



THE  
**DOCK**

JOANNE LAWS  
ART WRITER IN RESIDENCE 2017

AILBHE NÍ BHRIAIN  
08 APRIL - 27 MAY, 2017  
PRESENTED IN COLLABORATION WITH  
DOMBAAL GALLERY, LONDON.

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## Shrouding to Make Visible

In showcasing Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's current solo exhibition, The Dock's bright and expansive gallery spaces have been dramatically transformed into dark cinematic chambers. Black wall-mounted curtains lend an insulating quality to these newly immersive settings where Ní Bhriain's captivating moving image works are slickly presented. The artist is best-known for her multiscreen films which combine computer-generated imagery and video montage techniques. Her wider practice explores notions of representation and displacement, and the works shown in this exhibition portray deep interrogations of place. Though some of the films appear deceptively slow-paced, muted and even minimal, they function as portals into vast and complex territories. On multiple visits to the gallery I grappled with this complexity, negotiating ways to position myself as a viewer and calling upon cultural and art historical references to anchor my encounters.

Originally commissioned by the RHA, Dublin, *Reports to an Academy*, 2015, is staged in Gallery 1 as a four-screen installation. The looped films are screened simultaneously and are unified through a minimal electronic soundtrack. The films portray four generic locations, namely: a natural history museum; an artist's studio; a library; and an archetypal landscape, presumed to be the west of Ireland. Each film is exquisitely composed with an innate understanding of symmetry and the pictorial frame. The footage of the artist's studio is so visually seductive that it shimmers with an almost painterly sensibility. What appear at first to be static scenes are gradually subject to some form of erosion or intrusion. Elements enter the frame, as if from nowhere, while other details disappear before our eyes. The iconic stone wall depicted in the landscape film slowly accrues gaps between its rocks, rendering it increasingly fragile and unstable. With encroaching water levels, this leaky membrane is ineffectual, functioning neither as a floodgate nor as a permanent boundary marker.

The artist has described these scenes as “stage sets” in which “identities might be constructed”. I also began to think about these locations as sites of knowledge. In this way, landscape becomes a repository of cultural knowledge; the studio is where new contributions to discourse are actively produced; the library becomes a vault where the written word is amassed and preserved; while the museum is a place where seemingly outmoded knowledge is classified and displayed according to some prevailing narrative. However, it is the use of computer-generated imagery that really prompts the viewer to question what they are looking at, compromising their grasp on reality. For example, scenes of *Reports to an Academy* are bisected horizontally and mirrored, creating a destabilising effect. It is possible to conceive the bottom half of frames as reflections on water, as if situated on crystal-clear lakes or in subterranean grottos. In this way, the presented scenarios become even less plausible or certain. It's as if the artist is trying to undermine their authenticity.

Another significant feature of Ní Bhriain's film-making practice is the juxtaposition of incongruous elements through digital means. Features of landscape – such as swimming fish, uprooted plants and rising tides – are startlingly introduced into domestic interiors or civic buildings. Plucked from their natural exterior realms, these displaced items disrupt our preconceptions about what is foreign and what is familiar. They prompt us to consider the residual layers of personal or institutional history that permeate these sites. *Reports to an Academy* features an array of bird species – from ravens and puffins to owls and eagles – that conjure an uneasy feeling. They also call to mind the vivid philosophical and Christian symbolism of birds in western art history, from the Gothic period to High Renaissance.

However, it is the interjection of clouds into Ní Bhriain's interiors that I find most effective and surprisingly soothing. Hovering at the edges of scenes like gentle intruders, these wispy forms signify all things transient and intangible. It is tempting to think about Berndnaut Smilde and his heavenly 'Nimbus' series (2010 – ongoing) in which the Dutch artist creates 'self-made clouds' in various indoor locations. Nimbus is Latin for 'rain' and Smilde's clouds – made from smoke and water vapor – linger only for a few seconds before evaporating. Ephemeral and constantly changing, clouds signify daydreams, fleeting moments and in-between situations. Presented out of context, they also have entertainment value as humorous, cartoonish and playful entities. Our metaphysical connection with clouds is underscored by all manner of symbolic attributions, from the divine and cosmic to the ghostly and uncanny. They evoke a childlike wonder and remind us that sky-gazing can be one of life's simple joys and a route to spiritual reflection. As stated by a member of Leitrim's Cloud Appreciation Society, "we give shape to a cloud in order to ease ourselves".

In Gallery 2, the sister works *Window* and *Departure*, 2013/14, are projected simultaneously on opposite sides of a purpose-built partition wall. The two single-screen installations depict slow tracking shots through an abandoned airport terminal – itself a loaded site in the Irish literary imagination, associated with notions of migration, exile and the 'homeland'. Dual sonic scores seem to combine the low hum of machinery, running water and occasional ritualistic chimes. *Departure* begins with the charred silhouette of an uprooted plant against a backdrop of stainless steel airport check-in desks, empty display screens and electrical wires that dangle from the ceiling. Swathes of dusky-pink fabric and glossy plastic are draped periodically, suggestive of dust sheets, while also functioning as robust compositional devices. Other static elements include puddles on the ground. They speak of stagnation and are as reflective as pools of molten silver.

In contrast, moving elements create a sense of animism in this derelict setting. Black ravens rotate slowly like mechanical toys, scavenging on piles of discarded plastic. Flocks of birds hover like swarms of flies. Detritus – perceived as discarded white plastic or even feathers – is propelled across the floor, held at a distance by some invisible forcefield. Elsewhere, black snake-like forms twist and coil, as if entranced. A remote landscape is projected to create a scene-within-a-scene where a snared piece of plastic flaps in the breeze. Roving lights twinkle in the darkness. They are as reassuring as a sea of stars, yet as sombre as a nocturnal search party.

In the opening scene of *Window*, the pink fabric appears again, in this instance shrouding a rigid corrugated form, appearing like skin pulled taught over vertebrae. The same object is later revealed as a white plastic structure, used in a subsequent scene as a receptacle for plants. We realise that the scenes we are observing are highly constructed, and that the artist sources and reuses props across her films for deliberate effect. Given the fact that film production is such a long and labour-intensive process, we acknowledge that nothing appears by accident; every element has been painstakingly fabricated. As if to counter the long production process, Ní Bhriain often embarks on more immediate bodies of work such as ‘Inscriptions’, 2017 – a series of digitally enhanced pigment prints that are presented in The Dock’s atrium space. These monochromatic works take a hybrid form – part montage, part photographic collage – and present playful compositions achieved through the juxtaposition of different pictorial elements.

The recurrent use of drapes appears to have some deeper conceptual purpose, potentially linked to notions of concealment, magic and optical illusion. It could be argued that the act of wrapping or shrouding something conceals it, yet makes it ultimately more prominent and visible. In high classical sculpture, drapery was employed to camouflage nudity, shroud death and to soften the severance of heads and limbs. In male subjects, flowing togas and cloaks conjured movement within static marble statues, asserting their stateliness, while in female subjects, drapery enhanced feminine virtues, rendering them otherworldly and fragile. A particular shade of pink features in drapery of various textures, from plastic sheeting to voile curtains. It is reminiscent of the dusky-rose hues prominent within Early Renaissance Christian art that became further muted through the fresco technique – whereby water-based pigment was applied to fresh plaster surfaces – exemplified in epochal works like Fra Angelico’s *The Annunciation*, 1438–45. Recent years have seen a burgeoning revival of this Rose quartz shade across design and fashion, causing it to be named Pantone’s colour of the year in 2016. I have also observed its ubiquitous appearance in painting, particularly among emerging artists. Femme-positive aesthetics, gender fluidity and an emphasis on wellness in our increasingly anxious post-modern age have been cited as explanations for contemporary usage of ‘Millennial Pink’.

In the closing scenes of *Window*, the coiling black ‘snake’ is revealed as a tendril of seaweed or some other organic matter. In serpent form, it was loaded with anguish and foreboding, calling to mind the plights of Cleopatra, Eve or even Poussin’s Baroque masterpiece, *Landscape with a Man killed by a Snake*, 1648, in which an idyllic pastoral scene is chillingly subverted with writhing black coils. Ní Bhriain regularly introduces restless stray lines that disappear from view, epitomised in corrugated pipes emerging from drapery like umbilical cords, or electrical cables disappearing into holes, as if in search of a power source. These free radicals punctuate scenes with mark-making gestures that may nod towards the artist’s background in printmaking – a disciplined form of training that has undoubtedly refined her intuitive understandings of composition, layering and durational processes. It is these attributes that make Ni Bhriain’s outputs as a filmmaker so aesthetically striking; however, it is her willingness to invest in such substantial themes that makes her moving image works so conceptually rich and, arguably, the very antithesis of popular film in the digital age.

**Joanne Laws is an arts writer based in Leitrim and Features Editor of The Visual Artists’ News Sheet.**



# THE DOCK

The Dock  
St Georges Terrace  
Carrick on Shannon  
Co. Leitrim  
+353 719650828  
[www.thedock.ie](http://www.thedock.ie)

**Gallery opening times:**  
**10:00am - 5:30 pm Monday to Friday**  
**10:30am - 5:00pm Saturday.**



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**For further information or to apply please contact Laura Mahon:  
[lmahon@leitrimcoco.ie](mailto:lmahon@leitrimcoco.ie)**

Joanne Laws is an arts writer, editor and researcher based in county Leitrim. She has recently been appointed Features Editor of The Visual Artists' News Sheet. Joanne is a member of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) and a regular contributor to international arts publications including Art Monthly and Frieze. She was previously assistant editor for the online resource publicart.ie and coordinator of the Roscommon Visual Artists Forum (RVAF). Joanne won 'VAI/DCC Critical Writing Award 2012/13' for her extended essay 'Commemoration – A Forward-Looking Act'.

She has previously developed research reports and policy documents for organisations such as 126 Artist-Run Gallery, Kilkenny Arts Office and Youth Work Ireland. Joanne Laws website can be seen here