



Sibyl Montague
SELF SOOTHERS
By **Cristín Leach**

During one of the looser levels of lockdown, Ireland 2020, I drove from Cork to Carlow to see Sibyl Montague's SELF SOOTHERS exhibition. I'd been consuming art digitally for months, including occasional glimpses of Montague's. Her latest work doesn't look "nice". In digital form, it doesn't even look comforting, despite the show's title.

In the middle of a global pandemic how, or what, do we want art to make us feel? Connected? Alone? Inspired? Understood? Challenged? Soothed? Is art a salve? For audience, or for maker? At the heart of Montague's creative impulse is a process. It's an unravelling and a re-connecting. And it's probably not designed to make you feel "good".

In the gallery, I look and I write: zips, spines, stitched lines; snakeskin pattern, disembodied. Bottles of

liquid, nondescript, ordinary, suspicious, unidentified. Soft drinks? Poitín? Water? It looks like Montague is trying to catalogue a mess by making, and containing, a bigger one. Her one-room installation at Visual includes snakeskin fabric-covered tubes reaching from ceiling to floor. On a mat, on the ground, there's spilled, pale pink liquid. Yogurt? Calamine lotion? Blankets, sheepskin, chopped up clothes; fabric, cut, stitched and scarred; precarious bowls of sticky stuff, rubber teats, magazine clippings, stains. All this binding, undoing, repairing and mess-making feels instinctive and interconnected, driven by gut feeling over linear thought. Sometimes we look to art for answers. Montague gives us unresolved exploration: no fixed destination, no end point, no solution to the conundrum of memory, progress or regress, and experience. Every texture, every colour, every item feels imbued with significance, and none of it is explicit. I've got some questions.



Whose blankets are they?
Whose Aran jumper is that?
Is the stuffed torso shape
hanging on the wall some
kind of impossible backpack?
Who did you pickle the
vegetables and fruit for? Who
is the baby in the photo on
top of the jar? What's in the
bowls? What's in the jars?
What's in the bottles? Where
did you find the animal skulls?
Did you keep them for a
long time? Did you ever wear
these clothes? Are the coke
cans filled with concrete? Are
talismans important? How
long have you been making
this show? Are you sewing
it all up to pack it away and
contain it, or are you making
it into art to expose and
reveal it? Are there people
in the room? Are you in the
room? Where will it all go
when the show is finished? Is
any of it precious?

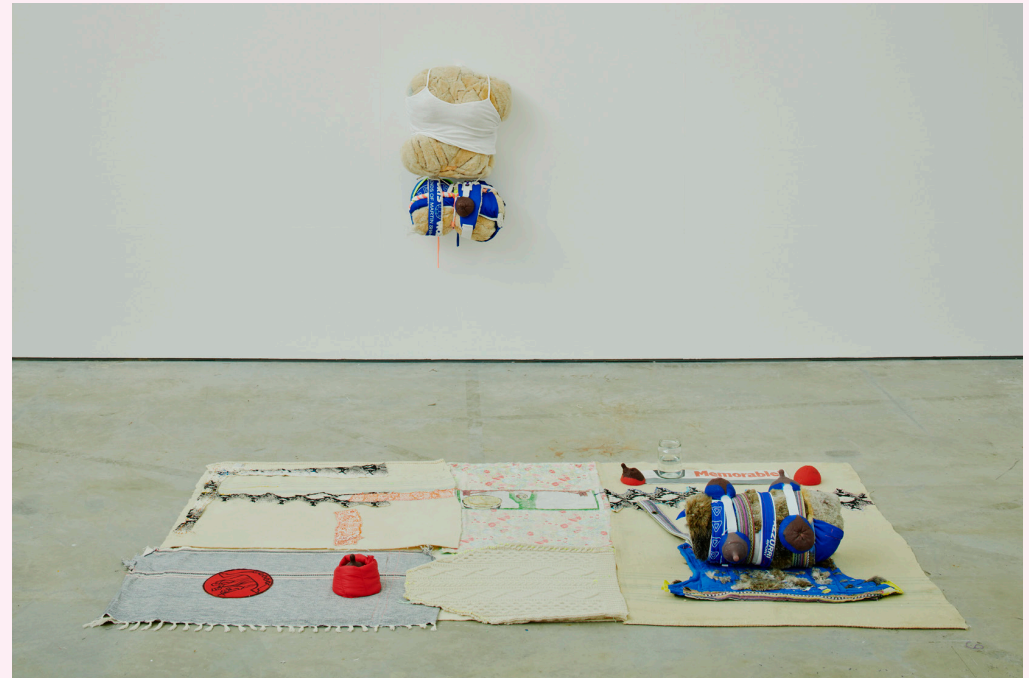
I phone her a week later. This
is an extract from the phone
conversation that took place:

*The blankets are the typical
Irish blankets of growing
up. Lamb's wool from a pre-
central heating era.*

*The Aran jumper is my sister's,
which I inherited. At some
point I had repaired it so
many times it got to the point
of not being wearable. For the
past couple of years, I've been
working with snake print so
much. One day I suddenly saw
the snakes in Aran. That was a
piece of the puzzle for me.*

*Impossible backpacks?
Ah yes, they are. I've been
making work around the
handheld for quite a while
and now they've grown
larger: they're something
you can embrace, hold or
carry. Coincidentally, with
the pandemic the intimacy
of holding (or the burden
of carrying) became more
accented.*

*I didn't pickle the vegetables.
They're purchased. Some of
the liquids in the bottles are
mixed by me. The one with
the sock is a mix of urine,
beer and water and it's been
in there for a while, but the
pickles are bought. There's
a nice aspect of being able
to get my materials from the
supermarket.*





I was focusing on the handheld. The “handheld” feels like a very new technology but actually it’s so old. Most objects are handheld.

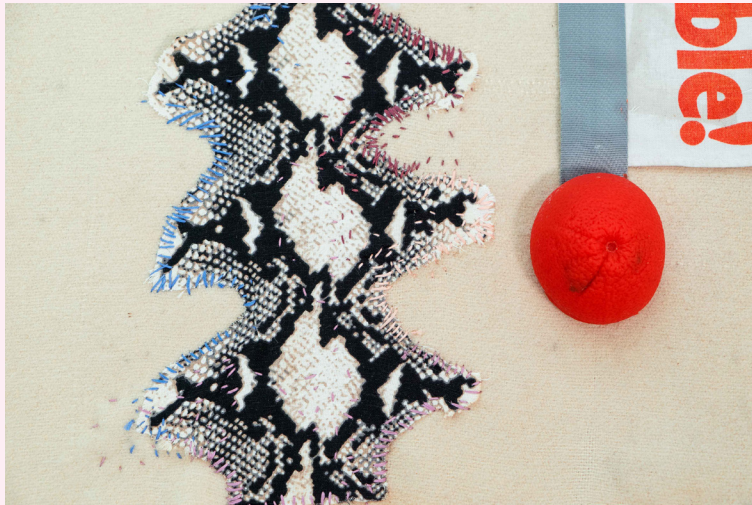
The bottle is something that I keep coming back to. It’s an early handheld. I started thinking about the bottle and the pub my grandfather [my father’s father] used to drink at: his brother’s pub and apparently a wild place. He wasn’t getting enough work to support the family; it was the Depression in New York. This story allowed me to think about the handheld – in this case, the bottle – as a shapeshifting object. Shifts that become generational. It’s also trying to approach alcohol, a liquid embedded in the Irish psyche. I never got to meet my granddad, but I can hold a bottle and I know he held a bottle.

I started researching at the National Folklore Collection at UCD, one of the largest oral archives in the world, to find new legibility around the material I’m working with. There’s drawer upon drawer of

accounts of supernatural and other dimensional entities – faeries, shapeshifters, giants, banshees, changelings. I find it interesting how the discovery of Quarks (quantum physics particles that change when you observe them) offer a quantum model for shapeshifting – something habitual to our ancestors. The collection has a lot of material on plant medicines: the shamrock was a sacred plant, but as a national emblem it has been so endlessly reproduced it’s lost its alchemy. My research has become a practice of decolonising my own value system, and re-centering ancestral values around material and resources.

I was looking for the snake in the collection. It’s such a large piece of the Irish narrative, but its history has been hard to piece together. St. Patrick drives them out; it’s visible in high crosses and under the foot of the Blessed Virgin, who is pictured crushing the snake: most grottos feature a snake underfoot. That’s likely an illustration of the suppression of Gaelic indigenous





knowledge. Otherwise there's very little mention of it. You might associate snake print with a skirt or a top, not serpents.

Originally, I focused on gathering all the snake print textiles I could find in Dublin. My intervention was simply in restoring them back into snake form, consciously re-working that connection. It became an extended process of collecting, taking apart and re-stitching items back together, creating dozens of snakes.

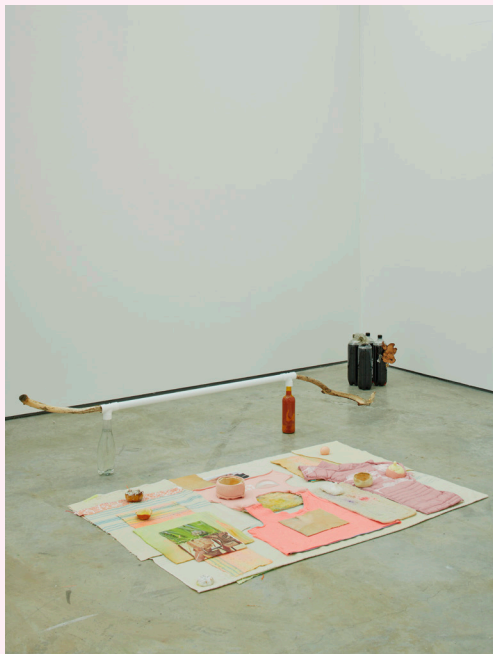
That baby photo? If you go to get your photographs developed, that's printed on the envelope you get them back in. I kept the image at the time because it really struck me how those images are marketed towards women in a very specific way. I guess I'm kicking back at that. I've been pulping women's magazines for a number of years now and interacting with all that shit that women get marketed towards them.

The bowls? They are dried grapefruits and oranges. Then the nipple oranges, the silicone works, are the inversion of those, they're cast from oranges. So, it's like a breast being a bowl or a container, or not.

There are pickled vegetables, cabbage, carrots, lemons and limes in the jars. The bottles are untampered with. There is water, tonic water, carbonated water, whiskey, coke and palm oil.

The animal bones are from walks, they're mostly from sheep. I kept some of them for a long time, yes. I have an old cow's bone which the neighbour's dog buried in the front garden and forgot about.

Some of the clothes are used - the dish towels, the GAA top, the shearling. The snake prints were bought at end sales. So they are rescued, having almost passed through the whole cycle, the whole chain, without having been used.



The coke cans are filled with concrete and Wicklow quartz, because there might be gold in Wicklow I reckon.

There's another word for talisman: amulets. In the work, they are the debris and things in the corner of my studio, things I pick up, or find on the street. I think when you press human energy onto objects, they absorb that energy. Talismans are important.

There is sewing in this work. There's a labour of care:



binding and sewing things together, giving attention to poor materials - and there's taking things apart.

I'm not in the room. It seems personal, but I think what's personal is the intimacy of the handmade and handheld.

The snakes are traveling to Galway for an exhibition called The Law is a White Dog at TULCA Festival of Visual Arts. The rest of the work will come back to the studio. Parts often get reassembled into new



works. Things get destroyed or things get remade and it goes back into the current, into the stream of materials in the studio.

Is any of it precious? No! I mean, no, what does precious mean? Like it has a monetary value? No. But, somehow I feel like putting snakes back into snake form is important, so I'm going to continue doing that. The actions and gestures behind the works have more value than the actual outcomes. It's the energy that's been directed

and focused in a certain way that's important.

Now, how do you feel?

***SELF SOOTHERS* showed at VISUAL Carlow from 23 March - 18 October 2020**

***TULCA: The Law is a White Dog* curated by Sarah Browne ran from 6 - 22 November 2020**

Photography by Patrick Bramley & Ros Kavanagh