

Memorare

Haunting and evocative show by the artist and designer Mary Nagle.

Within this space of the former Good Shepherd church, Mary has responded to the past of this structure. Over the years, the set of buildings that now constitutes the Limerick School of Art and Design has assumed many forms; it's been a Lancastrian school, a Christian Brothers' institute, a centre for Limerick Lace, and latterly a Good Shepherd convent, an orphanage and a Magdalen laundry. It is this later part of the history that Mary is working with and thinking about here. This history of this period is beautifully evoked by Dr. Susan Halvey's illuminating essay in the catalogue where she speaks movingly of the women incarcerated in these institutions. It is also poignantly recalled in Mary's work for this show, *Memorare*.

Memorare means 'remember.' This is a show about memory; about the need to remember. It's also an ancient prayer of supplication; a prayer for those in distress. Using the double meaning of this word, Mary reflects on the ghosts of the past. Here we see the return of the repressed –past lives come into focus through the objects on display, and past spaces become reanimated through exhibition design. This show is site-specific, designed especially for this place. The form and layout mimics the cruciform space of the original church. It also signals the past functions of this space: the votive objects; crucifixes, holy water fonts, tiny, cast cherubs are all located on the curved wall, which conceals the hidden area previously occupied by the altar.

Before it, laid out like pews, are rows of delicate, vernacular objects. It's impossible not to be moved by the fragile, beautiful pieces on display here, and the wider resonance they evoke. These humble artefacts of material culture celebrate physical labour undertaken by the women who lived here. Because these objects are so relatable, they have the ability to link us with the past in a vivid, direct and immediate way. The poet Patrick Kavanagh in his poem 'Advent' talks about the miraculous nature of ordinary objects -'The why of heart-breaking strangeness in dreeping hedges' –in this show it is not the religious objects that command veneration, but the small, heart-breaking objects that speak of household labour, the bonds of maternal love, and the haunting nature of loss.

These very beautiful and emotional objects have an edge of Surrealism. Nothing here is quite as it seems. On closer inspection, the baby boots are made of the abject materials of human hair. The burned imprint of an iron lies at the crotch of the little paper dress. The gilded cracks in the bucket recall the Japanese art of Kintsugi or "golden joinery", where scars and breaks are commemorated and not forgotten.

Using these fragile objects, Mary Nagle maps the spectral traces of lives lived within these walls. There's a quiet sensitivity at work here that has resulted in a sympathetic and moving engagement with the complex and difficult lives lived here by the women and their children.

Memorare is a reminder of the value of fine art; which at its best not only responds to a site or situation, but provokes a reaction, starts discussions, illuminates issues and brings what has been concealed into plain view. For above all, *Memorare* honours hidden lives, it draws them out of the shadows and commemorates them. It's a masterclass in how the act of making becomes in itself an act of commemoration. These objects on display gently evoke memories of lives lived here, their scars and their sorrows. And as the golden cracks in the bucket remind us, what is broken can be beautiful. What is broken is of value. What is broken makes us pause, makes us contemplate, makes us remember.

Dr. Tracy Fahey February 2020.

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