

Ursula Burke
'The Precariat'

Amanda Jane Graham
'Stage Left'

17 NOVEMBER - 5 JANUARY 2019

JOANNE LAWS
ARTS WRITER
IN RESIDENCE
2017 - 2019

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A RESPONSE TO EXHIBITION
URSULA BURKE 'THE PRECARIAT'
AMANDA JANE GRAHAM 'STAGE LEFT'

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J O A N N E L A W S

Two concurrent solo exhibitions at The Dock variously consider how power dynamics – both intimate and systemic – manifest at the level of the individual. Reappropriating art historical conventions, theatrical tropes and visual culture imagery, both artists interrogate forms of violence, exploring the dichotomies of oppression, from public to private, provincial to global.

In the light-filled and expansive arena of Gallery 2, Ursula Burke presents an arresting installation, 'The Precariat'. The centrepiece is a high-impact series of static black and white busts, titled *The Wounding*. Meticulously fabricated in Parian porcelain (traditionally used to emulate carved marble), the busts are elevated at different heights on black custom-made columns and plinths – a classical presentation format more commonly associated with colonial houses or Vatican museums, that resonates particularly well within this former nineteenth-century courthouse. Having studied the human form in marble during a residency at the British school in Rome, Burke sought to subvert the classical paradigm of memorialising powerful white European men, by integrating the narratives of class and race.

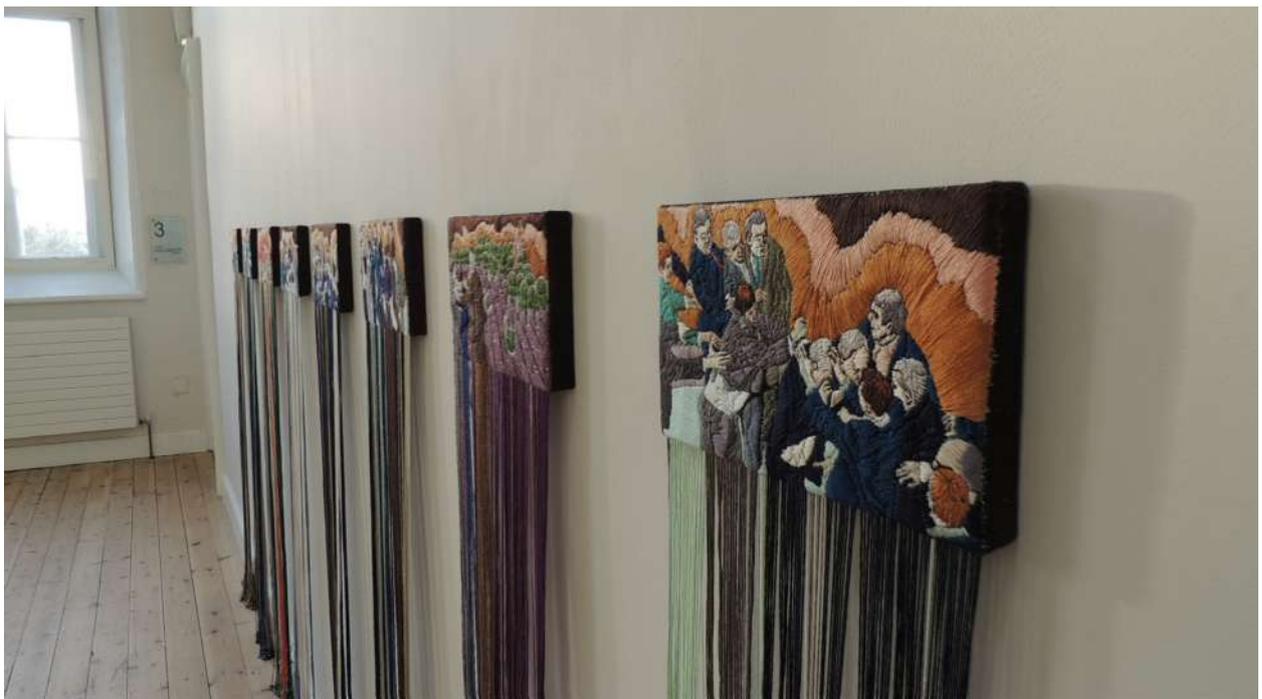
Burke's subsequent residency at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh coincided with the Black Lives Matter campaign, as well as the controversy surrounding the inclusion of Dana Schutz's painting, *Open Casket* (2016), in the 2017 Whitney Biennale (which depicts the mutilated face of Emmet Till, a 14-year old black boy, brutally murdered by two white men in Mississippi in 1955). Making busts of African American faces seemed a timely and natural progression for this series, which had already begun to destabilise the conventional form, by incorporating wounds, deformities and bruising. Many are lumpen and disfigured, several have swollen eyes, and some have had their noses gnawed off, resembling the Great Sphinx of Giza. Closer inspection reveals the prominent depiction of scars, wrinkles and other imperfections, not traditionally preserved in such forensic detail. A black head lies on its side, its anguished face and drooping eyelids suggesting semi-consciousness.



One woman wears a simple lace coif, associated with Renaissance peasantry, while another is veiled, reminiscent of Raffaele Monti's marble sculpture, *Veiled Vestal* (1847). The triangular formation faces the door, confronting viewers as they enter the space. To the rear is a bare-chested Roman soldier, wearing a lion headdress and brandishing a bulging cheek. The group is spearheaded by a particularly mischievous character, with a soft plait and kiss-curved fringe; despite a swollen eye, she sticks out her tongue in defiance. Collectively these anonymous men and women command a strange kind of reverence; though we may feel discomfort and pity at their individual afflictions, we perceive their solidarity as a force to be reckoned with.

As described by British economist, professor Guy Standing, the precariat – a portmanteau of 'precarious' and 'proletariat' – is an emerging class, even lower than that of the working class. The global precariat is a byproduct of increased labour market flexibility under neoliberalism, which succeeded in "transferring risks and insecurity onto workers and their families" (1). According to Standing, the precariat "consists of many millions around the world without an anchor of stability", who are becoming a "new dangerous class"; as the modern 'swing-voters', they have political potency, because they are "prone to listen to ugly voices". Instability in the contemporary political sphere is further manifested in a large-scale mural, which extends across the back wall. Titled *The Augury of Birds*, the mural echoes *Villa of Livia* (an ancient Roman Fresco located in the Palazzo Massimo) presenting a "dilapidation of the original". With 'augury' denoting some kind of omen, this monochromatic grainy scene features weeping birds, with the once-abundant fruit turning rotten. The lush botanical scene has also been stripped of colour. As described by Burke, colour can be very divisive, particularly in politically turbulent regions, or post-conflict zones like Northern Ireland.

Burke's embroidery friezes, titled *The Politicians*, are hand-stitched panels, drawn from internet images that document fighting politicians. Channelling the dramatic intensity of Baroque paintings – and employing a similarly muted, almost medieval palette – these works show physical scuffles that occasionally break out into riots, as men hold each other back, throw chairs, and nurse bloody noses. Ultimately, the frenzied activity occurring within these small frames cannot be contained; it leaks out, as stray threads fall towards the floor, suggestive of rising global tensions and the unravelling of social fabric. A singular embroidery work from this series is also presented in the mezzanine, generating a moment of supplication for visitors as they ascend the stairs. The circular composition features another brawl, as a man grapples with another man's face, met by outstretched arms and a clenched fist. The heated scene is cleverly structured to make use of coextensive space – a compositional device associated with the paintings of Caravaggio, which extends a scene's action beyond the picture plane. In addition, the artwork's pseudo religious aesthetic is inspired by Bernini's Baroque masterpiece, *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647-52), which was theatrically illuminated from above with golden beams of light. Conversely, Burke's circular composition is enshrouded with dark shards that extend outwards, emphasising the chiaroscuro effect, while suggesting a dramatic moment of divine revelation, corruption or redemption.



Nucleus of the World

Where Burke's installation considers the discreet forms of systemic violence that permeate society at large, Amanda Jane Graham's immersive and playful installation in Gallery 1 interrogates private forms of trauma that frequently unfold behind closed doors. Combining personal reflections and memoir, Graham seeks to make visible the hidden worlds of terminal illness and domestic violence. While alluding to the clinical and pathological advancement of progressive conditions, the exhibition title, 'Stage Left', also suggests some sort of poised departure – a theatrical concept that is reinforced in the space, using thick blackout curtains and dramatic spot-lighting. The artist – who is currently undertaking PhD research on the social function of rural art centres – presents two works from her previous series, 'There's More to Me Than The Big C', which explores her grief, following the death of her mother in 2012. During an artist's talk on 17 November, she vividly conveyed her impulse to "jump off planet earth and be with her in the world of the sick" – a realm in which daily life is controlled by medical teams. Two large-scale wall-mounted panels combine monochromatic drawing, brightly-coloured collage elements, and printmaking techniques to pay homage to her mother as a matriarch, chieftain and "nucleus of the world".





Other pieces in the installation are an extension of her ongoing body of work, 'The Domestic Abuse Panorama', which uses humour to process the aggression she experienced as a young child. A recent drawing from this series (not shown in this exhibition) depicts her parents on their wedding day, with her father brandishing an abnormally muscly right arm, like Popeye. Drawing on the comedic culture of cartoons, the artist creates imaginary realms that offer escape from bleak realities. In the cartoon world, no matter how severe a character's injuries, how torturous their fate, they always re-emerge seemingly unscathed, gathering up their body parts like shapeshifters and resuming play.

In the corner is a three-dimensional manifestation of the Batman-style exclamation, POW! while a cartoon-inspired audio work permeates the space with heavy breathing, spring sound effects and the extended whistle of a falling object (followed by its inevitable crash). This could be perceived as a comical soundscape of daily warfare; we visualise missiles being launched, as distant cities are reduced to rubble. A floor-based drawing, titled *Exit Stage Left*, depicts a curly-haired child who peers up from the centre of a crater, in the shape of Wile E. Coyote's flattened silhouette. One imagines that the hapless critter has just plummeted from a tall cliff onto the canyon floor, having been lured to the edge by the cunning Road Runner, who watches on triumphantly, from the top of a classical column, in a sculptural work entitled *Wile E. and Me*.



For some reason, I think of a story recounted to me by a psychoanalyst friend about one of her patients, in which she was driven to the edge of cliff by her husband, who threatened to drive off unless she admitted that she was having an affair – an unfounded belief that had fuelled her husband’s obsessions for most of their married lives. Knowing that she had four small children at home, the woman pleaded, before finally conceding to his most elaborate demand to date: she agreed to travel to America for a lie-detector test. It seems preposterous, almost comical, to think of that poor woman boarding a plane, knowing that she would be vindicated by the test, but worrying what new scenarios would be dreamt up by her delusional husband. Sadly, we are all too aware that such shocking abuse is a daily reality for the countless women and children who are not safe in their own homes. According to the most recent Femicide Watch report by Women’s Aid, over half of female murder victims were killed by their current or former boyfriend, partner or husband, with 61% being murdered in their own homes. Rather than ‘crimes of passion’, these intimate-partner femicides are often planned and form part of a persistent pattern of abuse. The artist quite rightly seeks to highlight domestic violence as a destabilising force that affects people for their entire lives. In an exhibition that seeks to confront loss – caused by bereavement, an unsettled childhood, or the “menacing grief” of an unhappy relationship, described by Graham’s mother as a “broken dream” – such individuals are framed not as ‘victims’, but as resilient spirits, who refuse to let their experiences define them.



Notes:

(1) Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011) p.1.

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 Forward Looking 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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For further information or to apply please contact Laura Mahon:

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Gallery Opening Times:

10:00am - 6:00 pm Monday to Friday

10:30am - 5:00pm Saturday.