

Risk & Trust

CLIODHNA SHAFFREY INTERVIEWS MARIE BRETT ABOUT HER PROJECT 'AMULET' (2009 – 2015), WHICH EXPLORES THE EXPERIENCE OF INFANT LOSS.



Clíodhna Shaffrey: Loss and human suffering is the subject you explore in the 'Amulet' project. Here, you directly involved a group of bereaved parents who have suffered pregnancy and infant loss. You have described the overall project as one "that exists on the pivot of risk and trust". How do you enter this difficult territory as an artist? How do you begin?

Marie Brett: I'm interested in how artwork can make space for new thinking and conversations about this difficult territory. For 'Amulet' I began with this question: how do we make the ethereal concept of loss physical? (September 2011). I was researching amulets at Oxford University Pitt Rivers Museum and was invited to lead a research residency at Cork University Maternity Hospital (November 2009 – March 2011). Questions arose about memorial markers and Ireland's death rituals surrounding infant mortality. I invited bereaved parents to further inform and influence me in the making of a new work exploring these questions. An invitation such as this demands clarity of intent and acceptance of the inherent pivot of risk and trust, as the stakes are high on both sides.

CS: In the LAB, Dublin, which is currently hosting this exhibition (as part of a visual arts touring award), a round table session brought together a range of people involved in the project. 1 Cathy Quinn, Consultant Midwife in Perinatal Bereavement, spoke of 'Amulet' as being "more than an artwork". Clearly she was as moved by the whole process (in which she played an important supportive part), as much as by its outcome as an artwork. But how might you respond to this comment – do you see 'Amulet' as more than an artwork?

MB: I don't claim that 'Amulet' is 'more than an artwork'; you're right though, many others have said that it possesses a cathartic agency, educational influence and insight for change (inherent in both process and outcome). As an artist, I'm aware of the need to be cognisant and mindful of such complexities in my practice, while not aligning with therapeutic or healing agendas, or modes of empowerment, pedagogy or campaign.

CS: 'Amulet' is an artwork that involves a whole participatory process. Can you perhaps describe some of the challenges that were faced and decisions that were made in creating this work?

MB: I was always clear that I would hold authorship, and negotiated this decision with participants at the onset. For the artwork, it was really important to adopt a neutral and factual viewpoint; I was aware of the potential to overwhelm or patronise and the need to be mindful of sentimentality. I continually pared back and prioritised a minimal, almost austere aesthetic. It was important that the artwork had a rawness without being sensational. A key challenge was to include something from each parent's gifted material. Also, each family didn't know what form the artwork would take, meaning that there was always the potential that they would ask to withdraw their contribution even once the work was made. I had to think very carefully about honouring the

bereaved families' participation in balance with my needs as an artist and equity in the artwork. This is interesting but tricky territory to tread.

CS: I am interested in how you have realised the final work: as photographic images representing the amulets, rather than presenting the objects themselves. These are accompanied by audio clips of the parents speaking and elegantly presented on small, neat white desks. I am interested in the interplay you have set up, which asks for an intimate engagement by the viewer / listener, where the artwork itself acts as representation or translation of grief.

MB: I realised early on that to borrow the actual objects (the families' amulets) wouldn't work for several reasons. Not only is the 'ask' too invasive in an already charged and highly sensitive context but 'Amulet' isn't an archival repository for precious originals; neither is it reaching for a physical resonance. Rather the work is about trace and ideas of a signifier. I was interested in the photographic images as abstracted signifiers to lure the viewer into a close interplay, inviting an intimate engagement where the viewer would sit and listen (using headphones) to an unknown element: the bereaved parent's voice talking about the 'amuletic' object and its relation to their loss.

CS: The work draws us into someone else's personal and sad story, and, in doing so, seems to have the capacity to go beyond the individual stories and provoke consideration of how this topic – miscarriage and infant death – has remained a hidden subject, not freely discussed in Irish society. Can you discuss the responsibilities you felt in bringing this often-private subject into the public arena?

MB: It was important for 'Amulet' to go beyond the individual's story, to move from the intensely private into a collective public arena. I aimed for the artwork to take the viewer to a new place of thinking, of new conversation, to break taboos and ask questions, but not to provide answers. While the subject of pregnancy and infant loss remains hidden and stigmatised in Irish society, 'Amulet' isn't a campaign tool.

CS: 'Amulet' was a huge undertaking by any standard. It involved a number of partners around Ireland: Cork University Hospital, University Maternity Hospital Limerick, Waterford Regional Hospital, CREATE, Waterford Healing Arts Trust and the Social Health Education Project. It has gained support from the Arts Council through bursaries and a Visual Arts Touring Award. 2 These bring in another tier of partners in the exhibiting galleries. What have you learnt about organising and undertaking a project of such scale? How were you supported through the process?

MB: I've learnt to accept that time is a vital component, especially when partnering with a number of organisations each juggling differing agendas and needs. I also realised the importance of leading, be flexible, voicing my artistic needs, to negotiate and not to be so shy in asking for help. Other professionals have been very generous with their advice, which has been a great support. Producing a project of such scale was a



huge organisational undertaking, supported partly by an advisory steering group and freelance specialists. Funding enabled me to produce and present the work to high standard, to be able to document it well and to invite other artists to make creative responses to the work, which was brilliant. A structure of in-kind support facilitated counselling as needed and developmental discussion of the 'what ifs' and time for reflection.

CS: At the start, did you imagine that 'Amulet' would become such a large-scale project, or did it develop its own momentum overtime?

MB: 'Amulet' developed its own momentum over time. It started in Cork and spread nationally.

CS: At what point did you decide to tour the work?

MB: To coincide with the first exhibition of 'Amulet' at Sirius Arts Centre (7 March – 1 April 2013), I organised a seminar at the Crawford Art Gallery to discuss the work from a variety of perspectives. During this event I met people from various settings and different parts of the country who had an interest in the work. This sowed the seed, as I realised there was potential to develop new partnerships for a tour and also means to exhibit the work in different contexts.

CS: How has the work changed when it's been shown in different contexts? Has the touring led to adaptation or new elements at the different gallery sites? For example, at the LAB on the opening night, you invited a number of performance artists to respond to the work with new performance pieces.

MB: Yes the work has changed quite a bit during the tour, both physically and in relation to the different contexts. At Galway Arts Centre (1 – 29 August 2014), the work was shown in darkness – adapting each piece to include an individual spotlight. At University Maternity Hospital Limerick (25 – 26 September 2014) the work included a 'response / child space' staffed by hospital personnel. At Cork City Council's atrium (13 October – 28 November 2014), the work was positioned in front of a large glazed wall facing the street, inside an extremely busy public foyer. This bustling civic context shifted the work from an intimate and elective viewing experience to a highly public and potentially unintended viewing experience.

Alongside these distinct elements in each different exhibition site a number of artists responded to the work with written and live performance pieces. These new works in turn prompted further questions, conversations and entry points to 'Amulet', providing new layers of meaning to the work.

[amulets.ie / mariebrett.ie](http://amulets.ie/mariebrett.ie)

Notes

1. 'The Amulet: Exploring Infant Loss' (16 January – 28 March 2015), The LAB Gallery, Dublin, with round table discussion (16 January)

2. The 'Amulet' exhibition tour is funded through the Arts Council Touring and Dissemination of Work Award 2014