

A Magpie's Eye for Appropriation

Gavin Murphy *Remember*

4th November - 16th January 2011.
Curated by Michael Dempsey /
Dublin City Gallery, the Hugh Lane.
Text by James Merrigan.



Gavin Murphy, *Received Ideas*, 2010, framed archival pigment prints, Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane; image courtesy of artist.

One more word about giving instruction as to what the world ought to be. Philosophy in any case always comes on the scene too late to give it... When philosophy paints its gloomy picture then a form of life has grown old. It cannot be rejuvenated by the gloomy picture, but only understood. Only when the dusk starts to fall does the owl of Minerva spread its wings and fly.
George H. W. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* (1820),

While listening to Gavin Murphy's 25 minute audio in the *Golden Bough* "suite" of the Hugh Lane Gallery, 3 visitors came and went. The duration of their stay was made up of that sweeping arc that the viewer takes when wandering into a museum to glance at the primary medium of painting. I don't know the empirical statistics that figure out the duration of the human interaction with a piece of art, but the time given to a painting is no more than 5 seconds on average. The adage "a picture is worth a thousand words" only holds true if the viewer is willing to take a longer vigil than 5 seconds. It could be said that the *Golden Bough* curatorial is out of step with the Hugh Lane audience. The projects that have occurred in the "suite" are generally not oil on canvas. Murphy also had to contend with a significant 20th Century "painters' painter" upstairs - one Richard Tuttle. Painting does rule the roost at Dublin City Gallery, but if the viewer was willing to stay a while longer, they would realise that Murphy's project, titled *Remember*, and curated by Michael Dempsey, offered more than a sweeping glance could give.

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Far from a white cube, the architecture of the gallery space invites a looped appraisal of the work on show. The two large antique wooden benches that take a foothold of the *Golden Bough* floor space were subtly disguised by Murphy with two acrylic and hardwood screens. The long staccato titles of each screen such as: *The Novel as Journey through the Centuries and Continents*, echoed the zigzag display of the screens. Perception and duration were sensitively touched upon in the placement of a potted household plant behind a hinged-to-the-wall tinted glass frame, which cut a clouded detail of the plant from a certain viewpoint. On the same wall a series of laser-cut acrylic, letter and punctuation “signs,” juttred-out perpendicularly to the wall, to make up a long winding sentence, just like the screens. Narrative took shape as I bobbed my head up and down to decipher what the letters amounted to— a sentence, poetry, more postmodern ambiguity? No, the words were appropriated from the script of Federico Fellini's film *8½*; a film maker who was criticised for a "stylistic tendency to emphasize images over ideas." The designed font, commissioned by Murphy, read as follows:

We suffocate under words, images and symbols, which have no reason to exist. They come from the void and go towards the void. A truly worthy artist should be asked for nothing but this act of sincerity: to educate himself to silence.



Gavin Murphy, *Eulogy to the Blank Page*, 2010, Laser cut acrylic, hardwood, Typeface *Personal (Stencil)*, designed by Oran Day, commissioned by artist. The Golden Bough, Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane; image courtesy of Gavin Murphy

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Personal knowledge is a funny thing; it is only revealed by speaking and writing. The artist on the other hand tries to avoid such literal announcements. Today we are in the *infinite* period of post-modernism. Gone are the manifestoes and statements, replaced by an uncertainty that acts as a border between ownership and appropriation; or in more literal terms, paraphrase. Murphy's audio acted as archive of the archaic ruin of Enlightenment to the postmodern ruination of of art discourse. Brian Dillion is the go-to-guy for such 'ruin' analysis, but what I heard beyond the rubble of the ruin in Murphy's work was the futility of knowledge. The dictation of paragraphs from Walter Benjamin's *Unpacking my Library: A Talk about Book Collecting*, to Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, is a

ransacking of written history. Murphy plucks one sentence from Lyotard's seminal work when the audio voice announces:

Data banks are the Encyclopedia of tomorrow. They transcend the capacity of each of their users. They are 'nature' for postmodern man.

To avoid a fraudulent paraphrase of Lyotard, it is important to add the paragraph from *The Postmodern Condition*, that follows Murphy's appropriation.

"As long as the game is not a game of perfect information the advantage will be with the player who has knowledge and can obtain information. By definition, this is the case with a student in a learning situation. But in games of perfect information, the best performativity cannot consist in obtaining additional information in this way. It comes rather from arranging the data in a new way, which is what constitutes a 'move' properly speaking. This new arrangement is usually achieved by connecting together a series of data that were previously held to be independent. This capacity to articulate what used to be separate can be called imagination. Speed is one of its properties. It is possible to conceive the world of postmodern knowledge as governed by a game of perfect information, in the sense that the data is in principle accessible to any expert: there is no scientific secret. Given equal competence (no longer in the acquisition of knowledge, but in its production), what extra performativity depends on in the final analysis is 'imagination,' which allows one either to make a new move or change the rules of the game." Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.

Lyotard's conclusion regarding "imagination" is a powerful one in the context of art. There is a blurring of ideas through the utilisation of images and language in contemporary art that warrants the use of the imagination. You could even go as far as to say that imagination is compulsory concerning the articulation of art. Logic is no good, and if it was a tool in the reception of art, art would lack the "performativity" that Lyotard's holds important and also, would make the "game" about rules rather than the breaking of them.

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Gavin Murphy, *The Novel as Journey through the Centuries and Continents*, 2010, Screen (black), acrylic/ hardwood, The Golden Bough, Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane; image courtesy of Gavin Murphy.

One such rule-breaker, who is referenced by Murphy by way of a modest colour scan taped to a bare wall with green "artist tape," is the High Renaissance Venetian painter Giorgione. His Painting *La Tempesta* c.1505,

which is the specific work referenced by Murphy, has had, as Andrew Graham-Dixon put it, much ink “spilled on.” Giorgione’s work of that period did not really spread the word of God. Whether by the behest of his patrons (who, it has been written, were an esoteric and intimate circle of individuals), or Giorgione’s own personal interest in a genre outside the parameters of good theological sense, his work is more in consort with today’s postmodern “identity” crisis than yesteryear’s heavenly *faith*. By including this incongruous photocopy, from what I presume to be a historical catalogue of Renaissance art, Murphy’s other works fall into a niche that slides between ‘ruin’ and ‘archive’; between the fabrication of history and forgotten history; between imagination and the artifact; between word and image.



Gavin Murphy, *Received Ideas*, 2010, framed archival pigment prints, The Golden Bough, Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane; image courtesy of Gavin Murphy.

On the opposite wall were what Murphy referred to as “framed archival pigment prints,” titled *Received Ideas*. The title is a double reference to Gustave Flaubert’s *Dictionary of Received Ideas* and his unfinished work *Bouvard et Pécuchet*.

Flaubert was a kind of mad comedic scientist who relished in putting his written characters and even language itself through the hoop of stupidity. His work must glitter for the ‘magpie eye’ of the contemporary artist, because in recent times Flaubert’s writings have found many an artist *nest*. Christopher Hitchens of the *New York Times* wrote of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* that “The work references Flaubert’s own ruthless skepticism about the idea of “progress”... I think, in the occasional cruelty that results from seeing human and other creatures as potential subjects for experiment.”



Gavin Murphy, *The Novel as Utopia of a World that has no Forgetting in it*, 2010, Screen (white), acrylic/hardwood, The Golden Bough, Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane; image courtesy of Gavin Murphy.

Ironically, Flaubert hoped that *Bouvard et Pécuchet* would become his *magnum opus* and with added hubris, the greatest piece of literature ever written. Murphy’s installation at the Hugh Lane signifies the postmodern position of “receiving ideas” from the past. Lyotard would prescribe the “imagination” in creating a facade of ‘false’ progress, but what is left behind is a shuffled encyclopedia of nonsense. Maybe Flaubert was right to be skeptical about our idiotic and futile hubris, along with his own.

Donato Bramante, who's name Murphy mentions in the audio, is an apt reference for the artist's project for the *Golden Bough*. Bramante was an Italian architect and through his work, primarily the design of the new St. Peter's Basilica in 1506, ironically became known as *Bramante ruinante* — "Bramante the wrecker." He gained this nickname for his part in the destruction of the 4th century Constantine Basilica that was in the way of 'progress' and a better Rome.

Murphy's project at the Hugh Lane invokes the voices of many literary ghosts, which once again brings us back to two words that have become the Flaubertian clichés of postmodern discourse, the 'ruin' and the 'archive'. Here the artist's work reflects a found shredded dictionary from the past, both ruin and potential archive. But there is a third word that transcends these 'trends' and that is 'play'. In the same vein as Jorge Luis Borges's *Library of Babel*, Murphy's work acts as both archive and ruin, a sordid reflection of our ongoing Myth of Progress, and makes this mixed-media work one of the most thought-provoking projects to be installed in the *Golden Bough* "suite" at the Hugh Lane.

Thanks to Gavin Murphy for images.

Works Cited

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