

LIKE ME

ALICE HANRATTY
KIAN BENSON BAILES
ELEANOR MCCAUGHEY

JOANNE LAWS
ART WRITER
IN RESIDENCE 2018

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'DECONSTRUCTING WORLDS'
J O A N N E L A W S

Curated by Sarah Searson, 'Like Me' is a group exhibition by Eleanor McCaughey, Kian Benson Bailes and Alice Hanratty, currently showing across at The Dock. While the title suggests a figurative inquiry – linked to portraiture or self-representation – the exhibition also champions art objects that emanate from one discipline, while masquerading as another. For example: painterly sketches have been digitally processed to create an anachronistic wall fresco; the formal language of sculptural assemblage is simulated through digital means; and the classical tropes of realist portraiture are distorted to border on the grotesque. The three artists articulate a shared impulse to deconstruct and reconstruct worlds. These virtual, art historical and imagined realms are encountered at different scales throughout the exhibition, via site-responsive presentation strategies that capitalise on the curator's intimate knowledge of the space and her awareness of how audiences tend to circulate.

In Gallery Two, Eleanor McCaughey presents a vibrant series of oil paintings that explore notions of portraiture within the modern 'selfie' era. A dark humour is evident below the seemingly frivolous, candy-coloured surfaces, lavishly adorned with infectious patterns that channel 1990s pop optimism and classic MTV. McCaughey's portrait series takes its title from Adam Curtis's 2002 documentary, *Century of the Self*, exploring the commodification of unconscious human desires in a consumerist society. Rendered in a classical realist style (with a commitment to underpainting, layering and glazing of the Flemish technique), McCaughey's unconventional subjects are treated almost as objects in a still life arrangement. In fact, the portraits depict sculptures of human heads, fabricated by the artist in polymer clay and other rudimentary materials. Extrapolated from old photographs sourced in flea markets, McCaughey's subjects are abstracted beyond recognition, to become genderless simulacra. As classical busts depicted on plinths, they suggest figures of importance; however, as stated by the artist: "they are nobody... they are imagined". Facial features have been distorted to create hideous yet compelling creatures that McCaughey affectionately refers to as "artworld rejects".



These paintings call to mind art historical discourse on the grotesque, not least in relation to the Gothic period, when fantastic gargoyles, gruesome chimeras and deformed monsters featured on buildings for ornamental purposes. Grotesque art revels in the absurd, championing fantasy worlds over the rigid strictures of realism, while functioning as an anthropological device to conceptualise existential experience. Characterised by hybridity and metamorphosis, McCaughey's malformed body-less heads elicit repulsion, humour and empathy in equal measures.

They also trigger associations with the 'abject' – a term employed by psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva in her seminal text, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980), to denote the repressed and unspeakable forces that linger inside a person's psyche (1). Kristeva argues that the process of abjection is associated with deformed bodies and bodily fluids – blood, pus, bile, faeces, sweat and vomit – that blur internal and external human boundaries. Within McCaughey's paintings, the glossy veneer of skulls gives way to viscous substances that ooze and drip from the decomposing forms. The surface of *Mask* (2018) is as shiny as an oil slick, while in *Family hour II* (2018), a sticky substance pours out of the head, like a pool of molten tar. According to Kristeva, when the internal body is exposed, all meaning collapses, as the abject "threatens our sense of cleanliness and propriety". Being forced to face the abject is therefore "inherently traumatic", because it makes us confront death and the inevitable corruption of our own bodies – something that we must "permanently thrust aside in order to live". According to Kristeva, art is indispensable to investigations of the abject, because its non-linguistic qualities permit cathartic expression of repressed desires, including the vilest aspects of human life. In this way, McCaughey's portraits show the human head as a totemic object made into a fetish: likeness is chiselled away to produce lumpen mounds; clay features are mauled through brutal human touch; clay is caked over eye sockets, like lumps of discarded gum; faces are smothered with glistening foil, recalling tribal death masks. This is the artwork as poultice, drawing out primitive impulses and crude behaviours outside of normalcy.

(1) Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

Yet the surfaces of McCaughey's portraits remain deceptively calm and untroubled, as if such trauma is locked away beneath the smooth, painterly veneer. The wider installation also concerns itself with surfaces. The exterior walls of the custom-built display area have been insulated with yellow fleece, variously demarking conceptual thresholds between: interior and exterior, reality and fantasy, the conscious and the unconscious, the self and the other. Only one painting transcends the individual, to consider collective formations. The clenched fist depicted in *Portrait* (2017), coupled with the inclusion of tactile fringing, recalls the historic handmade banners of suffragettes and worker's solidarity movements, while a green white and gold palette naturally channels the Irish tricolour. By aligning with seemingly anachronistic identity politics, the artist opens up a critical space to address the shifting mechanisms of power that ultimately determine how the individual is configured within society.

In contrast, within the digital worlds constructed by recent graduate Kian Benson Bailes, technology has been harnessed to create sanitised and sterile scenes, banishing all traces of the abject or the organic. A fantasy realm, normally encountered at the scale of the screen, has been enlarged to the size of a billboard and presented on a custom-built partition in Gallery Two. Reminiscent of virtual worlds generated within online gaming culture, this vista also echoes a perfectly composed art historical landscape. Foliage is rendered in various shades of grey, suggestive of drought, fossilisation or the passing of time. Bare tree branches are topped with puffs of cloud, resembling sticks of candy floss that extend the surreal aesthetic. The landscape is dotted with ripe pink orchids – a botanical element long associated with sexuality and fertility in western art. For all its digital composure, the scene channels a desire for the tactility of traditional fine art disciplines. Simulations of thick impasto brushstrokes can be identified, while polymorphous and kaleidoscopic forms emulate sculptural materials. An imp-like creature is visible in the foreground, suggesting some kind of gaming avatar, while a black silhouette looms large in the background, reminiscent of the dark towering presences that often punctuate Benson Bailes's sculptural installations.

Inserted behind the billboard like a hidden control panel, an iPad screen plays a short video on loop, showing digital renderings of rotating structures. The material and formal languages of sculptural assemblage and bricolage further underpin this piece, through the simulation of textures such as chipboard, resin, lace, hessian, rubber, plaster and cellophane. Despite their visually seductive qualities, these textures can only ever be meaningless digital hallucinations – metaphors of texture, generated through software coding and algorithms.

Amid this screen encounter, we are deprived of the space to circulate around sculptures or to study their fleeting forms in any detail. While software programmers can construct habitable, functional environments, these structures are just as capable of being corrupted or falling apart. As the digital equivalent of metaphysical chaos, glitches have the capacity to disrupt progress, to dismantle identities and to deconstruct worlds, thus collapsing all meaning built up in this precarious realm. Such entropic tendencies are enacted onscreen through the construction and deconstruction of forms that split apart and explode like dioramas. Elsewhere, two wall-mounted digital collages depict real sculptures, augmented through digital means. A makeshift structure is crudely constructed from timber struts; sticky substances glisten, while inflated elements pucker at the seams. Such tantalising representations of real-world materials makes us crave the authenticity of the sculptural encounter – to smell it, to feel its presence in relation to our own bodies. However, like McCaughey’s portraits, these objects are trapped within the two-dimensional plane, rendering them perpetually distanced and ungraspable.



Digital technologies were also employed in the fabrication of a new commission by Alice Hanratty for the mezzanine at The Dock. A series of Hanratty's portraits were scanned, digitally 'stitched' and printed as a continuous sequence, in dimensions specific to the space. Channelling the visual vocabulary of Renaissance frescoes, *Procession* (2018) wraps seamlessly around the atrium, complimenting the historical character of the building. The original paintings are presented in Gallery One, almost as fragments of the cohesive whole, like the delicate remnants of a crumbling frieze, awaiting restoration.

Throughout her career, Hanratty has made vast contributions to arts education and cultural life in Ireland – something discussed at length during her fascinating artist's talk with Sarah Searson and Eleanor McCaughey in February. During the late 1950s, Hanratty studied under Sean Keating, Maurice McGonagle and John Kelly at the National College of Art (now NCAD). She later undertook postgraduate studies at Hornsey College of Art in 'The Education of Vision' – a course that clearly ignited the artist's curiosity about art historical, museological and archival research methods. Her extensive training in traditional fine art disciplines strongly permeates this body of work. Using thinned oil paint on heavy paper, vigorous brushstrokes are solidified through linear mark-making, while her vast knowledge of colour theory is suitably harnessed. Subtle tonal interactions are achieved through the various application of yellow ochres, raw siennas and cobalt blues, recalling the muted and earthy palettes of Renaissance masters - not least Benozzo Gozzoli, who developed a famous cycle of frescoes in 1459 for the walls of the Magi Chapel in the Palazzo Medici Riccardi, Florence, including 'The Procession of the Magi' which adorns the chapel's south wall.



Hanratty's artworks are installed higher than normal in Gallery One, while a central seating area permits slow contemplation. At one stage, I found myself hovering in the doorway, simultaneously studying the original characters, while tracing their appearance within the larger sequence. Some figures are more prominent than others, such as a striking woman in a wide-brimmed red hat. According to the exhibition press release, another figure, rendered in shades of blue, resembles Federico da Montefeltro, the Duke of Urbino (1422 – 1482), a renowned intellectual, humanist and civic leader of the early Renaissance period, and patron of the Italian painter, Piero della Francesca. Nearly all of Hanratty's figures face the same direction, except one man who turns to look directly at the viewer – an art historical device long associated with Greco-Roman friezes and classical entablature.





Joanne Laws is an arts writer, editor and researcher based in county Leitrim. She has recently been appointed Features Editor of The Visual Artists' News Sheet. Joanne is a member of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) and a regular contributor to international arts publications including Art Monthly and Frieze. She was previously assistant editor for the online resource publicart.ie and coordinator of the Roscommon Visual Artists Forum (RVAF). Joanne won 'VAI/DCC Critical Writing Award 2012/13' for her extended essay 'Commemoration – A ForwardLooking Act'. She has previously developed research reports and policy documents for organisations such as 126 Artist-Run Gallery, Kilkenny Arts Office and Youth Work Ireland. Joanne Laws website www.joannelaws.wordpress.com

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Images by artist in residence Anna Leask

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10:30am - 5:00pm Saturday.