

Dublin Contemporary, *Terrible Beauty- Art, Crisis, Change and the Office of Non-Compliance*
Exhibition at Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane, National Gallery of Ireland, Royal Hibernian Academy, The Douglas Hyde Gallery
6 September to 31 October 2011
Curated by Jota Castro and Christian Viveros-Fauné

Terrible Beauty- Art, Crisis, Change and the Office of Non-Compliance was the inaugural exhibition of Dublin Contemporary, a new high-profile international art exhibition that featured over a hundred artists, forty of them Irish. The main venue spanned eighty-four rooms, three floors and two wings of Earlsfort Terrace, a deceptively large neo-classical building, formerly belonging to University College Dublin. The theme was inspired by William Butler Yeats' poem *Easter 1916*, suggesting that contemporary art has reached a critical point. The Office of Non-Compliance, a forum for artist-led discourse and discussion, was an on-going element throughout the exhibition that allowed for a dialogic exchange. This aspect of the exhibition presented an exciting possibility for a deeper engagement with contemporary art practice, however, it did not appear to be immediately accessible to the average viewer, nor was its function entirely clear. The sheer size and breadth of the exhibition recalled the former *ROSC* exhibitions (1967-1988), particularly as the latter exhibition was sited at Earlsfort Terrace in 1980. The space remained largely unaltered, with torn wallpaper and stripped floors and its previous educational function a constant reminder throughout. This permitted a pedagogical framing of the exhibition that suggested the true power of contemporary art lies in the open exchange of ideas.

Upon entering the exhibition, the first work encountered was large wall installation work by Dublin-born graffiti artist, Maser. On one wall featured a large cut-out portrait of 'the Liberator', Daniel O'Connell (1775-1847), his head framed by the date of Catholic Emancipation 1829. From the top of his head appeared four bars of florescent lights, referencing the 'Why Go Bald?' neon advertising on South Great Georges Street, a local Dublin landmark. Across the space, was a large neon coloured cut out sign that read, 'Emancipate Yourself'. As the florescent lights flashed on and off the sign opposite was temporarily illuminated. Although the phrase, reminiscent of Bob Marley's *Redemption Song*, suggested that positive agency rests in the hands of the individual, the garish colours of the sign undercut this simplistic idea, highlighting that oppression, in its many forms, is systemic.

Llaves de la Ciudad was a particularly powerful performance and installation by Mexican artist, Teresa Margolles (b.1963). In a quiet room, viewers patiently queued up to sit across from artisan Antonio Hernandez Camacho. Each viewer sat in turn with Hernandez while he related the realities of life in his hometown of Ciudad Juárez, a Mexican city frequently publicised in international media for drug related murders. The seated viewer was then asked to write a word on a piece of paper that Camacho expertly carved on a key. Afterwards, the viewer was instructed to string the key up on a thin metal wire that ran the width of the room. Conceivably, these keys form a linguistic construction, a sentence or poem that remains in the room bearing witness to the experience of witnessing. Returning in the final week of the exhibition, the room sat empty except for the remains of the performance and an installation of a sensor activated machine that released delicate bubbles high into the space of the adjacent room. The water in the machine was used to wash corpses prior to autopsy in the Mexico City morgue. The more the viewer moved, the greater the proliferation of bubbles, yet as they left a soapy

residue on the floor, the installation suggested the fragility of life.

Irish artist Amanda Coogan's (b.1971) *Spit Spit Scrub Scrub* featured three women enveloped in 'International Klein Blue' strapless dresses fashioned from a giant piece of material that filled the room. With their bodies anchored by the fabric they assumed choreographed positions while their gazes defiantly met the viewer's. The confrontational stares and red lipstick suggested the deadly power of witches, harpies or gorgons. As the work progressed, saliva slowly emitted from their mouths trickled down the dresses in a disturbing oral incontinence. Recalling Yves Klein's *Anthropometries* in which women's bodies were used as paintbrushes, the temporary staining of the spit on the satin dresses reasserted the physical presence of the body permitting for a contemplation of embodiment.

In a large room, David Zink Yi's (b.1973) giant ceramic squid lay spent, strewn on the floor in a puddle of inky black fluid. Although simple and beautiful, the abject liquid evoked the forbidden desire to touch the oil slick and the fear of contamination should one come into contact with it. Elsewhere Cuban artist Wilfredo Prieto's (b.1978) sculpture was simultaneously thrilling and threatening as suspended from the ceiling, coils of wrapped razor wire, appearing lighter than air formed a deadly cloud-like mass. Walking underneath and looking upwards, the viewer was uncomfortably aware of a distinct feeling of dread that at any time this installation could cause grave bodily harm should it fall and it was incidentally cordoned off at a later stage. The most remarkable element to this work was the juxtaposition of the sculpture with the streaming light imparted from an overhead skylight window that gave the impression of hope. In the Annex building, Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn's (b.1957) *The Green Coffin* (2006) was a chilling sight to behold, if not rather literal in its critique of the connections between politics, military force, capitalism and 'the West' through a pastiche of images that bring together models, newspaper photographs of war victims, chessboards, Renaissance paintings and crustaceans. Truncated mannequin arms held aloft the large cardboard coffin each wearing a wristwatch. While it invited the viewer to spend time with its numerous layered imagery, bearing witness to the atrocities of modern society and the realities of on-going ideological conflict, the D.I.Y. aesthetic of the packing tape affixed images lacked cohesion.

The exhibition featured a large number of time-based works, which is a welcome addition for those who enjoy a deeper level of spectator engagement. However, given the extended durations of many of the works, it is difficult to imagine that those with a single day ticket would be able to commit themselves to a vast number. This highlights one of the difficulties with an exhibition of this size and raises the question as to how much time one must spend with the work to unpack its meaning. Belgian artist Hans Op de Beeck's (b. 1969) *Sea of Tranquillity* demanded that the viewer observe the thirty-minute video and 3D generated 'film' in its entirety. The deliberate actions of individuals on a cruise ship, accompanied by the jazz song 'Sea of Tranquillity' hinted at a gnawing isolation characterised by a film noir element. Meanwhile, Jaki Irvine's (b.1966) mesmerizing *56 Inch Fantasy*, a five-minute video filmed at the Guinness Storehouse, was based on an enigmatic conversation overheard in an elevator. The linear movements of the camera positioned inside the glass elevator as it moved up and down captivated the viewer. As it descended it referenced the fall in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, while ascending into the famed Gravity Bar it evoked the joyfulness of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. The excellent musical score performed by the RTE Orchestra permitted one to lose oneself in the

mechanics of the elevator.

A series of paintings by Brian Maguire (b.1951) held their own in relation to the abundant new media works. Maguire installed a blackboard with white text, which referenced Joseph Beuys's 'social sculptures', noting the steady increase of gun crime in Dublin while highlighting the inequity of the situation, considering Ireland's international reputation as a 'peace-keeping force'. The portraits were inspired by newspaper photographs from stories that reported the subjects' deaths, rendered in Maguire's expressionist style with muted washes of colour that ran off the canvas. The depiction of these men in this manner represented the passing public interest in the circumstances surrounding their deaths, while the ages of the victims functioned as the titles of each painting (i.e. *Twentyfour*) and served as a stark reminder of how quickly individuals transition to statistics.

With an exhibition of this scale there was inevitably something for everyone, although those traditionalists that prefer paintings were probably disappointed. Additionally, further clarification about the Office of Non-Compliance would have been welcome, especially in reaching viewers who might not be 'art savvy'. For this viewer, the highlight of the exhibition was a number of shared moments with other viewers spent contemplating the rich complexity of the work in relation to the theme. These interactions stressed the on-going importance of engagement in contemporary art.

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