

The Visual Artists' News Sheet

# Critique

VNI

Edition 64: November – December 2022



Eleanor McCaughey, *Learning to smell the smoke*, 2022, mixed-media installation; photograph by Ros Kavanagh, courtesy the artist and Hugh Lane Gallery.

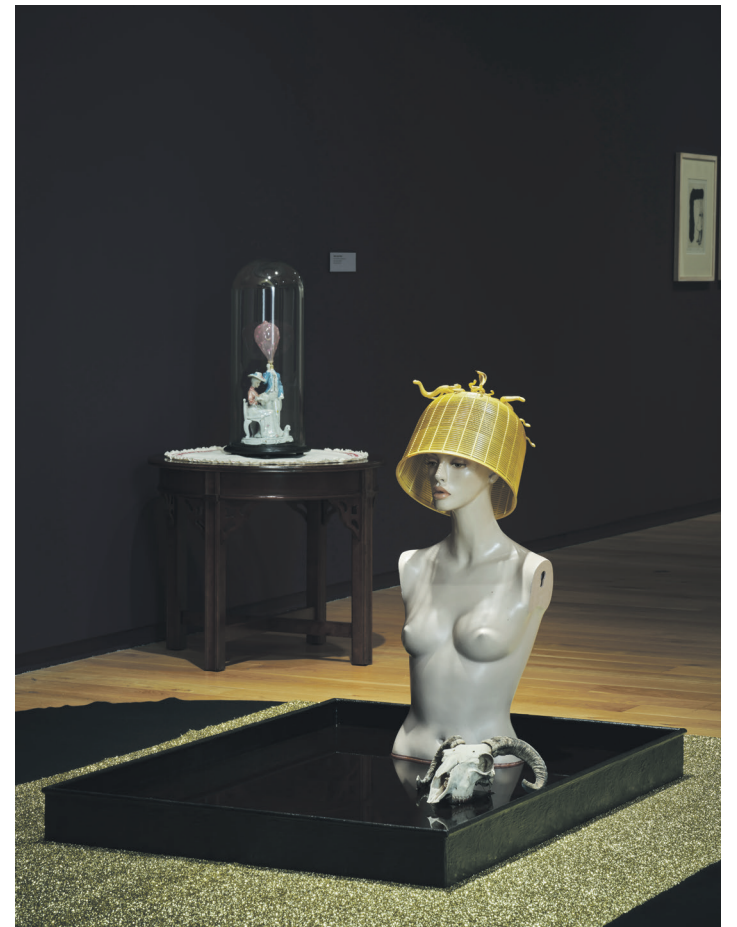
**'Bones in the Attic'**

Hugh Lane Gallery

11 August – 30 October 2022



[L-R]: Gerda Teljeur, *Childs Play 1, Maedhbh*, 2021, cotton bedsheets, cotton stuffing, coloured cotton thread, handmade jewellery, chair; Amanda Doran, *Selected paintings*, 2014-2021, oil on canvas; photograph by Ros Kavanagh, courtesy the artists and Hugh Lane Gallery.



Sarah Jayne Booth, (for) *All Our Grievous Doings*, 2022, multi-media installation; photograph by Ros Kavanagh, courtesy the artist and Hugh Lane Gallery.

THE INTERGENERATIONAL GROUP exhibition, 'Bones in the Attic', at the Hugh Lane Gallery, offers intriguing opportunities to explore the recurring and ongoing oppressions faced by women. Issues such as bodily autonomy, gender-based violence, misogyny, sexism, and ageism are at the forefront of the exhibition. Curated by Victoria Evans, this exhibition brings together works from the Hugh Lane collection and by invited artists; it features works by Sarah Jayne Booth, Myrid Carten, Dorothy Cross, Amanda Doran, Rita Duffy, Jesse Jones, Alice Maher, Eleanor McCaughey, Na Cailleacha (Helen Comerford, Barbara Freeman, Patricia Hurl, Catherine Marshall, Carole Nelson, Rachel Parry, Gerda Teljeur, Therry Rudin), Kathy Prendergast, and Ruby Wallis.

Works in the exhibition turn to archetypal and female figures who do not fit easily into the roles available for women in a patriarchal society. Jesse Jones's photo collage *Though Shalt Not Suffer* (2019) sets a Sheela-na-Gig mandala against a black background, summoning a space for the power of the sacred feminine. Objects from the *Tremble, Tremble* (2017) archive, presented in a glass vitrine, evoke how women's embodied knowledge might subvert patriarchal law. Three larger-than-life photographs from Ruby Wallis's ongoing series *A Woman Walks Alone at Night, With a Camera*, document experiential walks through the urban landscape, disputing the misogynistic societal expectation that women bear responsibility for the potential harms they may encounter, unaccompanied after dark. Elsewhere, Dorothy Cross's ambiguous and troubling *Shark Lady in a Balldress* (1988) is brought into dialogue with *Glaoch na Cailli (The Hag's Call)* by Irish language poet Ceaití Ní Bheildiúin.

A famous poster by the Guerrilla Girls, *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist* (1988), inspired Na Cailleacha – an art collective of eight older women – to develop the witty statement, *The Advantages of Being a Cailleach Artist*, which recognises women's political agency and calls out the inequalities that ageing and older women face. Their *Child's Play* (2021) rag dolls, presented in situ and as black and white photographs

documenting their placement in the Irish landscape in the Irish landscape, address tropes of Irish womanhood while commenting on the untapped power and knowledge of ageing women in contemporary society.

Recalling the dancehall etiquette of earlier generations, Kathy Prendergast's *Waiting* (1980) is an observation of societal expectations of women's inherent passivity. Myrid Carten's moving image work, *Sorrow had a baby* (2021), with home-movie footage, family photographs, and an ongoing dialogue between mother and daughter, examines how a complicated relationship with the maternal figure and wider societal standards impact the development of a young woman's sense of self. Watching a poignant pretend beauty pageant, one wonders at the futures that exist for pre-teen girls beyond societal constructs. Alice Maher's etchings from 'The Conversation' explore imaginary worlds and childhood curiosities, centring on the often-invisible figure of the young girl. In *Swarm* (1994) a girl faces a dress of buzzing bees. Does she understand this as a warning or a challenge? A dancing girl with wild hair in *Big Shoe* (1994) is oblivious to the oppressive shoe looming overhead, or perhaps she dances in defiance.

Sarah Jayne Booth's multi-media installation work (for) *All Our Grievous Doings* (2022) is a dangerous domestic interior. A long, thin cactus protruding from the middle of a plush, red velvet telephone seat or 'gossip bench', alludes to the potential repercussions for disclosing that which happens inside this home. Across an expanse of gold carpet, a medusa-like assemblage stands over a white animal skull like a warning. Cherished porcelain collectibles atop small wall shelves reveal minuscule subversions. A mother distractedly holds her child while engrossed in Marie Stopes's *Married Love* (1918, Fifeild & Co), a book banned in Ireland at the time for its birth control references, while nearby a young girl shoulders her burden, composed of two bunches of penises. There is no reprieve to be found in Rita Duffy's perilous *Sofa* (1997). The hairpins protruding through its waxy, rust-coloured skin render it a proxy for body hair, portraying the potential of the female body to provoke disgust. The relational quality

between the abstract framed work with figurative elements in Eleanor McCaughey's *Learning to smell the smoke* (2022) and the sculptural installation opposite – comprising large swathes of fabrics with drawings, light and sound transcending the two-dimensional – encourages one to delve into the interiority of the work and contemplate embodiment. With vibrant colours and thick brushstrokes, Amanda Doran's paintings depict body-positive femininities that challenge prescriptive gender stereotypes. The powerful four-armed, four-breasted woman in *God is a Woman* (2018), gives birth while her arms occupy themselves with care duties. On a circular canvas, Doran's *Self-Soothing* (2021), a mouth inside a mouth, voices an inner self, radiating a certain pleasure of being able to speak frankly.

Ambitious in its remit, 'Bones in the Attic' draws important interconnections between the recurring 'othering' of women in historical and contemporary Irish society. If one of its aims is to stimulate ideas about 'safeguarding the future of feminism for all', then representation matters (hughlane.ie). While this exhibition is a non-exhaustive point of departure, an inclusive future of feminism, drawn from women's plural experiences in contemporary Irish society, cannot be imagined if we do not also recognise vital cross-cutting issues. Not all inequalities are distributed evenly, and to that extent, the inclusion of artists from underrepresented cultural or ethnic minority backgrounds would have been welcome, to further nuance the different barriers women face in Irish society. No woman is free until all women are free, and given the current international socio-political climate, now is not the time for complacency.

**Dr Kate Antosik-Parsons is a contemporary art historian who writes about gender, sexuality, and the body. She is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at Trinity College Dublin on a cross-border project researching reproductive citizenship on the island of Ireland.**

kateap.com