

Un(der)cover on Sherkin Island

with

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The short ferry ride from Baltimore pier is deceptive. Sherkin, we were to discover, is a world apart. As we drew away from the mainland, and as the sea and sky merged becoming a redolent aquamarine wash, one couldn't help but muse on the legendary Islands of Shakespearian comedies or renaissance operas in which an Island setting always signifies more than geographical separation. Identity, origins and even sexuality tend to become confused in such island settings as the protagonists are cast off from the mundane world they have left behind. Invented islands seem to signify an 'elsewhere' or a 'beyond' in which discovery happens in more than a topographical sense as the enchanted isles morph to become a place where the magic of art holds sway. Anticipation of our first Sherkin experience was therefore tinted with notions of the unexpected: the rich and strange. True to form, as soon as we cast off in Baltimore reality began to unravel fast as we began to unwind and a comedy of errors unfolded. We were comically mistaken for Scots as there was a mix up with the cash proffered for the ferry tickets.

Once on the island, we kept bumping into people we knew; students, friends and colleagues the expected artworld confluence at such events but this time it was not simply in the usual gallery or college venue. The degree show was spread out over 17 sites across the island and so the next couple of days were spent walking on short forays to find works exhibited by the 17 students on the course. The myriad of settings included an historic abbey, a national school, a hostel, watery inlets, a cliff edge, a hotel and of course the pub next door. The show even has its own minibus and bicycle service running in parallel with the existing island service, both somewhat erratic but willing nonetheless to rescue anyone caught in sudden rain showers, or overtaken with art fatigue. The weekend was in fact blessed for the most part with peerless blue skies and so the rhythm of walking between exhibition spaces lent an interesting temporal dimension to experiencing the show. In retrospect the effect seems to have sharpened recall of certain exhibits, revealing the walking journey to operate like a medieval mnemonic memory device which any amount of off-piste socializing between artworks seems not to have expunged. If

anything, the time delay and the beauty of the spaces between the exhibits heightened one's ability to make connections between the works on display.

The image of a crushed handkerchief, used by philosopher Michel Serres to describe how seemingly disparate areas of thought can become juxtaposed and connected,ⁱ characterizes perfectly how the topographical experience of the show has shifted into another configuration since returning to the mainland. Indeed, the temporal

The work of Deirdre Buckley Cairns and Monica Dunne came together in one's mental map because they both explored the experiential register of the viewer. Buckley Cairn's paintbox, swing box and picturebox were sited on a breathtaking promontory of the island and invited the viewers to make colour studies in watercolour, to swing under coloured glass panels and to view a slideshow of found images. Dunne's work, evolving from the maker's process, engaged the viewer in sniffing, scrunching and listening to a variety of interestingly combined materials, including crocheted fishing line pouches filled with marbles or steel pot scrubs. These uncanny forms, hanging or lying in the community hall evoked a domestic or piscarian skill set and emanated evocative smells such as carbolic soap – an olfactory and tactile archive of lives lived on the island. Such attention to the experiential turn in contemporary art practice was also echoed in the material vocabulary of Ben Townsend's sculptures, one of which dominated the outdoor space within the ruined abbey near the pier to bring sky and landscape into the viewer's lines of sight with an ingenious system of mirrors. His works become the scaffolds for performance pieces; a ladder structure on video nearby, reminiscent of the poignant ladder pieces made by Gordon Matta Clark in memory of his twin brother Sebastian.ⁱⁱ Buckley Cairns, Dunne and Townsend's works also performed a certain kind of child like provocation to play which, as Freud observed, is always an act of creation that rearranges things in the world in a new way so that objects and situations taking place in the imagination are reformulated to become tangible, perceptible and visible things in the real world.ⁱⁱⁱ

On a different register, the installations by Daireen McMullin, and Lesley Cox used materials such as UV light and menstrual blood to take the viewer on a journey away from the immediacy of visceral experience (the more familiar abject mode of works by artists such as Judy Chicago or Kiki Smith for example) and deployed these materials to hint at intimate bodily narratives told with great subtlety. Narrating a challenging installation on the subject of violence against women, McMullin constructed a rather prim Victorian parlour to articulate the construction of social norms and habits that stultify domestic violence. Titled 'Whisper', the installation comes to life when a series of eight wallpaper panels are sporadically illuminated by a sophisticated UV lighting system to reveal these suppressed histories through an unfolding patchwork of intricate drawings. Technically flawless, the room becomes reminiscent of an ante-room in a bordello, into which the Demoiselles D'Avignon might plausibly be expected to enter at any moment. There is

also an uneasy tension in the way that the playful and the anachronistic are composed as strategies to speak to the traumatic and the present.

Cox had an equal command of her vocabulary in her installation which included a grid of tiny bloodied fabriano squares tacked to the wall. Although Cox's squares seem to exhibit the expected menstrual seepage, the blood used to paint them has dried and therefore speaks eloquently of closure. The random pattern of the iron coloured fluids is unified by a continuous hum of horizontal lines, drawn a bit like a musical stave. Random words appear, also in pencil, hinting at a sequential narrative which is reinforced by the presence of white paper-bound diaries hanging nearby in a pair of tights. These modest and formally controlled works nonetheless hold the emotive narrative of the artist's own fertility which is simply manifest by every square counting for a month between the ages of 13 and 47. The penciled lines had a visible stop/start rhythm within them which, like Agnes Martin's lines, remind us of the body that made them, moving point by point across the surface and betraying a sobbing, uncertain fallibility, just like the menstrual history they delineate. Accompanying Cox's bloodied musical variations were a series of small, intimate, oil paintings of navels which were mounted in relief around the room. These works query the positioning of the body, and most particularly the female body, as object of exploration and appropriation in the history of art. By drawing attention to the umbilical knot as both the marker for an immemorial corporeal maternal connection and a reminder of such bodily disconnection, they invite the viewer into a space of intimacy and refusal where corporeal boundaries do not disintegrate but are, rather, contested.

This contestation and contamination of borders, boundaries and locations material, psychical and physical was a recurring theme that emerged and re-emerged to form a textured fabric of connection as we made our peregrinations across the island landscape. Deirdre Leddin's 'Rising Tide' employed hybrid mediums of photography, painting and installation that pitch the viewer into a particular kind of vertiginous exploration of space, place and ecology. Photographs of a beautiful but strange inwardly lit pyramid shaped structure floating on water were displayed in the Sherkin Island community centre, but in an uncanny doubling the angular shape is re-encountered when one is walking alongside a winding road as it suddenly dips down to the sea. There, floating in the bay, is this angular shape that one has already observed in something more like a gallery setting. Now it is clear that the shape is made of what appears to be a wooden frame encased in plastic and its incongruity in the natural landscape forces one attention not only to the wooden flotsam and jetsam one often encounters at sea, but also the slow poisoning of our marine environments occurring as a result of non-degradable materials casually disposed of by humans and industry around the world. The division between natural and human made environments was further perturbed by Ciara Ward's rather precise re-mapping of the errant Sherkin landscape. Using electric cables, fishing line and rope to re-structure a patch of Sherkin topography, Ward's work instantiates connective

threads and modal networks between urban and rural, culture and nature, thus fabulating novel narratives of connections and orientations for the production of memory. Tangible and intangible, material and immaterial meet to probe and pressure forces of exchange implicit in any act of journey making. In a further interrogation of space, place and memory making, Marika O'Sullivan used photography, sculptural forms and film to create an installation that, like the line of a drawing, sketched arcs through time and space. Interrogating the space of a hotel in a particular beachside location that O'Sullivan remembers from her own childhood, the structure of the building was constructed and deconstructed so that it became a place as much as a space that both bears memory and disturbs its seeming reliability. Joey Davis' alternately mischievous, performative, and evocative works test the potential for formalist materiality to speak to the hidden structures of power and control in society, whereas Lucy Cox creates an other-worldly reflection on the disenchantment of art in contemporary society.

Written on another day, in another location, different works by the other artists exhibiting their final year work on Sherkin, would issue forth from one's latent memory to press upon the present. Works such as Jean Dunne's highly stylized installation of lightboxes represent an engagement with the 'double' and the 'uncanny' in art which are further reorganized as fridge magnets, playfully fractured abstract games and just plain absurd framings of lemons in multi-mirrored boxes. Or Claire McLaughlin's complex "invisible walk," by touch, around the schoolhouse, which led the viewer into an spatial audio environment which reflected sporadically on a barred experience of art history but which kept the viewer in suspension until a final uncovering of a video triptych. The triptych relayed images linked to the audio experience to contextualize a long series of workshops the artist had designed to support the visually impaired to have access to the gallery and its content.

If there was a strong element of participation emerging out of many of the works there was equally a strong element of humor factored into a critical conceptualism. Ellès Innemee's mischievous and evocative explorations of romanticism belie a sophisticated parody of ecological subjectivity caught between over identification with nature and a distancing from its material realities. Using the trope of the staged 'Romantic Portrait', the artist winks slyly out through an elaborate series of recycled dresses and artificial photo-shopped backdrops. Sickly sweet in their falsity they simultaneously unnerve and prompt important questions about our contemporary condition, defined by German philosopher Ludwig Hegel as 'Beautiful Soul Syndrome'. Similarly Donal O'Connor's interrogation of the ready-made outside of its art historical contexts makes for an intelligent critique of the disjunction between art economies and the economic challenges faced by islanders. Using the banality of the everyday fruit box as an iconic representation of material and ideological circulation, O Connor reconfigures the ancient concept of prosopopoeia (the speaking object) to allow for the articulation of local perspectives on

globalization through a refined and hilarious vernacular performance.

Responding to the mobility of people in search of work and security, two key installations approach the processes of migration and immigration at the heart of globalization. Philomena Smith's reflections on the existential experience of liminality uses the materials of sewing, thread, curtains and pins alongside audio and light installations to provide the viewer with a feeling of tension and anxiety around the formation of identity. In this instance it is the awkward repetition of a voice trying to capture key phrases in a Lancashire dialect and then an Irish one that suspend our sense of place.

Where the voice in Smith's installation speaks to the precarity and vulnerability of assimilation, the voice in Brigid Madden's lyrical installation meditation provides a subjective point of entry into the experience of migrancy, *Pitched*, almost perilously, at the very end of one of the island promontories, the bottom floor of Madden's house glows in a deep sienna light on account of the windows being covered with suffocating brown packing paper, except for a few sporadic cuts made to allow for a temporary view of the sea. Filling the entire space, a woman's voice recounts a perilous journey from Syria to Ireland and in response to this voice the subdued and low-lit atmosphere of the ground floor is thrown into relief when the viewer moves toward the second floor that is bleached white through similar light techniques and which houses a drawing installation of masses of bodies traced onto the walls, barely there, clinging to each other, peeling off the wall in parts, while the voice below seeps through the floorboards.

All of these works, through an interrogation of the dynamics between materiality, subject and object, weave an uneasy, yet invigorating, patchwork of association: of connections and refusals that simultaneously gesture towards the past, in the direction of the future, and yet demand of us to be in the present. This sense of the show as a whole brought to mind again Serres' use of turbulence; a thematic model he frequently returns to in his writing in order to square the circle between disparate fields of knowledge. Turbulence 'brings things together, forming and destroying worlds' it is, he continues:

A sort of confluence, a form in which fluxes and fluctuation enter, dance, criss-cross ... It recruits the very heart of chaos by ceaselessly inventing different relations. iv

Perhaps the work which best encapsulated this sense of productive chaos and literally made the hairs stand up on our arms, was the video chronicle of 'Transodini's Tragedy' by Detlef Schlich. Continuing the nuanced interrogation of boundaries and crossings undertaken in much of the work on display in Sherkin, this work invites us to invent rituals and strategies of resistance to humankind's turn away from

relationality and community in our ever-increasing dependence upon technology. Yet, at the same time the playfulness of Schlich's video piece, the piercing black humour of Transodin's tragedy, is somehow gently restorative. As we viewed it, an understandably transported crowd were mesmerized, pausing for long periods in one of the dripping and dank spaces of the ruined abbey to watch Transodin shake batteries out of his hair and play his cardboard guitar. Our only regret was that we missed the reaction of the Mayor of Cork to Schlich's amusing and allusive film making when he attended an official reception at the abbey the next morning. Tina and I regrettably had no batteries to put in our hair after a night at the *Jolly Roger* and so we were feeling decidedly post-human until later that morning. We were reminded of the stamina required when we visited the Istanbul Biennale 2015, where our hotel in Beyoglu had a rooftop bar that was open to the stars, to a view of the Bosphorus, and until 3.00 am. Sherkin also has the sea and the stars, and the bar was still open when we left at three but on Sherkin we danced.

i Michel Serres and Bruno Latour (1995) *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*. Translated by

ii Jacob's Ladder 1977 and Descending Steps for Batan 1977 similarly used performance, audience participation and video in conjunction with precarious sculptural structures that place the body in a space that is Dantesque in its eschatology. see

<http://www.davidzwirner.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Gordon-Matta-Clark-Above-and-Below-2013-Press-Release-Extended-Checklist-David-Zwirner-New-York.pdf> and also <http://www.davidzwirner.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Gordon-Matta-Clark-David-Zwirner-2013-Checklist.pdf>

iii Sigmund Freud (2003) 'Creative Writers and Daydreaming' (1908) in *The Uncanny*. Translated by David McLintock. London and New York: Penguin, 23-34.

iv Michel Serres and Bruno Latour (1995) *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*. Translated by R. Lapidus. Ann Arbor: University of Press, 107.