



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