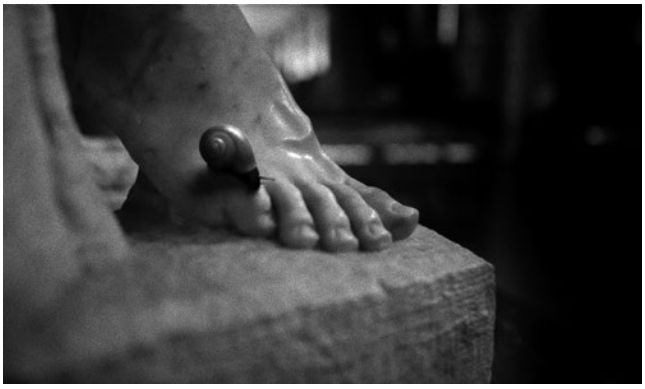
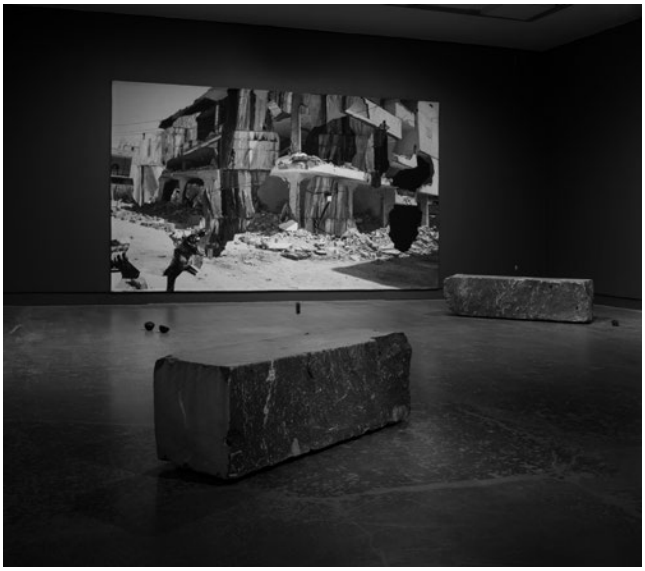
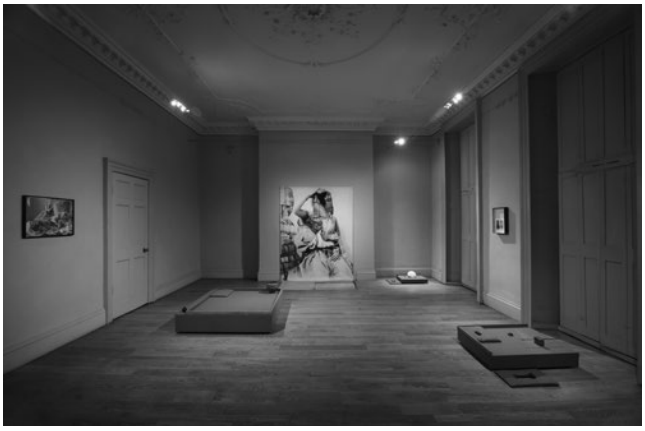


Inscriptions of an Immense Theatre, 2018



'An Experiment in Time', installation view, CCA Glasgow



'Inscriptions IV', installation view, domobaal, London

Profile

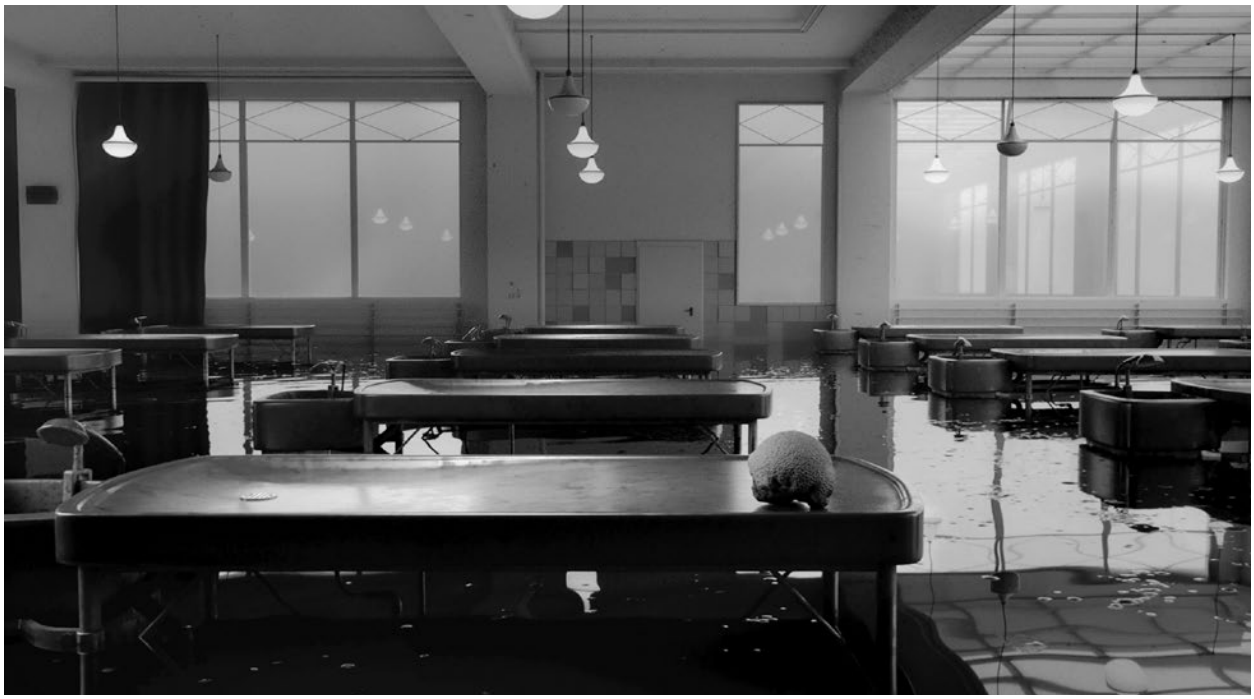
Ailbhe Ní Bhriain

The Irish artist explores colonial legacies through archives and museums, the official repositories of memory and history, to reveal what might lay hidden as the Anthropocene era recedes.

As a repository of accumulated knowledge, the archive serves as an institutional memory. Within its voluminous spaces – often underground or offsite and generally inaccessible to the uninitiated layperson – residual information is contained and categorised, ordered under the unifying authority of what Jacques Derrida calls the power of consignation: '*Consignation* aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration. In an archive, there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or *secret* which could separate (*secernere*), or partition, in an absolute manner.' Any discontents are absorbed into the archive's all-encompassing logic, or, if they are too divergent, too difficult, they are buried under the suffocating mass of cumulative materials. To sift through the repository is to not only uncover arbitrary or outmoded items but also to discover how the archive accommodates itself to difference, all in order to maintain its inclusive, idealising structure.

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's work digs deep into these vaults. She exactingly records their exhaustive holdings, obscure artefacts and undesirable elements, and, in the process, the systems of thought that momentarily coalesced into accepted fact before being, in turn, overtaken by others. In her film *An Experiment with Time*, 2022, the camera incessantly scans its surroundings, taking a precise measure of partially submerged, long-deserted premises. A medical facility and its rows of identical examination tables, a laboratory of obsolete computer hardware, rotating valves and circuitry, the sculptural form of Laocoön and his sons, perpetually frozen in agony within the cavernous ruins of an ancient basilica; each site is subjected to the forensic gaze of the lens as it meticulously documents machinery and murals, architectural details and interior fixtures. At every turn, these elements are reflected back in pools of placid water, bisecting the horizon into an upper frame of apparent reality and a distorted, diluted mirror image, while the chiming, plangent tones of Susan Stenger's soundtrack reverberate and echo. These drowned worlds, occupied only by the occasional bird or lizard, reveal civilisation as a mere blip in a timeline that long predates and perseveres far beyond human activity. As in Ní Bhriain's earlier film *Reports to an Academy*, 2015, with its bestiary of taxidermy animals standing vigil among the flooded ruins of a natural history museum, there is a pervading atmosphere of aftermath and abandon, of a space that has outlived its former overseers. The artist explains that 'many of the animals represented are at risk of extinction – so they stand for an ancient mode of consciousness or memory, which we may be about to lose'.

In her recent solo exhibition at Centre for Contemporary Arts Glasgow, *An Experiment with Time* plays across two opposing walls, unsynchronised to conjure unanticipated juxtapositions between the twin projections. This sense of dislocation is emphasised in Ní Bhriain's use of intertitles, phrases appropriated – and adapted – from JW Dunne's 1927 text of the same name, which proposed precognitive dreaming as being



An Experiment in Time, 2022, video

predictive of future events. The repetition of certain phrases, and the time-lag between the films, allows one to catch moments of inconsistency, a nagging feeling that something is slightly 'off'. Feeling obliged to decipher this sensation, I transcribe the title cards, compare them with each other, as if to resolve the reason for my uneasiness. Sure enough, the statement 'by virtue of this system, a system of sleepless labour, they measure gesture, proportion, effect, worth', becomes 'a system of endless surface' and, later, 'a system of elaborate conception'. This uncertainty is also a feature of Ní Bhriain's work, whereby instances of fact are revealed as mutable, contingent on the particular circumstances of a precise moment and place. Fittingly, in her forthcoming exhibition for the 16th Lyon Biennale, *An Experiment with Time* will be adapted to present 'an alternative iteration of the film, specific to the site'.

If liquidity is a continuing theme in Ní Bhriain's work, it is always countered by moments of fixation, when the fluctuation of time becomes solidified and stabilised into what we – and our ancestors – falsely believed to be objective knowledge. The water momentarily settles and, in our hubris, we determine certain structures to have always been in place, unyielding and permanent (as the basilica in her film suggests, certitude is a matter of faith as much as scientific method; Derrida also reminds us that the archive 'refers to the *arkhe* in the *nomological* sense, to the *arkhe* of the commandment'). In one room at CCA Glasgow, an array of quarried limestone slabs populates the floors, with single electron valves suspended by invisible wire just above each block. The devices levitate in space, in contrast to the weighted mass below. On the surface and in the crevices of the limestone, a series of minuscule bronze snail shells evoke other timescales: fossilised molluscs, shells calcifying and hardening as they cling to the rock face. A sudden electrical charge and the whole scene could be spurred in to action, resuscitated back to life. The same quarries where Ní Bhriain sourced these materials are depicted in her surrounding, large-scale Jacquard tapestries, digitally collaged scenes of excavated landscapes and devastated cities. They teeter on the verge of collapse, revealing blank apertures and exposed foundations. Yet, there is another collapse taking place here in which distinctions of the past and present are interwoven. The Jacquard loom, invented in the early 19th century, used interchangeable punch cards to undertake repeatable, automated tasks and, as such, prefigured modern-day computers. This potential future technology is embedded in the warp and weft of the fabric and, in turn, the textures of the material dictate the resolution of its imagery.

The quarry thus represents another archive of memory, where deposits of prior events are captured and petrified, preserved in a repository of deep time. Ní Bhriain returns to this source again and again, digging into and dredging up the information buried far beneath the surface. In her 2018 film *Inscriptions of an Immense Theatre*, the camera tracks through various collections housed in the British Museum, through empty and anonymous housing units for asylum seekers, before plunging into a limestone pit, descending beyond the strata of distant geological epochs, the calcified residue of plant and animal life, and the ravaged, ruptured earth itself. The title offers a route in: the flemish physician Samuel Quiccheberg's 1565 treatise *Inscriptiones vel tituli theatri amplissimi* provided what may be the first organisational system for the collection of objects – and was the predecessor for museological taxonomies. His text also bears the traces of imperialist, colonial ideology, couched within a universalising mission of cataloguing and collecting information for all humanity. For Ní Bhriain, the exposure of these fixed systems is analogous to mining: the extraction of information disturbs the very environment that one inhabits. Remnants of past events are revealed and ruined through the same processes, destroyed in the act of discovery. In uncovering the ideological certainties embedded within the archive, one cannot help but unsettle its very foundations.

Chris Clarke is a critic and senior curator at The Glucksman, Cork.