

## DOMOBAAL

### Palimpsest

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain has suggested that her work consists of lots of different failures collapsed into new possibilities. The juxtaposition of failure with possibility reflects a practice of on-going searching, experimentation, trial, testing, collation and collapsing, so that what might not work on one level can be reutilised to re-enter the final work. Ní Bhriain makes extraordinary photographs and videos of constructed imaginary places. Composed of details from many different photographs and video shots, taken in and of real places from her travels, her work creates other worlds - fictional, impossible, yet strangely evocative of places we sense we might know of from afar or vaguely recollect from dreams or memory.

The mysterious quality of Ní Bhriain's photographs – part room, part landscape - have the feel of small stage-sets, contained spaces that tip into a postmodern sensibility for the Gothic (ruins), and the surreal (illogical and strange). Abandoned rooms, flooded floors, bog trees' darkened silhouettes against stormy white-weather, shadows spilling branches that creep into the corners of sparse, decaying rooms, scraggly bushes and grass that grow out of their sea-floors, drapery strewn across tiled rooms, on peeling walls or curtaining windows, demonstrating a skill for detail as masterful as that of a Flemish painter's feel for fabric-folds.

The effect of seamless layering or collapsing one element of the picture's image over or under or into another, disrupts the spatial plane and we touch into a degree of unknowingness. Light hangs in darkness' shadow, casting visibility, illuminating details, yet it seems as if we are not on terra firma. What is inside, what is outside, external or internal remains unclear. Skies appear inverted, forests press up against open rooms and isolated objects defy gravity. The present or 'tangibly there' is intertwined with an immaterial other - insubstantial, faded elements that float and hover and appear as if lodged somewhere between the very act of appearance and disappearance - slipping in or out of (in)visibilities. In Ní Bhriain's scenes eerie unsettlement dwells as emptied out and silenced space, where inhabitants have left and entropy begins and where nature seems on the verge of taking back. These are displaced spaces - places that have been left behind in aftermath or perhaps touch the future from its hither side. It is as if they are coming from the far edge of what can be seen, like Rebecca Solnit's Blue of Distance, and although in part or vaguely familiar, they dislodge any sense of rational connection, of ordered belonging, they are places you can never go<sup>[i]</sup>

*Palimpsest*, the title of Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's new series, is a meditation on place – on familiarity and otherness. Acutely aware of the (photographic) image's power of illusion and ability to deceive, Ní Bhriain's work acknowledges this inauthenticity and she does not attempt to contrive any reality: instead she works with fragments and incompleteness to suggest another world. Dislocation creates a new location. Photographing, filming, cutting, tearing, burning, folding, editing, collapsing her material's sources, Ní Bhriain returns a mystery and opens up the possibility for an untranslatable other<sup>[ii]</sup> – the (im)possibility of an indefinable unity without having to fully know, without having to fully understand. These are not hybrids, where one element squares readily with the other. The Kerry beaches and the boglands might resist complete assimilation, retaining a hint of familiar presence, while a sweet-smelling tree that stood outside a primary school in Cambodia, a former prison camp, is lost within the dissolution. A symbol of enduring hope against a terror that is perhaps too impossible to comprehend. In Ní Bhriain's work familiarity with otherness is made possible because reality is kept at a distance and strangeness is retained. We do not fully recognise these places and yet respond to them emotionally, intuitively, so that a certain melancholic tension, a sense of something dark, of something strangely other is allowed to swell from the crevices of an internal mind.

Victor Burgin wrote that in looking there is always something that is not seen, not because it is perceived as missing, but because it does not belong to the visible<sup>[iii]</sup> Ní Bhriain's photographs and videos provoke us to think of things that are not (visibly) there, things that are not what they are or that exist outside of place. Questions of 'what this is' or 'where we are' spring not from a narrative's unfolding momentum but from something stilling, slowly arresting. Her videos continue this strange unknowing quality – still elements with slowly moving parts – clouds, billowing smoke, burning fires, shooting stars, long grasses, swaying shadows - injecting time into the almost dead-calm scenes. A dolphin's corpse lies stranded on a deserted beach, the beach has been made from filming burning

## DOMOBAAL

paper, and the tiny orange fires - still alight - are taken from the petering flames. Monumental, alone, utterly out of place, the dolphin's death is made more poignant, more lonely against the derelict dunes that reach to horizon's sea-less sky. In another work, the artist's portrait has been projected onto and simultaneously filmed at the sea where a drowning occurred. The movement of seawater over the liquid image constantly distorts it - into and out of shape - making a ghostly presence out of light. The face appears as if from above, as if from beneath, there, but not there at all.

Maurice Blanchot talks about the strangeness of the image as being the strangeness of a cadaver: "Something is there before us which is not really the living person, nor is it any reality at all... He is more beautiful, more imposing... and so absolutely himself that it is as if he were doubled by himself" .<sup>[iv]</sup>

A different nature opens itself to the camera, as Walter Benjamin wrote, introducing us to unconscious optics.<sup>[v]</sup> In Ní Bhriain's displacements, reality is unhinged, so, like Blanchot's cadaver, her photographs and videos have the effect of bringing us outside of ourselves and as they do they seem to bring us closer to something other inside. Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's work stirs a sense of the transient against lifeless things. It is as if, in collapsing fragments, another understanding opens up and something overwhelming, not quite containable seeps through, like the strangely poignant beauty of incomplete reality found in ruins.

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Ireland, February 2008

[notes]

<sup>[i]</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *A field guide to getting Lost: The Blue of Distance*, pp 29, Viking, Penguin, USA, 2005

<sup>[ii]</sup> Sarat Maharaj, *Perfidious Fidelity: the Untranslatable Other*, from *Global Visions; Towards a New Internationalism in Visual Arts*, pp 28-30, ed Jean Fisher, Kala Press in association with the Institute of International Visual Arts, 1994. Sarat Maharaj speaks of the notion of untranslatability of the term other - the translations failure, as something that falls short of the dream-ideal of translation as 'transparent' passage from one idiom to another, from self to other.

<sup>[iii]</sup> Victor Burgin, *Perverse Space*, in *Sexuality and Space*, pp 227, ed Beatriz Colomina, Princeton Architectural Press, NY, 1992

<sup>[iv]</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, pp 256, 258, University of Nebraska Press, 1989

<sup>[v]</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Mechanical Age of Reproduction*, in *Illuminations*, pp 238, ed Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, Fontana, London, 1973