

# **LUAN GALLERY**

***Borrowed Memories***

29 - 11 - 12

## Foreword

We present the inaugural exhibition *Borrowed Memories* at Athlone's new contemporary visual art space the Luan Gallery. In its previous incarnations the building has been many things to many people and to the town: a library, a concert hall, a cinema, a temperance hall to mention but a few.

These memories and associations with the building are as rich and colourful as the inaugural programme. These memories are deeply embedded in the psyche of the town and townspeople of Athlone. Respect for this felt-sense of connection to the building formed a centre point of the dialogue with the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) around this inaugural exhibition. Projecting from this, the geographical location of Athlone *at the nation's crossroads* as a site for a new contemporary art space was also ever-present in the dialogue.

The Library Gallery which occupies the former home of Athlone's library has been transformed into a beautiful and elegant gallery space. This elegance drew us very quickly to the quietly powerful work of Daphne Wright *Where Do Broken Hearts Go*, while *Ark of Dreaming* by Westmeath's own Patrick Graham, with its intensely uncompromising, visceral visual language demanded an epic space in which to be seen and considered.

The River Gallery was conceived – perhaps more as a viewing space, less as a gallery space, although the potential must always have been there to marry the two. As the build progressed, the unique identity of this space emerged. It presented itself proudly as a modern component of the gallery, pleased to have arrived at its riverside location and insisting on being part of the Luan Gallery's visual story in the fullest of terms. The *Fragment sur les Institutions Républicaines IV* of Shane Cullen - created from the smuggled messages of the 1981 Maze hunger strikers presents itself to the audience as a forceful narrative of a dark time in our history which demands reflection. Positioned as it is along the main wall of the River Gallery the work invariably triggers reflection on our own memory of this time, and the stories that are told on the large black and white text panels. The soothing accompaniment of the river Shannon flowing parallel to the gallery, strolls gently alongside the audience as we breathe in Cullen's installation.

The new wing was determined to assert its entitlement to raise questions, to provoke and to challenge. There were four parties in the dialogue that ensued: the artworks, the building, the IMMA National Programme and Athlone Art & Heritage with the location of the gallery and its geographical centrality remaining ever present in the conversation. Ann Hamilton's installation *Filament II* demanded consideration, not only for the way in which it engages with the architecture of a site when in-situ, but also by extension the requirement from the audience to locate, participate and interact with the work. The installation's language of perception, of looking outward, of radiating from a central point found its home in the new gallery. As an installation piece *Filament II* announced 'here I am', 'step inside me', 'from within look out', all proclamations that affirm the Luan Gallery's emerging vocabulary. Hughie O'Donoghue's *Blue Crucifixion* and the Amelia Stein's *Loss & Memory* series of photographs, complete the tapestry of 'memory' and 'remembering'. These works are - at times clear and fathomable and at others almost obstinate. Radiating from this - a sense of intrusion, of peering into the memory landscape of others, of borrowing so-to-speak the memories of others.

The inclusion of photographic artworks by Amanda Coogan and Hannah Starkey, alongside the Stein series provides the viewer with a multiplicity of perspectives and platforms from which to communicate with the works and the recollections triggered within and without. Whether through performance as in the case of Coogan (*Medea* is a still photograph from a 3-hour performance), or through staging as with *Untitled - August 1999* by Starkey we are invited 'in' by the artists and invited 'in' by the space which houses these artworks.

Luan Gallery's inaugural exhibition of work from the IMMA Collection - it could be said raises more questions than it answers. If this is so - if there are unanswered questions then there must be discourse, and where there is discourse there is passion. For the opening of a new visual art space, this seems like a good place to start.

Miriam Mulrennan  
Manager, Athlone Art and Heritage

Amanda Coogan

*Medea*, 2001



Photograph, lambda print on  
diabond under acrylic  
92 x 123 cm

Collection  
Irish Museum of Modern Art  
Purchase, 2005

Shane Cullen

*Fragmens sur les Institutions Républicaines IV, 1993 – 1997*



Painted text; acrylic on  
96 styrofoam panels  
12 blocks of 8 panels  
each block 251 x 480 x 6 cm

Collection  
Irish Museum of Modern Art  
Purchase, 2000

Patrick Graham

*Ark of Dreaming*, 1990



Mixed media on canvas  
180 x 316 cm

Collection  
Irish Museum of Modern Art  
Purchase, 1991

Ann Hamilton

*Filament II*, 1996



Organza fabric, steel mount with  
electronic controller  
Dimensions variable

Collection  
Irish Museum of Modern Art  
Purchase, 2002

## ***Borrowed Memories***

As Ireland enters into a 'decade of commemoration', and debates rage about how to memorialise events such as the Dublin Lock-out, the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence, given the contested nature of their legacy even a hundred years on, an exhibition with the theme 'borrowed memories' seems particularly timely. The exhibition acknowledges memory's public character as it is circulated, borrowed and passed-down, but also draws attention to memory's dependence on personal acts of recollection, making it affective and individual, but also elusive and frequently unreliable. The historian, Pierre Nora, has argued that memory:

...remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived.<sup>1</sup>

Patrick Graham's *Ark of Dreaming* (1990), powerfully suggests the operations of memory through its form. The dense, gestural use of paint, the gaps and gashes in the canvas, some of which are crudely stitched together, the mysterious fragments of text and the vestiges of figuration, are all strongly reminiscent of the incomplete and unstable character of memory itself. Despite this partial and sometimes partisan nature and a tendency to forget as much as recall; memory provides access to past events, allowing us to place ourselves within the present and imagine our futures.

Shane Cullen's *Fragmens sur les Institutions Républicaines IV* (1993 - 1997), is a work concerned with public memory that speaks strongly to the present moment. Although monumental in scale, Cullen's work is the antithesis of the authoritative, univocal public monument and its attempts to assert a coherent, collective memory. The work engages with one of the most charged events in recent Irish history, the 1981 hunger strikes which led to the death of ten republican prisoners, but does so in a nuanced and layered manner that considers the traces and fragments of the event, and the complexities of their meanings. Over the course of four years, the artist hand-painted the text of 'comms', messages relating to the hunger strikes secretly passed in and out of the Maze prison by republicans.



Although the hand of the artist is visible in the work, other decisions made by Cullen render the work inexpressive and distant; each panel of text has a uniform background, a rigid format, and the text utilises the Bondoni typeface associated with the first French Republic. Mick Wilson has read the work in terms of absence and presence, the presence of the artist through his painstaking labour (and indeed the presence of the viewer through the considerable demands posed by reading the work) and the absent bodies of the hunger strikers 'reduced, erased and superseded by text.'<sup>2</sup>

Amanda Coogan has also been concerned to draw attention to absent bodies through the ritualised performance of her own. Several of her works memorialise those absent from official commemoration. In *Yellow* (2008), for example, first performed in the Oonagh Young gallery, the artist repeatedly scrubbed and wrung her long yellow dress, in a work which made visible the labour of those women rendered invisible through their incarceration in Ireland's Magdalene Laundries. *Medea* (2001) is a photographic trace of a performance of the same name, where Coogan, whose parents are deaf, used Irish Sign Language to narrate a history of the Irish Deaf community, their marginalisation within Irish society, and the oppression and abuse they suffered within Catholic institutions for the deaf. Irish Sign Language is a particularly charged vehicle of expression in this context. From the nineteenth-century origins of deaf education in Ireland, deaf boys and girls were educated separately, leading to the development of two distinct, gendered sign systems. Today the feminine signs have largely died out as the masculine signs have become standard, demonstrating how language can be a powerful carrier of memory, preserving a history of the marginalized even when, or perhaps particularly when, that language operates through silent gesture.<sup>3</sup>

This example also shows memory under threat, particularly within the cultures of minority groups that struggle against the increasing standardisation of modern life. Modern recording technologies, both visual (photography, film) and aural (recordings of oral testimonies, music etc.), alongside other attempts to preserve the physical traces of the past, as in the development and growth of archives, while seeming to offer new ways to fix memory, also create a 'crisis of memory'. These developments make memory permanently present, but also standardise memory, and replace individual memory with a collective 'third memory' formed not from actual, lived experience of events, but from an immersion in the media environment of late capitalist society.

Hannah Starkey's work creates a type of third memory; her photographs are atmospheric and evocative, they seem to record and preserve significant moments from everyday life. However, these allusive moments are staged; Starkey carefully controls the settings of her photographs, and uses professional actors. Because of this, works such as *Untitled - August 1999* create a type of false memory.

The development of modern technologies to record and keep memories, means that all modern memory is, to an extent, borrowed, but also creates new possibilities for the role of memory within culture. Andreas Huyssen argues:

The form in which we think of the past is increasingly memory without borders rather than national history within borders. Modernity has brought with it a very real compression of time and space beyond the local, the national, and even the international. In certain ways, then, our contemporary obsessions with memory in the present may well be an indication that our ways of thinking and living temporality itself are undergoing a significant shift... the most interesting aspect of the debate is what it may portend for the emergence of a new paradigm of thinking about time and space, history and geography in the twenty-first century.<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary art has shown a fascination with modern technologies of memory, with artists engaging with the archive and utilising modern media forms such as film and photography. This exhibition includes work which uses sound recordings (Daphne Wright's *Where do Broken Hearts Go*, 2000), and there's a particularly strong representation of photographic practices. Rather than presenting a standardised public memory, many of these works take an individual and personal approach. Amelia Stein's photographs, from her series *Loss and Memory* (2002), are a poignant reminder of photography's relationship to death, from its memorialising functions in nineteenth-century images of the recently deceased, to more recent concerns with photography's archival impulse. Stein created an intensely personal archive, through the photographing of her dead parents' possessions, in a work that speaks of her own grief,

but resonates with all those charged with the task of gathering and sorting the belongings of the deceased, deciding what to preserve, and what to lose. Stein's discussion of these objects strongly conveys their evocative power, their ability to summon the dead:

Objects which always required her permission to use were now mine. Working out what to throw away, what to keep... Everything has a use, every plate comes to life as I cook. Every possible recipe has its own pot. In spirit she stands beside me, my hands are her hands - I peel chop and stir my way into her memory.<sup>5</sup>

While Stein is concerned with her own direct memories of her parents, Hughie O'Donoghue's work has been concerned with an ancestral memory, evoking the ghosts of more distant relations. His more recent work has integrated photography into his paintings, where it acts as a trace of lives lost to direct experience. In many of his works landscape acts as a substitute for absent bodies, and the experience of particular landscapes can unite the generations. Returning to his mother's home in Donegal, the artist spoke of the Owenmore River acting as a conduit for memory, uniting bodies across time. The motif of the river infuses O'Donoghue's work, transforming the human figure into 'a meandering and flowing form', a tendency apparent even in certain of his Passion paintings, such as *Blue Crucifixion* (2010).<sup>6</sup>

The works in this exhibition borrow the memory of others, demonstrating the social aspects of memory, however; rather than a presentation of public memory in terms of collectively agreed meaning, these artworks emphasise the partial, incoherent and unstable nature of such memories. However unreliable these memories may seem, in their attempts to recover the absent bodies of the past, they represent an intensely personal, but also universal impulse, to cheat death and to alter time, making the past present.

Fiona Loughnane

Associate Lecturer, National College of Art and Design

- 1 Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, No.26 Spring 1989, p.8
- 2 Mick Wilson 'Fragments and Responses' in Liam Kelly (ed) *Shane Cullen: Fragments sur les Institutions Républicaines*, Derry: Orchard Gallery, 1997, p.19
- 3 for a detailed account of how Coogan's practice animates a collective memory see Kate Antosik Parsons, 'Bodily Remembrances: the performance of memory in recent works by Amanda Coogan' in *Artefact*, issue 3, 2009, pp 6-19
- 4 Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, California: Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 4
- 5 Amelia Stein, *Loss and Memory*, Dublin: Rubicon Gallery, 2002, up
- 6 Hughie O'Donoghue, 'Naming the Fields' in *Hughie O'Donoghue: New Paintings*, Dublin: Rubicon Gallery, 2001, p.6

Hughie O'Donoghue

*Blue Crucifixion*, 1993 – 2003



Oil on linen canvas in 3 panels  
330.2 x 823 cm

Collection  
Irish Museum of Modern Art  
Gift, The American Ireland Fund,  
2010

Hannah Starkey

*Untitled - August 1999*



C-type print  
122 x 152 cm

Collection  
Irish Museum of Modern Art  
Donated by George and  
Maura McClelland,  
2000

Amelia Stein

*Loss & Memory - His Shoes, 2002*



Photograph  
25 x 25 cm each

Collection  
Irish Museum of Modern Art  
Donation, in memory of Mendel Stein, 2004

Daphne Wright

*Where Do Broken Hearts Go*, 2000



Continuous tone photopolymer  
intaglio plates, tinfoil, glue, resin,  
woman's voice reading Country  
& Western songs  
Dimensions variable

Collection  
Irish Museum of Modern Art  
Purchase, 2000

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## **Colophon**

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Manager, Athlone Art and Heritage.

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