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LOWNDES, SARAH; ALEANA EGAN – KUNSTHALLE BASEL CATALOGUE TEXT, 2008

‘...experience teaches that in visual perception there is a discrepancy between physical fact and psychic effect. What counts here - - first and last - - is not so-called knowledge of so-called facts, but vision - - seeing. Seeing here implies Schauen (as in Weltanschauung) and is coupled with fantasy, with imagination.’⁵

Aleana Egan is both a reader of material and a writer of forms, who sculpts commonplace materials into quotations of windows, doors, books, ceilings and piers. Egan uses sculpture to address the ‘beyond speech’ qualities of place and memory.⁶ Although since the late 90s she has mainly lived away from Ireland (attending art school in Glasgow, before moving to Berlin), her work is infused with her childhood hometown of Dun Laoghaire, near Dublin. In re-imagining this place, her work echoes the work of writers such as James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, W. B. Yeats and Iris Murdoch, who spent much of their adult lives outside Ireland, yet remained closely associated with the locales of Dublin.

Dun Laoghaire lies within sight of the Martello Tower where James Joyce spent six strange days in the summer of 1904. ‘Shut your eyes and see’, Stephen Dedalus mutters angrily to himself as he strides across the crackling wrack and shells of Sandycove beach in the opening pages of *Ulysses* (1922). These words could have been Joyce’s instruction to himself, as he wrote about his fraught experiences in Dublin from self-imposed exile in Trieste, Italy. Egan now divides her time between Berlin and return visits to the shores of Dun Laoghaire and the mountains of County Wicklow - a necessary split, as she says, ‘I do feel that Ireland is very important to my work: my ideas of Ireland and 'home' have

⁵ Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1971), p.68.

⁶ Discussing Eva Hesse’s *Contingent* (1969), Rosalind Krauss writes that the work ‘delivered a message of privacy, of a retreat from language, of a withdrawal into those extremely personal reaches of experience that are beyond, or beneath, speech.’ Rosalind Krauss, “Eva Hesse: *Contingent*”, *Eva Hesse*, October Files 3, Mignon Nixon, ed., (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2002), p.28.

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probably been pulled into focus since being in Berlin. [...] I feel pretty torn between these two places.’⁷ Since moving to Berlin, the peculiar atmosphere and colours of Dun Laoghaire register ever more vividly in her work, in ‘signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs.’⁸

Ireland as it figures in Egan’s practice is not only a place, summoned by the specific hues and detailed textures of her photographs, collages, videos and sculptural installations. It is also ‘home’: a place where self-actualisation and artistic activity conjoin. When at her mother’s house between Monkstown and Dun Laoghaire she swims in the ‘green mass’⁹ of Dublin Bay every day - even in the winter. The sea inspires her handling of material – such as the muslin she dyes a particular shade of blue (*Closing Room I and II*, (2005)) or the jam jars filled with various shades of grey (*Carrying Assumptions*, (2007)). Her abiding connection to the waters of Dublin Bay is reflected in her extensive archive of hundreds of sea photographs taken over years, as if trying to reflect the mutability of the waves.

Joyce alludes to the sea as a symbol of the ‘feminine’ Imaginary, when the character of Buck Mulligan describes the Irish Sea as ‘our great sweet mother.’¹⁰ The sea is allied with the Semiotic, the pre-Oedipal phase of language when the child believes itself to be a part of the mother, and perceives no separation between itself and the world. Egan’s work represents the ‘pulsational pressure’ of

⁷ Aleana Egan, in response to questions sent by the author, March 7th 2008.

⁸ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 1922, 1960 Bodley Head Edition (1960, (London: Penguin, 1980), p.42.

⁹ ‘The ring of bay and skyline held a dull green mass of liquid’. James Joyce, *Ulysses*, *Ibid.*, p.12.

¹⁰ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, *op. cit.*, p.11.

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the Semiotic¹¹ through expressionistic use of colour, material and form. These compositions disclose a constant negotiation between the private self and exteriorized representation. This process has been facilitated in part by the other lodestone of her practice - her father's workshop in the mountainous region of Glencullen in County Wicklow.

Aleana Egan's father is a skilled carpenter, who specialises in constructing timber frame houses and 'healthy buildings' insulated using recycled materials. Egan has 'been using his workshop since the beginning of consciously making art'¹² and has worked collaboratively with her father on several projects, such as the piece *Balcony Leaning Design* (2006), which included a pencil drawing credited to him. Sculptural works such as *House* (2006) and *Corner* (2006), in which lengths of timber are fastened together and positioned to spell out simple architectural forms gesture towards the building process which forms part of her background. A more recent work, *Bedroom Ceiling, Hans Otto Strasse* (2007) replicates the raised plaster outlines of a ceiling in a room in Berlin, using MDF, wood, timber and white paint. The re-making of this detail makes it strange – what is, on one hand, a practical exercise in recognizing and rebuilding an existing form, is also a dislocation. Egan prises the form free from its original context, and props it on its side. This work is reminiscent of the combination of logic and intuition found in Eva Hesse's *Hang Up* (1966), as are other works by Egan in which a frame is made anthropometric: such as *No Birds Sang, The Heat Had Silenced Them* (2007) and *Mimosa* (2007).

The processes of physical building that Egan has experienced through her father's work find a cerebral corollary in the influences she has absorbed from her mother, a former English teacher, who retrained as a psychotherapist. Her mother

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, *La Revolution du langage poetique*, (Paris: Seuil, 1974, English translation by Margaret Waller, New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.)

¹² Aleana Egan, in response to questions sent by the author, 7th March 2008.

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introduced her to the writings of Iris Murdoch and those of British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, both of whom could be said to be chiefly concerned with analyzing human relationships. Winnicott's ideas first appeared in Egan's work in tangible form in a piece entitled *Doldrums* (2005), which she showed in the blue bedroom of an apartment in the East End of Glasgow. The transition from childhood to adulthood that begins at that age is memorably described by Winnicott as 'the doldrums' in his influential book, The Family and Individual Development (1968). Winnicott writes that the doldrums is a phase in which adolescents 'feel futile and in which they have not yet found themselves.'¹³

Egan's *Doldrums* installation responded to the atmosphere of a small bedroom in a Victorian tenement. The window was curtained with muslin, overlaid with dyed blue velvet, from which the silhouette of a girl had been cut. The spectator was asked to remain on the threshold, held back as an observer of a private struggle. The title of a collection of Winnicott's essays, Home is Where We Start From (1986) is a phrase that could equally be applied to Aleana Egan's work, which is so occupied with the physical and mental environment of 'home'.

Perhaps the most significant symbols of home that appear in Aleana Egan's work are the piers of Dun Laoghaire harbour.¹⁴ Her works alluding to the piers also contain a sense of projection into another place –and recall Stephen Dedalus's misfired joke that Kingstown¹⁵ pier was 'a disappointed bridge'.¹⁶ Egan's archive contains numerous photographs taken on the piers, such as *Mail Pier* (2007), *End of the Pier* (2005) and *Girl* (2005), in which her outline is glimpsed at the edge of

¹³ D. W. Winnicott, The Family and Individual Development, 1968 (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2006), p.122.

¹⁴ The most famous of the town's piers are the mile-long granite East and West piers that were built between 1817 and 1827, and the Carlisle or Mail Pier, built between 1855 and 1859.

¹⁵ In 1820 Dun Laoghaire was renamed Kingstown in honour of the visiting King George IV – the original place-name was reinstated in 1922.

¹⁶ James Joyce, Ulysses, op. cit., p.31.

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an image of the pier and the sea. Egan's Matisse-like posters, depicting the simplified forms of a *Sea Girl* (2005) or *Sea Woman* (2005) were exhibited temporarily on the sides of the West Pier. The conflation of ideas of the sea and the female can also be seen in *Beautiful Stylish Woman* (2006), a large tarpaulin which has been layered and worked with acrylic, gouache, PVA glue and coloured pencil, eventually taking on the pale blue grey tones and texture of the sail of a boat, or water-wrinkled skin. Until the 1970s the mail boat that used to depart from Carlisle Pier (Mail Pier) brought not only letters from elsewhere, but also carried emigrants and travellers away from Ireland, to England and America. Iris Murdoch refers to the mail boat twice in her writings about Dublin Bay – in the short story “Something Special” (1957) she describes the maudlin atmosphere as the boat departs and in her novel The Red and the Green (1965) she details the view as the mailboat clears the harbour of Dun Laoghaire. These excerpts relating to the harbour formed the basis of a filmed performance by Aleana Egan's mother, included in the exhibition at Basle Kunsthalle.

For the 2008 Berlin Biennale, Egan constructed a metal structure entitled *grey luminous light from the sea (a structure for readings)* (2008), which was ‘conceived of originally to ‘house’ in some way an evening of readings, organised for one night in June.’¹⁷ The shape of the sculpture is partially based on the Victorian bandstand situated at the end of the East Pier in Dun Laoghaire.¹⁸ By ‘housing’ or framing the reading of these extracts of Murdoch's writings within the structure, Egan draws attention to the constructed nature of her descriptions of the Dublin Bay area. The shelter becomes a kind of vestibule,

that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an ‘undefined zone’ between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward

¹⁷ Aleana Egan, in response to questions sent by the author, March 7th 2008.

¹⁸ In July 2007, the bandstand was removed, and sent to Glasgow, where it was originally fabricated, to be restored.

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side (turned towards the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world's discourse about the text)¹⁹

Iris Murdoch's biographer Peter J. Conradi notes that her 'disturbed love-hate relation towards Ireland itself [...] made a 'naturally separated person' of her'.²⁰ Conradi describes Murdoch as viewing her 'motherland' with a mixture of desire and fear. One way in which she was able to neutralize the affective power of Ireland was through her heightened, highly detailed descriptions. 'I think I am drawn to her books because of the details', Aleana Egan says,

The way she writes the characters 'living quarters' and the physical surroundings. I have taken her sentences sometimes to title works. One hanging relief work I titled "He sat down where the gap in the reeds showed him a small section of the water".²¹

Murdoch's prose immobilizes the threatening quality of a country that was 'a mystery, an unsolved problem'²² by describing places and events as though they were specimens under glass. Murdoch lends an unreal quality to the things she describes – 'the grey luminous light from the sea' and the yellow rocks 'shining with crystalline facets'.²³ It is apparent that she is translating things from memory and imagination into a language that is formal and hard.

Elsewhere in the writings of Iris Murdoch, the difficulties present in communicating the internal self are a prevalent theme. There is a sentence from her novel Henry & Cato (1977), which holds particular significance for Egan: 'You don't know what it's like to be me'. Egan used this phrase as the title for a video set in 2005, creating an emotional environment similar to that of the

¹⁹ Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, quoted in Shepherd Steiner, "Book Things", The Libraries of Thought and Imagination, (Edinburgh: Pocketbooks, 2001), p.157.

²⁰ Peter J Conradi, "Iris Murdoch: A Life", The Guardian, Saturday September 8, 2001.

²¹ Aleana Egan, in response to questions sent by the author, March 7th 2008.

²² Iris Murdoch, The Red and the Green, op. cit., p.10.

²³ Iris Murdoch, The Red and the Green, op. cit., p.9.

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Doldrums installation using blue dye, muslin, black and white photocopies, sugar paper, posters, brown paper, pink labels, wood shavings and blue thread. She says,

I think that Iris Murdoch is quite dark in some respects in her assertion of our difficulties in communicating with each other - but then I also think that there is an uplifting element in believing this too and that by making art one is not too debilitated by this idea.²⁴

Egan's explorations into the ways in which art can be used to express psychological states have continued in the large-scale sculpture she made on site in the Oberlichtsaal of the Basel Kunsthalle, called *Stage of Concern* (2008). Stage of concern is D.W. Winnicott's term for what Melanie Klein described as 'the Depressive position'. The opposing positive oedipal complex and the inverted oedipal conflict generate the conflict implicit in this stage. Eventually, a confluence develops between the loved and hated figures, resulting in an internal object (parent) that is both loved and hated.²⁵ Egan's sculpture represents the complex constellation of affects, attitudes, object-relations, anxieties and defences associated with the Depressive position.

The technicians in Basel have made the underneath structure from wood and then I have (with help) covered it in various types of cement and bonding. It is about 5m in height so it had to be built in the space and will be destroyed afterwards. In some ways I pictured it as being quite 'neutral' in a way, like a mass to project ideas and thoughts onto instead of picking them out and forming thoughts itself. It feels too big for me to call it an 'object' and there is so much surface to concentrate on.²⁶

R.D. Hinshelwood observes that one of the great characteristics of the Depressive position is when 'the capacity for love and hate is joined by the capacity to

²⁴ Aleana Egan, in response to question sent by the author, 26th March 2008.

²⁵ R.D. Hinshelwood, *A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, (London: Free Association Books, 1989), p.63.

²⁶ Aleana Egan, in response to questions sent by the author, 26th March 2008.

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observe and know'.²⁷ For Hinshelwood, 'the depressive position is more than the attaining of the Oedipus complex. It involves the capacity to begin a better knowledge of the internal and external worlds.'²⁸ *Stage of Concern* marks a significant transition in Aleana Egan's work, representing as it does a reconciliation of physical facts and physic effects. The object that is loved and hated can now be observed in a neutral way: open your eyes and see.

²⁷ R.D. Hinshelwood, A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought, op. cit., p.63.

²⁸ R.D. Hinshelwood, A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought, op. cit., p.64