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Ailbhe Ní Bhriain: *Inscriptions IV*



Ailbhe Ní Bhriain

Inscriptions IV

14.02.20 - 21.03.20

domobaal / London / England

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain: *Inscriptions IV* / Reviewed by Jon Stapley / 17.03.20

Tucked away in an unassuming Georgian townhouse in Holborn is domobaal gallery, currently housing its fourth exhibition by Irish artist Ailbhe Ní Bhriain – *Inscriptions IV*. Initially a filmmaker, Ní Bhriain's work has diversified to include photography and computer-generated imagery. For this exhibition, she draws multiple disciplines together.

What grabs the viewer's attention immediately is a large-scale Jacquard tapestry, stark and monochromatic. It takes a moment to understand what is being presented – the tapestry is made up of a composite of photographs, a human form and a bare landscape. It's a pairing of colonial-era portrait photography and imagery from Ní Bhriain's films of excavated quarry walls in Ireland. It has an unsettling hollowness – a person we can no longer recognise because they are stripped of their parts. We have to sort through the bones of a wrecked, fractured landscape before we can try and make sense of them.

Opposite this lies the exhibition's most affecting image – a mask-like child's face, orphaned against a black background. It immediately feels somehow *off*, a sensation that deepens as you start to notice the way some features don't quite line up, the way they repeat and overlap, like ghosts in the machine. Ní Bhriain created this image by layering multiple portraits generated by an AI – the final image is a person made up of several people, none of whom were ever real. Between this and the tapestry, the viewer is faced on one side by someone who *should* exist but has been erased, and on the other by someone who *shouldn't* exist but has been created. There's a palpable tension in how we ignore the mistakes and crimes of our past, while rushing into a future for which we are ill-prepared.

The exhibition also includes images taken from Ní Bhriain's films at Bletchley Park, where thousands of people, predominantly women, worked to break the Nazis' Enigma code with the aid of colossal electro-mechanical computers. The existence of such machines would have been unthinkable to most people just a few years prior, just as the tapestry weavers of the Middle Ages could not have imagined the punch-card process of a Jacquard machine, and the first experimenters with photographic chemicals never dreamt of computers producing a photo-realistic human face.

Strewn across the floor are disparate objects: black stones, scraps that might be pieces of an artifact, something suggestive of a claw. The kind of thing you could expect to see in a particularly lonely corner of the British Museum – which has come under recent scrutiny over questions of who "owns" the objects on its shelves, many of which were plundered by colonisers. Ní Bhriain does not "own" much of what we see in *Inscriptions IV* – not the AI's faces, certainly not the colonial photographs, nor their subjects. Who owns the culture of a thousand years past, and who has the right to display it? In asking such questions, *Inscriptions IV* may prove to have been something quite prophetic.

reviewed for Photomonitor by [Jon Stapley](#)

*Ailbhe Ní Bhriain: *Inscriptions IV** continues at domobaal until 21 March, 2020. View installation images on the gallery's website: domobaal.com

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'Inscriptions IV' 2020 at
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