

HOW IS IT MADE?

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Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, still from Reports to an Academy #4, 2015; video & CGI composite

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, The Passenger #2 (detail), 2015; pigment baryta print

# Exile, Dereliction & the Authentic Image

TRISH BRENNAN INTERVIEWS AILBHE NÍ BHRIAIN ABOUT HER CURRENT BODY OF WORK.

## HOW IS IT MADE?



Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, 'New Irish Works' installation view, The Library Project, Dublin, 2017

**Trish Brennan: It seems as though 2017 will be a busy year for you, with exhibitions in Domobaal, London, The Dock, Carrick on Shannon and the Broad Museum, Michigan, to name a few. What work will you be showing?**

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain: I'll be showing video installations spanning 2011 to 2016, as well as two recent series of photo-collages. The solo exhibitions will bring a number of works together for the first time. They aren't intended as survey shows, but it is interesting to consider the various works in this way – as a set of relationships.

**TB: There are clear thematic overlaps within your video installations from this period. What primary focus do they share?**

ANB: Architecture and landscape are the recurring motifs; all of my work exploits and tries to interrupt the readymade associations that surround certain sites. I tend to work with archetypal imagery and locations – museums, thatched cottages, iconic landscapes and so on. I'm interested in the relationship such sites have with idealised traditions like Victorian collections, classical statuary or the genre of landscape painting. I try to explore how these traditions link with collective identity and what they mean in the contemporary moment, in the absence of the philosophical or pictorial certainties that might have defined them in the past.

**TB: You are originally from the west of Ireland and this landscape crops up a lot in your work. Is this connection to your background important?**

ANB: It probably was originally, but I became more interested in the difficulty of representing this landscape than whatever might have led me there in the first place. In trying to work with the landscape, I was amazed by how things invariably tipped into cliché – the Bord Failte/Enya/Paul Henry pitfalls were everywhere. It made me aware of the constructed or iconic relationships between place, image and meaning. The other thing that struck me was the ownership that Irish literature and poetry have over this territory. Irish writing has grappled so brilliantly with ideas of place, roots and identity, so inescapably this became something to take on. The attempt to address this daunting literary heritage alongside the iconic baggage of place came to define my work in a way.

**TB: Why do you think Irish writing has been able to avoid the clichés you mention in its 'grappling' with place?**

ANB: One critic referred to Irish writing as being 'a monument to its own failure' and I like this idea. The suggestion is that our relationship to place and language in Ireland has been interrupted by historical and cultural disinheritance, but it is this very interruption or lack which fuels Irish writing. The search for identity, necessitated by historical

rupture, itself becomes a form of cultural identity and the frustrated connection to place forges the impulse and the subject of the work. In this way, you can think of Irish writing as being located in its own dislocation; you see it in contemporary writing, modernist literature, ancient mythology. They are all infused with ideas of exile in a way that seems almost prophetic and circular.

**TB: As an artist you are known for your use of digital technology and CGI. How does this technical approach link to these ideas of history, mythology and literature?**

ANB: I decided to take this cultural and literary paradox of location-in-dislocation and extend it into a strategy of image-making, aimed at locating the work in a continual oscillation between place and placelessness. So yes, I often do this through the use of computer-generated imagery in order to simulate altered and impossible versions of a place. But I also try to achieve it through material interruption, simple collage devices or ad-hoc stage sets. What these strategies have in common is that they undermine the authenticity of the image; the image is no longer strictly 'believable' or 'real' and with that, the usual associations that it carries come undone. The emphasis becomes one of displacement and uncertainty.

**TB: You often work with the interiors of public spaces, such as offices, airports, museums and libraries. Why are these architectural spaces significant for you?**

ANB: Public spaces tend to create a kind of collective conformity to certain prescribed ideas or behaviors. I work with spaces that are empty or derelict, precisely because of the way the construct of that conformity gets exposed when the façade or function breaks down. It's this tension that is always there in architecture between the pure space of the imagined ideal (typified by the architectural model) and the messy compromises of the real – the failures of materials, funds or people.

This question of what remains when the ideal collides with the real is always of interest to me. It comes back again to this issue of how these large subjects can be addressed or represented in the contemporary moment, when the certainties and ideals of the past no longer seem relevant or even possible. I think it leads me to enacting the same process of disturbance or deconstruction on the images I'm working with, as though a certain kind of representation has also suffered a dereliction.

**TB: Working with such archetypal landscapes, do you worry that your work will be misinterpreted as overly traditional or romanticised?**

ANB: I purposely skirt close to this dilemma all the time. At first

glance, the work seems to conform to some familiar representation, but as the viewer spends more time with it, a sense of strangeness kind of leaks out. These dilemmas of representation are a touchstone in my work and link to questions of identity.

I am interested in the way national identity is forged, often upon a representation of itself. For example, Irish free-state identity was informed by the Irish cultural revival of the early 1900s. But as a retrieval of a lost culture, via drama, literature and art, this cultural revival was by its very nature constructed and also intrinsically political. In it was a fiction of authenticity which in turn became a model for our national identity. I think assumptions around authenticity always need to be probed; what we think of as authentic is so often founded on some kind of fiction or construct. It is strange and frightening to see these one-dimensional versions of national identity being so exploited around the world right now.

**TB: A lot of your work uses literary titles. 'Reports to an Academy', for example, refers to a Kafka short story, while 'Great Good Places' and 'The Passenger' are taken from works by Henry James and Nabokov respectively. Can you talk about this relationship with literature?**

ANB: Embedding details from a novel or short story into a film or collage feels like inserting a little narrative code: the films are in no way representations of the stories they take their titles from, but they do pick up on some intrinsic idea or atmosphere. I like the way the titles themselves suggest narrative, as though alluding to the absent element in my films (which themselves loop endlessly and are caught in a state of perpetual anticipation or aftermath). Literature is where ideas take shape for me. I discovered this pretty starkly last year, after a head injury left me unable to read for eight months. I've just 'relearned' how to read and with it my work suddenly makes sense to me again.

**TB: What are you working on at the moment?**

ANB: I'm in production for a new multiscreen film work with actor Eileen Walsh and composer Susan Stenger. I'm working with a project award from the Arts Council and this is facilitating a push in new directions. This work will be shown in a number of galleries across Ireland and the UK in 2018.

**Trish Brennan is Head of Fine Art at the CIT Crawford College of Art and Design.**

**Ailbhe Ní Bhriain is a Cork-based artist who works with film and computer-generated imagery.**