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Aporia: A Room for Dwelling and Doubt

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Aporia: A room for dwelling and doubt

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Germany/Italy: March 2015

Hunters' hides or "Hochstand" are raised wooden structures found throughout Germany. They are a liminal presence located along the edges of tree lines where forests end and meadows begin. Travelling north from Munich to Göttingen (home of the Brothers Grimm) and south from Munich to Italy through the Brenner Pass I saw many of them. I also saw refugees travelling north through the pass as they attempted to make their way into Europe.

Belfast, Artist's Studio, June 2015

These Munich memories converged and the idea for a large-scale art installation began to form. The installation would include a full size Hochstand and a series of small paintings depicting selected motifs from the original Grimm's tales. Images of weapons, towers, prisons, animals and children baked in pies questioned the concepts of hunter / prey and predator/ victim so that overall, the work could be read as a Romantic nightmare; a meditation on landscape, identity and exile. By August 2016 the design and construction of the hunter's hide using basic building materials was underway and work continued on the development of the paintings.

(Fig.1)

Bristol, June 2017

I attended the *Exhibiting Gender, Curating Conflict* workshop at Bristol University to talk about my artistic practice and its use of historical conflict as source material. I discussed my *Looking For Frank* project (Ritchie, 2015), which centred on the military experiences of my paternal ancestors and I finished with images of the developing hunter's hide project, which was called *Munich Mnemonic*. The discussion that followed the presentation was lively and the

paper presented by Deborah Withers which critiqued and contextualised the *Looking for Frank* project was provocative (see her Encounters piece in this issue). Withers's location of that work within a wider memorial landscape and her perceptive reading of the images was so charged with possibilities that I could not fully respond to her insights on the day. Regretfully, I had to leave the session prematurely and missed most of the keynote address by Christine Sylvester (which became her contribution to this special issue). I did, however, talk with her during the day. These brief interactions with two academics not only sowed many creative seeds but also had a transformative impact on my artistic practice. How so?

Two things happened: Deborah Withers generously sent me a transcript of her paper and I obtained a copy of Christine Sylvester's book *Art/Museums: International Relations Where We Least Expect It* (2009). I spent the summer considering the contents of both.

Withers (2017) said of my work (in relation to the Wounded Poppy series) "Perhaps Ritchie's folding, distributing and planting of the poppies embodies the gesture of the aporetic experience, in that it creates room for dwelling and doubt, making the known unknown—an avenue through which it is possible to think again what the poppy means...". These words resonated with me despite not knowing what an 'aporetic experience' was! Cue online dictionary definitions: Aporia (noun) perplexity, difficulty. Aporetic (adjective) to be at a loss. Or, as Socrates put it, reducing someone to a state of aporia is to show them that they do not know what they thought they knew (*about something*) and to instill in them the desire to reinvestigate that *something*.

I started reading Sylvester's book. The Hochstand with all its Germanic references was abandoned as I travelled metaphorically from the British Museum to the Greek Parthenon, then onwards to the National Museum in Iraq for a consideration of how (and why) art and antiquities are looted during times of conflict. I dug out my husband's postcards from his trips to Syria and Iraq in the early nineties when Palmyra was not yet destroyed and Saddam Hussein was in power. I went back to Sylvester and read her argument for using collage both as an art

form in the traditional sense and as a methodology for bringing together disparate disciplines within the field of IR. Inspired by this, I made a little collage of my own which included Kim Jong-un. **(Fig.2)** These experiments and digressions into art/IR were proving to be more interesting than fairy tales. With reference to the title of Sylvester's book, I did not expect to find IR making its presence felt in my studio but there it was.

Enniskillen, July 2017

Also unexpected, and arising from an afternoon spent with the archivist at the Royal Inniskilling Fusilier (RIF) Museum, was the discovery that my great grandfather, Frank Ritchie, had only transferred to the 9th Battalion of the RIF just prior to his death in March 1918. He had spent most of WW1 with the 11th Battalion, a fact unknown to me and one which questioned the validity of my research about him. Frank remained enigmatic.

Belfast, September 2017

My studio was full of notes, photographs, postcards, sketches and models which had accumulated over the preceding months. It was chaotic and overwhelming. The Hochstand exerted a solid presence in the middle of it all. I went inside it and closed the door. Darkness. Now I knew what it felt like to be in a state of aporia but there was one thing I could be sure of: I did not know where this project was going and I had taken Wither's writing (or a portion of it) quite literally. The Hochstand had become *a room* 'for dwelling and doubt' and I was standing in it.

Any negative assumptions at this point should be dispelled. Lightbulb moments do exist! The realisation that I was standing in a structure which had the potential to offer up endless meanings was very exciting.

As it had been designed in kit form, it could be shown as a four walled structure, or opened out and shown as a screen. The roof could be on or off, the window flaps open or shut and the pediment placed either on top of the structure or not used at all. A vernacular hunting hide

could therefore be re-created as a memorial, a site hut, a watch tower, a shelter, a prison, or a two-faced temple of war. It had the scale of a sentry box or a confessional. Over time, with repeated use, it would become a palimpsest, which could be read as a text or the support surface for the collaging of diverse but connected ideas. It would be in a state of continuous evolution. In this way, it answers artist Christian Boltanski's call for artists to 'produce nothing finished and self-contained anymore but only fragments' (cited in Steinhauser 2004:132).

Now, rather than use the structure as a vehicle to carry an overload of ideas, it would be used on its first outing to carry just one. It was time to revisit, reinvigorate and bid au revoir to the *Looking for Frank* project. Sequentially then, one moves from ancestral research, to the production of artworks, to describing the meaning of these artworks through an illustrated essay in 2015. That essay was presented in Bristol (June 2017) and the project deemed complete - until new information about Frank came to light.

Belfast, 29th September 2017

My day of aporia – what did I know? Thanks, Frank. And Deborah! If history, like memory, is fluid and changing then it followed that my art practice should be less static and more open to interpretation and interaction. More than images on a wall, or words on a page but something that brought the past into the present in an immersive, open ended and even emotional way. I started afresh.

Platform Arts Belfast, November 2017

The finished work made its debut as part of a group exhibition about conflict.¹ Titled *Aporia: A Room for Dwelling and Doubt*², it was a piece of art which people walked around, locked themselves into, stood inside reading and/or played music. Simply put, it was an installation centred around a wooden structure which housed digital photography, a journal article and a sound piece. It had a roof, door and two apertures at eye level. Externally, on the walls flanking the structure were two paintings, below which, on the floor, clay beads were scattered. An excavator's trowel fixed to the pediment's apex served as a rusted finial. **(Fig. 3)**

In the middle of the interior rear wall, on a shelf, was a music box mechanism. When the handle was turned, it played *It's a long way to Tipperary*. Above this, an image of a road block at Ballykinler Army Barracks and below the shelf, a clipboard which held the *Looking for Frank* article reprinted onto archival newsprint paper. Anyone who read the article would discover the background context of the work, but the installation could be appreciated without doing so.

From inside the structure, people could look out into the gallery through either of two apertures, one left and one right. This was a deliberate framing device guiding the viewer's gaze to a painting from the *Wounded Poppy* series. Would they get that this visual axis was a play on East/West Cold War politics inspired by research at Glienicke Bridge in Berlin and that the metaphor, by extension, included the geopolitics of global East/West relations today? Did it matter? Scattered below each poppy painting, on the floor, were small beads; the negative imprint of wet clay pushed into dried poppy seed heads. These flimsy flowers of remembrance stood not just for Flanders but also for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The dried clay poppy beads, like so many lost military buttons or droppings from the Winged Bull of Nineveh were reminders, perhaps, that we all return to dust when our colour fades. The poppy paintings on the wall were at eye level; the clay seed casts on the floor below. Two dimensions became three

¹ And This Too at Platform Arts Belfast, November 2017 featured work by: Sean Campbell, Jill Gibbon, Brendan Jamison, Ciaran Magill, Mark Revels, Gail Ritchie and David Turner. For more information <http://platformartsbelfast.com/project/and-this-too/> and www.gailritchie.com/2017

² This work was supported by Arts Council Northern Ireland Support for Individual Artists Programme

and the viewer was encouraged to look up and down. This introduced a North/South axis into the geometry of the overall composition. **(Fig. 4)**

The dual image of me with Frank, as shown in the original journal article, had been changed. Now there was just the image of me imitating Frank pinned to the door interior. With the door open, I faced towards the gallery. **(Fig. 5)** With the door closed, I was in darkness, surrounded by the research of a past which I couldn't see. On the night of the exhibition opening, over two hundred people turned up. It got loud. I drifted about, meeting and greeting, networking and taking photographs but every so often, above the swell of conversation, the melancholy notes of *Tipperary* made themselves heard. Someone was inside the room for dwelling and doubt, experiencing my past, in their own way. **(Fig. 6)**

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- Sylvester, C. 2009. *Art/Museums: International Relations Where We Least Expect It*. Colorado: Paradigm.
- Withers, D. 2017. "A response to the work of Gail Ritchie". Paper presented at Exhibiting Gender, Curating Conflict: Body Politics and Affective Objects in Art and Museums, Bristol University, June 6.

Figures Below:

Fig 1: Working images from Munich Mnemonic including painting, location photography and sketchbook work. 2016. Dimensions variable.

Fig 2: Digital Collage. 2017. Print size 20 x 20cm.

Fig 3: Aporia: A Room for Dwelling and Doubt. Mixed media installation, 2017. Dimensions: 2.5 m x 5 m x 2 m.

Fig 4: Installation View. Top: Horizontal axis through structure to gallery wall. Bottom: Clay seed heads on gallery floor.

Fig 5: Detail: Background wall, image from Wounded Poppy Series, 2009. Right: Door interior with image of artist, 2017.

Fig 6: Installation view: Visitor reading journal article; music box mechanism, 2017.