



Ailbhe Ní Bhriain

The Dock, Carrick-on-Shannon,
Leitrim

Kirstie North

The first thing you encountered upon entering Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's solo exhibition at The Dock was her ongoing series of black and white photographs titled *Inscriptions*. This title refers to the earliest published text on museology, Samuel Quiccheberg's *Inscriptions of the Immense Theatre*, 1565. The photographs are digital collages which combine museum artefacts with expansive landscapes and studio debris. The overlaying of this source material, accumulated from disparate sites, gives these surfaces a fragmentary quality as some of the

images, on first glance, look as if they have been dented, torn or damaged. Marble statues seem infringed upon and the precious space of the museum appears vulnerable. However, this perceived tearing or denting was illusory as these collages have actually evaded physical touch by being composed using digital cuts and layering. Harnessing chance, the manipulation of each image in this series is strategically limited to three or four moves or interventions that determine the final outcome. This process has its roots in Dada and Surrealist collage, an appeal to chance operations that rhymes with Ní Bhriain's address to other aspects of Surrealist aesthetics in her work more broadly. Functioning as preparatory studies or 'antidotes' to the labour-intensive processes of her video work, the photographs comprising *Inscriptions* served to introduce key concerns that ran throughout this exhibition of recurring, psychically charged motifs, persistent objects, and prolonged time.

The exhibition in its entirety spanned three spaces: the mezzanine at the top of the stairs which displayed *Inscriptions*, and two darkened galleries. Inside Gallery 1 was found the multi-screen installation, *Reports to an Academy*, 2015, a sequence of four video works shown across three of the room's four walls. Anti-clockwise from right to left were the shelves of an academic library, a stone wall shot on the island of Inis Oírr, vitrines containing stuffed animals from Dublin's 'Dead Zoo', and the white walls of a studio space. Each image of this installation is strikingly still and each space flooded by water, the four scenes each becoming cross-sections of a drowned world. In each screen the water has risen up to a similar horizon line

that reflected the space at the top of the image into the space below. Human life appears to have vacated these visions of a beautiful apocalypse composed of gently rippling water and slow-moving clouds that dreamily float through interior spaces. The only signs of life here are a number of relaxed looking birds of prey, an intriguing and recurring motif in Ní Bhriain's practice.

Reports to an Academy was first shown at the RHA, Dublin, in 2015, as four large-scale video projections in a room blacked out with paint. Here at The Dock the whole room was cloaked in bespoke blackout curtains, which stopped light spillages and made the subtle yet evocative soundtrack seem softer. Large LED screens now brought the meticulously composed imagery into sharper definition and the colour was more vibrant. The swathes of a fresh pink fabric, moving ever so subtly in the breeze, were energised, and petrified animals sprang forth from a dense and saturating cadmium yellow. In the current climate of increasingly restrictive budgets, especially for regional arts centres, this financial commitment from director Sarah Searson and her team at The Dock enabled the achievement of these remarkable effects, and should be highly commended.

Reports to an Academy evokes the title of Franz Kafka's eponymous 1917 short story. Kafka's tale concerns an ape who teaches himself how to be human in order to escape captivity. In the story the ape reports back to an academy on how he effected his transformation. In three of the spaces that make up *Reports to an Academy* we see animals out of place in rooms reserved for human study. The three interior spaces – the studio, the library, and the museum – seem

intimately connected to the research-based art practice from which they are born. This makes the stone wall in a quintessentially Irish landscape seem at odds with the others. However, perhaps this 'report' is to an art academy – a museal look back to, and transformation of, painterly traditions. Stone walls feature heavily in the history of Irish art, from Paul Henry's post-impressionist paintings of the west of Ireland, to the more abstract work of Sean Scully. Though lens-based, Ní Bhriain's work is remarkably painterly, with a distinctive style untypical of film/video work. In front of this stone wall is an owl perched on a rock which protrudes from the water. In the video to the right we also saw a falcon out of place in the library. These birds of prey reappear throughout *Reports...*, as does an eagle, and it would seem that the primary function of these birds is to enliven the stillness of each scene. However, these hyper-real compositions, with their recurring motifs of clouds, birds of prey, and bodies of water, are also very reminiscent of the paintings of surrealist painter, René Magritte, to whom I will return.

Suspended somewhere between reality and the fictional world of painting, or dreams, the tension between movement and stillness in *Reports...* was palpable. This gave rise to an inherent difficulty with the experience of viewing this installation, as a cinematic or sequential mode of looking came into conflict with the desire to become more deeply immersed in the meditative pace of each moving image. Gallery 2 suggested one way in which this tension could be resolved. Here we found a bespoke wooden screen, which stood diagonally in the space like a monolith. Projected onto the front and back of this



Ailbhe Ní Bhriain: *Window* (2013/14). Still. Video & CGI composite, colour, sound, 8.50 mins. Courtesy the artist & Domobaal gallery, London.

screen were two companion videos, *Departure* and *Window*, 2013/14. Now the visual richness of each video could be fully experienced in isolation, whilst they still felt intimately connected as two sides of the same object. *Departure* and *Window* were shot in the decrepit disused spaces of the terminal of the old Cork city airport. The same tension between moving image and photographic stillness is at play here, however; while *Reports to an Academy* reduces video to an almost absolute stillness, *Departure* and *Window* are composed of still images which are animated via stop-motion animation and virtual tracking shots. Overlays of shots of the sea and flocks of birds again recall Magritte.

Departure and *Window* again feature a large bird of prey, perhaps an eagle or a hawk, who commands the space. In a poignant moment in *Window* the bird looks up from the ground and turns towards the camera, cocking its head

sideways as if taking in the presence of the viewer. In numerous shots the bird is joined by a fake-looking tree in a pot. This juxtaposition brings to mind Marcel Broodthaers who, like Ní Bhriain, was also invested in museology and surrealist legacies. The eagle was Broodthaers' infamous emblem for art. It stood for art's suspect character as a symbol of power and wealth. In the *Département des Aigles* of his 'fictional' Museum of Modern Art, Broodthaers brought together a display of objects and images of eagles captioned with signs that read 'This is Not a Work of Art,' directly referencing the famous painting by Magritte, a fellow Belgian, *The Treachery of Images*, 1928-9. The bird of prey in *Departure* and *Window* also has a suspect character. Though seamlessly composed, the highly mediated nature of Ní Bhriain's works is never concealed as she reverses the operation of Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* by imbuing things from the real world with the illusory quality of painting.

This perfectly encapsulates German media theorist, Wolfgang Ernst's belief that the 'technologically neutral code' of photographic technology collapses through digital manipulation, which returns 'images to a prephotographic quality of painting: that characterised by the painterly brushstroke.' (*Digital Memory and the Archive*, 2013) Ní Bhriain consistently exploits the malleable capacity of computer-generated imagery always exposing and never repressing the structure of her medium to the point that *Departure* boldly displays the green screen itself. Drawing on art historical lineages and painterly conventions, these captivating works give weight to Ernst's argument that the digital is less a continuation of analogue film/photography, than it is a *departure* that returns us to painting. Yes, Ní Bhriain's imagery is treacherous, but it is all the more sincere because of it.

Kirstie North is an art historian and independent curator. *Ailbhe Ní Bhriain*, presented in collaboration with Domobaal, London, was on view 8 April – 27 May 2017.