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Aftermath

an exhibition by Ailbhe Ní Bhriain
at DOMOBAAL in April/May 2007

review by Maximilian Le Cain

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's video *Immergence* begins as a static image: lake backed by desolate forest against a murky sky. A soggy, wintry melancholy suffuses this composition, as does a marked sense of distance. Flat and lethargically forbidding, it resists any impulse of traversal or penetration. Yet its initial stillness begs the question of what movement might be appropriate to such a landscape, one which exists as a focus of contemplation rather than as an inhabitable space.

The artist responds to this question with a series of jets of oil, or ink, or some other dark liquid, that begin to unhurriedly ascend from the lake in languid geysers. This phenomenon is discussed by Ní Bhriain in terms of exile, of the slippage wrought by memory between 'real' space and image. The instability revealed by this 'impossible' event occurring within the frame remains internal to the image, the revelation of an inherent liquid component that situates a previously invisible, if palpable, floating quality within the composition's apparent initial stillness.

The photographs and videos that constitute *Aftermath*, Ní Bhriain's first solo exhibition, considerably develop on *Immergence*'s work with fragile, haunted landscapes. *Aftermath* consists of two distinct sets of work. The video *Residuum* and the series of photographs that share the exhibition's name reveal forlorn visions of desolated walls and buildings. The face and body are the focus of the *In Memoriam* video and *Self Portrait* stills, or rather distorted faces and fragments of bodies half-submerged in an inky oblivion of nocturnal water.

One difference stands out between this work and *Immergence*. Whereas the initially concealed source of instability in the latter video emerged from within the image, which remained a solidly sealed space, the *Aftermath* works are porous and intensely engaged with out of frame space.

The *Aftermath* still series is the starkest and most haunting work in the exhibition. Its rows of unforgivingly frontal compositions present a vision of severe horizontality, grey skies uniformly bisected by flat surfaces of walls. These already claustrophobically rectilinear designs are frustrated by being in portrait format, a constriction that leaves the eye straining to move beyond the frame, to follow the horizontal lines further right or left.

Not, one suspects, that the vista would change much with wider visibility. These walls, mostly whitewashed, appear as remnants of ruined and deserted buildings, seldom higher than one storey. Doors, windows and ledges penetrate and protrude from their surfaces, as does the occasional strip of unpainted brick showing that a vanished wall once stood at ninety degrees to the ruin. A foreground sliver of overgrown pathway, tiled floor, or rubble at the foot of the photograph indicates whether the wall is seen from what was once the building's interior or exterior, better to highlight the current meaninglessness of this distinction.

Yet none of these features create a sense of depth. Even when an interior space is glimpsed through an opening in the wall, its almost unvarying flatness is more suggestive of another plane of horizontality than a space of inhabitable dimensions. Just as the portrait formatting of the pictures leaves the viewer with the frustrated desire to see beyond the frames' edges, so the very flatness of their visible subject gives the impression less of an object viewed than of a sort of barrier separating us from something beyond, as much an obstruction to vision as a landscape made visible.

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An obstruction to seeing what? The sky? Hardly. The leaden severity of these grey or, occasionally, black, cloud-mottled planes is uninvitingly stolid. The double frustration of suppressed depth and stunted horizontality, caused by the severe portrait framing, renders the images oddly self-deprecating, as if they exist less to hold the attention than to refer it elsewhere. This 'elsewhere' remains undefined, yet overwhelmingly pervasive, as if these buildings were once witness to some momentous event that bereft them of any reality other than the haunting of its 'aftermath'. Gazing on them evokes the disturbing sensation of being visited by a memory that refuses to clarify itself, a powerful yet vague feeling that stubbornly resists being traced to any person, place or event. Memories that ultimately pose the exasperated question of whether they are actually retracable to lived experience or whether they just unexpectedly emerged, having covertly penetrated our consciousness from outside like a chill suddenly making itself known in a body.

Looking more closely at Ní Bhriain's photographs, a series of uncanny details unhook them from any frame of objective reality. An interior doorway opening on to the corner of a building, two joining walls receding from it in one of the very few exceptions to the general suppression of perspective; bare trees oddly out of proportion to the buildings that overshadow them; reflections in pools that correspond to nothing outside of themselves... These reveal the images as purely artificial constructs, as if assembled by an alien consciousness that had appropriated visual elements from reality without fully understanding them, like the planet Solaris in Tarkovsky's film of that title which replicates the earth after images plundered from space travellers' brains and comes up with a rainfall inside a house.

This ontological displacement locates this *Aftermath* outside of historical time. Rather than landscapes defined by a past trauma, by the memory of an event distinguishable from its traces, what remains is an attempt at articulating that formless trauma through the construction of landscape. An inevitably failed attempt to give form to an elusive but pressing emotion that successfully resists manifestation. The unifying theme of the *Aftermath* exhibition is a failure to communicate, a failure to adequately embody a dark melancholy that is all the more urgent for existing just beyond the grasp of images. All it can arrive at are broken visual approximations- its attempt to exist in time results in vague nostalgia, its desire to occupy space creates surrealistically inflected bodily and architectural ruins.

The instability implicit in the *Aftermath* stills' well-ordered melancholy is chillingly active in the *Residuum* video. Its visible component-a green-tinted image of a large, inevitably ruined building- appears static and forlorn compared to the agitation of the void of darkness that surrounds it. This is registered by the billowing of large sheets of cloth or plastic attached to the building's façade, which suggest the action of a strong wind. But directly below it is a pool of black liquid spouting Immurgence-style geysers. Unlike those in the earlier video, these are random, chaotic, staccato in rhythm, displaying none of their predecessors' revelatory stateliness. There is no clear distinction between the rising liquid and the gusts of darkness flapping the sheets of cloth- these currents could just as easily be liquid as air, giving the whole picture an ambiguously submarine atmosphere eerily anomalous to the building's presence.

The self-effacing neutrality of the building, silently gauging the languidly surging activity of its surrounding darkness, inverts the idea of negative space. The faceless, fathomless potential of the invisible is the true focus of this video, with the ruin's besieged structure there chiefly to outline, or partially outline, its force. If the severe framing of the *Aftermath* stills causes the mind to wander beyond their visible edges by not showing enough of the image, *Residuum* does the opposite. It positions itself too far from the ostensible subject, fully revealing its tenuous existence encompassed by a darkness charged with obscure potential.

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Of course, the ruined building is not an image selected at random. Its desolation illustrates the fragility of form in Ni Bhriain's work in comparison to the fecundity of formlessness. Rather than presenting a despairing statement on material decay, she sets in play a comparative dynamic between the expressed and the unexpressed struggling to emerge as image. If the depth of mystery inherent in the latter state of becoming holds an incomparably stronger fascination than the finished image, this is not necessarily to be understood as a failure of the image. Even as they prove woefully inadequate to the demand of expressing all that we sense haunts them, Ni Bhriain's images succeed in leading the viewer to the threshold of this teeming darkness. To go any further into it means passing through the film of image, and venturing within ourselves to pay heed to the hints and whisperings that haunt our own inner shadows.

The video *In Memorium* is perhaps the most precise illustration of how Ni Bhriain situates the visible within her perceptual hierarchy. Again, darkness is liquid—the surface of a nocturnal lake. Ghostly, distorted close-ups of a face flicker and melt on this unstable screen. The title refers to a drowning incident that occurred at the video's location, although it could have been shot by any stretch of water on the planet. The face projects the idea of an image emerging from the water, whilst remaining too chimerically transparent to have done so. It is not an emanation of the tragedy it refers to, it is not a light emerging from the darkness. Rather, it remains on the surface. Its very fragility eloquently indicates the presence of a troubling reality far greater than itself, the extent of which it expresses through its own inability to more than signal to it.

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