

Lenses and Lentils - On the work of Roisin McNamee

I first encountered Roisin McNamee's work in 2011. Her installation *(sun)(sine)isinglass* was memorable amongst the works in that year's NCAD M.F.A. show, a work that attempted to envelop the viewer in mysterious tides of associations. The room in which it was housed was painted light sea-blue-green and filled with objects and equipment: an air pressure gauge, a fish tank, isinglass string, black bamboo, a blackboard with “para:site” written on it and pots covered with agar gelatin skins. The overall effect was like a cross between a laboratory and the house of someone who cannot stop beachcombing, collecting. A noise emitted at intervals in the space added to a sensation that something was happening in the room; it was definitely active in some way.



This blue-green colour flowed in different incarnations and relations throughout the varied objects, finding itself manifest, for example, in the old buoys that littered the room. Where these were once used to mark the sea, itself mark-less, they now marked a point in a net that McNamee has slung to catch various connections and meanings. A tray of black liquid, with small floral blotches, turns out to be Guinness, and so instincts about something being active turn out to be correct; for tiny organisms are living, breathing in that dark stuff.

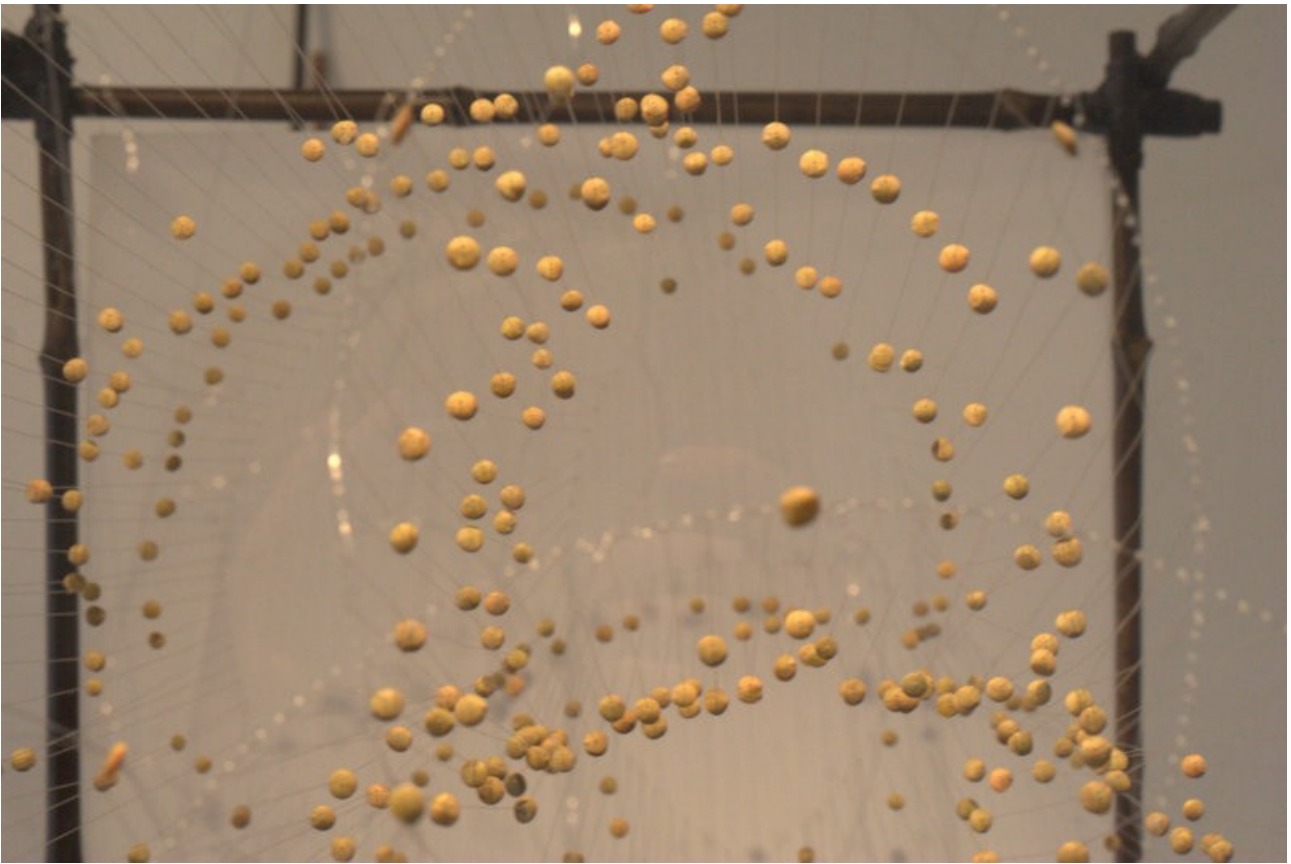


These sorts of evocative materials form the basis of McNamee's work, which is influenced by craft, science and psycho-geometry. The source of these materials are often found in nature, in the sea. At times the materials favoured are chosen for the lyricism of their names – cordelyine, isinglass, and sometimes their origins – seaweed, lentils, the interior organs of fish, gelatin, cotton, discarded and overlooked objects. While in earlier work there was a voracious gathering of materials, her more recent work is pared back, with a certain rough minimalist aesthetic drifting in.

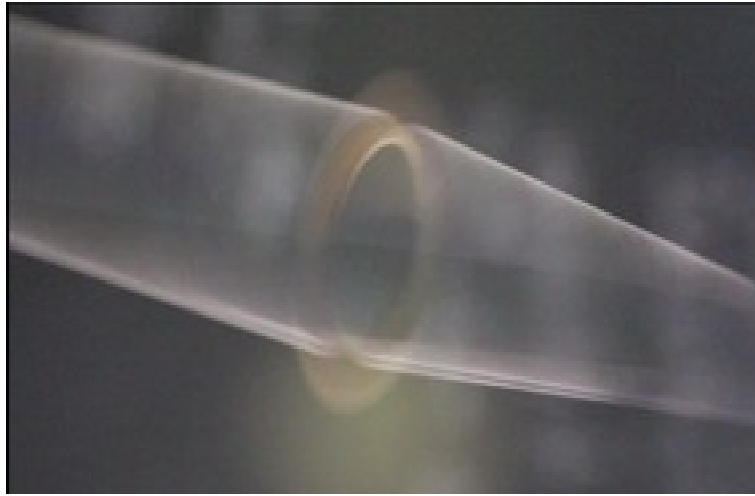
At times McNamee is caught by her subject for long periods of time. In the past she was hooked on researching the swim bladder of sturgeons, which formed the center of *(sun)(sine)isinglass*, its buoyant nature carrying the other ideas around it. Her work is formed of tentative connections, her own perceptions and scientific ones, swimming alongside each other.



The work is often painstakingly delicate and time-consuming, as was seen in her 2012 solo show in The Joinery gallery; *Lenticularis*. In this show a bamboo structure appeared both like a frame to hold a sacred relic and conversely, one can imagine, as a structure to dry fish on in some small Asian fishing town.



On a closer look inside this frame, one saw a multitude of tiny specks – lentils strung at various distances and heights on fishing line, arranged in three interlocking loops. In this incarnation the pulses could be imagined as distant planets or asteroids whizzing through some quantum wormhole of time, or else magnified atoms caught for a moment in their complex intertwinings. The bamboo frame seemed to steady, hold this whirling space, contained it from spiraling out and encompassing the room, a tight power, a delicate vortex.



These quasi-scientific assemblages at times resemble experiments in some post-apocalyptic sci-fi world, where knowledge of their original purpose is long since lost. Passed down orally through generations they become instead hand-crafted ritual objects for meditating on existence, while still retaining a trace memory, a backward grasp for a lost knowledge, albeit with humbler materials. While in McNamee's video work, the opposite impulse is at work, visuals of sophistication are created from the simplest of materials, as seen here in *Lentil/Lintel Dawn*, where a lentil spinning on fishing-line created the illusion of a hole, a portal, perhaps for access to some other realm. This sacred and profane back and forth is a theme in McNamee's practice, as is both precision and carelessness - minute work often contained in rougher structures, almost unfinished, everyday objects propelled into transcendence of their origins.



And so the work of McNamee drifts, gathering its materials and connections to make and remake the universe, from the tiny to the vast. Collecting flotsam and jetsam, the discarded and obsolete, to be reimagined, to be gazed upon until they induce, at last, some response; waveforms to crash on the sides of the brain.

Suzanne Walsh, 2013.