



AILBHE NÍ BHRIAIN

AN EXPERIMENT WITH TIME

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's work incorporates film, computer-generated imagery, collage, tapestry, print, and installation. Having won a plethora of awards and exhibited both nationally and internationally, Ailbhe is back with her first in-person solo exhibition since 2020, *An Experiment with Time*. SNACK caught up with her at the CCA.

Super excited about the exhibition: it's so nice to have things in person again, especially immersive installation-type work. How has your practice fared since the pandemic, and how does it feel to be back in the gallery space?

I had gotten to the point where I had finished the production of the film and I started to almost wallpaper over the experience – I was just full of the positive vibes of the people I had worked with, because it had worked out and I forged this memory of working over the past two years as really quite a positive one. Then my daughter got a positive Covid test just a few weeks ago. Suddenly it was a question of 'Are we gonna be able to install?' and it was all back in lockdown and in the house and homeschooling and it all came back to me and it's like, [laughing] that had all been so hard! I think our narrative around the Covid experience is very unreliable; I think we're still so unsettled by it.

But yeah, my experience over the last two years: it was my last solo show, it was in London, it ran for about three weeks and then was cut short by the first lockdown. I had a raft of shows lined up, and was feeling very full-steam-ahead – and then it all, obviously, shut down. I found it really, existentially, quite shocking; the idea of galleries being closed or that world kinda being revealed as a construct, something that can just be cancelled. You think 'I've totally believed in this, and you have to realise that your belief system is forged upon something that can just disappear.'

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An Experiment with Time, Film Still, 2022

I was meant to do filming around Italy, the UK, and Ireland, but none of that could happen. My method of working became a lot more about 3D modelling – things where it can all be realised virtually. I had been travelling with a production company (the remarkable *Enter Yes*). That became day-long screen sharing sessions, and that was around two small kids, and I was home-schooling them, and trying to mind house. It was a kind of amazing, flexible new model that wove itself around that. So, this body of work all got made over the last two years and everything that is being shown came from that period.



And how was that collaborative experience?

When you're enlisting other people to work on something you have to know very, very clearly what you're asking them to do. There's flexibility and fluidity within that when you're saying, 'Oh hold on a minute! Bring the camera back, that actually looks good, let's pull that out!'



This description of fluidity in your working practice intrigues me; could you elaborate?

Openness is totally embedded in how I start a piece of work. I mean, I'm almost trying to surprise myself.

I talk about collage being like that – you're trying to surprise things into new meaning. So a lot of that is [Ailbhe arranges her phone and mask in a range of different angles on the table] 'So if I put these things together, what happens if I put it this way or this way?' It starts as an act of collecting and putting things next to each other and seeing what emerges; if there's any interesting points of tension that kind of get brought up by that.

Sometimes that's just combining different locations, or a piece of music and a found text and a found photograph and a location. It's an act of collage; of moving things around and letting ideas and contexts be sparked, because I do think we are suckers for narrative. We fake narrative all the time to make sense of the world for ourselves; that's sort of what we do, how we understand things, and I'm letting that in intentionally.

So, the title of the exhibition, *An Experiment with Time*, is actually taken from J.W. Dunne's book which shares the same name. Can you elaborate on the text and its connection to your work?

An Experiment with Time was published in 1927 and J.W. Dunne was an Irish popular scientist who forged this theory called serialism, which was around dream narratives kind of being predictors of future realities. The book is extraordinarily dry, almost unreadable, so I would say that I don't find it an inspiring read, but it's odd.

Something in the book that I was interested in was the idea of, one hundred years ago, it emerging, in the aftermath of a global crisis and maybe in anticipation of another global crisis. That idea of playing with the scientific, the technological, and the dreamlike to connect to this time of crisis.

Do you think this exhibition is also infused with disaster, or more of a cathartic experience, or neither?

I want to pull the viewer in and let the work reside somewhere between relaxation and dread. I'm really trying to forge a space that takes these huge subjects – of climate change, of our impact on the world and what this means for our place in it in the future – and removes them from the kind of binaries that they've become caught in. It's about opening out a space where the real and the imaginary and the external and the internal can all get infused.

It's not quite disaster; it's a space of nuance, almost, where you get to live inside the contradictions for a while. I'm interested in the work holding these anxieties and letting it vibrate – I'm not proposing an answer, it's just like, 'this is a deeply strange experience we're collectively going through' and it seems the strangeness itself is worth reflecting on.

What would you like the audience to enter/leave this exhibition with?

I would like them to enter it with no prior knowledge, no feeling of obligation that they need to read a text or know anything specific to fine art or any other subject. I feel really strongly about that. There is no requirement to have certain thoughts or be educated in advance around a subject.

I would like them to leave having felt immersed in something. Maybe just an experience of sitting in their own space of reflection, responsive to the images. Maybe even be energised by it. To feel something like 'This makes sense, even though there is no logic.'

An Experiment With Time opens at the CCA on the 4th February and will be available to view for free every day from 11am-6pm until 19th March

