



MARY NAGLE *memorare*

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17 - 28 February 2020

LSAD Gallery, Limerick School of Art & Design

Front cover: *Parlour*. Steel, paper, aluminium foil, gold leaf, wire. 33 x 33 x 33cm. Photograph: Roland Paschhoff.

Back cover: *Elevated Position I* (detail). Corrugated iron, cast porcelain, gold leaf on Fabriano paper mounted on board. Photograph: Matthew Gidney.



**Foreword**

Limerick School of Art and Design, LIT is delighted to welcome this solo show, *Memorare*, by Mary Nagle to the LSAD Gallery.

This is a show about memory, the act of remembering, and resonance; the quiet resonance of the past softly resounding around us. *Memorare* is a meditative show. It reimagines the lives of the women who once lived in this building, and reflects on the everyday domesticity of their lives. *Memorare* is not a didactic show; Mary Nagle instead offers us a succession of fragile, beautiful objects using vernacular forms and delicate materials – hair, paper, ash – as objects of quiet contemplation.

Mary Nagle has spoken of her interest in memory, and of the necessity to remember the past and to learn from it. Each of these objects she presents to us is imbued with emotion and symbolism. Their craftsmanship bears witness to her double identity as a designer and an artist. A lecturer in Limerick School of Art and Design since 1981, Mary's own career here saw the acquisition of the current site, which became the home campus for the School in the 1990's. *Memorare* is also a reflection on her own time spent here in LSAD, in this building, and the resonance that it continues to hold for her. Parallel to the quiet tenderness of these pieces is a sense of joy in making which Mary feels characterises the new incarnation of this building as a school of art and design.

*I often reflected on this when working at school, the difference in the lives between the women who were incarcerated, and, within the same four walls, the students and staff today...the encouragement, the opportunity, the freedom, the respect, the positive open-minded place that LSAD is, and has always been. (Mary Nagle 2020)*

Beautiful, delicate, contemplative, *Memorare* is a show that we are very proud to host; a reflection on the nature of this site, past and present, by our dear colleague of many years, Mary Nagle.

**Dr. Tracy Fahey** February 2020  
Head of Department of Fine Art  
Head of Centre for Postgraduate Studies  
Limerick School of Art and Design, LIT.



*Trousseau - Bonnet*  
Paper, cotton thread.

## Memorare

In this exhibition, I endeavour to honour the lives of the women and girls who were incarcerated in Ireland's Magdalene Laundries during a dark period of Ireland's history. Cast out and shunned by society, hidden away by church and state, forgotten by most. I hope to lend dignity to the manual labour at which they toiled, and most importantly, to acknowledge, despite loss, shame and lifetimes of suffering, the deep-rooted instinct that is maternal love.

Working for over 25 years at Limerick School of Art and Design, Clare Street, Limerick, in a building that had previously been the Good Shepherd institution, operating between 1848 and 1990 as a Magdalene Laundry, an industrial school, a reformatory school for girls, an orphanage, a convent and church, my thoughts would often turn to the previous purpose of the building, with its imposing perimeter stone walls, and the lives of the women it housed. I would reflect on the isolation, deprivation and degradation endured by women in Magdalene Laundries in Ireland, and the fortitude of the human spirit.

In a few short years, this building has shed its sorrowful past and emerged as a welcoming place of equality, creativity, opportunity and autonomy.

Made mostly from found and discarded objects we are all familiar with, worn by use or time, and lowly materials of little value, the work in this exhibition aims to bring to mind the past, memory, lives lived and lives forgotten.

Memorare. Remember.

Mary Nagle February 2020

## A Fragile Resilience

Dr. Susan Halvey

Vladimir Nabokov wrote that 'while the scientist sees everything that happens in one point of space, the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time.' Genius he claimed, lay in 'finding the invisible links between things.'<sup>1</sup> The artist and designer Mary Nagle, works by carefully accumulating a repertoire of lowly worn out objects, selected for their quiet beauty and fragile resilience. The artist takes time to contemplate these fragments, attentively reading their visual language before going on to gently work the pieces, augmenting them, meticulously placing and juxtaposing. The material is polysemic and evocative, but in the hands of this artist, potential meaning is amplified and intensified. The objects become powerful and heart breaking. The fragile beauty of the found piece is never disrupted by the artist's intervention, for Mary Nagle demonstrates a delicate and precise touch, coupled with a heightened awareness of the aesthetic qualities embodied in an old or ordinary, yet exquisite thing.

Limerick's Magdalen Asylum first came into existence in 1828. As a lay Refuge presided over by a Mrs Mead, it provided sanctuary to 'fallen' women released from the local jail. In 1848, at a time of mass starvation and disease, the Refuge moved to the Clare Street building and was taken over by Sisters of the Good Shepherd Congregation who arrived from Angers in France, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March. Within a climate of industrialisation and the rise of systems of institutionalisation, which saw benevolent alms houses increasingly replaced by punitive workhouses, women who had been used to less repressive rule were confronted with a harshening regime of onerous physical labour and ecclesiastical control. Yet according to transcripts of the Annals of the Good Shepherd, by their 'regularity, piety, industry and truly extraordinary spirit of penance' the women 'became a great source of consolation to the nuns.' In the 1850s with seventy-five women in residence, the building was deemed to be excessively overcrowded. By 1869 the number of 'penitents' was at two hundred and twenty-five. At this time, thirty-one women were either sent to hospital, or died soon after being admitted. Some would have gone to the hospital to give birth but there is no doubt that others were victims of disease and the abysmal living conditions. Between the arrival of the nuns in 1848 and 1877, a total of eight hundred and ninety-seven women had been



taken into the asylum, with the length of stay varying from one week to fifty years. The age of those admitted ranged from thirteen to sixty years old.<sup>2</sup>

It was not until 1913 that the church was built, complete with its eight-sided baptistery, a jolting physical reminder of the babies whose lives began in the building. With the establishment of the Irish State in the early half of the century a new and powerful alliance between Church and State emerged. During the period from 1922 to the 1950s there was an unprecedented acceleration in institutionalisation in Ireland. Clara Fischer asserts that 'between reformatory and industrial schools, mother and baby homes, a borstal, prisons, psychiatric institutions, and Magdalen asylums, a staggering one percent of the population was institutionalised.'<sup>3</sup> A percentage of the population, which exceeds that of penal incarceration under Stalin. Unmarried mothers, who had become pregnant because of sexual crime, incest, innocence, or 'folly', were confined and concealed behind the convent walls so that the myth of a sexually pure Irish Identity could be forged and upheld. For much of the twentieth century the laundry operated as a viable commercial enterprise, providing services for hotels, hospitals and the citizens of Limerick city. The laundry had at its disposal an entirely unpaid workforce. Over the course of its history, thousands of women and girls passed through the gates of the Good Shepherd Convent. In the 1990s the nuns announced their intention to sell. The building was vacated, the statuary and other contents were auctioned, and the Limerick School of Art and Design took up residence, beginning a new chapter.

Michel Foucault, speaking evocatively of the space of our dreams and our passions, tells of 'a light, ethereal, transparent space, or again a dark rough, encumbered space; a space from above, of summits, or ... a space from below, of mud; or again a space that can be flowing like sprinkling water, or a space that is fixed, congealed, like stone or crystal.'<sup>4</sup> Mary Nagle has during her years working as lecturer at Limerick School of Art and Design, absorbed something of the past contained within the walls of the old Good Shepherd Convent, just as she has absorbed the aesthetic language of the objects she finds. Through an act of deep empathy, Mary has been able to connect with

the complex chiaroscuro past and present of the building, and to the internal worlds of people who have resided in the Clare Street building, finding the invisible links between things, feeling everything that happens, in one point in time.

*Memorare* pays homage to the women who passed through the gates of the Convent of the Good Shepherd. The exhibition commemorates their lives, their work, their love and their devastating losses. The carefully arranged pieces make a profound statement about the dignity to be found in domestic work done with diligence. To the repertoire of augmented found objects, Mary has added skilfully executed artworks. A paper christening garment embellished with a tiny rose, dusted with Lenten ash. Precious pieces lovingly rendered in the artist's hair, resonant with enduring maternal love. A fastidious labour of devotion acted out in the private internal world of the mother, long after the child has left.

Dr. Susan Halvey February 2020

Dr. Susan Halvey is a lecturer in Critical & Contextual Studies at Limerick School of Art & Design, Limerick Institute of Technology, where she has worked for the last twenty years. In the 1990s, Susan graduated with a BA in Fine Art, Painting, and a Higher Diploma for Art and Design Teachers. After spending some time teaching in Valladolid and in Galicia, Spain, she moved to London where she completed a Masters in the History of Art at Goldsmiths College, University of London. In 2018, Susan received a PhD in Education at the University of Limerick, the research explored experiences of the Visual Arts Practice PhD in Ireland.



#### Endnotes

1 Nabokov, V. (1968). *Nabokov's Congeries*. New York: Viking Press.

2 Finnegan, F. (2014). *Do Penance or Perish. Magdalen Asylums in Ireland*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Additional information was accessed through the Limerick City Library's Local Studies archive.

3 Fischer, C. (2016) Gender, nation, and the politics of shame: Magdalen laundries and the institutionalization of feminine transgression in modern Ireland. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 41 (4), pp. 821-843.

4 Foucault, M. (1998). Of Other Spaces. In N. Mirzoeff (Ed.), *The Visual Culture Reader* (pp 237-244). London: Routledge.



*Purgare* (detail)  
Steel, wood, cast porcelain, foam insulation, steel wire, human hair, bone, plastic.

Opposite: *Purgare* (detail)  
Steel, ash, porcelain, gold leaf, plant material.



*Watch Over Me* (detail)  
Steel, human hair.



*Trousseau* - Vest, Gown, Booties (detail)  
Paper, cotton thread, coal ash, lanten ash.





Above: *You Always I*  
Human hair, masonry, emulsion paint.  
30 x 27 x 10 cm



Left: *You Always IV*  
Human hair, masonry, emulsion paint.  
30 x 24 x 11 cm

Opposite: *You Always III*  
Human hair.  
12 x 14 x 5 cm





*Night Prayers*  
Steel, plastic, foil, paint, wire on Fabriano paper, mounted on board.  
67.5 x 53 x 7cm.



*Linea Caelesti*  
Steel wire, gold leaf mounted on board. 61 x 51 x 5 cm.



*Elevated Position I*  
Corrugated iron, cast porcelain, gold leaf on Fabriano paper mounted on board. 73 x 91 x 4.5 cm.



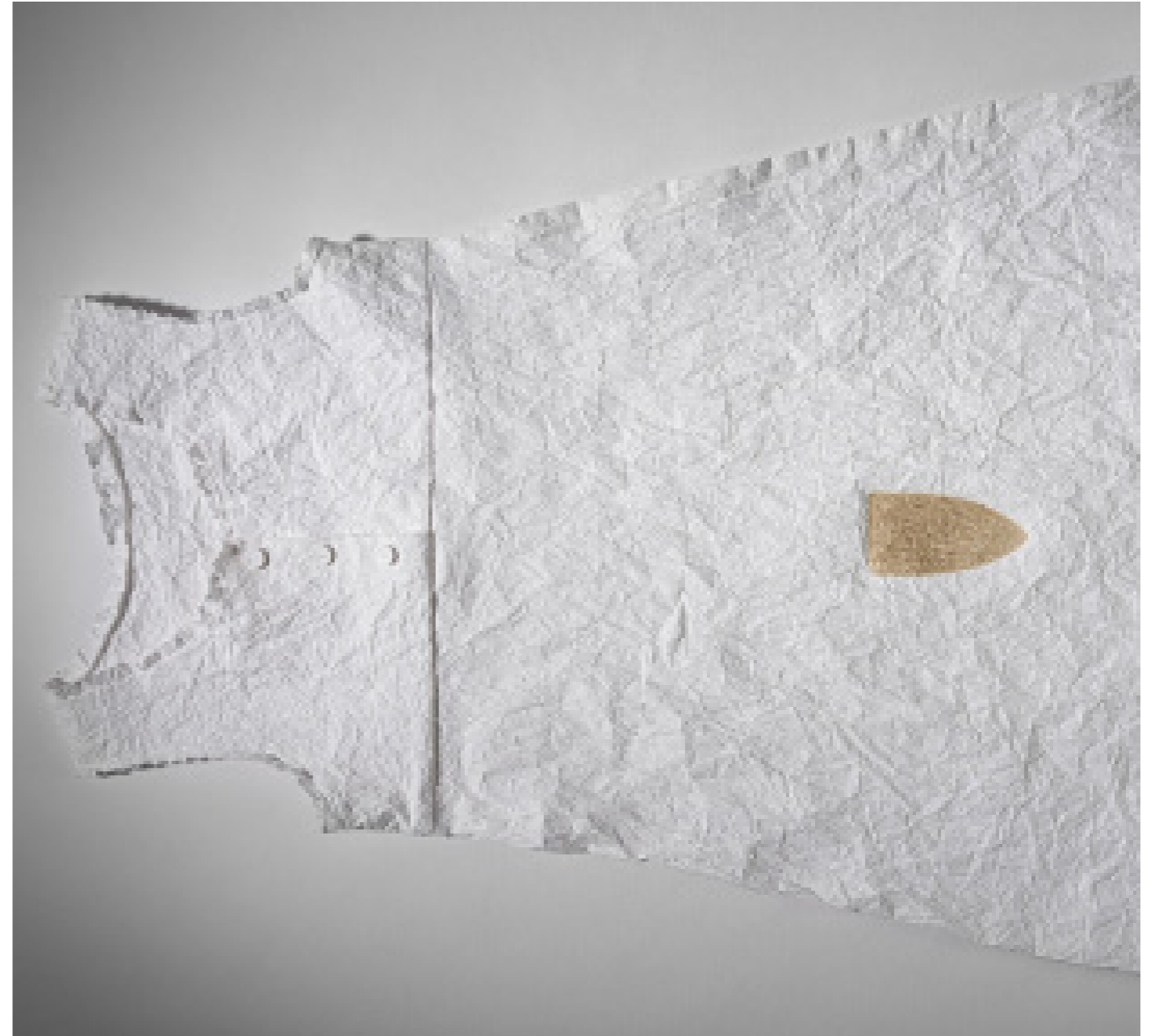
Above and opposite: *Faultline* (detail)  
Plant material, cast porcelain, wire.

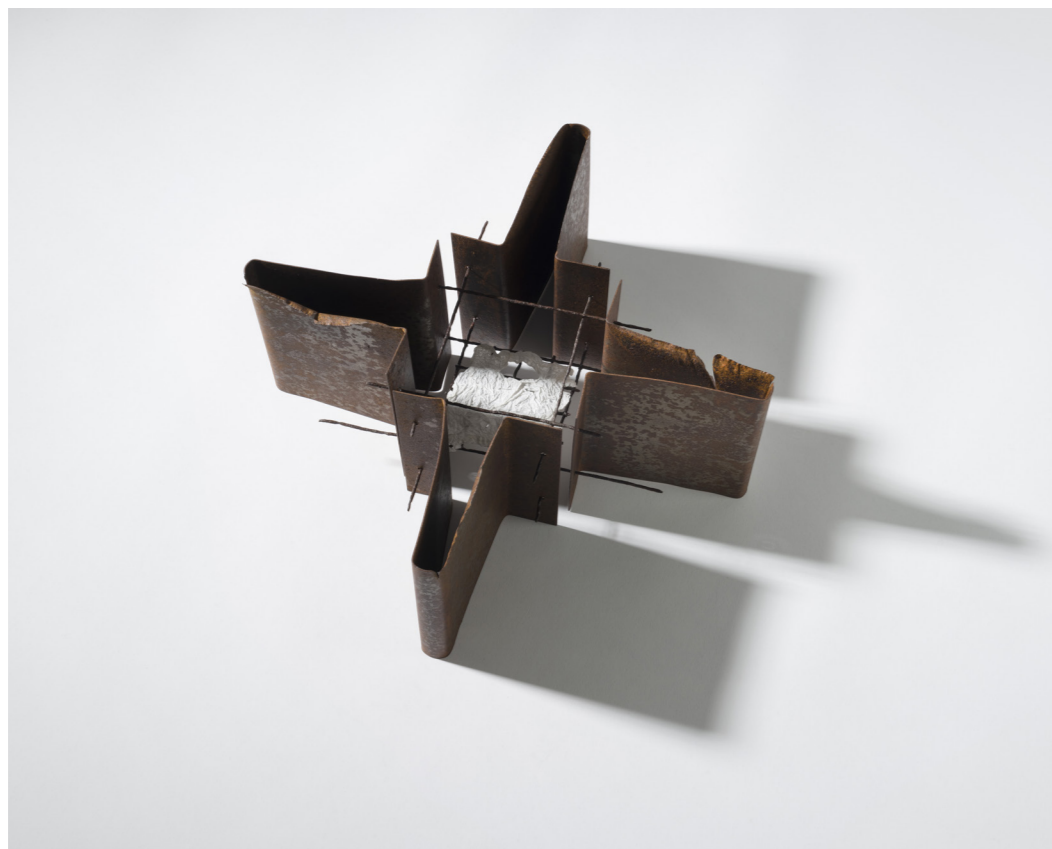
Left: *Faultline* (detail)  
Steel, cement, cast porcelain.



*Inglorious Act* (detail)  
Cast iron, wood, marble, paint.

Opposite: *Inglorious Act* (detail)  
Paper, cotton thread.





*Lone Crucible*  
Steel, paper, wire. 30 x 30 x 11cm.



*Bitter Fast (detail)*  
Steel, aluminium, tin, Lenten ash, paint.



*Signum*  
Steel, brass, glass, plant material. 46 x 78 x 1.5 cm.



*Signum* (detail)  
Steel, brass, plant material.

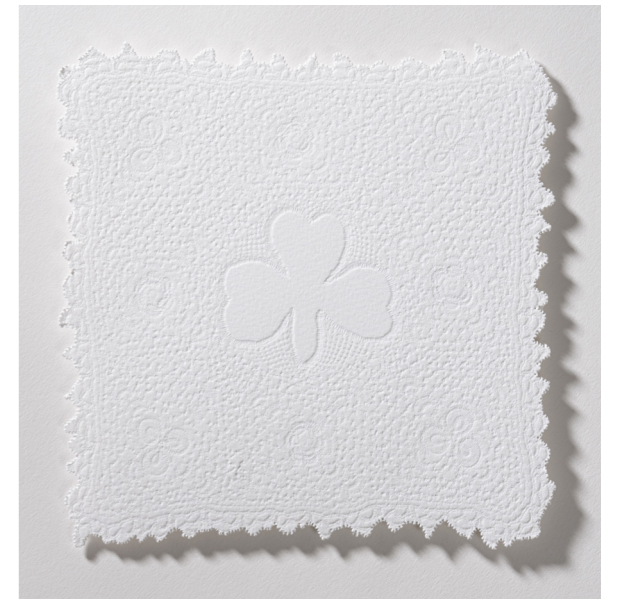


*Tenacious Flame I* (detail)  
Paper, steel wire, guache paint, glue.

Opposite: *Tenacious Flame II*  
Copper, paper, steel wire, guache paint, glue. 56 x 28 x 12 cm.



*Tenacious Flame III*  
Paper, steel wire, guache paint, glue. 53 x 33 x 30 cm.



*Celestial Order* (detail)  
Embossed Fabriano paper.

*Celestial Order* (detail)  
Cast iron, cast porcelain, tin, silver leaf, gold leaf, steel, wood, bone, mother of pearl.





Above: *Rueful Exile*  
Steel, wire, sterling silver,  
plant material on Fabriano  
paper mounted on board.

Left: *Greivous Fault* (detail)  
Fabriano paper, gold leaf,  
cast porcelain, marble,  
plant material.



## Mary Nagle

Born 1953, Limerick, Ireland.

Mary Nagle studied Graphic Design at Limerick School of Art and Design (LSAD) graduating in 1979, having previously studied and graduated in Art Teaching.

In 1981 she established MN Design, a professional design practice undertaking cultural, educational and corporate projects.

Mary combined her design practice with her career in education from 1981, lecturing at University of Limerick Adult Education Programme, Crawford School of Art and Design as visiting lecturer, and Undergraduate and Postgraduate level at Limerick School of Art and Design and Mary Immaculate College of Education (MIC).

Since 2014 she has been engaged in a fine art practice working in mixed media relief compositions and small sculptures.

### Selected Group exhibitions

- 2015 *Limerick Printmakers Winter Exhibition*, The Hunt Museum, Limerick.
- 2016 *LSAD Open*, LSAD Gallery, Limerick.  
*Mass Communication*, LSAD Gallery, Limerick.
- 2017 The National Crafts Awards, RDS, Dublin.
- 2018 *Blurring The Edge*, The Hunt Museum, Limerick.
- 2019 *Blurring The Edge*, Flowerfield Arts Centre, Portstewart, Co. Derry.  
*Summer Show*, SO Fine Art Editions, Powerscourt Town House, Dublin.  
*Sculpture in Context 2019*, National Botanic Gardens, Dublin.

### Solo Exhibitions

- 2020 *Memorare*, LSAD Gallery, School of Art and Design, Limerick.

### Awards

- 2020 Individual Arts Bursary Award, Limerick City and County Council.

## Acknowledgements

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I also thank Audrey Whitty, National Museum of Ireland for her interest and encouragement.

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