

# Tales From a Changing World

Report on the 2015 Tulca Festival of Visual Art 'Seachange' curated by Mary Cremin, multiple venues, Galway, 14 – 29 November.



Seoidín O'Sullivan's workshop with *Orchard System*, Tulca 2015

Climate change and tales of the sea were the two threads that ran through this year's Tulca Festival of Visual Arts. Curator Mary Cremin chose the mythical island of Hy-Brasil as a way to reflect on the transformations of our environment. The island was said to lie off the west coast of Ireland and to have sunk in the ocean like Atlantis or Anaïs Tondeur's *Nuuk Island*. 35 artists participated in the exhibitions, which took place across six venues in Galway city. The festival featured an extensive lineup of events, including talks, storytelling, workshops, a film screening and an education programme.

In the festival's main exhibition space, the Connacht Tribune Print Works, there was a great variety of work on show. Colin Crotty's representational paintings of idle teenagers tagging miniature Greek temples in gardens, reminiscent of Watteau's *fêtes galantes*. sat tantalisingly close to Dennis McNulty and Ros Kavanagh's installation piece *How Will I Know When To Go Indoors*, which describes how to survive a nuclear bomb according to guidelines set out by the Irish Civil Defence in

the 1960s (hint: tarpaulin helps).

Perhaps most impressive were the floor works, with Richard Long's *Kilkenny Limestone Circle* as the centrepiece. Long's circle possesses a timeless, universal quality, which contrasted with the methodical rectangular arrangement of Owen Quinlan's *Time and Place*. Quinlan collected, sorted and arranged seashore materials into two aligned rectangles, one comprising manmade materials and the other natural objects. The items were then sorted by size: the larger items placed side by side. A spider crab skeleton and a sheep skull faced a plastic buoy and a rusted tin. As they receded to tiny fragments, the objects looked increasingly similar. Pieces of glass and ceramics looked not so different from pebbles and shells, suggesting a common horizon, where distinctions between the manmade and the natural are no longer pertinent.

For *Solid, Liquid, Gas*, Tue Greenfort caused a glass bottle of frozen water to explode in the gallery. The ice melted into a puddle and eventually evaporated, enacting the three states of water. *More Equal Than Others*, a work by Jason Deans, also depended on the states of water: 15 pillars of compressed mortar sand, made specifically for the exhibition, were built to slowly crack and crumble as the exhibition wore on, with the rate of decay depending on the moisture levels in the gallery.

Seoidín O'Sullivan's *Orchard System* was situated in a space adjacent to the main gallery, which also facilitated meetings and workshops. The installation comprised eight octagonal platforms, each of which supported a heritage apple tree from Irish Seed Savers. The platforms were on wheels and could be moved around into different formations. After the exhibition, pupils of the Lettergesh National School planted the trees on the school grounds. In advance of the planting, O'Sullivan conducted workshops with the children, both in the exhibition space and in their school, to talk about the trees and how to protect our common green spaces. Also in this room was O'Sullivan's *Seating System*, designed in collaboration with architect Karol O'Mahony as a nomadic school system ([seoidinosullivan.com](http://seoidinosullivan.com)). These modular wooden boxes, along with apple-shaped blackboards also included in the installation, were used as part of the continuing Tulca education programme (T. Ed) conducted by Joanna McGlynn and Hilary Morley.

The Festival Gallery and the Galway Arts Centre featured a large and varied selection of video works. *Water Gold Soil (American River Archive, doc. 2)*, by Susannah Sayler and Edward Morris, is a visually stunning historical and geological exploration of a Californian river, presented over two screens. Anne Maree Barry's *No Mean City* features striking cinematography, with haunting images of snow-covered cityscapes. Louise Hervé and Chloé Maillet's *The Waterway* explores fantasies of rejuvenation through seawater treatments that promise a future of eternal underwater youth.

The Nun's Island Theatre contained artworks by four artists that merged in such a way as to be experienced as a single immersive installation. The eerie imagery and soundtrack of Clare Langan's video *Floating World* set the tone. Accompanied by the

music of Jóhann Jóhannsson, slow aerial views, altered film contrasts and reverse motion combine to transform the islands of Skellig Michael, the lava-covered Montserrat and the skyscrapers of Dubai into floating or drowned places. In Maria McKinney's *Abyssal*, blue and green stage lighting drew strange columns of expanded foam out of the darkness. The columns are modelled on salt structures found in ocean depths. The overall impression of otherworldliness was completed by Ruth Lyons's *Afterings*, receptacles made out of rock salt, and in the blue neon of Martin Healy's *Pale Blue Dot*, which references the most distant photograph of Earth ever taken.

Having lost access to The Shed and the Niland Gallery, this year's Tulca exhibition felt very compact. The Niland Gallery would have offered a better setting for projections than the side spaces of the Festival Gallery. However, the concentrated nature of the exhibitions allowed Cremin to tie the venues together with strong geometrical and material dis/associations. Long's *Rock Drawings* (1994) in the Galway Arts Centre echoed both the stone circle in the Festival Gallery and Lyons's rock salt bowls. Barbara Knezevic challenged methods of presentation in her displacement and packaging of rocks between the Galway Arts Centre and the James Mitchell Geology Museum. Langan's Dubai skyscrapers engulfed in a sand storm were still lingering in my mind as I encountered Deans's crumbling sand pillars.

The programme of events included two days of talks in NUIG's Aula Maxima and an afternoon of film screenings at An Taibhdhearc Theatre. The 'Hy-Brasil Dialogues' featured geographers, geologists, marine researchers, linguists, architects, designers and artists, all engaging with the complexities of our changing environment.

The film programme reflected the key themes of the festival through documentary, fiction and science fiction. It opens with Robert J. Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1934). His shots of waves crashing over the Inis Mór cliffs have lost none of their power, and I found myself fascinated by the backbreaking labour involved in literally creating the soil for growing food. The shorter films that followed combined, in various degrees, archival material, lyrical landscape, texts, abstractions and performances. The most memorable for me was *Hydra Decapita* by the Otolith Group, in which sounds, spoken words and songs are densely layered over alternating still and moving images. The film takes J.M.W. Turner's *Slave Ship* as its starting point. The painting is glimpsed towards the end and its description by John Ruskin is sung as an incantation. The film suggests an underwater fictional world, Drexciya, the population of which was born from the pregnant African women thrown overboard during storms, such as the one represented in Turner's painting. Weaving together sinister events and poetical projections, *Hydra Decapita*, not unlike 'Seachange', brims with intriguing potentialities.

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