

Reports to an Academy

In Franz Kafka's short story 'A Report to an Academy', from which Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's latest work derives its title, the narrator addresses a scientific conference and recalls his former life as an ape before his self-consciously accelerated acquisition of a human nature and identity. His transition from monkey to man, it seems, was not born of an idealistic aspiration toward evolutionary advancement. Rather it was a pragmatic strategy of painstaking mimicry intended to release him from the cage to which he had been confined by his human captors. Something of Kafka's interests in elaborate fabrication and complex mirroring is borne over into Ní Bhriain's four-screen video installation, not to mention the peculiar atmosphere, at once dreamlike and precise, that suffuses much of his writing. (Kafka's compulsive storytelling, on the other hand, is alien to her impulses as a filmmaker.) Her work's title, *Reports to an Academy*, 2015, wittily acknowledges the identity of the institution by which it was originally commissioned, and for whose gallery it was purposely developed, the Royal Hibernian Academy, while its use of the plural registers the work's multifaceted composition. Given the installation's ambitious scope, it may also be read as signalling a noteworthy evolution in a body of work that has been marked from the outset by an enduring set of characteristics and concerns.

The four large screens the viewer encounters on entering the gallery space combine to create an all-encompassing, immersive environment. This environment, however, is composed of four distinct and archetypal locations, depicted on each of the screens: the library, the studio, the landscape and the museum. While these scenarios remain discrete, they are by no means impermeably bounded, given that recurring elements, some familiar from previous films, readily float from one to the other. A library is an archive in which memories of the past may be preserved, whereas a studio is a crucible in which visions of the future can be forged. The particular landscape in question is that of the Aran Islands, lying off Ireland's western shore, while the museum is Dublin's Natural History Museum, situated in the heart of the nation's capital. We might initially assume a schematic opposition here between raw nature and refined culture, to be mapped somehow onto that between storied past and emergent future. Yet this proves difficult to sustain, especially in light of the thoroughly mediated nature of the quintessential image of the West of Ireland with which we are presented on screen, a drystone wall bordering a brimming lough. It is impossible to read such an image today as anything other than a cultural construction, as artificial in its own way as the taxidermied reconstitution of the country's extinct fauna informed by the researches of Victorian naturalists. This is evident even before our eyes register the high degree of digital manipulation that has brought everything we see, on all four screens, into view in the first place. Things are clearly more fluid throughout these adjacent domains than any inferred schematic might suggest.

Common to the footage on all four screens is an oneiric theatricality, which has typified Ní Bhriain's films and installations for some time now, at least since *The Suspension Room* and *The Emigrant*, both 2010. Characteristically in such works each individual screen is a virtual stage, meticulously constructed by a virtuoso of video montage, on which hypnotically surreal tableaux are caught in a permanent cycle of languid transformation, courtesy of the transporting magic of digital illusionism. These disconcerting stages are layered, hybrid spaces, which tease and trick vision into accepting the simultaneous co-presence to the eye of inside and outside, of ocean vistas and receding fields, of dilapidated cottages, abandoned airport lounges, cheaply furnished office spaces, and time-worn galleries peopled only by huddles of neo-classical statuary. The elements themselves are confounded. Air has the consistency of water, a densely transparent medium through which disparate entities, both

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animate and inanimate, listlessly swim, exuding a sense of exquisite aimlessness. Distinctions such as that between animate and inanimate, sentient and insentient have, in any case, long been redundant in the world conjured by Ní Bhriain's work. (The absence of any direct representation of humanity facilitates this annulment of a traditionally hierarchical chain of being.) The languorously paced movements of a live owl, a stuffed raven, a swimming fish, a rigid twist of wire or a shredded scrap of plastic sheeting are all of equal significance. Or insignificance, for that matter. Orphaned and unmoored, displaced and disconnected, all things alike are adrift and in flux, going nowhere slowly.

Kafka's captive ape in 'A Report to an Academy' is quite explicit about the modest goal that prompts his transformation into a man. It is not freedom *per se* to which he aspires, a human delusion for which he has little respect, but a *freedom of movement* within an immediate environment that is, inevitably, constricted by its own boundaries and limitations. What he is manoeuvring towards, as the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari once put it, is 'a line of escape, or a simple *way out*, 'to the right, to the left, in any direction at all', which signifies as little as possible'.¹ If this seems less than ideal, a compromised kind of emancipation, then so be it. Ní Bhriain's films too, have an air of haunted fatalism, often enhanced by specially commissioned scores of electronic music whose general tone is one of quiet foreboding. The themes they have persistently addressed are urgent and substantial, though the mode of address is sometimes oblique. They include the topics of territorial conflict, environmental destruction and economic migration. In *Vanishing Point*, 2004, and *Forms of Forgetting*, 2005, the same black-and-white photographic image of a bleak, wooded ridge dissolves slowly before our eyes, in the first instance, or, in the second, is subjected to competing processes of erasure and occlusion by a set of frantically duelling ink pens wielded by off-screen combatants. The implication is that landscapes are vulnerable, mutable and frequently contested constructs, created by humankind rather than simply God-given, and subject to devastation at the hand of that same species. In the aftermath of the economic downturn of 2008, as Ireland once again began to haemorrhage people, Ní Bhriain produced *The Emigrant*, 2010, which features *inter alia* the churning wake of the exile's ship, scattered sheep grazing in a country field and flocks of faraway birds wheeling overhead. *Window* and *Departure*, both 2013, arrived some time later, both films set in the forlorn departure lounge of an abandoned terminal at Cork Airport.

The concerns of *Reports to an Academy* are more abstract and diffuse. They wheel around general questions of identity formation; not an insignificant matter in a time of ongoing political, social and economic crisis, both within Ireland and beyond its borders. It is worth noting that, as Ní Bhriain's work premieres, Europe is convulsed by a so-called 'migrant crisis', regularly described with recourse to dehumanising metaphors of ominous inundation: an influx, a stream, a flow, a wave, a tide, a flood. The contrasting locations depicted on each of the work's four screens are tentatively united by a shared structuring principle: each has been digitally bisected on a horizontal axis by a mirrored surface, such that the 'real' landscape or interior above is reflected in the 'illusionary' depths below. These mirrored surfaces are 'naturalised' to various, limited degrees within the image, e.g. as rippling water in the landscape setting, whose verisimilitude is subverted by the eventual appearance at the edge of the frame of a pink curtain seemingly suspended from the sky; or as what we might initially mistake for reflective glass amid the museum's vitrines, until we notice that same rippling effect that courses through all four scenes. The persistently deceptive *mise-an-abyme* allows for - one might even say encourages - multiplied possibilities of misrecognition. While affecting to offer the viewer a set of

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1975, p.13. The translation is the writer's and differs somewhat from that of the published English version.*

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cardinal co-ordinates - library, studio, landscape, museum - with which to orient herself along the axes of both history and geography, the installation is ultimately more akin to a disorienting, semi-submerged hall of mirrors. Library and studio alike, in particular, give off an air of abandonment. The empty shelving units in the former and the lack of any sign of recent industry in the latter suggest these spaces have been disused for some time. Haunted now by lone, fidgeting birds of prey and impossibly drifting clouds - both motifs that have migrated from earlier films - they have been voided of any sense of real purpose. Trapped in a recurring cycle of suspenseful animation, the fraught locales through which the viewer is invited to wander in *Reports to an Academy* are as burdened by the past as they are bereft of any currently foreseeable future.

by
Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith
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