

Supernatural Bureau

KATE STRAIN INTERVIEWS SONIA SHIEL ABOUT CURRENT PROJECTS AND HER FORTHCOMING SOLO EXHIBITION AT VISUAL CARLOW.

SONIA SHIEL IS an artist best known for her work in painting and sculptural performance. Throughout 2023, Kunstverein Auhgrim is accompanying her artistic practice, with the aim of underwriting some of the experimental methodologies she is currently developing, in the course of producing a major new body of work, commissioned by VISUAL Carlow for exhibition in September.

Kate Strain: What made you want to become an artist?

Sonia Shiel: I might say now it was my reckless optimism – that art school would place me within the general field of 'self-expression'. I didn't know then whether it would be painting or fashion or something more performative, but certainly I hoped that I could have that license to explore the arts as a maker. A couple of years in, and my motivations became necessarily charged by determination. I was a young single mum, embedded into a still patriarchal painting and educational system that, at the time, doubted the bedfellows of motherhood and a 'serious' career in art ever existing simultaneously. But motherhood helped me become more resolute about my career, using its tools of resourcefulness, and thriving off the chaos, with little time to waste.

KS: Can you tell us a bit about how other disciplines beyond painting, for example dance, law, or gaming, have come to shape your approach?

SS: Mostly my interdisciplinary influences have been facilitated or designed by residencies and academic fellowships, or site-specific shows. Collaboration on any level provides a lively cross-pollination of ideas between people. And what's nice is it's just two or three imaginations in a room and a load of materials – it's all constructive. Exploring subjects intensively for short periods of time situates me in other-worlds; allows me to appropriate non-art-related rules, materials, and histories; opens my self-reflexive stories to broader objectivity; and best of all, brings surprises.

KS: Can you describe some of your current artistic methodologies and how you arrived at them?

SS: In recent years, a strand of my painting practice has become very collaborative in its approach, and more rebellious in nature and form. Shows like the upcoming one at VISUAL allow me to explore ideas beyond the pictorial frame; to dematerialise space, navigate the politics of representation, and challenge conclusion. Adapting painted surfaces to soft-form sculptures, large floor works, free-standing sculptural shapes, or backdrops, sets and props, my paintings have been many things – but are nearly always storytellers. They have regularly featured sound or dictated choreographed routes to view the exhibition, have been narrated in animated states, appropriated to video or audio works, and are currently traversable.

KS: I'm interested in how you take thoughts, theories, techniques, and approaches from people in other disciplines, and incorporate them into your own practice. As part of your collaboration with Kunstverein Auhgrim, you've devised a series of Pulse Events, to which we're inviting responses from various interlopers of interest – people coming from fields of archaeology and gaming, theatre directing, and fan non-fiction. Can you tell us more about the ideas behind these Pulse Events, what the events entail, and what it is you

imagine they will do?

SS: *Pulse Event #1* took place on 25 May and involved the construction of a large gaming board in a borrowed studio at Temple Bar Gallery + Studios (where I have my studio). On top of this 4 x 4 metre platform, three performers were invited to reconstruct a fragmented landscape painting, and to engage with its terrain according to a set of carefully crafted rules. In this Pulse Event, portals into the fields of gaming and painting were opened, in the hope of manifesting a potential creative bleed between Benjamin Hanušek's gaming research and my painting practice.

Pulse Event #2 on 27 July was a conversation with acclaimed theatre director, Anne Bogart, that took place in my own studio, against a selection of works-in-progress. These included three triptychs, in which figures appear to ordinarily inhabit an extraordinary natural environment. The triptychs have emerged from a central terrain, which was first workshoped with Hanušek. The terrain is a dynamic floor piece, made up of composite shape-shifting platforms, housing seven slatted facades with a series of holes, features, and dressings that together form an enchanted landscape, through which visitors can walk. The terrain is at once many things – a nature table, painting, birdsong, music box, stage, map, animal, and an interactive walk. Ultimately it will orientate the visitor through the exhibition with apparent opportunities for elaborate agency.

Finally, for *Pulse Event #3* on 1 August (Lughnasa) myself, a group of performers, and the Kunstverein Auhgrim team were joined on a nature walk by an intimate audience, and virtually, by writer Elvia Wilk. Wilk presented a reading from her book, *Death by Landscape* (Soft Skull Press, 2022), which recounts literary and artistic references to women from literature who wilfully returned to the landscape in acts of sometimes principled, sometimes desperate, protest. On the walk, there was a sequence of botanical, sonic, and water features that follow a set of points on a map, and tailored orientation cues or field notes, to find a number of objects. These were choreographed opportunities for image-making that used observational, transformational, and co-operative actions – burial and excavation, washing and bathing, planting, picking, birdwatching,

cooking, drawing, burning and sawing. And they aimed to summon other, more disruptive agents – the weather, the long grass, tricks of light, ghosts, sounds, and a time of return. Back at the Kunstverein, the arrangement of these objects activated the topology, already part installed as *Supernatural Bureau*, a multi-dimensional cabinet that recalls the game and staging elements of earlier Pulse Events, and an abstracted taster of the performative terrain for VISUAL.

KS: Can you talk more about the involvement of performers as autonomous protagonists in your work?

SS: The alter egos I have created for the protagonists in my narrative works are variations of one persona, an artist longing to do something of import. They always seem to be in, or not far from, the studio, though life for them is multi-dimensional in every way. Their route is never simple; complicated by ego, the warping of time, lack of security, and faced with all sorts of adversities, they seem somehow to command the landscape or environment magically but powerlessly. I've used performers in workshoping texts, live performance, recording dialogue, voiceovers, and song. In upcoming works, the performers will care-take the work, through a season of 'unexpected' conditions, spectacles, and shapeshifts. The question of their autonomy is complex, as the performance and its environment are both improvisational and controlled.

Kate Strain is founder of Kunstverein Auhgrim, a curatorial production office for contemporary art projects, supported by the Arts Council.

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Sonia Shiel is an Irish visual artist based in Dublin.

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Shiel's *Supernatural Bureau* is on display at Kunstverein Auhgrim until 1 December. It acts as a prologue to her forthcoming solo exhibition at VISUAL Carlow (30 September 2023 – 7 January 2024).

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Sonia Shiel, *Supernatural Bureau*, 2023, maquette; image courtesy of the artist.