

Like a cracked kettle

(Ciara Moloney)

Depending on their social position, they wore dress coats, frock coats, jackets both short and long: good-quality dress coats, treated with great respect by the entire family and brought out of the wardrobe only on solemn occasions; frock coats with voluminous tails that flapped in the breeze, cylindrical collars, and big pockets like miniature sacks; jackets of coarse cloth, generally worn with a brass-banded peaked cap; very short-skirted jackets with, at the back, two buttons close together like a pair of eyes, and tails that might have been hacked straight from a single piece of cloth with a carpenter's hatchet. — GUSTAVE FLAUBERT⁽⁰¹⁾

While deciding on neat leather lace-ups instead of greying sneakers, or a cardigan over a sweater, might seem such a workaday act as to barely merit mention, it is worth acknowledging that the simple act of getting dressed involves negotiating a complex set of material and social circumstances. If the Bovarys' wedding guests have simply chosen to wear their best to a formal occasion, Flaubert recognises in this moment the signficatory power of something as seemingly innocuous

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as a coat collar. In Aleana Egan's recent series of outfit photographs, a model has been photographed from the neck down in a variety of outfits. The repetitive nature of these images, shot always in the same place, from the same angle and in the same light, lends the project the feeling of a controlled scientific experiment which differentiates the series from a simple fashion shoot. As Malcolm Bowie notes of *Madame Bovary*, *This is their attire come loose from their bodies and recorded as a series of shapes and sociological meanings*⁽⁰²⁾. Yet these are not straightforwardly informative images but, like Flaubert's detailed descriptions, only produce the impression of an objective distance from the subject.

Mary Mary

Similarly, Émile Zola approached writing in what he considered a scientific manner, first conducting interviews and compiling vast dossiers of notes ⁽⁰³⁾. Perhaps appropriately, this hyper-realistic mode sometimes led to a blurring of the boundaries between representation and reality. His rigorous research for *Au Bonheur des Dames* involved observing trade at *Le Bon Marché*, one of the most famous Parisian department stores. The novel's description of the dazzling displays which festooned the store's aisles proved so vivid that it inspired Frantz Jourdain's design for a rival shop, *La Samaritaine* ⁽⁰⁴⁾. This act of transposing art onto reality is reversed by *Binet's addition*, a sculpture produced by Egan after a piece of architecture. Named after the French architect René Binet, its attenuated frame has its origins in a photograph of his iron-framed elevator extension to (yet another) Parisian shop. As a new building typology, the department store required an appropriately modern architectural vocabulary. Iron, heretofore considered vulgar and industrial, was championed by archi-

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itects such as Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc and Pierre-François Henri Labrouste as a new building material which was functional and inexpensive. These buildings represented the rational counterpart to the masonry-clad Beaux-Arts classicism of the 19th century. Similarly, *Binet's addition* makes no bones about its own construction – Egan has ensured that how the sculpture was put together and how it might deconstruct is apparent from the form. It invokes the elegant forms of these cathedrals of commerce, but stripped bare of all its consumables, back to a purer architectural presence.

It is one of the great and wonderful characteristics of good books [...] that for the author they may be called 'Conclusions' but for the reader 'Incitements'. We feel very strongly that our own wisdom begins where that of the author leaves off, and we would like him to provide us with answers when all he is able to do is provide us with desires. — MARCEL PROUST ⁽⁰⁵⁾

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Reading plays an integral role in Egan's working process, with her work often emerging from an immersion in particular literary texts. The artist has described ruminating on a specific novel while crafting her sculptures and, indeed, a persistent tension between image and text runs throughout her work⁽⁰⁶⁾. Of course this engagement with text is not simply recorded by the artist but, as Proust describes, is utilised as a starting point to inform contiguous bodies of work. This is borne out by previous exhibitions of Egan's work, such as *Sunday Night* at Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin (2009), in which the works were inspired by a sustained engagement with modernist texts. Who can tell which details are absorbed whilst reading, and how they accrue new associations upon meeting with the full brunt of consciousness, one brimming

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with other thoughts, dreams, textures and encounters. How the impressions garnered from these readings are then embedded and transmuted by Egan into sculptural form is a mysterious and intuitive process. Moved by the work of others, this work in turn possesses a life beyond the artist, existing as it does in an exhibition, publication or documentation where it can be endlessly turned over and interpreted by new eyes and apprehended by new consciousnesses. These sculptures could well serve as inspiration for new artworks or texts (this very essay, for instance).

This engagement with literature is a deeply personal one for the artist and encompasses her own private experience. Yet the works indicate a search for meaning and understanding which can never be fully satisfied by words alone. If the interpretation of text is never fixed nor wholly reliable, then the sculptures remind us that abstract form can have an immediate impact on the viewer. Just as the imagery in Flaubert's novels proffer narrative strands in their own right, so too do Egan's sculptures, which we must as interested and engaged viewers make an effort to track.

Human language is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, when what we long to do is make music that will move the stars to pity. — GUSTAVE FLAUBERT⁽⁰⁷⁾

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The initially cool beauty of the work quickly gives way to a rather more intimate and gestural practice. Her hanging wall sculptures, with their lumpen filler and drooping forms, exude a pathos diametrically opposed to the sprightly tension of steel sculptures like *Understudy* (2009) which abound with a taut energy. The work is invested with readings and memories where personal significance can fleetingly emerge in steel,

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like the way the rings of *clarity afforded* (2010) hark back to a gate the artist encountered in Donegal. Such subtly inviting titles, which are usually fragments of text siphoned from her reading, represent another point of access and are employed as yet another material before pronouncing a work complete. At the same time, naming can only ever serve as a starting point for the viewer, with these titles resisting any single interpretation and activating significances across many levels.

Just as the iron frames of the department stores enabled their architecture to be light and airy, so too are the forms of her sculptures contingent upon their constituent materials. This is most evident in her cardboard and filler assemblages, in which formal decisions can be made to the very last moment. *Opinion* (2010), a recent triptych of wall works ranging from a mulchy green to a greyish blue, resemble harnesses or bridles at first glance. This dissolves on closer inspection where one can see the cardboard draped over nails, its joints reinforced by tape and filler. There is a consistency in Egan's use of materials (including her literary references) though they are utilised to very different affect in a range of sculptural objects. A number of smaller, tray-like works have been painted white and stuffed with polyester filler and tissue paper. There is a slight visual contradiction in these works, which possess a distinctly light and buoyant air, despite being placed on the floor, like a tray of food that no one wants.

The work's muted palette, too, emerges from the very stuff used to construct it – concrete and mortar repair filler tend to come in greyish blues, with the odd silver and off-white. The cement and bonding are painted over with thick matt acrylic paint but retain the downbeat tone of the material under-

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neath. This is part of her practice of ‘thinking in materials’, responding to the variations, capacities and limitations that they entail. Along with the use of prosaic building materials like steel, filler and concrete, this infuses her work with an architectural sensibility. As *Binet’s addition* shows, the structural rationale of her work is always made clear. The folded-over edge of her steel trays ensures that they are easier and safer to carry. The form of the wall works is always contingent upon gravity and without a wall and nails to hang from they would collapse. Architectural reference is also invoked by titles like *This form of hall* (2010) and *Lobby looking toward balcony* (2009), which could relate to a specific (or fictional) building, but also draws the viewer back to the sculpture’s shape.

The steel sculptures, on the other hand, must be carefully planned in advance of fabrication. Like many artists, drawing plays a key role in Egan’s practice and a form can undergo many changes in the journey from paper to sculpture. *Binet’s addition*, for instance, emerged from many levels of re-imagining, moving from photographs through drawings before arriving at a finished sculptural form. Early drawings of *clarity afforded*, with its elegant form and delicate loops, look like pages out of Charles Rennie Mackintosh’s notebook. Yet, in three dimensions, the work possesses a rather more sturdy presence.

These working practices have been synthesised in a recent series of band steel and mesh works. For these works, steel frames have been cast with between one and three meshed sections. The mesh is then filled with concrete repair mortar and moulded pigment. These works are quite flat, almost two-dimensional, and balance on rounded corners. *This form*

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of hall (2010) is a rather top-heavy version, somewhat reminiscent of folded furniture, whereas the others are more symmetrical, invoking the image of a film reel or perhaps a fence or barricade. While resolutely abstract, their scale possesses a rather human quality. At the same time, their hard finish and meshed edges lend them an industrial air, harder than the looser, more conditional cardboard works. Their squat, ever so slightly cumbersome forms, mark a departure from Egan’s other steel works.

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Egan is not only interested in the stories told in literature, but also in the formal devices adopted by novelists like Flaubert and Zola. While perhaps not an immediately obvious antecedent, there exist parallels between Flaubert's treatment of his subject and Egan's transmutation of experience into sculptural form. Both possess a keen sense of observation integrated into works of formal precision. Flaubert prized a detached tone and his writing often appears to be a straightforward and realistic transcription of detail. But, as is evident from *Madame Bovary's* wedding passage, his work is in fact highly stylised with the very structure and form of the text, not simply its content, used as a vehicle to convey meaning. For instance, the imperfect tense is consistently deployed in *Madame Bovary*, not only to convey when certain activities took place, but also to illustrate the banality of those activities. His high style points to the veils that intercede in any attempt to represent reality.

Similarly, any hint of scientific objectivity in Egan's experiments with 'personal style' is effaced by the numerous incarnations that this has taken – from her initial written descriptions of outfits observed in public places ⁽⁰⁸⁾ to her

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films, where shots of her sculptures are interlaced with scenes featuring a wardrobe of clothes. The varying affects wrought by the same motif being represented in different forms testifies to the power that form can exert over meaning – lest we forget Marshall McLuhan's maxim: the medium is the message. Egan's sculptures, films and photographs remind us that form is necessarily self-conscious and can never merely transcribe the real. Thoughts and feelings derived from memories and readings are engendered in sculptures which foreground the artist's subjectivity and celebrate meaningful individual experience. Yet somehow the physical work invested in her sculptures – taping, painting, setting, moulding and welding – helps to render fleeting sensations and experiences more solid and permanent. It is to Egan's credit that this range of personal references never overpowers the viewer but instead, in showing us the communicative capacity of pure form, lead us gently into imagining that which lies beyond words.

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⁽⁰¹⁾ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) p. 26 ⁽⁰²⁾ Malcolm Bowie, *Madame Bovary*, *ibid.* p.X ⁽⁰³⁾ *Au Bonheur de Dames* (1873) was one instalment of *Les Rougon-Macquart* (1871-93), an ambitious series of twenty novels which followed the fortunes of an extended family in second-Empire France. ⁽⁰⁴⁾ Rosalind Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in late Nineteenth-Century France* (University of California Press 1982) p.68 ⁽⁰⁵⁾ Marcel Proust, quoted in *Alain de Botton. How Proust Can Change Your Life* (Picador, 1997). ⁽⁰⁶⁾ For her Readings project, Egan filmed a number of friends reading their favourite texts aloud. ⁽⁰⁷⁾ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, see note 01, p.170 ⁽⁰⁸⁾ Aleana Egan. *We sat down where we had sat before*, (2008)