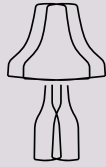




**REVIEWS**

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Object

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## *Review: Sibyl Montague, Cláí na Péiste (Worm's Ditch)*

Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin 16

December 2022 – 19 February 2023

*John Graham*

Entering from the rainy street, the bare room of the gallery is bathed in pink, violet and permutations of mauve. From within this soothing spectrum comes a faltering, disembodied voice. “I am the zombie; your wish will command me”. Slowed to a funereal pace, the familiar song is made unfamiliar by a glitchy, asymmetrical beat. Róisín Murphy’s vocal, pressed into service as part of a complex sound design, is the first in a sequence of sung voices effectively narrating this animated story of pigs and a circling worm – the *Péiste* of the exhibition title.<sup>1</sup> Screened directly onto the wall, the warm-hued images are framed by smart, black acoustic panels. As characters arrive in and out of the storyline, they appear to come and go through these dark portals. The eponymous *Péiste* is in two places at once, a

coiling worm/serpent within the main narrative, and a writhing figure let loose across the gallery floor. Psychedelic and loud, a sinister resonance undercuts the cartoon cheeriness. As animal noises snort and snuffle through the mix, it's all pretty dark, but funky.

A project commissioned by Temple Bar Gallery + Studios, the exhibition title, *Cláí na Péiste* (*Worm's Ditch*), refers to ancient earthworks running between Connacht and Ulster. Likely to prevent cattle raids over the territories of opposing clans, these raised borderlands were said to be made, according to different folklore, by a mythical wild pig or serpent. This attribution of human works to animal agency is buried and subverted within the film, with the mythic power of animals reduced to something much more quotidian. Borders of various kinds are enacted and traversed within the exhibition structure. The gallery becomes an enclosure for viewers held within its darkened space, while the shapeshifting *Péiste*, liberated from the parameters of the screen, runs amok behind your seat, and in the back of your mind.

This is not the first time Montague has created

animal surrogates. For *SELF SOOTHERS*, her 2020 show at Visual Carlow, fashionable fabrics of snakeskin print were appropriated to make snake-like forms.<sup>2</sup> The real animal behind the trashy aesthetic was foregrounded, albeit as shapes akin to stuffed toys or overly extended draught excluders. By deconstructing and reconfiguring matter, the artist imbues it with the value of care, a piously valorised but poorly rewarded function in our neo-capitalist economy. With a small exception (a discreetly positioned group of cast-silicone animal toys), the materials characterising Montague's previous work are not part of this exhibition. Instead, the video installation becomes like a stream of unconsciousness, a sublimation of awkward materials into more digestible form. The enlivening spirit inherent in material transformation is resolved into something else, a more literal animation.

To a significant degree, wider contexts are fleshed out through the exhibition's mediation, with a framed working drawing on an outside wall, a billboard sized window display acting as a film-noir style movie poster, and a pamphlet text running to almost 1200 words. With the word count effectively doubled by the translation of the

whole thing into Irish, you might feel, as I did, a little daunted, but the work carries its weighty contexts extremely lightly.

Like the German artist Andrea Büttner, Montague explores complex value systems through expressions of empathy and humble means. Touch is important. Things held, fashioned and refashioned, the understanding of relationships through habits of the hand. While Büttner has made paintings from the fabrics used for workers' uniforms and is fascinated by natural materials like moss – “the dust of nature” –, Montague has frequented Penneys clothing stores and supermarket grocery aisles to amass (perhaps to liberate) her base materials.<sup>3</sup> In Carlow, there was a lot of pickling going on too, with rows of jarred fruit and vegetables sealed in lubricants like whiskey, water and coke. In the same exhibition, her snake-forms were suspended over objects on the floor, arrangements that included variously filled bottles and jars, woollen blankets, layered cuts of pastel-coloured fabrics and clothing smeared with unctuous, miscellaneous creams. Familiar, but oddly alienating, these unheimlich assemblages were aftermaths, new beginnings, or both, a gathering of roadside picnics in some

indeterminate zone.<sup>4</sup> None of these are the historically ‘proper’ materials of art – though Joseph Beuys might beg to differ – and so all the better for challenging historical conventions.

Often viewed as light entertainment, hand-drawn animation has also been used for information films and subtle forms of propaganda. In cartoons made for children, ideas can be inserted under the cover of absurdity – *Tom* never catches *Jerry*, and the *Roadrunner* always escapes the *Wile E. Coyote*. Montague's film benefits from these associations, her use of the process not unlike her appropriation of other materials, where seemingly innocent forms are revealed to be mired in complex ethical considerations. Within the film, as hand-drawn animation and CGI give way to puppetry, a collection of detritus – bedraggled bundles – float about within a blackened space. There are no people here, as such, but a human presence is detectable as a negative space moving within the colourful churn. Other humans behind the scenes include animators, archivists, producers, camera operators, editors, curators, and writers. Seemingly divorced from the material basis of Montague's previous work, *Cláí na Péiste* becomes an orchestration of people and practices extending

the artist's hand towards other means.

The installation draws on numerous sources, including references to mythology, history and the Irish language. Mimicking the Celtic patterns found on ancient stone carvings and illuminated manuscripts, the *Péiste* is like a wriggling usherette, tying different elements together while tying itself into knotty configurations. Montague's research includes an extended engagement with the National Folklore Collection at UCD. The collection holds artefacts bridging transitions between both oral and written forms and handmade and industrial processes. Our troubled history with language is central, especially the gaps and misunderstandings occurring through forms of translation. 'There is nothing outside of the text', Derrida wrote, emphasising that all claims to objective authority are suspect.<sup>5</sup> In any kind of translation, authority and recognition are inevitably broken down, assuming a kind of floating contingency, an interzone of multiple potential meanings. The film's atmospheric soundtrack – sounding at times like a dubstep opera – explores this idea effectively, skewing traditional and contemporary genres of Irish music into a kind of dream fugue – a mesmerised

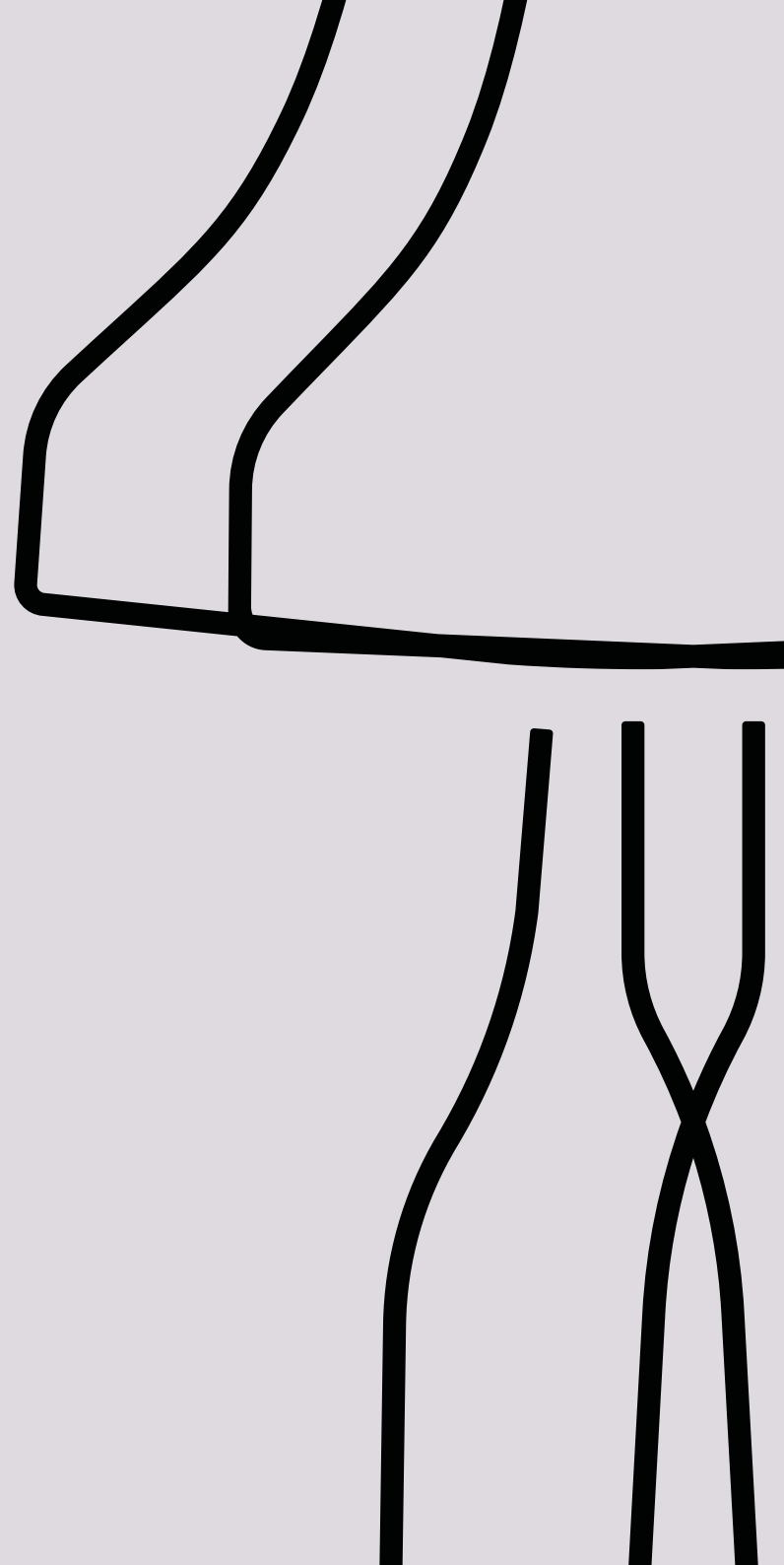
Moloko, a pitch-shifted Seán Ó Riada – with added vinyl crackle and hiss.

Animal farming can be a difficult subject matter, and the often-cruel trajectory of that process is not easy to look at head on.<sup>6</sup> Montague's terms of reference are wider, but taking on this subject without becoming preachy is an achievement in itself. The sleepy siren, 'Muc', is a doe-eyed cutie who wiggles her arse gamely in showgirl style. The headless, pulsating torso of 'Psychopump' is the first thing we see on screen and the external appearance of an impending inner world. The Disney-esque treatment of animal characters echoes how meat products are sold, with anthropomorphism promoting ironic affection, a sentimental attachment enhancing our desire to consume but destructive of genuine feeling. The film's trio of 'Weaner', 'Squealer' and 'Finisher', make this most explicit, three little pigs named for the different stages of livestock processing they represent.

Like the gallery itself – with natural light filtered through flesh-tinted windows – the film feels internal, an abattoir, a womb, a twisted sonic dream. A world inside the body of a pig, but

also of some collective psyche, where lost souls combine in a centrifugal dance macabre. Everything here is processed – drawings, sounds, language, and ultimately, the pigs themselves. As the music stutters and grinds to a halt, all that's left is a tragi-comic finale of animated sausage links, a chorus of strung-out forms serenaded by a baby-voice song. A singing sausage sinks to the floor, jaded by the breezy façade, a final curtain of closing eyes.

1. Moloko/Róisín Murphy, *Sing It Back*, 1999
2. Sibyl Montague, *SELF SOOTHERS*, Visual Carlow, 23 March – 18 October 2020
3. Andrea Büttner, *Moss/Moss*, Hollybush Gardens, London, 27 January – 4 March 2012
4. Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* (1979) and the infamous 'Zone' are based on the science fiction novel *Roadside Picnic* (1972) by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky.
5. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, corrected edition, trans Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore and London, John Hopkins Press. First published 1967, Translation 1976 p.158
6. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* was originally published as *Animal Farm: A Fairy Story* (Secker and Warburg, London, 1945). This political fable inevitably comes to mind, though, with the exception of Snowball, Orwell's pigs are hardly sympathetic.





# imma: 30 years of the global contemporary

With a rich history, global reach and fundamental relationship with human existence, textiles and their production are a powerful lens through which to view some of the concerns of the last thirty years, and to read the museum's collection and history.

Many contemporary artists have harnessed the broad socio-political and cultural heritage associations of textiles and their histories to explore wider concerns such as globalisation, industrialisation, migration, labour rights, and the environment, amongst others. Similarly, textiles have provided space to express more personal matters, to depict the biographical, emotional and psychological.

Recently, this personal space of expression feels as if it might have been profoundly important and sought-after. With the isolation of pandemic restrictions came various adaptive behaviours, such as working online, dog-owning, and crafting and textile-making in the home. Textile-making, as related to the haptic and hand-made, was used as a personal form of resilience, self-sufficiency and healing in what became temporarily a post-touch world.

Textile production in various forms, and over thousands of years, has been so integral to humanity, globally, that its residue is present in everyday language. A few examples in English include clue, interlace, shed, shuttle, spider, spinster and web.

Despite, or perhaps due to, being so fundamental to culture and human activity, textile as fine art holds an uneasy position. Anni Albers, in an interview with Gene Baro in 1977,<sup>1</sup> commented on the lack of recognition associated with textile practice, 'I find that when the work is made with threads it's considered a craft; when it's on paper, it's considered art... Prints gave me a greater freedom of presentation as a result, recognition comes more easily and happily, the longed-for pat on the shoulder.' Albers is by no means the only artist to have observed this bias and imposition of hierarchy upon craft and textiles, and Rozsika Parker commented on the effect of such a hierarchy in *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*,<sup>2</sup> 'I identified historical hierarchical division of the arts into fine arts and craft as a major force in the marginalisation of women's work'. However, it is this marginal position that many contemporary artists, particularly women, have exploited to engender agency and empowerment. This is the subtext connecting the works in *Social Fabric*. The artworks, sourced from both IMMA's Collection and loans, are installed in the four domestic-sized rooms of IMMA's Courtyard Galleries, each with a slight shift in focus.

The first room considers textile as a commodity, associated with global industry and exchange through the works of Ibrahim Mahama and Sibyl Montague. Both artists play with the life cycle of commodity, but rather than

1. Albers A., in conversation with Gene Baro, G. (1977). *Anni Albers: Drawings and Prints*. New York: The Brooklyn Museum.
2. Parker, R. (reprint, 2010). *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. London: I.B. Taurus & Co. Ltd.
3. Plant, S., (1995). 'The Future Looms: Weaving Women and Cybernetics', in *Body and Society*. London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: SAGE. [https://monoskop.org/images/1/13/Plant\\_Sadie\\_1995\\_The\\_Future\\_Looms\\_Weaving\\_Women\\_and\\_Cybernetics.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/1/13/Plant_Sadie_1995_The_Future_Looms_Weaving_Women_and_Cybernetics.pdf)

pointing to the wasted endpoint of a material object, imbue it with regenerative energy to imagine future possibilities.

Kathy Prendergast's *Stack* is one of two artworks by women which IMMA acquired in 1991. The second room uses this piece as a catalyst to look at textile materiality as a representation of underpaid labour and vulnerability in both industry and domestic situations. *Stack* is shown here alongside works by Maureen Connor and Sarah Browne, artists who have also used the gender associations of domestic textile production, and textiles in homemaking, to investigate themes of labour and women's rights.

The focus shifts next to the opportunity provided by textile-making and materiality for personal expression and agency—proposing that textile in all its forms not only empowers through frequently subverted association with the 'tender crafts', but also as a symbol of care, repair, and an heirloom of knowledge and self-sufficiency. The works by Louise Bourgeois, Rachel Fallon, Leanne McDonagh and Kathy Prendergast included here conjure ideas of repair and protection. Bassam Al-Sabah considers queer possibility by subverting the gender associations of the different media he works with, while Rhona Byrne's wearable works are tools for activating relationships between individuals, groups and communities.

The final room in *Social Fabric* explores the relationship between industrialised textile production and the development of computers and contemporary digital technologies. In 1995, Sadie Plant wrote 'The Future Looms: Weaving Women and Cybernetics'<sup>3</sup> in which she observes 'the computer emerges out of the history of weaving, the process so often thought to be the quintessence of women's work.' Ahree Lee's video *Pattern : Code* looks at the interconnections between technology, craft and women's labour, while Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, similarly reflecting on the relationship of the Jacquard loom to binary code, explores the backwards transition from the virtual to the tactile by translating digital collages to woven tapestries.

*Social Fabric* offers a brief glimpse into how, over the last thirty years or so, artists have used textiles—with all their richness of materiality, associations with knowledge, technologies and industrialisation, human and environmental resources, and hierarchical contradictions—as a supercharged tool through which to discuss narratives of the here and now, and of the global and personal.

**Georgie Thompson**  
curator

Sibyl Montague  
(Ireland, 1979)  
*Hand Held (Bottle)*, 2020  
carbonated water, tonic water, plastic bottles,  
bone (sheep vertebrae), sun dried magazine,  
dimensions variable  
on loan, courtesy of the artist

Sibyl Montague  
(Ireland, 1979)  
*SELF SOOTHERS (Snake)*, 2020  
reassembled snake print items, so,  
hand sewn textile, wadding, PVC  
IMMA Collection, purchase, 2020





Sibyl Montague  
(Ireland, 1979)  
**SELF SOOTHERS (Snake)**, 2020  
reassembled snake print items sourced from fast fashion cycles SS 2019, AW 2019, SS 2020 (Ireland),  
hand sewn textile, wadding, PVC overflow pipe, jute cord, dimensions variable  
IMMA Collection, purchase, 2020



Ibrahim Mahama  
(Ghana, 1987)  
**BUPEI**, 2017  
scrap metal tarpaulin on charcoal jute sacks, 325x330cm  
on loan, courtesy of the artist and White Cube, London

Sibyl Montague  
(Ireland, 1979)  
**Hand Held (Bottle)**, 2020  
Coke, water, plastic bottle, chicken wire, paper, (dirty) sock, dimensions variable  
on loan, courtesy of the artist



Sibyl Montague  
(Ireland, 1979)  
**SELF SOOTHERS (Snake)**, 2020  
re-assembled snake print items sourced from fast fashion cycles SS 2019, AW 2019, SS 2020 (Ireland),  
hand sewn textile, wadding, PVC overflow pipe, jute cord, dimensions variable  
iMMA Collection, purchase, 2020



Ibrahim Mahama  
(Ghana, 1967)  
**BUPEI**, 2017  
scrap metal tarpaulin on charcoal jute sacks, 325 x 330cm  
on loan, courtesy of the artist and White Cube, London



Sibyl Montague  
(Ireland, 1979)  
**Hand Held (Bottle)**, 2020  
Coke, plastic bottles, leather, charms, copper wire,  
bone (sheep), dimensions variable  
on loan, courtesy of the artist



Sibyl Montague  
(Ireland, 1979)  
*Hand Held (Bottle)*, 2020  
Coke, plastic bottles, leather, charms, copper wire,  
bone (sheep), dimensions variable  
on loan, courtesy of the artist

# A different cloth

Seán Kissane sees an artistic tradition in the work of Sibyl Montague that continues on from the French artist Louise Bourgeois.

**S**ibyl Montague (b. 1979, Cork) is a multidisciplinary artist working out of Temple Bar Studios, Dublin. Her practice encompasses sculpture, video, drawing and assemblage. Her installation *SELF SOOTHERS (Snakes)* is currently on show at IMMA as part of the 30-year anniversary exhibition, 'The Narrow Gate of the Here and Now, Chapter 4: Social Fabric'. The theme underlying this work is fast fashion – that is, mass-produced and low-cost replicas of recent catwalk trends, made in Asia and sold by multinational retailers. The theme is expressed through the artist's process, which is to gather clothes from this industry and remake them. The drives behind this include exploitative working practices which affect vulnerable women; the

massive impact on the environment; and the artist's own need to understand the paradox of making artifacts that comment on the economics of globalisation, while inserting yet more objects into globalised economies.

Montague's methodology for this work involved researching texts such as Mary Condren's *The Serpent and the Goddess* (1989). The snakes that St Patrick drove out of Ireland were, of course, our pagan ancestors. The snake can also reference Eve, Original Sin and Christianity's villainising of sexualities. Yet, when the snake sheds its skin, it becomes a symbol of rebirth. Like the spiral of a DNA helix, it is at the source of all creation; it is the umbilical cord. The second research method is less familiar – as Montague describes



## IN THE SLOW AND MEDITATIVE UNPICKING OF THE STITCHES SEWN BY WOMEN IN ASIA, THE ARTIST CONSCIOUSLY CONNECTS TO THOSE MAKERS, HONOURING THEIR WORK AND COMMEMORATING THEIR LABOUR

it, 'loitering in multinational stores to understand my own desires around consumerism and my compulsions to acquire, sometimes buying a snake-print skirt for €1 – that is – at the very bottom of the retail cycle'. She identifies this compulsion to acquire as deriving from the lessons learned from Western capitalism – the 'trick' that to be happy, to soothe ourselves, we need to acquire things exterior to us. This contrasts with Eastern or (speculative) pre-Christian spirituality, which teaches that it is the connection to nature, the present moment and oneself that makes a person complete.

Another unconventional, hidden and performative aspect of the process was in acquiring a piece of clothing from a specific store, bringing it to the studio and transforming it by unpicking the stitches and remaking it, then returning it to the store from which it came and leaving it behind on a shelf. For Montague, this was an exercise in seeing the artifact somewhere outside the privileged, white-cube space

of the gallery. It directly implicates the 'high' economy of the art market in the 'low' economy of fast fashion, and in doing so interrogates the idea of value.

The answer proposed by the artist is that it is human time and energy that have true worth. In the slow and meditative unpicking of stitches sewn by women in Asia, the artist consciously connects to those makers, honouring their work and commemorating their labour. More broadly, she connects this practice to a long line of women makers, in sewing, embroidery or lace – including her own grandmother, an accomplished embroiderer. Yet, while those traditional Irish crafts had outcomes that were fine and intricate, *SELF SOOTHERS (Snakes)* arrives at a different aesthetic point. These slyly feminist objects are somewhat raw in appearance; they have no 'intrinsic' value and are modelled over (discarded) Wavin waste pipes, which returns them to a form that mimics the titular 'snake'. This layering of abject elements articulates an ambivalence about the traditional hierarchies of art, pushing against the low status given to crafts in opposition to that granted to fine-art painting and the contiguous female-male divide.

Montague can be described as the heir to two artistic traditions: firstly, that of Louise Bourgeois, who, in the gathering together of scraps of tapestry or other fabrics with personal history, created new anthropomorphic forms filled with a psychological charge – a powerfully suppressed energy speaking of family tensions and a dystopian vision of the domestic. Bourgeois' spider and Montague's snake share the characteristic of waiting patiently for their prey before they strike with a poisonous bite. A second tradition with which Montague can be associated is that of Rosemarie Trockel, who assertively critiques the subjectivities of visual representation and art's commodification. Trockel often upends the conventions

of exhibition-making by presenting the work of other artists alongside her own; by restlessly employing a polyvalence of artistic forms; and, notoriously, by making knitted paintings that are superficially copies of Abstract Expressionist paintings by famous men.

Montague's preoccupations with consumerisation, globalisation, ecology and feminisms each speak to the precipice at which we all now find ourselves – the tipping point of climate catastrophe. Her insistence on slowing down, highlighting unsustainable consumption and refocussing on ancient knowledge offers a creative pathway to follow. Her self-reflexive practice and its implicit critique of the art market implicates both you, the reader, and me, the writer. Montague's art urges us to engage consciously in the habits of our daily lives, but also with the art industry in which we participate. ■

Sibyl Montague, 'Social Fabric', curated by George Thompson, Irish Museum of Modern Art, until 19 November.

Seán Kissane is Curator of Exhibitions at IMMA.

**1** SIBYL MONTAGUE  
*SELF SOOTHERS (SNAKE)* 2020  
Re-assembled snake print items, sourced from fast fashion cycles SS 2019, AW 2019, SS 2020 (Ireland) textile, foam, pvc overflow pipe, hemp cord  
Collage from IMMA, Photo Róis Kavanagh

**2** Sibyl Montague  
Photo Leta Girardin

# THE LAW IS A WHITE DOG



## VIII. The Law is not evergreen

Certain kinds of legal speech (judgements, in particular) force new realities into being, when they are declared by the powerful: 'I find you guilty'; 'I pronounce you married'; 'I sentence you to X'. Galway Arts Centre is home to a disruptive series of presentations that revise, evade, or re-invent aesthetic language, through multiple senses.

Bathed in an orangey glow on the ground floor and placed throughout the building are silent sculptures by Sibyl Montague, composed of disassembled textiles, plastic bottles and animal bones. Materials of 'fast fashion' (fluorescent polyester, woven wool, printed tee-shirt slogans and synthetically-rendered snakeskin) are somehow slowed down, digested, composted and re-wilded in the gallery. Montague's set of mysterious objects embody an illegible and resolute logic of superstition. A series of new, unruly paintings by Kevin Mooney involve canvas, jute, distemper bound with rabbit-skin glue. The paintings present surfaces endowed with a mass of hairy limbs, murky leaves and decorative patterns, in a distinctively agricultural palette of broadleaf green and gammon pink.

Two voices permeate the building; the occasional, machine voice used by AM Baggs in their video, *In My Language* (2007), and the eerie voice of Suzanne Walsh, as she recites *Lazarus Lingua* (comprising the names of extinct animals, from 4000 BC to present day). The Latin used in Walsh's performance has some small changes in pronunciation to link it with Classical Latin, a language now also extinct, but once spoken throughout the Roman Empire, rather than Neo or scientific Latin. In this recitation, the names can also suggest something esoteric or theatrical, connoting the ritualistic Ecclesiastical Latin of the Catholic Church, to the occult, or the fictional usage that's vaguely familiar from magical spells of fantasy books and films. *Lazarus Lingua* is primarily an invocation of the dead, and in particular the extinct, most recently from human activity. These utterances also at times move beyond language, into calls, vocalisations that dissolve these human categorisations into something that brings awareness of our own animal nature, as well as querying the order we place on others.

Baggs' video presents an intense experience of 'felt thought' as they show themselves interacting with their indoor surroundings: hands flapping, singing with string, dancing with water, smelling pages, rocking. The second part of the video is a complex 'translation' of the first: Baggs, a non-speaking autistic person, attempts, using a communication device with a synthesized voice, to place and

articulate the significance of oral or written language in their world. Referring to the first part of the video as their 'native language', they explain how different their mode of thought is, and that, 'The thinking of people like me is only taken seriously if we learn your language.' They claim that the video is not 'voyeuristic freak show where you get to look at the bizarre workings of the autistic mind', but rather a sincere effort at communicating and defending the profound value of difference: 'There are people tortured, people dying, because they are considered non-persons, because their kind of thought is so unusual to not be recognised as thought at all.'

## IX. The Law is a sprung rubber dancefloor

The third and final screening programme of *The Law is a White Dog* is titled *The Grammar of Pleasure* and features films by Eric Baudelaire and Charlotte Prodger and a performed reading by Eimear Walshe (see pages 39-47 of this book).

Baudelaire and Prodger's works edge towards identifying forms of sensual or sexual pleasure, but deliberately remain in the elusive space between sensory impression and its naming. [sic] by Eric Baudelaire, made in 2009, explores the Japanese technique of censorship known as *bokashi*. In this method, genitalia or other sexually arousing features of an image are voided through delicately scratching the ink from the surface of the page.<sup>17</sup> [sic] draws attention to the interpretative process of defining and regulating obscenity, and the obscure quest of creating a universal standard of potentially arousing imagery. [sic] also highlights the gentle erotics of the censorship act itself.

:-\* (*Colon Hyphen Asterisk*) by Charlotte Prodger features a series of videos ripped from YouTube, involving close-ups of trainers being taken apart. The precise and mysterious care in tending the trainers conveys the impression we might be witnessing a fetish of some kind, even if we cannot identify or understand the logic of the desire that's in play. The voiceover, voiced by the artist, describes memories of listening to house and techno on a Walkman in the woods in Aberdeen, outlining a formative moment in the evolution of her queer identity.<sup>18</sup> Echoing AM Baggs, Prodger describes the unfamiliarity of the imagery used in *Colon Hyphen Asterisk*: 'Some people tell me the footage I use

<sup>17</sup> [sic] is accompanied by a timeline on the artist's website that traces the history of censorship in the Japanese legal system from official state decrees to the now more commonly practiced self-censorship: <http://baudelaire.net/anabases/sic/>

<sup>18</sup> She says: 'I stopped going to the progressive house / minimalist techno clubs which played amazing music with amazing drugs but were totally hetero, and started going to a provincial gay bar that played trashy vocal garage. It was like I had to take a step backward in one way to move forward in another...' Barrow, Dan (2015). 'Scale Models' in *The Wire*, Issue 378, pp.16-18.

Sibyl Montague, *Handheld (bottle)*, 2020.  
Whiskey, dog muzzle, tonic water, sheep vertebrae, cork, glass, plastic.





**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?

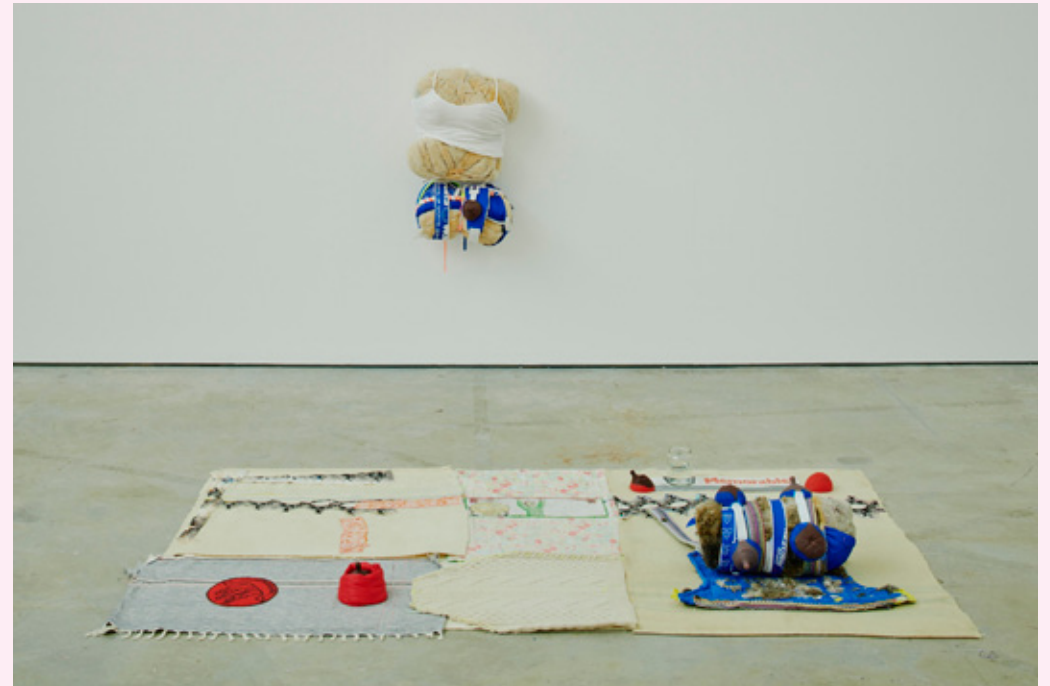
I phone her a week later. This  
is an extract from the phone  
conversation that took place:

*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.*

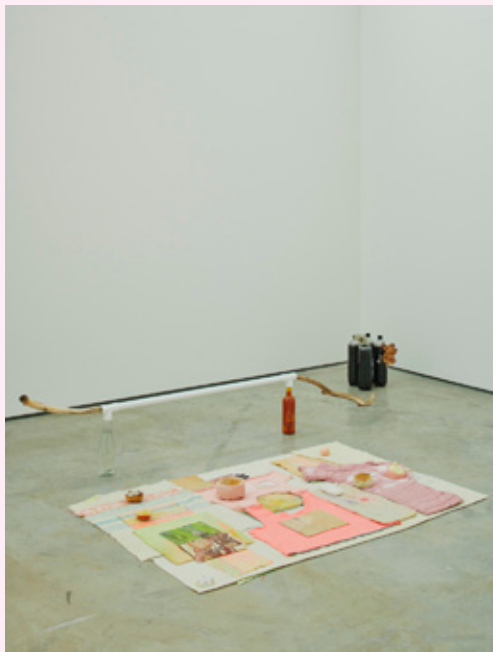
*That baby photo? If you go to get your photographs developed, that's printed on the envelope you get them back in. I kept the image at the time because it really struck me how those images are marketed towards women in a very specific way. I guess I'm kicking back at that. I've been pulping women's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

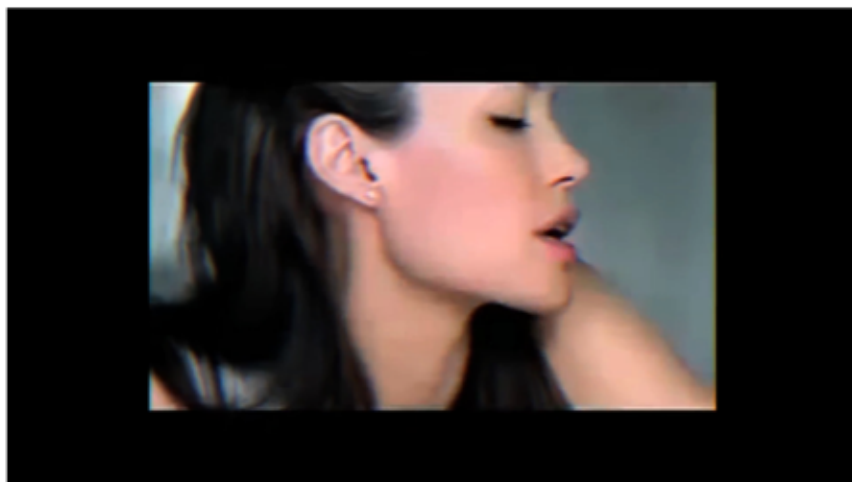
*Now, how do you feel?*

***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***

◀ **Sibyl Montague, *Profit and Loss (2013 - 2016) I, II, III, IV*** with an interview by Morgan Quaintance



aemi is delighted to present *Profit and Loss (2013-2016) I, II, III, IV* by artist Sibyl Montague as the third in its current series of online screenings. Sibyl Montague is a studio artist at Temple Bar Gallery + Studios and was one of the co-directors of PLASTIK Festival of Artist Moving Image. This is the first public presentation of Sibyl's Profit and Loss series of videos, several more of which we will present as part of an in real life screening event that will take place at Project Arts Centre later this year. The works in this series were assembled on a daily basis over a fixed period through a form of collage that Sibyl also adopts in her practice as a sculptor – gathering material, manipulating it and developing ideas from the act of combination. This online presentation of Sibyl's work is accompanied by an interview with her by London-based artist and writer Morgan Quaintance

### Interview between Sibyl Montague & Morgan Quaintance

To start with, could you tell me a little about the history and working process behind *Profit and Loss*?

The works that aemi are screening are a suite of films made from a period between 2013 and 2016. They were made at a time I didn't have a studio and I didn't have a camera. I had a laptop and that became the studio. The idea of practice, in the sense of doing something every day, is something that I have always maintained. The films were a thing I would do every day. A daily practice.

How would you describe them formally speaking?

I consider them collage more than film, material collected primarily from the internet in the form of screen recordings, downloads, purchased corporate content, ripped commercials, movies and tracks. A lot of the imagery is low resolution copies, what I consider digital detritus or 'poor images'.<sup>1</sup>

There will be a physical screening of the works at Project Arts Centre, hopefully in 2020, where they will be installed in conjunction with some blankets I made this year.

**Rather than sitting and deliberating for ages about what you were doing, it sounds like you were really freeing yourself with these films; you were thinking through making. Was that something you intended to do from the beginning? Was it something you found difficult?**

I don't think I've ever approached it by saying to myself, 'I'm going to make a moving image work, it's going to be about x'. You get to know your process and I know I understand things by doing them. I can see the same strategies I use now with sculpture, the concerns are the same. I take things apart.

For example, the loop of Angelina Jolie that keeps coming up. It's a 3 or 4 second loop from a *Shiseido* commercial I kept returning to. It was made in 2013, a moment when these hyper definition images were really emerging. This hyper HD. I was drawn to the new HD image and wanted to understand why. I worked and reworked this tiny segment of Angelina turning her face away from the camera. It's cut and cut and slowed down to the point of collapse, her movements becoming like ticks or jerks. The image now looks so white and so augmented. 2013 seemed to be when we accepted the augmented body image as a form.

**That focus on super high definition images and bodies is something that I noticed too, but you track its emergence to 2013.**

I don't know if it emerged then, but it felt that way. Camera definition specs were getting higher and higher, and you couldn't get enough pixels or money or storage to own them. It was a reaction I guess, making low resolution films.

I struggled working with the immateriality of digital media: files in a folder on a hard drive. Though I continued to collect them, I was frustrated by a lack of tactility and physicality with the material. In 2020 I have a better visualisation of that.

Ireland is home to the world's largest tech companies; *Apple, Microsoft, Facebook, Amazon* etc. Approx. 10% of the national energy grid is used to power their enormous servers and keep them cool<sup>11</sup>. Data centres have been quietly mushrooming up around the landscape. During lockdown I thought about all the heat emanating from these things. Hito Steyerl describes its (the internet) mass as hordes of bots pinging invisible spam around us like ghosts. These processor farms give definite, consequential form to digital.

**Was this focus on making moving image a one off thing or is it something that you've continued to develop as a core part of your practice?**

*Profit and Loss* was the start of an enquiry into the commodities produced by capital. They almost feel like a precursor to what I'm doing now, like I was working through the obsession.

**Behind the videos there seems to also be this artificial notion of 'well-being', I feel it emerged around the same time as those super high definition videos. If you go online now the web is saturated with wellness offers and beauty instructionals.**

Face Yoga is the new one **[both laugh]**. I mean wellness is innate to us as creatures...we know it...what's interesting is how we consent to interact with auxiliaries exterior to ourselves instead. It's a hack really...wellness. I tend to focus on these as perversions, so called performance driven values of form and how they proliferate and pollute. You could view the wellness industry as a perversion of spirit.

**So the 'health-space' (so to speak) has exploded online, and that's also collided with and amplified the inherent mysticism, or rather the mystical aura of commodities. Now because of Covid, it feels a little like we've had a slight detox or separation from this experience of commodity enchantment, but some people seem desperate to throw away that potential empowerment and run back to the high street.**

I think people are smarter now. We've become so visually deft with images. We're consensual with constructing and performing our own image. It's an implicit skill now.

The majority of the images in *Profit and Loss* are manufactured. Images like the Angelina Jolie commercial are highly architected with signifiers and triggers put in motion by capital. They're like corporate spells.

You could say artists have been doing that job since visual culture emerged- breaking the simulacra. Previous generations left us decent tools, cut up, abstraction, distortion, absurdity. Other strategies, hybrids, metamorphosis, anthropomorphism evolve at pace with new technologies. Sometimes to me it's like moving the frame or viewfinder slightly off.

I made a commitment at some point to working with the abundance of commodified material in our world. Abundant in the sense that it's cheap or disposable- poor material. It's highly constructed already in terms of its value and life span. The word 'poor' could mean frugal or humble. 'Poor' in this context is impoverished by capitalism.

Working with this material I try to think about it in terms of its base matter. It's raw material. When you start to pick at these things, you find always some sort of violence in its history. Commodities become tangible in terms of loss; labour, plant, animal or carbon -they're like effigies of earth's exploitation. Lately I've been working with textiles sourced from global manufacturers of fast fashion, outlets such as the Irish company Primark.

**Oh, it's Irish? I didn't know that!**

Yeah it's Irish! It's called 'Penneys' here. I spent a lot of time in those spaces. I would take items and reassemble them in the studio, bring them back and leave them there. I hated those spaces, but I spent time there watching the cycles of stock, trying to qualify and absorb its mass. Someone once called it a process of embodied carbon. The objects I made in response look like animal/product hybrids, handbags or handhelds.

So, in a sense I've come to understand working with this material how all these objects have some sort of sentience at their core. Extracted, re-assembled and reanimated. Sold back to us fundamentally distorted and with all this other stuff attached to it. We've been engaging with that version of reality for so long. It broke this year. In the first month of lockdown, there was a lament to return to how things were before – a kind of collective grief. Maybe a spell broke.

i Steyerl, Hito, 'In Defense of the Poor Image', e-flux Journal #10, November 2009, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>

ii 'Ireland faces data centre challenge to power demand' on Power Engineering International, October 16th 2017, <https://www.powerengineeringint.com/renewables/ireland-faces-data-centre-challenge-to-power-demand/>

Sibyl Montague, *Profit and Loss* (2013 - 2016) I, II, III, IV, , 8 mins

Screened: 7 October - 3 November 2020

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Additional Information

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words  
Rachel Donnelly



IMMATERIAL

Last month saw the launch of the new Artist-Initiated Projects series at Pallas Projects, an artist-run studio and gallery space in Dublin 8. The series will run throughout 2018 and offers a space for emerging or lesser-seen artists to show work with a shorter lead-in time than usual. "Addressing what artists need to develop is at the crux of what we do as an artist-run space," says Gavin Murphy, co-director of Pallas alongside Mark Cullen. I spoke to three artists who are part of the inaugural series.

## SIBYL MONTAGUE

*"I'm definitely a sculptor who doesn't want to put more objects in the world."*

Multidisciplinary artist Sibyl Montague is drawn to the supermundane. By this she means the things around us that are "so part of our environment that we don't notice them anymore. We're in this moment of intense overproduction, so in that sense I'm really looking for materials that already exist in abundance". She's intrigued by energy drinks, including them in her recent work (*Super Critical Liquid*, 2016). For Montague, the energy drink is a particularly colourful example of how objects perform in our economy. "You buy an object but you're not really paying attention to the material or its source – it's what the object represents. We're all guilty of that to a certain extent. We're exchanging symbols or signifiers all the time, rather than the physical thing."

She's interested in the different attitudes to material that exist in the different corners of our capitalist economy. Montague has been working for the last two and a half years with a group of individuals who are on probation, running workshops around improvising with materials. She found the members of the group worked with the materials she gave them in a very

'intuitive, gut-driven' way. Given the scarcity of materials, including tools, in a prison environment, the former prisoners were naturally highly creative in their manipulation of objects. "What I was highlighting to them was the sculptural interventions of their actions. They wouldn't consider art on their radar whatsoever, but within a prison environment they were always being highly creative with material."

The conditions of their imprisonment dictated that this creativity was mostly directed towards creating objects for defence, 'out of fear'. This means that, as prisoners, these individuals relate to the materials around them in a very different way to how we as consumers relate to objects in our world. They bend the objects to their needs; we, as consumers, often find ourselves bending to the influence of objects. So in parallel to the work with the probation group, Montague is also looking to work with a UX designer. "All their training, all their knowledge is directed towards getting humans to consume, making design seamless, seductive. I guess when you're looking at objects in the world, you realise that most material now is manipulated towards human consumption."

The artist is interested in learning more about the principles of UX design to apply them to the sculptural objects she's making for her show at Pallas. The show is provisionally titled *The Bottle* and there's a particularly personal story behind it. Montague's great-uncle ran a speakeasy in New York in the 1920s, where her grandfather, her father's father, worked and drank until its closure during prohibition. The resulting lack of work meant Montague's father and his siblings were sent home to Ireland. The artist draws a line from 'the bottle' to the path her family took, including her own birth. Her current work for Pallas takes this very personal starting point to explore the relationship between objects and our 'inner experience' as individuals, extending this exploration out through the work with the

probation group and an appropriation of UX principles. In doing so it inevitably touches on the ecological implications of our often dysfunctional relationship to the materials in the world around us. "It's problematic where we are now in the world, how we do things without intention because we're so addicted to consuming."

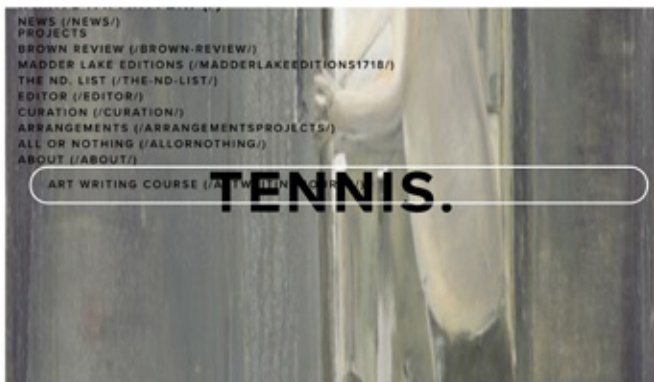
## EMMA MCKEAGNEY

*"There are these really active materials that have a life of their own that will probably go on to live longer than you do."*

For recent graduate (2017) Emma McKeagney, her time at university was marked by feeling a pressure to intellectualise her work. "I was very self-conscious about 'just' making. I'd always work very directly with materials and then feel I had to bring in political concepts to create deep reasons for what I was doing." It was only after discovering New Materialism, a school of thought which collapses the hierarchy that places humans above and separate to the rest of the material in the world, that McKeagney came to feel that 'just' working intuitively with the materials without preconceptions was an equally valid way of art making.

"I was interested in this symbiotic relationship between myself and the material I was working with. And I realised there's so little you can plan at the start of a process – the more you try to control what you're working with, the more you take away from what it is. In my grad show, I was working with clay. I felt I wanted to get to the very source of where clay comes from, so I refined my own clay. It was almost like stepping back from the process and allowing the clay to be more of a vital component in that process, and like I'm almost a catalyst for this material doing its thing."

For her show at Pallas, titled *Unstable Cat-*



[brown review \(/brown-review/?author=5b717b9121c67c133d1885f9\)](/brown-review/?author=5b717b9121c67c133d1885f9) ·  
 September 15, 2018 (</brown-review/2018/8/8/tennis>)



## TENNIS .

There's a painting by the late Norbert Schwonkowski titled *Bosch* that shows an ill-formed human being (as if there were any other sort) in boxer shorts

opening and reaching into a fridge humming with light against a murky river of *that* famous Schwonkowski slop that painters drool and wonder over. Slurp. Caught between night and day, celestial and corporeal, cold and temperate, dream and reality, quotidian and fantasy, right and wrong—I'll stop there—the ill-formed human is also caught between reaching and grasping the milk, the meat, the butter, the cold pizza, the best-before-date, the whatever, the whenever....We don't know: the night thief's hand, in the act of reaching and retrieving the object of desire, of need, of gluttony, is cut off at the wrist as if a crime is being committed in the act of committing it. We are caught—dumbstruck with drumstick—between the perishable past and the preserved present, like the milk, the meat, the butter, the cold pizza, the best-before-date, the whatever, the whenever. "Eat or be eaten," I say. Schwonkowski's fridge hooked on to me years ago; only time will tell

if Sibyl Montague's work at Pallas Projects Dublin will do the same. I think it will. Like Norbert's ill-formed human, Sibyl seems to have also raided the fridge in the middle of the night, the day, the past, whenever, in her regurgitation of perishables, the perished. Floor— wall— table— sky-bound we trip over shapes and ingredients that seem out of place here, revealing our limiting tastes while challenging them in that coldest and cleanest of fridges: a jar of chillies, Frankfurters, peanuts, beer, fillets of gelatine, bones of a bird, fur ball of faux fur, piss, condoms, sweaty, mâché'd, calcifying waste (and *Hello Magazine*)... there's lots here to taste and consume with eyes and nose but daren't imagine ingest with mouth. Here the mouth is for telling stories— pieces of Sibyl, pieces of me, pieces of you, pieces of celebrities, pieces of *Sean*. *Sean's Story* involves a satellite dish on its back like a beetle, like a sieve, like the fire that warmed last night's knacker drinking, with

strewn beer cans drowned and hardened in plaster, in cement, in forgetting; memory set so as not to forget. I won't. I Promise. REMEMBER, remember, r e m e m b e r.... A Too Tall table tells stories, too, of Prohibition, of sex, of something past its best-before-date waiting to be jilted. On my watch, when the exhibition wasn't officially open, mould was growing on the meaty slabs of gelatine. If left longer?... well that's a story for the future. Like metaphor, the hook to real life is temperamental, temporary, personal, and although some stuff hooks to life better than other stuff, rust, mould, crow's feet come with time. We live. We die. We leave stuff behind. Headphones hook a branch of another branch stood standing in a plaster placeholder ready to take you for a limp around the gallery like a portable IV Stand feeding you sounds that wean you further from sense, from this space. I take them off, *here* is what I want to remember, to be, for now. Anyone for tennis. Sibyl's

white, wraparound racket tape elevates us from the downward plumbing of dirt where piss, beer, condoms, memories sieve through the gutter of our consumption, to a cleaner place. *But* bet Federer stinks in the fifth set; arse cracks don't lie. This is not art tied in a bow or stepping on the purple coattails of a revisionist canon of art history as Daniel Rios Rodriguez does, dances, slips on Forrest Bess at Kerlin Gallery currently. Gentlemen please! No. The coattail that Sibyl is stepping on is muddy. Of course artists have used perishables before: shit, sperm, beans, whatever, whenever. I'm not going to look them up now and pretend I remember; I forget. I won't this. Remember the day we played tennis?



# Frieze

Critics' Guides 7

## Critic's Guide: Dublin



BY GEMMA TIPTON

24 NOV 2017

Highlights of the shows included in the third iteration of Dublin Gallery Weekend



Back for its third annual outing, the **Dublin Gallery Weekend**

<http://www.dublingallerymap.ie/> (DGW) continues to grow. This year, in addition to 34 participating spaces, there is a series of artist conversations at the Allied Irish Banks premises on Grafton Street. The theme is 'place, journeys and realities.' Given the current reputation of banks in Ireland, this is either a brave or an empty gesture, though the artists – Alan James Burns, Alan Butler and Dragana Jurišić – are all individually making very interesting work. Alongside guided tours, special events and screenings, there's a music night inspired by Detroit-based Drexciya at The Hugh Lane, plus a party on Saturday night at the Temple Bar Gallery. The Hugh Lane event is already sold out, which makes one wish a few more of Dublin's institutions might have thrown



Gareth Anton Averill, *The Harvest Swarm*, 2017, performance documentation. Courtesy: the artist and Pallas Projects, Dublin; photograph: Louis Haugh

### 'Periodical Review #7'

Pallas Projects <<https://frieze.com/event/periodical-review-7-pps-v-rgksksrg>>

24 November 2017 – 20 January 2018

While it always seems longer when you're in the thick of it, a year whips quickly by. Judging from the works in this, the 7th iteration of Pallas Projects' 'Periodical Review', the 2016 / 2017 period been a good one. This year the Pallas team teamed up with Kate Strain and Rachael Gilbourne, who work together as RGKSKSRG, to take us down art's memory lane, though they expand their selection beyond the strict confines of 12 months. The galleries at Pallas aren't of a size to allow for a full survey show, so expect to be tantalized with fragments and glimpses, but as these include work from Jesse Jones' Venice Biennale installation *Tremble Tremble* (2017), alongside more from Alan Butler, Jason Ellis, Barbara Knezevic, Ailbhe Ní Bhriain and Sonia Shiel, it promises to be an intriguing trip. Knezevic's 'exquisite tempo sector' at the Temple Bar Gallery at the start of the year was a winner, while 'Old Anatomy' by Jason Ellis, at Oliver Sears in 2016, saw what

could have been a clinical series of anatomical stone carving come alive with delicious, and often uncannily disturbing heart.

For more current and soon to open shows in Dublin, head over to On View

<[https://frieze.com/on-view?](https://frieze.com/on-view?field_location_city_mask=Dublin&field_date_value=All&recommended=All&search_api_aggregation)

[field\\_location\\_city\\_mask=Dublin&field\\_date\\_value=All&recommended=All&search\\_api\\_aggregation](https://frieze.com/on-view?field_location_city_mask=Dublin&field_date_value=All&recommended=All&search_api_aggregation)

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Main image: Sibyl Montague, *Super Critical Liquid*, 2016/17, soft drinks (sparkling water, ginger ale, bitter lemon) plaster, resin, 2 ltrs / 1 ltrs. Courtesy: the artist and Pallas Projects, Dublin; photograph: Kasia Kaminska

GEMMA TIPTON

Gemma Tipton is a writer and critic based in Ireland.

# SHOWER OF KUNST

HOME IMAGES REVIEWS OPINION POLITICS ABOUT  
ARCHIVED SITE

14/09/2016

## REVIEW: BEYOND VIOLET

Almost tribal.



There is something deadly in the work of Sibyl Montague. It's a quiet sensation of threat dabbling between precarity, vulnerability and material seduction. Montague's work tends to look, at first glance, benign enough. Look a second more and it grows wildly beautiful – in a wabi sabi way – or mesmerisingly slick. It is within these subtleties, running just under the work's wiry grip, wherein lies lethal potential.

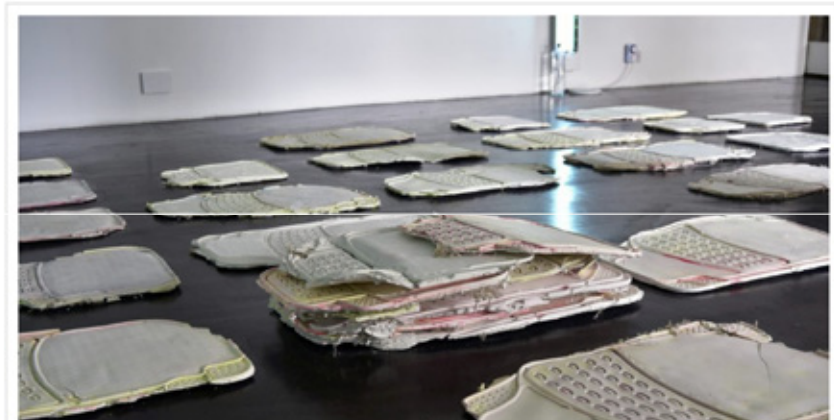
The exhibition Beyond Violet at Wexford Arts Centre is set across two floors. The floors are worth mentioning. Downstairs the floor is polished and oily-black, its bitumen surface having been known to sink and morph under the weight of particularly heavy artworks in the past. It makes a perfect stage for Sibyl's

uneasy assemblages.

Enter the viewer.

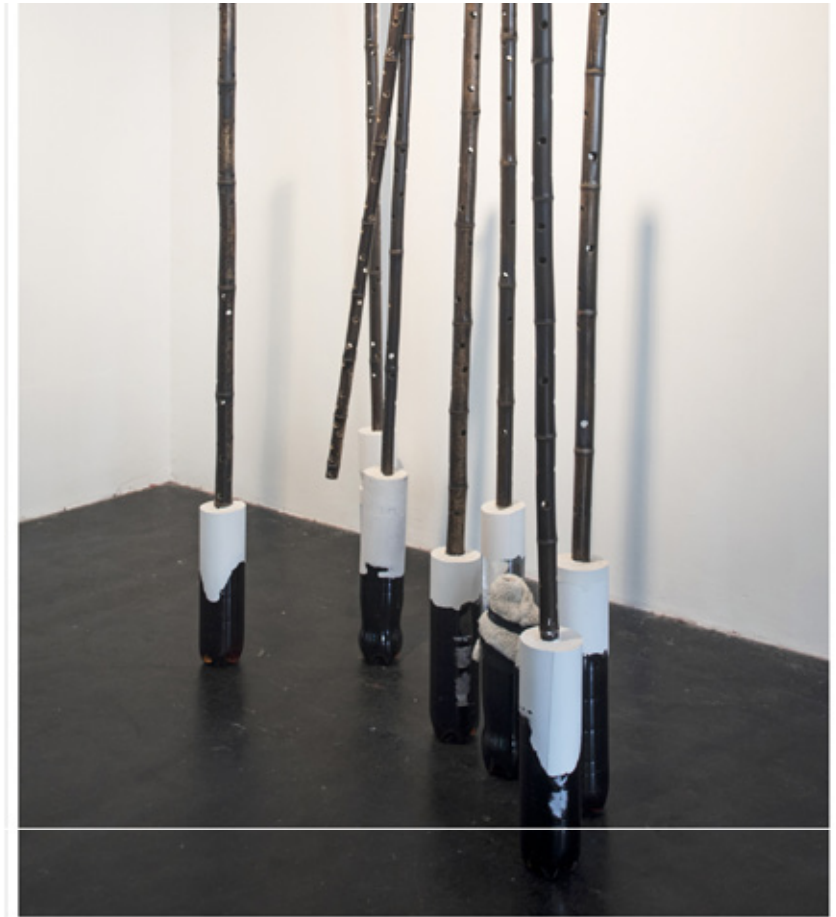
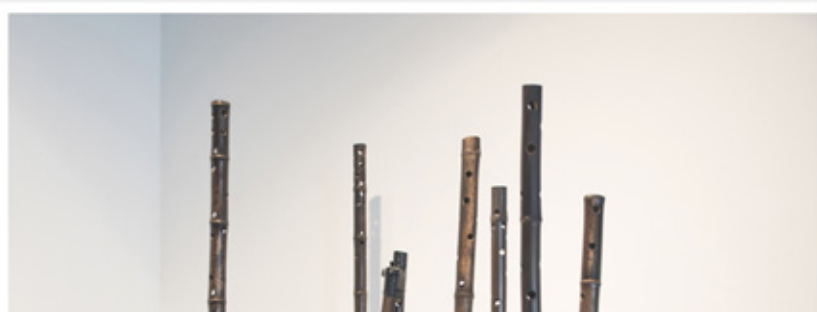


Here lie a luminous series of something approximating car mats, inverted and pale, with edges and patches blushing in soft fluoro hues. Clustered in heaps, these impossible plaster mats are parked in rows, all facing the same way like a body of praying pilgrims. All are frayed or frizzled to some extent, all absolutely unfit for purpose, but all doing their best to continue being what they are. These mats, in their traffic jam stasis, greet you like a crowd of spectators when you walk through the gallery doors. What is notable is their calm, collected individuality. Some are bent or cracked or folded, others are stacked or touching or fully detached. Apprehended as singular entities, it seems as though they have come together just for the show, for a limited time, like a swathe of yoga students or a team of sports fans, in this strange and anonymous assembly: a community of interest – stationary, expectant.





The floor is where everything begins. From there, from around this mass of misplaced onlookers, you follow the hum of the room to the walls. In the corner, a snow screen in negative, with black flakes fluttering on uncertain shadows, seems to flow listlessly like a view from a falling car. On the floor – bottled water, water in bottles, and bottles of water. All around they pepper the room. The two-litre kind, mass-produced in clear toxic plastic. Quite beautiful in form, when stripped of their branded packaging. These are the kind of water bottles you take with you on a long car journey. The kind that, a while back, were reported to carry increased risks of cancer (due to chemical contamination from the plastic) should they be left sweltering for too long in a hot backseat. Something about one of these vessels on the loose, rolling about the floor of the car until it sneaks up under the brake pedal jamming your chances of stopping and impeding your ability to drive, scares me.



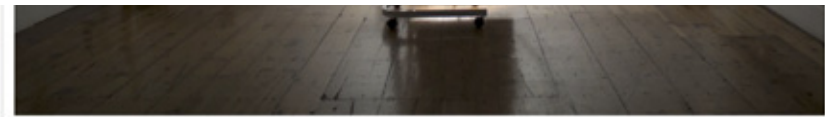
The bottles reappear in the form of a group of sculptural towers, this time filled with black liquid. The sculptures are fat-bottomed and mono-pedal, with a smooth plaster cast supporting the transition from oil-black Coca-Cola base to perforated bamboo steeple. They are confusing to look at. They register, visually, somewhere between a toilet brush and a totem pole. The bases remind me of diesel siphoned or a petrol bomb waiting to be thrown. Their darkness let's them disappear into the floor, leaving their stalk tops hover like a forest of newly scorched trees. Nearby, three isolated lens discs, removed from sunglasses, dangle as pendants on a coarse string.

One more element reigns down at intervals on this glorious floor. UV light.

Two vertical, wall-mounted light bulbs are flanked by lengths of bamboo. Each hollow shaft of black Indonesian bamboo is bored with circular holes. The wall sculptures are tight, upright, and timed. The UV light blinks on and off like a slow-motion strobe, setting the rhythm to which the meditating car mats, rolling water bottles, and bamboo stilts perform.



Moving to the gallery upstairs, a whole other atmosphere awaits. Here the vivid soundtrack of American culture is intoxicating. We're at a ball game, on the sidelines, the sound of the marching music thick in our ears. Brass instruments, the rattle of drums, whistles, a stampede of cheerleaders. The main event is a large vertical object. Not dissimilar to the monolith from 2001. On closer inspection, you see that it's the lid of a disemboweled tanning bed, removed from its original context, and standing in the throw of a projected image. The projection shows a revolving basketball, endlessly morphing out of shape on the contours of the sunbed's surface. On the other side of the lid, a group of plaster-clad hula-hoops are strapped to the structure like necessary appendages. These hula-hoops, great hulking circles of rough hewn white plaster, are the dummy lungs of this Frankenstein. Behind them, the redundant strip-lights flicker and dance. And towards the floor, eggs. Delicate and pink, they balance and roll out across the floorboards, precarious.



Opposite this nest of materials-made-strange, the eye is drawn to a structure mounted high on the wall. Here two of the circular hula-hoop sculptures are strapped together, self-supported by their own tension and weight. With their surfaces echoing crumbling bone or ivory tusks, they become a kind of warrior trophy – not quite a basketball hoop – presiding over the frenzied hullabaloo below.





Sibyl Montague's *Beyond Violet* compels the viewer to attempt to form understandings through visual associations, shifts in surface, and object choreography. Yet there are contradictions throughout that stutter any instant reading. Minimalism is highly textured. Insistent monotone is broken here and there with golds and pinks. Gatherings are infused with a sense of hollow isolation. This culminates in the work's ability to be simultaneously performative and vulnerable. And makes it all a little intoxicating. You watch the interplay between works, the artist's material sophistication, and the thrill of something deadly in her use of cultural/commercial codes.

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*Beyond Violet* firmly sets out Sibyl Montague as an artist to return to. This is work that is dark, and dangerously addictive.

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**Beyond Violet**

**Sibyl Montague**

Wexford Arts Centre, Wexford

27 June – 13 August 2016

Text by RGKS SRG. RGKS SRG is the curatorial practice of Rachael Gilbourne and Kate Strain, this was a commissioned response to *Beyond Violet*.

Photos by Laurence O'Toole.

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**Sibyl Montague**