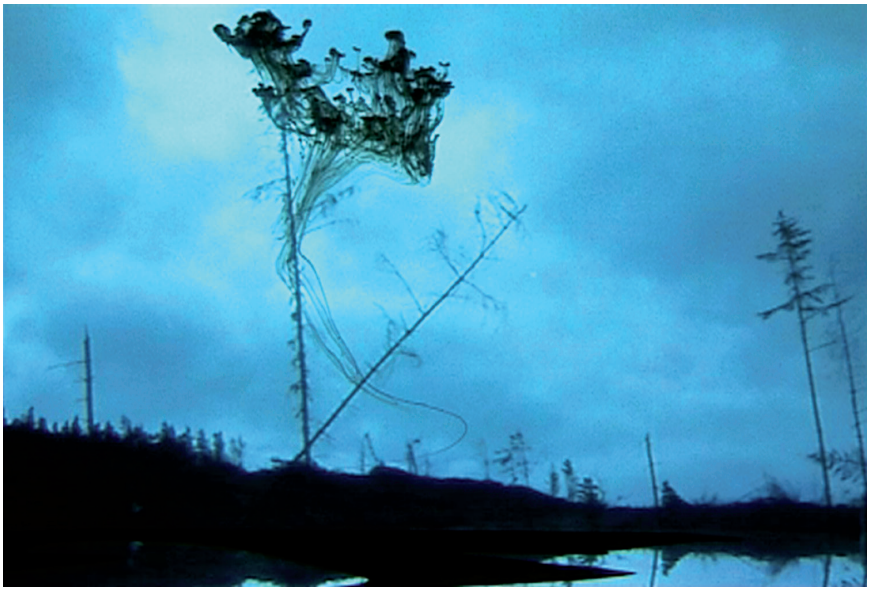

Fig. 1 – Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, *Immergence*,
single channel film, SD, colour, no sound, 2004.

Fig. 2 – Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, *Vanishing Point*,
single channel film, SD, colour, no sound, 2004.

CMGL: Would you say that there was a certain subordination of "content" to "form" in these early experiments with material processes, which became less tenable later on with the introduction of elements of architecture, narrative, theatre, etc., into your films?

ANB: The early work all dealt with landscape – specifically Irish landscape. I was trying to unpick the dilemma of working with this landscape, which as a subject is so visually over-inscribed and culturally loaded that it quickly tips into cliché. My approach, in literally disrupting or breaking down the familiarity of the image, was as much about trying to re-inscribe a relationship to the subject and place as it was about process. I was exploring the displacement embedded in images – the way images conjure an imaginary space or presence, the way they sit in this slippage between physical surface and perceived depth. But drawing this out through a material action also connected me to the subject of landscape, touching on the displacement that sits within our relationship to place in Ireland. This idea of exile, both within the image and within a culture became key for me.

Subsequent works look at sites that relate to collective identity in different ways. These range from generic office spaces and classical statue galleries (*Great Good Places*, 2011), to an abandoned airport terminal and military port (*Window / Departure*, 2013) (fig. 3-4), to the Natural History Museum in Dublin (*Reports to an Academy*, 2015) and the British Museum in London (*Inscriptions of an Immense Theatre*, 2018). I was interested in the constructs underpinning our relationship with these places and again wanted to expose the constructed nature of the image itself as a way of exploring this. But I began to do this by interfering with composition, using simple collage techniques and introducing unlikely elements to create amalgams and dislocations. My filmmaking now relies on digitally composited and computer generated imagery. While this may seem far removed from the early analogue and material experimentation, it is still trying to capture that same element of uncertainty or hybridity. Now, it just happens in the digital configuration of the image and in the approach to narrative, which operates in an unresolved space between anticipation and aftermath.

CMGL: What is your attitude toward the question of medium-specificity – once a sacred cow of modernism – and the proliferating use of hybrid forms in contemporary art?

ANB: Doing my MA at the Royal College in London (which was, and is, still tightly defined by disciplines and departments) there was always a motley crew of painters, sculptors, photographers and printmakers who wound up working in film. We were all improvising around limitations – whether our own technical skill or available resources or the perceived narrowness of the "standard" approach to media within our given departments. But what was most striking in the end was the clearly legible material sensibilities in the final effort – a focus on form or surface or distilled narrative that linked each work back to the originary discipline. The migration to film often revealed the ghost of the abandoned medium and made for something quite distinct.

Fig. 3 – Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, *Great Good Places*, four-screen installation, colour, sound, 2011.

Fig. 4 – Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, *Window / Departure*, two-screen installation, colour, sound, 2013.

I'm interested in this idea of limitation and the responses and improvisations it provokes. I think the focus on medium specificity within late modernism, and the rhetoric of presence that is attached to it, has acted as this kind of limitation; in a sense its singularity emerged from a fear of art's obsolescence but wound up as its own kind of over-determined end-point. It is a seductive end-point, though, and I think a lot of contemporary art, for all its fractured hybridity, is cast in that backward glance at modernism's ideals. I'm interested in hybrid forms as a response to the increasingly unsettling times we are in. I'm interested in the potential for work that circulates around absence or limit, that has a less determined relationship with representation, that has conversations with ghosts.

CMGL: I think you've made several separate, but equally interesting points here, all of which are worth teasing out further. First, could you say a little more about your perception of the current limitations of representation – at least of the over-determined kind – as a basis for artwork?

ANB: The general awakening to structures of inequality is definitely in the mix. Representation, and its relationship with identity, is obviously in this wider process of being renegotiated – decolonized from the systems of visibility that we've all been schooled in (basically western, white, straight, male). I think this necessarily brings a disorientation to representation as such within art making – a demand to look again at the relationship between aesthetics and politics and knowledge. Trying to rethink how we see and what we think we know destabilizes a lot of familiar modes of representation – they begin to feel linked to assumptions that no longer bear up.

On top of this is the phenomenon of image-saturation / addiction in our lives. The idea of living in the time of representation isn't new, but the reality, or unreality of it is newly intensified. I think this extreme relationship between image and technology exerts a real pressure on visual art. When Jean-Luc Marion wrote about the image covering the surface of the earth and the surface of the eyeballs in 1991[2] there wasn't even social media to reckon with. As an artist now, putting more images into a culture so simultaneously absorbed and displaced by imagery can feel hard to justify.

CMGL: You also may well be right that an appropriate response to our unsettling times is the deployment of hybrid forms. But why do you think so? And what would or should such a hybrid art, adequate to our predicament, look like?

ANB: I see this heightened currency of representation, to do with issues of identity and image-ubiquity, as having a more general threshold state as a backdrop – a state of being caught between the impossible certainties of late modernity and a kind of paralyzed anticipation of the future. Right now this future is so full of the known-unknowns of climate change, literally set to change the world we see and also

2. See Jean-Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible* [*La croisée du visible*, 1991], James K. A. Smith (trans.), Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 47.

forcing us to look at the "progress" that brought us here from a different perspective. It feels like there are a lot of forces displacing our relationship to representation and the idea of subject. Working from a deliberate position of uncertainty rather than authority seems to me to be one way to address it – allowing art to inhabit that boundary state between making and unmaking, knowing and unknowing. I guess I see the use of hybrid forms as belonging to this. It's the potential to engage different material and conceptual relationships and in the process to allow for contradictions, instability, provisionality. I'm not sure that art can be adequate to our predicament, but much of the work I am drawn to is open to it, even as it seems to withdraw. I'm thinking of work by artists like Ian Kiaer, R. H. Quaytman, Haris Epaminonda, Elizabeth Price, Arthur Jafa…

CMGL: That's fascinating. This sense of simultaneous engagement and withdrawal certainly seems true to your own work, at least as I perceive it. I'd still like to hear you elaborate a little, if you wouldn't mind, in relation to specific works of yours.

ANB: I guess the engagement is there most explicitly in the choice of locations. The locations in my recent film, *Inscriptions of an Immense Theatre*, 2018, for example, include the earliest collection of the British Museum and a temporary accommodation centre, like those used for housing asylum seekers (fig. 5). The work connects these as sites of displaced culture underpinned in different ways by the imperial project: the museum being its obvious historic representation and the accommodation centre a symbol of human dislocation, representing its ongoing dark legacy. These are clearly not neutral sites and I was drawn to them precisely for the politics of visibility and invisibility that they embody. But challenging culturally prescriptive thinking by replicating its qualities of directive certainty was the last thing I wanted to do. It really matters to me that the work avoids polemic. What I'm interested in is creating a space of quiet estrangement and reflection.

This is, I suppose, where the quality of withdrawal comes in. For me pace plays a big part in this withdrawal. The motion in my work is always extremely slow and constant; this has its roots in my early process-based works. It's not the kind of motion associated with computer-generated imagery and it creates huge technical challenges. But I want the work to have this hypnotic quality – to slowly lure the viewer in and catch them in a space between relaxation and dread. I think it's in this space that our relationship to what we're looking at becomes more interesting – more open and more unnerving. My approach to framing and composition also links to this. I play a lot with mirroring spaces through water reflections, or literally upending perspective through inverted camera positions. Viewers might spend significant time working out what is being looked at and how it's being looked at. This perceptual disorientation can even have a physical effect, a kind of dizzying or vertigo that infuses the viewing experience. So, while the work plays with imagery that is loaded with symbolism and cultural association, it's also very much about the mutability of perception, the slipperiness of meaning.

Fig. 5 – Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, *Inscriptions of an Immense Theatre*, single channel film, colour, sound, 2018.

CMGL: I'm intrigued by your championing of an art, as you put it, "that has conversations with ghosts". Much has been made of Jacques Derrida's "hauntology", a term coined in *Spectres of Marx*[3], by various writers who felt that time was somehow "out of joint" in the opening years of the twenty-first century; a time, one might add, when the living dead also proliferated in popular culture. Is any of this relevant to your thinking?

ANB: Yes, I took some of this stuff on in the early 2000's – though I don't know it in any thorough way, more as a kind of pocketing of stuff that instinctively made sense for my practice. But I was always drawn by Derrida's idea of the spectre as "the furtive and ungraspable visibility of the invisible"[4]. I also found a lot of Jean-Luc Nancy's writing around this really evocative – the imagining of a world slumped in on itself and art as vestige – "both an evanescent trace and an almost ungraspable fragment"[5]. Funnily, I think I was compelled mostly by the *visual* richness of these ideas – the strangely opaque atmosphere and sense of suspended passage they conjure just made me want to go make more films. The wider bleakness of the worldview and the sense of catastrophe within these texts seemed less vivid to me. I probably found it all a bit overly miserable. Now of course this idea of a time that is, in Derrida's words, "disarticulated, dislocated, dislodged […]

3. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* [*Spectres de Marx*, 1993], Peggy Kamuf (trans.), New York – London, Routledge, 1994.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
5. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses* [*Les muses*, 1994], Peggy Kamuf (trans.), Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1996, p. 81.

deranged, both out of order and mad"[6] resonates in an entirely different way. But maybe I've just grown up…

CMGL: Can you say something about your recent work in photography and tapestry?

ANB: Photography and collage always happened in the background – part of the general thinking and research process – but recently I've started to bring it to the fore. The locations and image-combinations tend to mirror those found in my films but the approach is really different – loose, almost gestural collage instead of painstaking digital composition and computer-generated imagery (CGI) (fig. 6). I often set restrictions around these collages, to make sure they don't end up overworked: a limit of three source images for example and three "moves" or cuts to combine them. This kind of making serves as a pretty important antidote to the madness of animation – as something that can happen quickly and that has a physical reality. Countering the virtual with the tactile also informs my recent move into Jacquard tapestry (fig. 7). But there's a further connection in that the Jacquard loom, which was one of the first applications of binary code, in effect functioned like a really early computer. So the gulf between the tapestry and the virtual world of my films is not in fact so vast…

CMGL: Given all our talk of hybrid forms, I wonder have you ever considered incorporating text into your imagery? Language is a notable absence.

ANB: As much as I love text in other people's work and as much as I rely on literature for ideas and context, I always shied away from using language directly in my own work. The fear of falling into literalness or bad poetry overwhelmed me! But for my most recent film I created a script for voice-over, working with collaged fragments of the earliest western museological text, *Inscriptions of the Immense Theatre*, from which the work takes its title, which was published in Latin by the Flemish scholar Samuel Quiccheberg in 1565. This felt like a natural extension of working with found images and locations to create something new. The script repeated with variations across three distinct segments of the film and three distinct locations. So the relationship between text and image was always evolving and being unsettled. This new aspect of playing with the construction and permeability of meaning through appropriated text is definitely exciting to me. It's something I'm also incorporating into my new work.

CMGL: So, perhaps this is the point where we wind up by my asking you what the immediate future holds for you and your work?

ANB: Right now I'm working toward shows and screenings in London in early 2020, at Domobaal Gallery and The Whitechapel Gallery. I'm also in planning for a new

6. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p. 18.

Fig. 6 – Exhibition view of Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, *Inscriptions* (#1) at Galway International Arts Festival, 2017, curated by Paul Fahy (pigment baryta print in raw walnut frame).

Photo credit: Ailbhe Ní Bhriain.

Fig. 7 – Exhibition view of Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, *The Muses* at Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin, 2018, curated by Cliodhna Shaffrey and Michael Hill (installation with Jacquard tapestry, pigment print in archival display case and clay objects).

Photo credit: Kasia Kaminska.

film, which looks at sites of medical, technological and religious history. There are various ideas around embodiment and disembodiment running through this… definitely a few spectres in the mix!

Interview carried out between June and July 2019.

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