

Inscriptions of an Immense Theatre

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Visual Artist

MY NEW FILM, *Inscriptions of an Immense Theatre*, which was recently shown at Temple Bar Gallery & Studios, opens in the interior of British Museum. The choice of location was a follow-on from my previous film, *Reports to an Academy* (2015). Here I took certain archetypal sites of collective cultural identity – the Natural History Museum in Dublin and the traditional drystone walls of the West of Ireland – and used film and computer-generated imagery to transform them into stage sets of a kind. I was looking to play with the constructs that underpin our relationship to certain familiar sites.

When that film was completed, I started to look to further cultural fortresses. As the first national public museum in the world, the British Museum seemed a good place to start. There is much reference within the museum to its telling of “the story of human culture” – a claim which reveals many presumptions. But as I spent time in the museum, the use of the word ‘story’ struck me as increasingly significant. Looking at the site through the lens of fiction became something I wanted to do, to navigate the troubled seam between the certainty and the fiction contained in such a space.

I start making films in the same way I make collages: by putting one thing next to another and seeing what happens. I am interested in the imaginative leap that happens when locations, images or texts are simply placed in contact and how a logic can be revealed or broken by the simple fact of proximity. Playing with these connections – poking at existing ones or trying to surprise new ones into existence – defines how I approach any new piece of work. In the context of the British Museum – which embodies a regime of visibility with such political, historical and cultural consequence – this relational approach was never going to lead me into simple territory. In the end, issues of environmental destruction, human displacement and the history of objects converged.

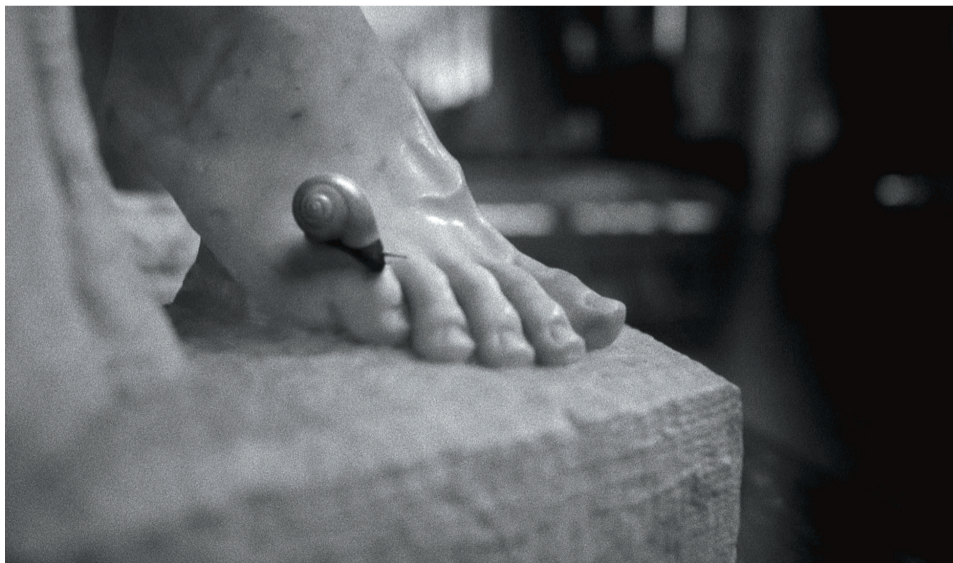
The ideas and structure of the film stemmed from a single small display cabinet that I stumbled upon during an early exploratory trip. This was a relatively sparse display of early Assyrian artifacts, which included a small stone monkey

(with a particularly compelling gaze) and two partially cracked and fully inscribed clay forms, supposedly recounting the glorious past of the earliest Assyrian empire. A photograph I took of this display became an unexpected touchstone for the work, providing visual cues to think through relationships between the museum, contemporary displacement and the ways in which cultural history is variously inscribed, broken and reconstituted. It led me to the final trio of locations in the film: the earliest collection in the museum; a contemporary accommodation centre for asylum seekers; and a working limestone quarry. The display also prompted the presence of a small capuchin monkey in the film, surveying his man-made surroundings with a strange, fatalistic calm.

The work is accompanied by a voice-over composed from collaged fragments of the earliest published text on museums – *Inscriptions or Titles of the Immense Theatre*, a treatise by Samuel Quichheberg dating from 1565, which also gave the film its title. The voiceover is stripped of specific contextual reference. Overlaid across the three disparate locations, it prompts questions around the ultimate implications of the museum’s imperial agenda.

Technically, this film was my most challenging production to date. It was made possible through Arts Council funding, which facilitated me to work with a lot of great people including Kris Kelly, Stephen O’Connell, Susan Stenger, Eileen Walsh and Feargal Ward. These relationships are precious and also underpinned the work I made for Sirius Arts Centre’s ‘One Here Now’ programme – Miranda Driscoll’s beautifully varied series of commissions responding to Brian O’Doherty’s wall painting at Sirius. This commission influenced my thinking in ways I couldn’t have predicted, drawing me into the polyverse that is Brian O’Doherty’s work and bringing me into contact with some incredible new pieces – works like Liz Roche’s *I / thou* or Peter Borderick’s *One Hear Now*, that make you look and listen differently and believe that commissions and collaborations really can result in little moments of magic.

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Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, *Inscriptions of an Immense Theatre*, 2019, video still, single channel film, 33:09 mins; courtesy the artist & domobaal gallery, London