

'Following Threads'

Crawford Art Gallery

9 September 2023 – 28 January 2024

'FOLLOWING THREADS' AT Crawford Art Gallery features a diverse selection of artists working in the medium of textiles – once perceived as peripheral but now increasingly central to contemporary art practice. The remit of the exhibition is seemingly simple: to showcase the breadth of artists using fibre and thread today.

The group show spotlights prominent artists such as Dorothy Cross, Cecilia Danell and Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, whose practices involve a broad range of mediums and methods. Ní Bhriain, who usually works in film, photomontage, and installation, presents a jacquard tapestry, *Intrusions III* (2022), in isolation. The artist's broader practice is often concerned with imperial legacies. However, this singular tapestry – a surreal composition of an architectural ruin – achieves a critique of power structures and grand narratives through its mode of display. The large wall hanging reminds us of Annie Albers's assertion that "along with cave paintings, threads were among the earliest transmitters of meaning." From Ní Bhriain's clean-cut machine-woven lines, or the haunting painterly quality of Dorothy Cross's mixed-media boat, to the boundless loopy joy of Danell's hand-tufted rugs of enchanting landscapes, here is a material language that is being stretched and pulled in all directions, aesthetically and conceptually.

This presentation highlights the "potential of thread in contemporary art" through a variety of artistic practices. Matt Smith reworks traditional textiles to subvert the original imagery. His interruptions cause the compositions to give way to mesmerising abstractions of pattern. In Isabel Nolan's installation, *The Light Poured Out Of You* (2017), large swathes of material are draped from the ceiling to create a chandelier-like centrepiece. The work is an exciting demonstration of the possibilities of textiles in the basic formal qualities of light, colour, texture and space. The gallery collaborated with Ceadogán rugs to document the process of rug making and to present sketches by Cubist painter Mainie Jellett in textile form. Jennifer Trouton's hand-embroidered series, *Mater Natura: The Abortonist's Garden* (2020–21), visually references the medium's origins in domesticity and the feminine. The fine needle and thread-rendered imagery features plants commonly known to induce abortion. The traditional presentation of her work highlights the importance of textiles as a feminist communicative tool, rendering the domestic realm as highly political.

The exhibition occupies the ground floor of the gallery. In its centre, there is a small room which provides some historical context. A selection of the gallery's collection of Cork lace is presented alongside portraits by James Butler Brennan. Brennan was an advocate for the development and support of craft and design and the headmaster of the School of Art in Cork in 1860, when it occupied Crawford Art Gallery's current building. We are told that Brennan developed a visiting educator scheme in partnership with local convents, including the Presentation Convent in Youghal. It is worth noting that Youghal began to pro-



duce its own lace during the Great Famine (1845–1852). Deprived women and young girls could engage in the industry to avoid further poverty and so the lace work was developed out of economic necessity.

Michelle Malone's three digitally woven tapestries of the Artane Boys Industrial School speak to the medium's working-class roots. The school was a reformatory institution for young boys who had committed minor offences or were facing destitution. While detained at the school, the boys were engaged with activities such as pull wool roving, as depicted in *Workshop, Artane Boys Industrial School* (2021). Malone's digitisation of the tapestry process acts as a pointed political commentary on modern labour histories. The artist's source images originate from *The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Activities, Volume I* (Dublin: Government Publications, 2009). The tapestries hang from brass bars that further institutionalise these depictions.

It is noticeable that all of the artists featured in the exhibition self-identify as female or queer. Traditionally a gender assigned medium, textiles continue to occupy a contentious space between fine art and craft, the domestic and public realm, labour history and economics. The scope of this medium is anything but simple; it involves potent material of vast political and social expression.

Sarah Long is an artist and writer based in Cork. In 2020, she created *The Paper* – an online forum for discussing and responding to the Cork art scene.

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Top: Isabel Nolan, *The Light Poured Out Of You*, 2017, mild steel, paint, fabric, dye; image courtesy of the artist, Kerlin Gallery, and Crawford Art Gallery.

Bottom: Cecilia Danell, *The Primeval Sunset*, 2022, hand-tufted rug, 100% wool yarn, 200 x 200 cm; image courtesy of the artist, Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, and Crawford Art Gallery.