

Inscriptions (One Here Now)

A camera tracks along the surface of a slab of quarried limestone. The stone is cut at intervals, linear incisions along its edge. Every section has been numbered. The camera moves slowly, steadily, treating this wall of stone – mostly a uniform grey, though smeared here and there with an oily black – like a panorama to be gradually, sumptuously revealed. It is impossible to tell its scale.

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's *Inscriptions (One Here Now)* is a fifteen-minute filmic exercise in disorientation: a sequence of slow panning shots of stone surfaces, drone footage of what the exhibition material describes as a working quarry, though it looks, for all the world, as if deserted. It is unclear at any given moment which way is up or down, left or right; are we regarding the stone face-on, or from underneath, or above? Only at the end of a shot will the camera track to the end of the limestone landscape, revealing a pool of milky water or a staircase, or the rubble at the base of one wall of exposed stone, the base of a ladder, a pile of discarded neon-yellow safety wear, a jacket, a crumpled sleeve: the one clear suggestion of the human figure. Even then, there is something unearthly about these details. The milky substance in the water looks a little like a lunar landscape.

These long panoramic shots are interspersed with much shorter pieces of footage of the quarry's interiors, the offices and other working spaces. These are likewise depopulated, watery, abandoned-looking backdrops, though each one is occupied by a more-or-less anomalous: a hawk, an owl, an eagle. These superimposed animal forms have become a recurrent signature feature of Ní Bhriain's work. (In her recent *Reports to an Academy*, 2015, birds of prey make their way through a number of empty spaces, a Victorian natural history museum, an art school, a library.) The dripping interiors of *Inscriptions (One Here Now)* are like a set of surrealist tableaux, adding to the viewer's disorientation, introducing the possibility that none of what they are seeing is real. The animals sit watchfully in the flooded recesses of the quarry, looking as if they have only just acquired consciousness. One monkey, in wonderment, reaches his hand out as if to test some new impression of the world, only for it to halt, glitch, before he brings it back down, disappointed.

The otherwise grey expanses of Ní Bhriain's film work are enlivened by these computer-generated interventions, as well as by the artist's evident attentiveness to the accidents of colour encountered in the quarry itself. A cluster of red poles jutting from a pool of murky water. Blue marks daubed on cut limestone slabs. A bright yellow piece of quarry machinery. Black-and-yellow-striped poles standing upright. A steel factory staircase, painted red. A spray of blue curtains. These localised concentrations of intense colour – bright brushstrokes against an otherwise dim palette – seem to be one evident reference to the sonorous wall paintings of Brian O'Doherty in the adjoining room at Sirius Art Centre, to which *Inscriptions (One Here Now)* is framed as a response. The bright primary colours of O'Doherty's *One Here Now* (1996) seem to emerge out of the dim cave-like interiors, or to surface in a stray piece of yellow tubing or a long blue cable hanging over the quarry itself.

These visual parallels are not the only correspondences between the two works however. Ní Bhriain's interest is less in the specific conditions of the limestone quarry in County Carlow than in the materiality of limestone itself. The limestone headstones on graves across Ireland, not least that of Patrick Ireland at

IMMA. *Inscriptions (One Here Now)* can be understood as an enquiry into a material that represents loss, here marked as a double deprivation, the human dead lost to the bereaved and also the stone lost to the land. There is an elegiac quality to the film that has its correlation in O'Doherty's work. *One Here Now* is a work of mathematical precision, rectangular forms arranged around the room, bright colours divided carefully into rectilinear patterns, yet its abstract meticulousness is combined, as in so much of O'Doherty's work, with an emotional richness. In a text written to accompany the original exhibition of the wall paintings, Alexander Alberro noted how O'Doherty's calculated, almost depersonalised process as an artist could lead to work that was close to history painting in its scale and resonance. *One Here Now* was site-specific, not just in terms of its responsiveness to the architecture of Sirius Arts Centre, but also in the ways in which it responded to the conditions and context of the town of Cobh, with its long-standing, complicated heritage of Empire and exile, as an important tributary of the British Empire's shipbuilding industry, as well as one of the major ports for transatlantic journeys, taking boatloads of Irish emigrants to America throughout the country's desperate history. This sense of place is present in Ní Bhriain's work, which she has also described as a kind of history painting, though such preoccupations have been refracted in different ways through the artist's contemplation of the materiality of limestone and the processes of extraction, suggesting perhaps even – in this ex-imperial shipbuilding town – the quarrying of human resources too, the plundering of colonies, like Ireland, for whatever is of value, human or otherwise.

There are other histories at work here. *One Here Now* is inscribed with vertical and slanting dashes, which are approximations of the inscribed letters of the ogham alphabet, the writing system used in Ireland between the first and ninth centuries AD, traces of which survive now as inscriptions on stone monuments around the country, either place markers or commemorations of the dead. (This conjugation of place and loss in the scriptive logic of ogham seems pertinent to Ní Bhriain's work.) O'Doherty's ogham markings – which circumnavigate the upper walls of the Centre Gallery at Sirius Arts Centre – are mirrored by the functional inscriptions in the limestone quarry, though here they are accompanied by other odd embellishments, strange circles with dots, illegible hieroglyphs in the stone, which may or may not be part of the shorthand of the quarry's workings. These curious symbols deepen the curiosity of this environment, suggesting another level of coded exchange, other languages. Ní Bhriain plays with this sense of indecipherability, treating the quarry almost as if it were an ancient site, as if a future or alien species were uncovering it for the first time, trying to decode these numbers, these incisions, trying to make sense of this insular language, the indecipherable shorthand of industrial production. Alternatively, *Inscriptions (One Here Now)* could be understood as taking place against a chronology of deep time. The rock face marks the passage of many millennia. The film is marked by this sense of astral perspective, reducing the activities of the quarry to stasis, and the presence of the human to a discarded yellow sleeve.

This meditation on time and place and loss is given further resonance by a soundtrack that is by turns ominous and elegiac, an unsettling accumulation of droning bass sounds, underscoring a haunting melody line on an English horn. This score has been generated by the composer Susan Stenger, whose practice is embedded in questions of language and landscape (having worked with writers like Iain Sinclair and made compositions in response to Tim Robinson's work). For the collaboration with Ní Bhriain, Stenger made use of the form of the Irish *keen*, working with the traditional phrasings of the

form, but also taking the more conceptual decision to translate the singing of Kitty Gallagher – a singer whose recorded keenings have become trad standards – into morse code, the result providing a formal basis for the overall composition. Stenger's approach builds upon Ní Bhriain's interest in encoded languages, communicative codes, playing with questions of legibility in ways that seem indicative of a close and fruitful joint process, a rich collaboration the fruits of which are evident in the work's evocative interplay of image and sound.

At a certain point, towards the end of the film, the screen cuts to black, but for several minutes the audio track continues, becoming more involved, more complex. The score has now reached its climax, the melody lines layered three times over. The blank screen is confusing at first. This is no longer a soundtrack, it is a piece of music to be listened to in its own right, a strange lingering lament in the dark. There must have been some hook to the sound, some primal concordance to those phrases of the keen, maybe, for the music stuck with me after I left the gallery, playing in my head while I walked around the Victorian town, with its seafront terraces, its bandstand and decorative iron railings and the small park benches on the green beside the sea. The music was still with me while I sat and waited for my train in the low-lying red-brick train station, with the rain coming down and the ships passing, the mechanical noise of the wind turbine across the water (on the same island with the military base that glowers across at the town), and the snippets of conversation from the few other passengers, waiting, and the whooping of two boys making their way along the windswept sea-front promenade, across the tracks.

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An essay by Nathan O' Donnell on Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's exhibition *Inscriptions (One Here Now)* at Sirius Arts Centre, Cobh, Ireland, curated by Miranda Driscoll; published in *One Here Now, The Brian O' Doherty / Patrick Ireland Project*, produced by Sirius Arts Centre & Paper Visual Arts, 2019.