
Ailbhe Ní Bhriain

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The Butler Gallery's decision to stage a solo exhibition by Cork-based artist Ailbhe Ní Bhriain (b 1978) was both shrewd and timely, as the artist's relative youth belies the technical and thematic maturity of her photography and video work. Her academic credentials, too, are impeccable: she graduated with a first-class honours degree from the Crawford College of Art, following this with a master's at the Royal College of Art in London, for which she received a distinction. At present, she lectures at the Crawford, while studying for a Ph D at Kingston University. Ní Bhriain has also won several awards, including the Jerwood Drawing Prize in 2004, is represented by the Domobaal Gallery in London, and has participated in many exhibitions here and abroad.

The Kilkenny show, however, was Ní Bhriain's first major exhibition in Ireland, and featured a selection of photographs and video works made between 2006 and 2008. Seen together, the overall sense conveyed by these meditative works is that of contingency: the contingency of the moving and the still image, the contingency of the self, the contingency of reality. In her work, internal and external, conscious and unconscious, stillness and movement, past and present, dream and reality – these traditionally conceived opposites – do not so much collapse as merge into each other. Through *ostranenie* techniques, that which was once assumed to be familiar or knowable is rendered strange, uncanny, indefinable. This Ní Bhriain achieves

both by exploiting the technical possibilities of photography and video, and in terms of the content of the works. Indeed, Ní Bhriain once said she was drawn to ancient Chinese brush drawing, as it "attempts to marry the nature of the materials of the craft with the nature of that which it depicts," and a similar attempt is revealed in her work.

There are two overlapping strands to Ní Bhriain's work in this exhibition: a series of photographs and a video loosely based on portraiture; and a series of photographs and three video pieces that take landscape as their starting point. In each, she uses the techniques of photography and video to confront us with our assumptions about the medium itself and the visual strategies used in portraits and landscapes – those familiar devices we have come to accept as 'natural'. Her work thus explores representational constructs of staging, framing, perspective, horizon lines and techniques to suggest surface and depth. By revealing such strategies as artistic constructs, we are by extension invited to question our relationship to perceived reality.

The mutability of memory, traces of the past and fragmentary reconstructions are also explored, creating a sense of time as something which is not linear but is, like her work, fluid and inconclusive. This is particularly the case in *Perimeter*, a series of nine black-and-white photographs. Each image plays with the viewer's perceptions and reveals its own constructedness. They are at once familiar and alien, recognisable and strange, like half-remembered dreamscapes. The images have been created by compositing and layering details from videos and photographs of places Ní Bhriain has encountered in Ireland and on her travels – a tree from Cambodia, a west of Ireland bog, a former prison camp – to create a series of uncanny,

eerie images that are part-interior, part-landscape. The photographs are in dialogue with each other, establishing a syncopated rhythm across the series – a pattern of similarity and difference in which elements are played with, reused or changed.

Each photograph takes a frontal viewpoint and has a similar depth of field, creating room-like spaces not unlike stage sets. But these interior elements are integrated with fragments of landscapes: the floor becomes a flat expanse of water, rolling sand-dune or stony grey soil; a tree grows inside a dusty, empty interior; a wall dematerialises into a gloomy landscape expanse; a window frames an unexpected vista; a horizontal line on a wall becomes a horizon line on a blasted wasteland; a transparent rickety bedframe hangs upside-down from a ceiling, its reflection in water beneath it taking on a three-dimensional presence. There is a sense of harshness and decay in these unpeopled constructions, with their crumbling walls, murky corners, abandoned spaces, leafless trees, fluorescent lights and tiled, institutional floors. Inexplicable shadows, strange reflections and uncertain light sources, meanwhile, add to an overall sense of constructed dissolution.

In the three landscape-based video pieces – a diptych depicting a decaying beached dolphin on a boggy beach; a part-room, part-landscape of frames within frames; and the nine-screen *Palimpsest*, where each screen shows a view of a constructed landscape – an initial impression of stillness is gradually eroded through the act of looking. Small changes reveal themselves over time: a bird flying overhead, a plume of smoke puffing gently, a light flickering, a boat slowly traversing an expanse of sea. Thus stillness and movement become intertwined; there is a sense of time stilled, yet passing still.

Portraiture, meanwhile, is addressed in the works that bookend the exhibition. In the reception area of the gallery, two long rows of black-and-white photographic images traverse the wall, nine per row. The top row features indistinct images of a face at various angles; the bottom shows different sections of a body, blurry under water, its curves and indentations abstracted to evoke a watery underworld landscape. The title of the top row is *Aftermath (self-portrait) series one*, and the bottom row is *Aftermath (self-portrait) series two*. In a sense, these images encapsulate the essence of Ni Bhriain's practice, for it could be argued that the fluidity of self is at the core of her work. In her photographs and videos, the self is always both present and absent, suggesting something yet revealing nothing; her work is seeking, somehow, to represent the self yet acknowledging, too, the impossibility of achieving such an aim.

Perhaps, more precisely, her work involves the questioning of what it is that defines the self or, indeed, the inevitable inability to define selfhood. Instead, all that can be aspired to are versions of a self, a series of inconclusive images that can only capture certain angles or sections, images which are themselves rendered in such a way as to be vague, blurry, inconclusive. The self is thus in a perpetual state of becoming and, simultaneously, of dissolution. The titles of her works are, in this context, revealing: *Aftermath (self-portrait)* underscores the impossibility of rendering the self in portrait form – all that can be achieved is an aftermath of a moment, a trace of something fluid and liminal. Titles such as *Palimpsest* and *Perimeter* likewise underscore this sense of liminality and contingency.

In the last room, at the end of the Butler Gallery's colonnade of spaces, the exhibition concludes

with *In memoriam*, playing looped on a small television screen placed in a modest position on the floor. A face gradually emerges from opaque, lapping water, merging in and out of visibility with the ripples of the water: but although appearing to be submerged, the face is in fact projected onto the water's surface. The chimerical visage is both present and absent; it is a vision that hints at hidden depths – but only on the surface. These depths take on added complexity when one knows that the projected face is the artist's portrait, and the water onto which it is projected was the site of a drowning. Thus *In memoriam* becomes a translucent, ephemeral memorial – to a lost life, to a past time, to a contingent self – rendered infinite by the ever-looping video.

Eimear McKeith writes
on visual art for the *Sunday
Tribune*.