ARTFORUM

Review
March 2024

DUBLIN

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain

KERLIN GALLERY

The art of Ailbhe Ní Bhriain is often, and with good reason, profoundly pessimistic. Destruction, extinction, decay: Again and again her subjects draw on the catastrophic downsides of modernity. Visions of apocalyptic ruin have been common. For instance, her 2022 film installation *An Experiment with Time* guides us through a trio of flooded interiors: a historic anatomy theater in Hamburg, Britain's National Museum of Computing at Bletchley Park, and an Italian cathedral—places of learning, technological innovation, and collective belief—constructed or reimagined via CGI as abandoned sites of post-human desolation. For *Inscriptions of an Immense Theatre*, 2018—its title adapted from Samuel Quiccheberg's foundational 1565 text on museology, an openly imperialist guide to constructing a *Wunderkammer*—Ní Bhriain envisioned a similar sequence of waterlogged worlds, combining digitally altered footage of a limestone quarry, a prefab emergency accommodation used to house refugees, and a gallery in the British Museum in London. These diverse flood scenes were linked as a mesmerizing, mournful reflection on the origins, present-day crises, and potential aftermath of a modern civilization fueled in part by colonial pillage and extractive plunder.

Ní Bhriain's debut show at the Kerlin Gallery, "Interval Two (Dream Pool)," mined related territory with different tools. It centered on three imposing and intricate jacquard tapestries. These grand woven renderings of photomontage compositions, each roughly ten feet high, give sumptuous physical form to surrealistic visual amalgams of ghastly scenes and ghostly figures. Again, situations of disaster and devastation feature prominently. The tenebrous vista of destroyed buildings dominating *Interval VI* (all works cited, 2023) inevitably brought to mind recent footage of blitzed urban landscapes in Gaza and Ukraine, even as overlapping and intersecting imagery point to other times and places. Views of bomb-blasted architecture merge with cut-up snapshots of jagged cave formations, while a cluster of anonymous reclining figures (sourced from archives of early photography) lounged in the foreground, their incongruously lazing bodies disordered and incomplete, their faces absent or obscured. The six seated or standing figures in *Interval I*, appropriated from a nineteenth-century studio portrait, at first appeared larger, more important, but the featureless characters were nothing but contours emptied of human presence. Inside each posed outline, Ní Bhriain inserted an assortment of natural structures and man-made objects: stalactites and rock faces, a clump of coral resembling a human brain, a constructed walkway through underground caves. At the feet of the group, half visible, two Tasmanian tigers (a species wiped out by European colonial settlement) underscored the abiding sense of loss and existential uncertainty.

One paradoxical aim of Ní Bhriain's reality-rearranging art may be to see hard truths clearly: to face contemporary emergencies in light of the destructive long-term influence of capitalism and colonialism, looking behind illusions of inevitable human progress. (Among a selection of smaller pieces featured in the exhibition were, notably, several framed prints showing the backs of archival photographs: studies of the normally hidden material properties of historical images.) Yet the marvelously complicating effects of Ní Bhriain's artistic process also suggest an equal and opposite instinct: an interest in how separate strands of history might be diversely woven together, in different contexts, from different perspectives. Against another richly collaged background of caves and crumbling buildings, the faceless individuals gathered for a portrait in the third of the tapestries, *Interval V*, were positioned both inside and outside a thinly demarcated, golden-hued rectangle, a frame within the wider framing of the violently uncanny scene. Inside this artificial division between reality and its representation, other fragments of identically shaded lines were also evident: discontinuous indications of an additional inner border, hinting at a recursive *mise en abyme* of worlds within constructed worlds. Moreover, to see up close the details of these layered pictures—the varying colors and qualities of wool, cotton, silk, and Lurex threads—was to discover, each time, something else, something different. In such moments, to borrow familiar words from W. H. Auden, the "negation and despair" so frequently faced in Ní Bhriain's work become nuanced by "ironic points of light."

—Declan Long

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, *Interval V*, 2023, jacquard tapestry, cotton, wool, silk, Lurex, 9' 7⅛" × 14' 10¾".

SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHY MAGAZINE

Review by Neva Elliott
Issue #113, Winter 2023

Interval I (2023) jacquard tapestry, cotton, wool, silk, Lurex

AILBHE NÍ BHRIAIN
Interval Two (Dream Pool)

17 November – 6 January
Kerlin Gallery, Dublin

On the turn of the stairs of the Kerlin Gallery, I am met by an image from the diptych *Untitled (cage)*. At first, it looks blank, but on closer inspection, there are shades and texture in the darkness; it is a woven fabric. The other half of the diptych, on the converging wall, depicts a caged Orangutan, head in hand, an image suggestive of human despair. An earlier work of Ní Bhriain's refers to the Franz Kafka story *A Report to an Academy*, in which an ape learns how to act like a human to escape captivity. Here, it acts as a forewarning: we are approaching material on what it means to be human.

Reaching the top of the stairs and stepping into a bright white room to see the rest of Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's first solo exhibition at the Kerlin Gallery feels like an inversion; we should be going downwards into a basement to view hidden artefacts found bricked away.

Interval Two (Dream Pool) comprises three large-scale Jacquard tapestries, photographic-based works and two resin and polyurethane foam sculptures. The exhibition title refers to *The Dream Pool Essays* by Chinese polymath Shen Kuo from 1088, which includes what is considered the first published reference to climate change.

The tapestries, hung close to the floor, are created from digital imagery. The two mediums; modern mechanical weaving and computer files, share a common ancestor through the invention of the Jacquard loom in 1804. This used punch cards to automate the interaction of the warp and weft, generating woven patterns by the application of binary code, in effect, the first computerised image.

The composition of each wall hanging is achieved by collaging photographs. Unlike a seamless snapshot the resulting layered images take time to read; we can only discern fragments at a time. Instead of offering instantaneous comprehension the images suggest the constructed nature of knowledge. Woven in cotton, wool, silk and Lurex, the textiles are mainly black and white; when colour appears, it is in the corroded tones of age and handling.

Each tapestry contains formal photographic portraits; their subjects dislocated from family albums to haunt these Hades-esque netherworlds. In *Interval V*, layered

Interval V (2023) cotton, wool, silk, Lurex

Picture VII (2022)

Installation view by Lee Welch

portraits of faceless groups expose details of a crumbling multi-story building in the background. My eyes find it hard to settle on one element, catching a washing line, caves, a well, and a landscape. *Interval I* is occupied by a group portrait in which the figures have been cut out leaving only their silhouetted figures. The space where one head should be is obscured by a streak of red, disembodied shoes float next to the legs of fold-up chairs, a shell, a brain-like object and stalactites rest on the table. The scene is flanked by two departing cat-like animals (the extinct thylacine or Tasmanian Tiger), heads already out of view. *Interval VI* foregrounds what could be a nuclear family portrait; on cloth-covered rubble, in a near mirrored pose, two girls lean towards each other, headless, an owl in place of the face of one. Behind them are some barely discernible parental figures, with stalagmites and a bird of prey, on a backdrop of ruined tower blocks.

These images are not set in one specific place, they have the odd familiarity of somewhere that could be anywhere. In trying to capture these sites, I'm brought to the Black Lodge of David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*, a metaphysical space between realms accessed by fear, through which souls enter to confront their 'shadow self', the darker, hidden aspects of their nature.

The tapestries' titles, *Interval I, Interval V*, and *Interval VI*, also invoke an in-between-ness – of a break in a dramatic production. If it were a Beckett play there might be instructions to sit here and worry – about colonialism, displacement, climate change, the state of our own and collective humanity and its future. However, no such instructions are needed. If anywhere can become one of Ní Bhriain's apocalyptic disaster zones, we and our families can become its political debris. This is a not unfounded contemporary anxiety when seeing cataclysmic events unfold on the news. Today, it is impossible to view this work and not think of the situations in Palestine and Ukraine.

Of the framed works, *Picture VI* and *Picture III* initially look like abstracts but are actually photographs taken of the back of old documents. Their condition hints at histories without revealing their textual contents; the item in *Picture VI* is so damaged as to expose the soft textured fibres of its inner wadding, while the paper of *Picture III* is creased and pockmarked, perhaps eaten by insects. While the tapestries ask us to pick apart images, these works beckon us to look behind what we are being shown.

Facing each other across the gallery are two works featuring west of Ireland landscapes, *Untitled (mountain)* and *Untitled (seal)*, the first in a diptych with framed russet fabric, the latter a found photograph obscured by a crust of red and black acrylic. On either end of the gallery floor, one-and-a-half times life-sized white sculptures of bald cats curled up on life jackets, asleep or dead, saved or perpetually set adrift.

For the last few days, a James Baldwin quote has followed me: 'The role of the artist is exactly the same as the role of the lover. If I love you, I have to make you conscious of the things you don't see.' In a recent interview, Ní Bhriain also equated the act of looking or paying attention to the act of caring. Here is an artist who deeply cares, whose ambitious, exactingly produced work, a meditation on our times, slows us down and holds space for our anxieties by showing us a world where the familiar has become a devastating stranger.

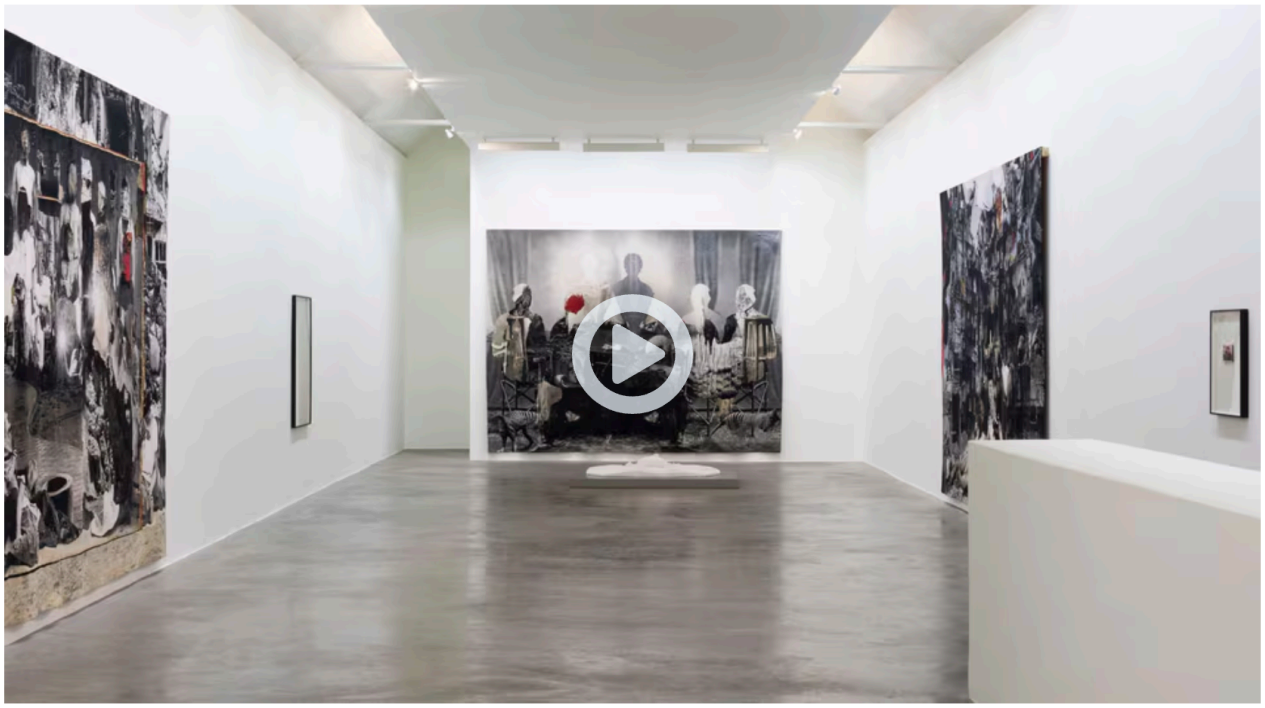
— Neva Elliott

THE IRISH TIMES

Review by Tom Lordan
Sunday 19 November 2023

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain: Interval Two (Dream Pool) – An exciting new stage in the artist's evolving visual practice

Visual art: The Co Clare artist's first Kerlin solo exhibition features three complex, room-dominating tapestries



Irish artist Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's first solo exhibition at Dublin's Kerlin Gallery runs until January 6, 2024.

Tom Lordan
Mon Dec 18 2023 - 15:38

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain: Interval Two (Dream Pool)

Kerlin Gallery, Dublin

★★★★☆

The Co Clare artist Ailbhe Ní Bhriain has a long-standing preoccupation with hybrid image-making processes, and over the past 20 years she has produced an arresting body of work that moves seamlessly between sculpture, installation, film, print and photography. This latest show at the Kerlin, her first solo exhibition for the Dublin gallery, augurs an exciting new stage in her evolving visual practice.

It features three room-dominating tapestries. Each is rendered with a Jacquard loom, which allows for the weaving of highly complex designs composed of several materials, including cotton, wool, silk and Lurex. In addition to the tapestries (all part of the Interval series), the exhibit includes several pigment prints and two resin-and-polyurethane sculptures of large, hairless cats, curled up in sleep, which are reminiscent of ancient Egyptian sarcophagi.

Patented by the French polymath Joseph Marie Jacquard in 1804, the Jacquard loom is able to process intricate designs by using a system of punched cards that determine where the threads are woven. Jacquard's method of transmitting information, of course, is a precursor to the computer. Charles Babbage, the English scientist often credited as the father of digital computing, famously repurposed this method to draw up designs for his "difference engine" and "analytical engine" inventions, which were some of the very earliest designs for calculating machines or "general purpose" computers. By incorporating the Jacquard loom into her practice, Ní Bhriain deliberately references the prehistory of computing.

As for the objects themselves, the tapestries are collages. Each combines and solicits from three traditional genres of image production: the family portrait, natural landscapes and something akin to war photography. At the centre of each study is a group photograph with several figures either standing or sitting in formal postures. Going by the clothes and texture of the portrait image, they look as though they are reproductions of archival photographs from the late 19th or early 20th century.

That said, the very notion of a centrepiece or central focus is studiously undermined by Ní Bhriain's collage technique. Intervening across the portraits are impressive rock formations, some of which bear the graceful, fluid aesthetic of mineral deposits in underground caves, while others are like distant visions of Alpine mountains. Adjoining these are images of bombed-out cityscapes, featuring strewn rubble and buildings in states of collapse. Each terrain of imagery invades the others equally, contributing to a sense of flatness in the composition. There are no layers, only distinct planes: the tapestries promote their surface and diminish any suggestion of depth or ground.

This flatness at the level of form is intriguingly amplified at the level of content. None of the human figures has a face – each physiognomy is replaced by scree, rock and detritus. Ní Bhriain's decision to eliminate her subjects' faces deprives the audience of a psychological foothold into the tapestries: depersonalisation is another tool the artist uses to achieve a sense of groundlessness.

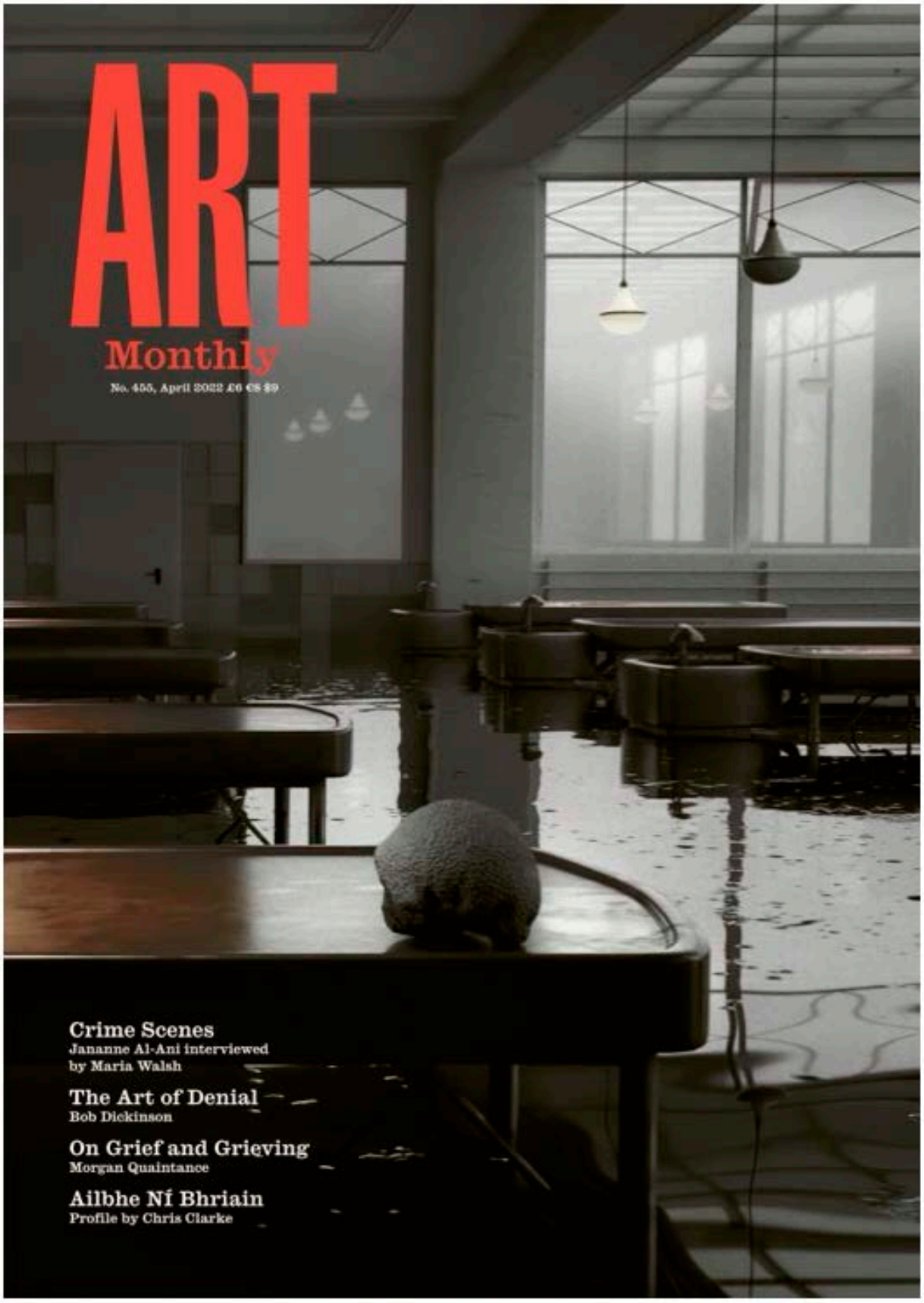
Highly recommended.

Interval Two (Dream Pool), by Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, is at the Kerlin Gallery, Dublin, until Saturday, January 6th

ART MONTHLY

Profile | Ailbhe Ní Bhriain

Chris Clarke | April 2022



Inscriptions of an Immense Theatre, 2018

'An Experiment in Time', installation view, CCA Glasgow

'Inscriptions IV', installation view, domobaal, London

Profile

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain

The Irish artist explores colonial legacies through archives and museums, the official repositories of memory and history, to reveal what might lay hidden as the Anthropocene era recedes.

As a repository of accumulated knowledge, the archive serves as an institutional memory. Within its voluminous spaces – often underground or offsite and generally inaccessible to the uninitiated layperson – residual information is contained and categorised, ordered under the unifying authority of what Jacques Derrida calls the power of consignation: '*Consignation* aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration. In an archive, there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or *secret* which could separate (*secernere*), or partition, in an absolute manner.' Any discontents are absorbed into the archive's all-encompassing logic, or, if they are too divergent, too difficult, they are buried under the suffocating mass of cumulative materials. To sift through the repository is to not only uncover arbitrary or outmoded items but also to discover how the archive accommodates itself to difference, all in order to maintain its inclusive, idealising structure.

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's work digs deep into these vaults. She exactingly records their exhaustive holdings, obscure artefacts and undesirable elements, and, in the process, the systems of thought that momentarily coalesced into accepted fact before being, in turn, overtaken by others. In her film *An Experiment with Time*, 2022, the camera incessantly scans its surroundings, taking a precise measure of partially submerged, long-deserted premises. A medical facility and its rows of identical examination tables, a laboratory of obsolete computer hardware, rotating valves and circuitry, the sculptural form of Laocoön and his sons, perpetually frozen in agony within the cavernous ruins of an ancient basilica; each site is subjected to the forensic gaze of the lens as it meticulously documents machinery and murals, architectural details and interior fixtures. At every turn, these elements are reflected back in pools of placid water, bisecting the horizon into an upper frame of apparent reality and a distorted, diluted mirror image, while the chiming, plangent tones of Susan Stenger's soundtrack reverberate and echo. These drowned worlds, occupied only by the occasional bird or lizard, reveal civilisation as a mere blip in a timeline that long predates and perseveres far beyond human activity. As in Ní Bhriain's earlier film *Reports to an Academy*, 2015, with its bestiary of taxidermy animals standing vigil among the flooded ruins of a natural history museum, there is a pervading atmosphere of aftermath and abandon, of a space that has outlived its former overseers. The artist explains that 'many of the animals represented are at risk of extinction – so they stand for an ancient mode of consciousness or memory, which we may be about to lose'.

In her recent solo exhibition at Centre for Contemporary Arts Glasgow, *An Experiment with Time* plays across two opposing walls, unsynchronised to conjure unanticipated juxtapositions between the twin projections. This sense of dislocation is emphasised in Ní Bhriain's use of intertitles, phrases appropriated – and adapted – from JW Dunne's 1927 text of the same name, which proposed precognitive dreaming as being

An Experiment in Time, 2022, video

predictive of future events. The repetition of certain phrases, and the time-lag between the films, allows one to catch moments of inconsistency, a nagging feeling that something is slightly 'off'. Feeling obliged to decipher this sensation, I transcribe the title cards, compare them with each other, as if to resolve the reason for my uneasiness. Sure enough, the statement 'by virtue of this system, a system of sleepless labour, they measure gesture, proportion, effect, worth', becomes 'a system of endless surface' and, later, 'a system of elaborate conception'. This uncertainty is also a feature of Ní Bhriain's work, whereby instances of fact are revealed as mutable, contingent on the particular circumstances of a precise moment and place. Fittingly, in her forthcoming exhibition for the 16th Lyon Biennale, *An Experiment with Time* will be adapted to present 'an alternative iteration of the film, specific to the site'.

If liquidity is a continuing theme in Ní Bhriain's work, it is always countered by moments of fixation, when the fluctuation of time becomes solidified and stabilised into what we – and our ancestors – falsely believed to be objective knowledge. The water momentarily settles and, in our hubris, we determine certain structures to have always been in place, unyielding and permanent (as the basilica in her film suggests, certitude is a matter of faith as much as scientific method; Derrida also reminds us that the archive 'refers to the *arkhe* in the *nomological* sense, to the *arkhe* of the commandment'). In one room at CCA Glasgow, an array of quarried limestone slabs populates the floors, with single electron valves suspended by invisible wire just above each block. The devices levitate in space, in contrast to the weighted mass below. On the surface and in the crevices of the limestone, a series of minuscule bronze snail shells evoke other timescales: fossilised molluscs, shells calcifying and hardening as they cling to the rock face. A sudden electrical charge and the whole scene could be spurred in to action, resuscitated back to life. The same quarries where Ní Bhriain sourced these materials are depicted in her surrounding, large-scale Jacquard tapestries, digitally collaged scenes of excavated landscapes and devastated cities. They teeter on the verge of collapse, revealing blank apertures and exposed foundations. Yet, there is another collapse taking place here in which distinctions of the past and present are interwoven. The Jacquard loom, invented in the early 19th century, used interchangeable punch cards to undertake repeatable, automated tasks and, as such, prefigured modern-day computers. This potential future technology is embedded in the warp and weft of the fabric and, in turn, the textures of the material dictate the resolution of its imagery.

The quarry thus represents another archive of memory, where deposits of prior events are captured and petrified, preserved in a repository of deep time. Ní Bhriain returns to this source again and again, digging into and dredging up the information buried far beneath the surface. In her 2018 film *Inscriptions of an Immense Theatre*, the camera tracks through various collections housed in the British Museum, through empty and anonymous housing units for asylum seekers, before plunging into a limestone pit, descending beyond the strata of distant geological epochs, the calcified residue of plant and animal life, and the ravaged, ruptured earth itself. The title offers a route in: the flemish physician Samuel Quiccheberg's 1565 treatise *Inscriptiones vel tituli theatri amplissimi* provided what may be the first organisational system for the collection of objects – and was the predecessor for museological taxonomies. His text also bears the traces of imperialist, colonial ideology, couched within a universalising mission of cataloguing and collecting information for all humanity. For Ní Bhriain, the exposure of these fixed systems is analogous to mining: the extraction of information disturbs the very environment that one inhabits. Remnants of past events are revealed and ruined through the same processes, destroyed in the act of discovery. In uncovering the ideological certainties embedded within the archive, one cannot help but unsettle its very foundations.

Chris Clarke is a critic and senior curator at The Glucksman, Cork.

ARTFORUM

Critics' Picks | Glasgow | Ailbhe Ní Bhriain

Calum Sutherland | 10 March 2022

In this compelling, dreamlike presentation, Ailbhe Ní Bhriain examines institutional power and imperial systems of representation to draw out their connections to anthropogenic decay. The show projects a ruinous future, montaged from the present. The two-screen film installation An Experiment with Time, 2022, nods to a 1927 book by J. W. Dunne that speculated on parallel timelines. Ní Bhriain applies the same strategy she used to create Reports to an Academy, 2015, in which slow panning shots survey spaces altered with CGI to look flooded with water. Here, the deluge envelops a German anatomical theater, an Italian church, and an English computing museum. These hypnotic scenes are interspersed with fragments of esoteric text and sections of black-and-white archival footage showing, among other things, women crying, an automaton, and a lone fighter jet. Together, they convey, in essayistic terms, a sense of apocalypse—the aftermath of an environmental catastrophe, perhaps. The two screens face each other, looping an out-of-sync and not quite identical sequence, heightening the sense of disorientation and fracture.

The film's mournful soundtrack—composed by Susan Stenger—bleeds into the adjacent gallery, where the aura of breakdown extends to "Intrusions," 2022, a striking series of monochromatic tapestries featuring a collage of ruined buildings. Their fabric evokes the granular quality of media images from a warzone. In another room, a set of arcane objects, some fruitlike and painted black, others cast in bronze, is housed in Perspex display cases, suggesting a provisional museological order. As elsewhere, these disparate and manipulated elements elude clear interpretation, offering a poetic lament for a conflicted time.