

MATERIAL TRACE/S

Mary Mackey

How does an artist 'make work' that responds to, articulates, and visually manifests the viscerally profound topic of infant loss. Is it even possible to create a work of art that 'doesn't collapse under the weight of its subject matter.'¹ Visual artist Marie Brett has created audio-visual artworks that seek to achieve this, sensitively, respectfully, revealing the intimate experience of absence and loss. Central to the artworks are deeply personal 'keepsakes', as symbol and signifier of loss, precious, few, tangible mementos, Amulets of remembrance. The works created underscore the inherent capacity of ordinary things to act as powerfully evocative objects, engendering narrative and encapsulating memory, redolent with meaning and emotion.

Death of a loved one, grief, mourning, intensity of absence - each of us experiences that in our lives. The traces of a life that remain behind, the material legacy of personal effects, no matter how slight or obscure they may seem to be, come to embody an evocative potency, possessing mnemonic, symbolic, and affective capacities. Objects of mourning and memory keep the deceased person present to us, enable continuing bonds, sustaining the past in the present. They elicit stories, facilitate recall, re-remembering and construction of memories. Such objects can play a fundamental role in the work of grieving, 'work', which enables release, a letting go of state of mourning.² With the passing of time they retreat, transition in meaning and intensity, become somehow veiled, unless or until, for whatever reason, unearthed from the back of a drawer while searching for something unconnected, or accidentally broken, our attention is drawn to their presence, and the object/s catch us by surprise and, having retained their *punctum* for us, their capacity to wound, precipitate involuntarily powerful memory.³

¹ Dr Ed Krčma of the Department of Art History, UCC spoke of this risk and dilemma at the panel discussion event at The Atrium, Cork City Hall on 15 October 2014

² The term work of mourning (or mourning work) comes from *Trauerarbeit*, a term used by Freud in his essay *Mourning and Melancholia*, 1917

³ Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida*, (London, Vintage, 2000) 27

With infant loss part of the intensity of the pathos is evident in the paucity of material traces through which we can grieve, envisage, remember. Margaret Gibson makes a distinction between objects that are incorporated in the work of mourning, and those that become remembrances of mourning, central to grieving and the memory of grieving, imbued with memorial value, conceptualizing these as Melancholy Objects.⁴ A melancholy object continues to be linked with, and evoke, remembrance of mourning. “The melancholy object is then the affective remainder or residual trace of sadness and longing in non-forgetting”. The Amulets, selected, gifted to the viewer by the bereaved parents participating in the project are possessed of that persistent intensity of memory and mourning. They do not have a trajectory of transition, where they detach from pain, loss, to become reabsorbed into a more ordinary life. These cherished objects are enmeshed in mourning, perpetual signifiers of an almost unimaginable loss. However, this interpretation of such cherished objects perhaps affords a consideration of melancholy as both an appropriate and affirmative response to infant loss. Is memorialising grief, the experience and state of grieving, melancholy, a means to keep the infant present, real? If so, then a melancholy object becomes a wondrous thing.

Each of the works in the exhibition consists of a photograph of a single object, the image small in scale, roughly post-card size situated at the heart of a large sheet of Hahnemühle paper, which in turn is float-mounted in a large white glazed frame. The images are slightly offset, juxtaposed with discrete lines of pierced needle holes, done by hand. Each frame sits on a low white table, the surface matt and soft to the touch. In order to participate in and attend to the piece, the viewer sits on a white low stool, its height tending to manifest a ‘face to face’ position with the image of the object. On the table to one side, set apart from the framed photograph, is a CD player and headphones, with a brief note on what to do in order to listen, obviating any technical confusion that might diminish the engagement with the work.

I have experienced the works created as part of the Amulet project in two locations. First as the Anamnesis exhibition in the Sirius Arts Centre in Cobh, white light filled rooms, arched fulsome windows gazing out to the sea, a sense of stillness within the space. And more recently in the Atrium of Cork City Hall, equally light filled, smaller physical space in which the works sit/settle, business of the city outside, movement of people and activity sifting around the space. And while

⁴ Dr. Margaret Gibson is Senior Lecturer in Cultural Sociology at Griffith University in Queensland, Australia

the works are physically the same in both places (although there are fewer works in the Atrium than in the Sirius Arts Centre. The exhibition is across two venues in Cork, the majority in the Atrium with two works in the Cork Public Museum) the sites and the positioning alter the experience in subtle ways without diminishing the work's poignant significance.

In the Sirius Arts Centre installation, the tables were set at a distance from one another, the gallery space assuming an atmosphere of sacred space with an ambiguous tension, an overlay of clinical space, resonance of hospital apprehension. The even spacing between the works, the distance, the physical getting up and moving to the next position stirred latent memories of Lenten rites, 'doing' the stations of the cross, a process/action of personal and collective mourning. Sitting to the table I inadvertently put my bag on the table, and swiftly took it off again, concerned about the seemingly precarious balance of the framed image, worried I had disturbed the reverential purity of the altar like surface. Connected, linked, bound to the table by the headphones I listened to each narrative, isolated in the quality of the sound from the rest of the room, separated from other viewers. In the clarity of the pervasive light, as I gazed at each image my image was reflected back at me, an unsettling interruption. Becoming affected by the words I was submerged in, caught in the emotion and distress of the voice, I had to look away, shift my focus to outside, beyond.

The Atrium in Cork City Hall provides a very different space. While there is a significant height, the footprint is small, allowing an intimacy, a physical closeness. The public siting of the exhibition in a non-gallery space affords a wider public engagement with the Amulet project and the trauma of infant loss, necessitating a sensitive situating of the work that considers the fragility and vulnerability of an accidental audience. The exhibition is situated immediately inside a large glass wall, every aspect highly visible, including the viewer. This initially made me reluctant to enter into the work, that hesitation involving me, as viewer, in the periphery of that pivot of risk and trust into which the participants and the artist had already entered.⁵ I was acutely aware of the risk of not knowing what contained emotion might surface in this public space, exposing my response to be the voices, seen, observed. Yet as a viewer in this transparent site, I felt shielded in the Atrium. The tables are close here positioned at an oblique angle, in sets of two, the framed works back to back, slightly offset, screening each from the other, somehow sheltering and private. This did not ameliorate the sense of pain or lamentation expressed in the recordings,

⁵ Marie Brett, *Anamnesis catalogue* (2013) 10

merely blunted the edge of rawness, softened in the hum and movement, the low level distraction of an ordinary day.

The expanse of paper around the photograph and the further space within the frame centres the image such that it draws the viewer's attention with a quiet insistence that is difficult to resist. The objects are familiar, clothing, butterfly, bracelets, ornate wood container, CD, letter, each set on a grey background. Some of the objects are turned away, the box and the CD partially open, as if guarding privacy, or carrying intimations of the overwhelming implications of opening Pandora's box. The images are small in scale, as are the objects themselves, the scale symbolic of the baby. The symbolism of smallness, writes the anthropologist Linda L. Layne, can be traced to 18th and 19th century natural theologians' consideration that the miraculous is present in the ordinary, and the infinite in the small, a notion expressed by the poet William Blake, the world in a grain of sand, infinity in the palm of your hand.⁶ From this perspective, Layne continues, smallness points to the 'special value of this life.'

There is a richness of communication in detail of the photographs. They are in colour, which seems particularly appropriate in the photographs of the baby clothes and christening gown. It allows for the culturally given associations with how we clothe, wrap, infants, babies and the symbolic nature of the colour used. An intensity of care is visible in the manner in which the garments are folded, how the light subtly catches the fabric, how they are held and supported by the rich warmth of background grey. This doesn't always quite work for some of the other photographs. The flattening of the colour somehow brings an artificial intrusion to the image, an overly worked quality that sets the image at one remove, almost too aesthetic. What holds it, prevents it from drifting into another realm is the piercing, wounding, penetrating needle holes in the surface adjacent to the image.

And unseen in all of this, yet steeped in every aspect of this exhibition, is the integrity of the artist and the investment of trust by each of the parents who allowed their grief, raw and excoriating/excruciating, to be exposed, open to scrutiny. Their testimonies powerfully attest to their child's being, to the fact that their infant was a real baby, with a real name, and baby things.

This is an exhibition that needs to be visited to fully appreciate the immersive quality of it. The accompanying catalogue and website are detailed and give a considered account of the project and

⁶ Linda L. Layne, "He was a Real Baby with Baby Things!": A Material Culture Analysis of Personhood, Parenthood and Pregnancy Loss" *Journal of Material Culture* 5 (2000): 336

the exhibition, but it is in being with the work, the participative action of sitting and listening, attending to the image of each cherished object as it ‘detonates its hidden histories’, absorbing the story, the voice, of grief and love, that the full potency of the Amulet is really felt.⁷

‘Anamnesis’ is a mixed media sculptural exhibition of audio-visual artworks made as part of a national, multi-site participatory arts project, ‘The Amulet’. The project was initiated and led by visual artist Marie Brett, as a community collaborative initiative, which focused on the subject of pregnancy and infant loss, giving voice to an often hidden and deeply sensitive life experience. A series of ten audio-visual artworks were produced by the artist, and exhibited as an immersive and site specific installation which re-imagines the individual family member’s memory and loss experience as a that of a collective cultural memorial, having resonance particular to Ireland, as well as universally. The artwork is touring nationally, funded by an Arts Council Touring and Dissemination of Work Award 2014.

Further information <http://www.mariebrett.ie/Amulet.html>

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Mary Mackey is a visual artist based in County Cork. She is currently undertaking a practice-based MA in Fine Art by Research at the Crawford College of Art and Design. Informed by theoretical perspectives of material culture and memory studies, her research is an investigation of the potentially evocative capacity inherent in otherwise ordinary things, in particular those that come to constitute our material legacy after death, and the role such objects may come to play in the act of remembrance and commemoration through the symbolic, mnemonic, and affective significance ascribed to them.

⁷ Sue Hubbard, “On Christian Boltanski”, Compiled from an article in ‘The Independent’ 6 April, 2002 and a talk at the South London Gallery, 2003. Reprinted in ‘Adventures in Art: Selected writings from 1990 –2010’ by Sue Hubbard, published by Other Criteria (<http://www.othercriteria.com>)