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A Knowing Nature

Phil Foley, Anita Groener, Julie Merriman,
Cliodhna Timoney and Chanelle Walshe.
The Dock, Carrick-on-Shannon
30 January – 12 March 2016

For every natural language is its own meta-language

Jürgen Habermas (1986) [i]

As well as groundbreaking theorisations on the 'public sphere', German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas is probably best known for his contributions to the field of Social Theory through his reasoning on Communicative Rationality – a set of theories focusing on human interaction and discourse that posits the sphere of language as the site of moral consciousness. For Habermas, the progression of a 'natural language' (i.e. a language that has evolved naturally through use) relies on an awareness of the linguistic tradition and the context in which it is transmitted.

It also places language users in a moral space that offers both autonomy and responsibility. Out of the authentic use of natural language, a 'meta-language' inevitably emerges, generating specialist dialogue that is best-placed to describe or analyse the former.

An obvious example would be the discourse of art criticism, which aims to critically reflect on the 'natural language' of artistic practice, while mediating these ideas to wider readerships in the art world – a community perceived as being unified and distinguished by this language. A Habermasian aphorism provided a concise, yet conceptually expansive, curatorial premise for the group exhibition *A Knowing Nature,* shown at The Dock in early 2016. The exhibition presented drawing, painting, sculpture and installation works by five artists at varying stages of their career. Arguably each of these artists is engaged in the pursuit of an authentic language that might sustain them individually and collectively. Overall the exhibition was well balanced and occupied the gallery spaces to great effect: moments of lightness and frivolity were anchored with weighty references to global issues. A robust awareness of wider societal and art historical contexts permeated the exhibition as a whole.


Channelle Walshe 'Subterranean Glow', 2015.

Painting Exposed

I recently heard a prominent Irish mid-career artist publically confirm what I have thought for some time: That painting is 'really hard' and 'almost impossible to blag'. In the absence of multimedia fanfares or meandering conceptual devices to beguile the viewer, good painting is a battle of wits invariably won by the gut. While skills and techniques can be taught, an innate painterly sensibility can rarely be learned. A selection of five new paintings by NCAD graduate **Channelle Walshe** generated a tender narrative in Gallery One, where the young artist's deep knowledge of painting was immediately apparent. Walshe's subject matter felt figurative, yet flesh, bones and bodily organs were treated with the sensibility of landscape. A palette of burnt umbers, deep crimsons, golden ochres and slate greys brought Ireland's murky bog lands, overcast shorelines and megalithic sites ever-closer.

An intimate pairing of small paintings on the back wall suggested torsos neatly enveloped in their own embrace. 'Ache' exuded a primordial, forensic appeal, while 'Subterranean Glow' shimmered like unearthed treasure. A second pairing of paintings on the arched wall employed thick black borders to designate pictorial space – a seemingly self-reflexive device referencing a pivotal art historical concern: the role of painting since the invention of the camera. Similarly, the white-washed, vacuous arena of 'New Ground' implied an inverted Polaroid – a nostalgic format revived in the digital age through image-sharing applications such as Instagram. Like landscape, good painting is immersive and fully exposed; it resides in the bones and under the skin of the maker, and I am filled with optimism when I encounter emerging artists who have the courage to paint.
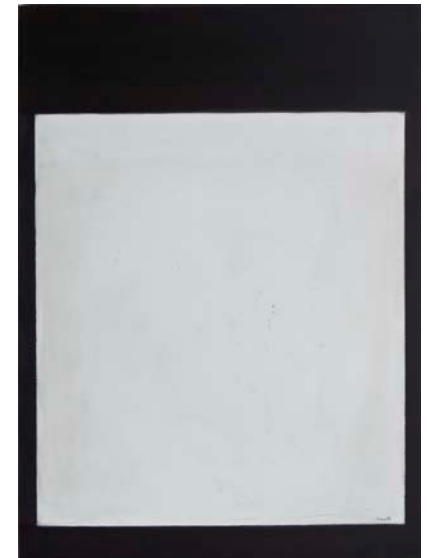
Top Image: Chanelle Walshe 'Telesthesia', 2015. **Bottom Image:** Chanelle Walshe 'New Ground', 2014. Images © Chanelle Walshe

Watery Grave

Galway-based artist **Phil Foley** presented a series of sea drawings developed in response to the recent flooding crisis across rural Ireland. The monochromatic graphite drawings were mounted inside low-level display cases, allowing the viewer to peer down into the encroaching tides. The moody horizons, swelling waves and frothy crests recalled 19th century Romantic painters such as Théodore Géricault or Ivan Aivazovsky. Smudged edges were left visible on the drawings, somehow making them feel vulnerable and more tangible. It could be argued that scientists have failed to sufficiently transmit the very real threat of global warming to the general public; perhaps the task must now fall to artists to generate a sense of urgency around this issue. Foley also presented a series of small paintings depicting vacant terraced houses in Loughrea, county Galway – an area perceived as having high levels of post-Celtic Tiger 'ghost estates', many of which currently reside in the multi-million euro property portfolios of global vulture funds. Two compelling paintings revelled in the endless raw concrete and oblique angles offered by Brutalist architecture, examples of which could be found almost anywhere in the world.

Gallery One: Installation View, Phil Foley. Image courtesy of The Dock

Film Still: Itsa Collective 'Le Gril' performance, 11th March 2016, The Dock, Carrick-on-Shannon, Image courtesy of Itsa Collective.

Foley is a founding member of the Galway-based initiative Itsa Collective, established in 2014 by five emerging artists, with the aim of interrogating the 'structures, narratives and constructs of contemporary visual culture'. The collective developed a public event 'Le Gril' at The Dock, whereby members were set the task of assembling flat-pack furniture without instructions. A comedic performance of power tools ensued; however a twist came with the dawning realisation that copies of the assembly instructions had been reproduced on the labels of drinks bottles provided during the event. Whether the assembled audience should share this knowledge, and at what stage they might intervene, infused the D.I.Y production with ethical dilemmas and reinforced the potential of collective action in deviating from prescribed routes.

While Foley's drawings posited rising water-levels as environmental catastrophe, a new body of work by **Anita Groener** reflected on the Mediterranean Sea as the site of geopolitical tension and a global humanitarian crisis. In the darkened space of Gallery three, *Citizen* was presented as a sombre grid of twelve spot-lit drawings. Comprising strikingly simple black gouache line drawings, there was no side-stepping the focus of the artist's inquiry: the displacement of refugees fleeing war-torn homelands and their collective alienation at the fringes of Fortress Europe.

An increasingly right-wing pan-European political agenda disregards the humanity of these cultures – a process described by Palestinian scholar Edward Said as 'othering'[ii]. With refugees framed as cultural pollutants, economic burdens and threats to national security, *Citizen* reaffirms our position as horrified spectators of daily atrocities.

Notions of displacement and otherness strongly permeate Groener's wider practice. The artist regularly uses disruptions of scale and reproducible silhouettes to represent exodus while rendering nationality, religion and culture completely invisible. In *Citizens*, a multitude of unknown people were represented via their limbs: feet were understood as symbols of mobility, while open hands were depicted begging and waving – the final act of drowning souls. Makeshift structures and other indiscernible 'units' floated on the surface, while clusters of limbs clung to one another, forming expedient rafts.

Top Image: Anita Groener 'Arms (2)' 2015, Gouache on Fabriano Paper
Bottom Image: Anita Groener 'Gridded Legs' 2015, Gouache on Fabriano Paper
Images © Anita Groener.
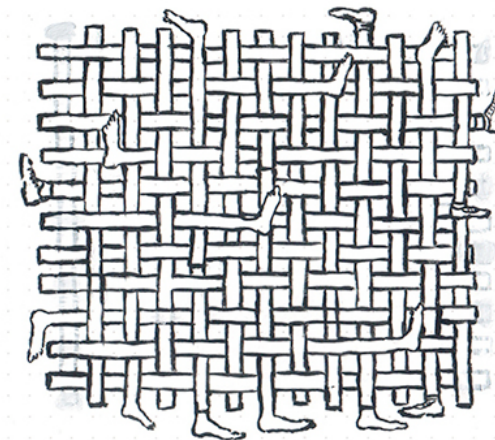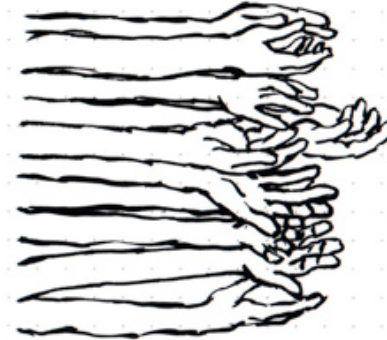
Drawn Together

A selection of new works by **Julie Merriman** in Gallery Two were described as drawings but were experienced as prints. The language of drawing – as a method to visually describe place, structure, concept and so on – was tracked by the artist across the drafting professions of architecture, engineering, science, cartography and mathematics. Merriman's archival inquiries reflected on the role of manual and mechanical drawing since the advent of photography and computer aided design. Inspired by 19th century analogue reprographic devices, Merriman developed drawings using 16mm typewriter carbon film, engaging in a labour-intensive process that produced unexpected slippages in the transfer of information.

The resulting drawings still retain traces of the original design aesthetic: blueprints, floor-plans, and cross-section diagrams are evident as shadowy apparitions of their original forms. For example, the ramshackle stacks of 'Compiler I–V' are tentatively held together with architectural grids despite being freshly inscribed with expressive mark-making, like electronic circuit diagrams rendered chaotic with stray wiring. A 'compiler' is a computer program used to translate programming language (typically written one line at a time) into a binary form of object code understood by computer processors. This term is especially pertinent when we consider the artist's working method. Deconstructing and transposing images in horizontal sections, Merriman creates grainy reproductions that flicker like a world viewed through venetian blinds.
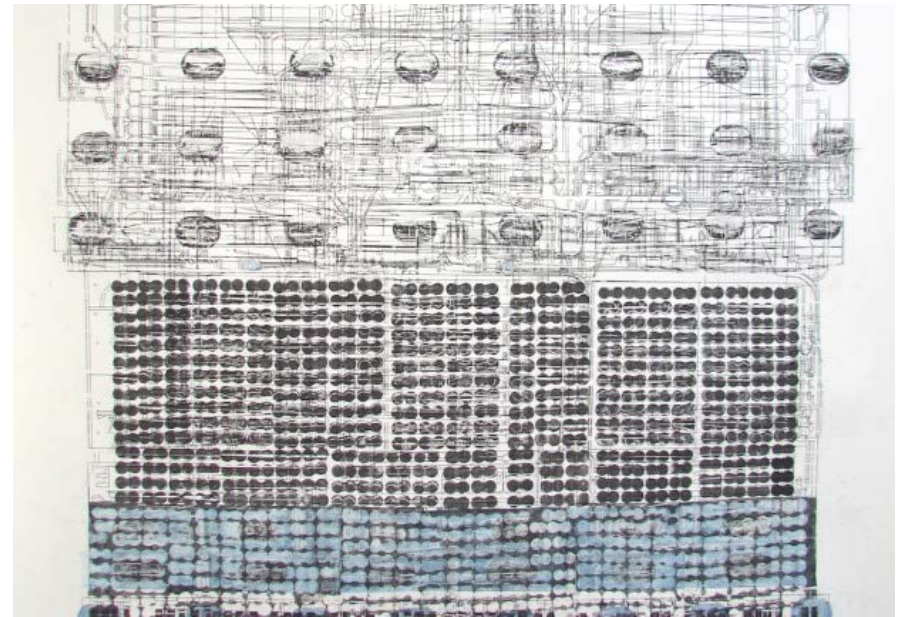
Julie Merriman 'Compiler III', 2015.

Cliodhna Timoney 'Laocoon' 2015

Recent IADT graduate **Cliodhna Timoney** presented mixed-media sculptures which commanded the space and introduced an air of theatricality and humour. Neither representational nor abstract, the sculptures offered only a vague sense of form; more precisely they appeared to portray a *memory* of form, dreamily imagined and partly assembled from the fabric of everyday life. With a Folk Art aesthetic, the exuberant, lumpen forms were supported on spindly legs and did little to disclose their identities.

Manifested as a cast of caricatures or a gathering of zoomorphic gods – featuring a small brown polka-dot ant and a sugary pink elephant with puckering lips – they nonetheless seemed perfectly comfortable in their own skin. As museological apparatus, plinths are infused with institutional values including the unseen processes of classification, selection and presentation. Timoney's decision to customise her plinths effectively allowed them to be subsumed by her artworks' vivacious personas.

The appropriately named 'Round Tower/Stalactite' was a tall, gnarly structure composed of fibrous coils that tilted like a loaded canon. Meanwhile, the frothy, peppermint-green 'Homage to Haegue Yang' directly referenced the artwork 'Semi-Dépliable –

Andante', 2011, by South Korean artist Haegue Yang, which liberated a clothes drying rack from its former utilitarian function. Elsewhere, the classical tradition of sculpture was recalled in the haphazardly protruding loops of 'Laocoon', through implicit references to the Trojan priest of Greek and Roman mythology. Laocoön was killed by giant serpents sent by the gods and famously immortalised in a marble statue (27 BC – 68 AD) depicting his fateful struggle.

Gallery Two: Installation View. Image courtesy of The Dock

Returning to Habermas' theorisations on communicative reasoning and the nature of language, the artists who exhibited as part of *A Knowing Nature* displayed a robust awareness of art historical traditions and the contexts in which art circulates. The artworks spiralled through deep time to channel past civilisations. Throughout the history of Hermeneutics, Art and Morality have been treated as autonomous realms united through the human subject. In abandoning the image of artist-as-lone-genius, the social and ethical responsibilities of contemporary art have come into sharper focus, prompting artists to deeply examine the consequences of human failings. With a language of conviction, *A Knowing Nature* carved out a communicative dialogue between art forms and artists at different stages of their careers, augmenting what Habermas describes as the 'divine agency' of language.

[i] Jürgen Habermas (1986) 'Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences', in *The Hermeneutics Reader*, K. Mueller-Vollmer (ed.), Oxford: Basil Blackwell, p 295.

[ii] Naomi Klein (2016) 'Let Them Drown: The Violence of Othering in a Warming World', *London Review of Books*, 38 (11), 2 June 2016, pp 11-14.