

Inscriptions of an Immense

Theatre

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain is an Irish artist best known for her use of video montage. Through her creation of video installations which combine film, CGI and sound, she invites viewers to immerse themselves in her altered landscapes. She has exhibited nationally and internationally, and has received a number of awards and grants for her work.

Her newest project, 'Inscriptions of an Immense Theatre', is a video piece that combines a number of unique locations, themes and images. As she draws inspiration from early museological texts, the work explores the construct of cultural and historical representation. I chatted with Ailbhe about what inspires her work, her future, and the Irish art scene.

Your work deals with themes like loss, legacy and cultural understanding; what motivates you as an artist?

I'm interested in little moments of destabilisation or interruption; when the way we expect to see something suddenly shifts a little. As a kid, I used to spend a lot of time imagining the room I was in as upside-down or back-to-front, trying to get to the point where I could no longer remember which version was the real or right one - a kind of rabbit/duck moment. Locations like the British museum [which I reference in my new film] interest me because of the way in which they themselves influence or define how we see things, in terms of cultural and historical narratives. Constructing an altered version of a place like this, as I do in 'Inscriptions of an Immense Theatre', is a way of thinking about the construct that also underlies the 'right way up' version.



'Inscriptions of an Immense Theatre' is a video work and in previous exhibitions you have used photography to a similar end. Why do you favour altered images as a medium for your work?

I'm trying to surprise the images I'm working with into a new series of connections or possibilities – sometimes using laborious processes like CGI and other times using very loose digital collage. Often the images I'm working with will be quite loaded with associations or prescribed meaning – classical statuary for instance or archetypal Irish landscapes – so this process of altering is a way of disrupting and questioning our ready made relationship to certain kinds of representation.

You mentioned CGI; a lot of your work is a mixture of real and doctored. Do you think the boundary between real and unreal is an important one to traverse in the 21st century?

I think the boundary between the real and the unreal is so much a part of the magic trick of art. That slippage between real and illusory space, surface and depth, fact and fiction is just fundamental to all image-making. Questions around truth and manipulation on a wider cultural level obviously have a real resonance at the moment and for me CGI is a really useful tool to work with. But I think the concern with this boundary is age-old – as are the politics of representation. This is what makes these things interesting to me.

You describe the piece as an attempt at "a theatre of aftermath" with pieces inspired from museum artefacts, debris and landscape – representational categories have broken down so how do you think we represent self/personal identity in the aftermath?

I'm not trying to propose a way – I'm more interested in the uncertainty. I think the idea of an 'authentic' form of representation is a kind of contradiction, as there's something essentially constructed in every attempt at representation. Harking back to a glorious and imaginary past is clearly a model that is being tested in various places at the moment – but not a happy one.

You are a widely acclaimed Irish contemporary artist and have received a number of awards for your work. What is it like an Irish visual artist in 2019?

Awards from The Arts Council have meant everything for my work over the last number of years. Through their most recent support I've been working with cinematographer Feargal Ward, actress Eileen Walsh, Dublin and Belfast-based post-production house Enter Yes and composer Susan Stenger, so it's been 18 months of working really closely with seriously talented people. These relationships make Ireland feel like a really exciting place to be right now.

Your work is always intermedial; whether through collage, live music accompaniment or improvisation. How important is the unexpected in your work? Do you find working with a mixture of media more accurately represents a fractured, multi-faceted existence?

A lot of what I do, because it revolves around animation and VFX, demands a crazy kind of precision and attention to detail. So the unexpected is the opposite of what I'm after for the major part of production.

I do bookend this extended control-freak phase with deliberate openness. I begin researching a new piece with a fairly unburdened curiosity – it's a case of 'what happens if this sits next to this?', shuffling the possible relationships between things, places and texts the way you might move furniture around a room. Likewise when exhibiting, it's really important to me to avoid being overly directive. My work is about taking content that is initially quite set or didactic within itself, and reconstituting it as something more odd and unstable. Working with musicians and incorporating live improvisation has been a way of emphasising this fluid element, continuing a kind of collage or layering process within an exhibition. I want someone coming to my show to understand it without being able to explain it. It's more a short story than a treatise.

'Inscriptions of an Immense Theatre' runs in Temple Bar Gallery + Studios until February 2.

