

Digging the Back Garden

by Roisín Power Hackett

In response to Material Witness, Roscommon Arts Centre by Nollaig Molloy

The first element you experience of Nollaig Molloy's Material Witness is its sound piece. On climbing to the top of the stairs and entering the gallery space you are greeted by it. Whilst wondering through the exhibition the sound piece *What call is there to do that?* is a background texture, which you are suddenly called upon to listen to occasionally when a voice is raised or an animal call is made 'chuck, chuck, chuck...'. In the centre of the space at knee level are two long plinth-like racks made of planks of wood resting on tea chests. Upon these are small sculptural objects mostly made of baked and unbaked clay. In order to inspect these objects in detail you have to stoop or crouch to their height. A physical effort is involved to get a close up. On the wall directly beside the entrance to the space are three framed scans of elegantly handwritten old copybook pages. All three written pieces entitled *The vessels used in olden times*. On the back wall is another framed old copybook scan entitled *Irish words and phrases which have been adopted into English Speech*. All elements in Material Witness are connected strongly to the locality and to one another. As a result the exhibition is circular.

Nollaig Molloy, born in County Roscommon, graduated with a BA in History of Art and Fine Art Sculpture from the National College of Art and Design in 2012. Until earlier this year she practiced as a visual artist in Dublin, a member of Brunswick Mills Studios. However since she has been awarded the CREATE Artist In The Community Scheme; Research and Development Award in 2015 she has been mostly working in Roscommon developing relationships with communities in the area. Though Material Witness is an unconnected project, it arose out of Nollaig's return to her native county. The exhibition also stemmed from a proposal developed by Roscommon Arts Centre in response to the call for proposals from Roscommon County Council for projects that responded to the 1916 commemoration. A lot of the materials and crafts Nollaig is concerned with, like pottery and woodturning, come from the traditions of the countryside and are rooted in the landscape of County Roscommon.

When the artist began to make new connections with her birth place, she became interested in the social history of the area. Nollaig used the National Folklore Collection in University College Dublin. This collection covers many areas, but the artist became particularly interested in the National Schools Collection. In 1937-38 National School children throughout Ireland were asked by their teachers to go home and ask a relative or neighbour for an old story under certain headings including death customs, local happenings, local fairs, crafts, cures and ghost stories. These stories were then written down by each child and subsequently the teacher wrote out selected stories in their own hand. One of these such stories was The vessels used in olden times, which the National Folklore Collection has kindly allowed Nollaig to reproduce for the exhibition. The vessels described were one of the inspirations for Nollaig's small clay sculptures, which sit like excavated fragments from an archaeological dig on their wooden boards. This story describes how wood and tin were used to make mugs and butter dishes and how when tea was first introduced people did not know what to do with it. However rather than wood or tin, the vessel sculptures in Material Witness are made of clay. This is where one might find a gap in the artist's logic, but there is no such gap as the sculptures produced are linked to the old clay pipe factory in Knockcroghery, Co. Roscommon.

As you move in to closely inspect the small objects arranged upon the low racks, carefully bending and examining them, you see their variety. On one of the racks there is a series of clay pipes grouped together. Beside them there is a large collection of pipe stems that you might find when digging your garden, which are placed in a pattern and remind me of a woven straw basket. There is a collection of various bowls some made from rough grainy reddish clay. On the opposite rack there are odd cup handles in assorted sizes and shapes as well as clay jars. The rim of the jars and the cup handles are covered in thorn-like spikes of clay. Overall the collection looks like a mass of broken fragments, neatly organised, as if an archaeologist had just uncovered and catalogued them. They are deconstructions. Pipes and cups broken into bits and re-imagined. Objects, like the cup handles, disassembled and re-created with folkloric thorns. According to Martin Heidegger, up until the turn of the 20th century Western philosophy, language and tradition privileged presence over absence, the whole over the broken or the lost. Deconstruction, which developed throughout the 20th century as a philosophy, is a valid lens to examine much contemporary art. A deconstructive investigation of an object, like a clay pipe, does not foist meaning upon the pipe, but rather

highlights the point in which the pipe works against itself. In other words, Deconstruction notes the gap in the pipe's function or where the pipe can be broken and reconfigured into something new. Deforming and cutting up objects, texts, experiences and reforming them, often in an odd Joycean way, seems to be a prevalent practice within art, a way of imagining and re-structuring our world. It is common, particularly near the old pipe factory in Roscommon, to find broken pipe stems and bowls in the earth. It is seldom you find a whole functioning pipe. Nollaig's sculptures explore the semi-disintegrated objects of the past that remain in the soil. The cup handles, the smaller one named Sty in your eye, come from a story the artist found in the National Folklore Collection, about a cure for styes. Take nine thorns from a blackthorn or gooseberry bush, point eight of them at or in the sty and throw the ninth thorn away. The handle, broken from the cup and covered with these thorns, is no longer usable. No longer a vessel for drinking from. The clay sculptures in Material Witness remind me of Heidegger's broken tools. If the functionality of a thing is threatened, the thing becomes more noticeable. Absence becomes presence.

The voices from What call is there to do that? float above the low rack. The exhibition is formed unusually, it is split between the clay objects at knee level and the sound piece that rises above them. Two worlds that are linked in their exploration of folk culture, but do not interrupt one another. The people recorded are members of the South Roscommon Singers Circle who meet once a month to sing local and national songs and perform spoken word pieces. The recording is a montage of singing, stories, snippets of conversation. Animal calls for things such as settling calves into new plots. Guttural sounds of all kinds interspersed evenly with songs and stories. It seems few of the snippets are put together with a logic regarding their content, but rather a logic in relation to their sound. What call is there to do that? speaks of people, events, realities and fictions all rooted in the past. A collective cultural memory. It feels as if the artwork in the exhibition has been made to preserve and treasure this collective cultural memory and raise a consciousness of it in the viewer. A sort of conservation of our culture as a living, breathing, endlessly evolving creature rather than something to be stored in a museum. Nollaig has done this by deconstructing it and presenting the information in a contemporary format by giving us short glimpses into each facet and then stringing all of them together. On careful listening, What call is there to do that? is an intriguing stand alone artwork, that needs no solid sculptures to necessarily prop it up.

Nollaig named the exhibition Material Witness on behalf of the clay sculptures, she sees them as material witnesses of our cultural past. They lived years ago as functional vessels that people used every day, for smoking and drinking tea. When they were no longer needed, they were discarded and crumbled and crushed into the earth, where the clay had been harvested from in the first place. This cycle and the functionality of objects is I feel what the artist wants to emphasis. Adding her imagination and the folklore she has heard to these back garden fragments she has created playful configuration such as Sty in your eye, where a functional object cannot function. This playfulness is how contemporary art and deconstruction work. This is the evolution of ideas.