



All images: Siobhan McGibbon, 'Xenophon: Making Oddkin with Japanese Knotweed', installation view, Galway Arts Centre; photographs by Tom Flanagan, courtesy of the artist and Galway Arts Centre.

## Xenophon: Making Oddkin

MICHAËLE CUTAYA REVIEWS SIOBHAN MCGIBBON'S RECENT SOLO EXHIBITION 'XENOPHON: MAKING ODDKIN WITH JAPANESE KNOTWEED' AT GALWAY ARTS CENTRE.

**SIOBHAN MCGIBBON'S PRACTICE** has never shied away from dis-comforting associations, whether covering car bonnets with lard and human hair or making delicate structures out of fingernails. So it's hardly surprising that for this new body of work – exhibited at Galway Arts Centre from 14 January to 25 February – she chose to make kin, however odd, with some of the most dreaded invasive species in Ireland.

Throughout Galway Arts Centre's succession of rooms, variously flooded in blue, picked up by spotlights or gleaming in ultraviolet, the visitor encounters vividly coloured assemblages of man-made tools, organic and synthetic matters. The listed materials of *Buzz Buzz*, *Slurp Slurp*, *Merge Merge* (2022) might give an idea of the sort of hybridisation at work here: "Wheelbarrow, knotweed, soil, sculptural silk shibori, Japanese knotweed stalk, foxglove, dandelion dye, unreal clay." As the latter item suggests, the very list of materials has become the site of speculative narrative.

This particular combination sees the metal structure of the wheelbarrow resting on its one deflated wheel at the front, and precariously supported by Japanese knotweed stalks emerging through orifices from a soft soil-like central mass. Elsewhere, *To whom are we response-able?* (2022) transforms a glyphosate sprayer whose body has been covered in a thin layer of purple and yellow clay, and with its hose sprouting ferns. The stark shadow projected on the wall by the spotlight resembles an awkward wading bird, suggesting that new functions might yet be found for this tool of destruction.

The monumental *Flipping Relations* (2022) is an arrangement of two casts of *Gunnera manicata* leaves, more commonly known as giant rhubarb – another garden favourite that has become a scourge for Irish ecosystems. The moulds render in clay the intri-



cate structure of the huge leaves, but the flesh tones imbue them with a charged erotic presence – possibly and humourously alluded to by what looks like underwear, suspended on the stem-like apparatus.

These works inhabit and expand upon the world of Xenophon – a territory explored by the artist since 2015 in collaboration with writer Maeve O'Lynn, which they describe as “an alter-imaginary populated by Xenothorpians, a fluid species that commune and mutate with living and non-living entities to adapt to the Anthropocene.” This might go some way to explain why McGibbon employs a synthetic clay commonly used for animation, whether on the textile of processional banners where one would expect embroideries, on the canvas instead of paint, or throughout as a coloured skin on all sculptures. Aside from giving the show its very specific tone and texture, the clay, remaining soft, seems offered to the next nudge of a modeling tool or that of a meddling thumb, still in the making.

For all its chimerical looks, the work is grounded in a very practical inquiry which began during a research residency at Leitrim Sculpture Centre in 2020: How to deal with the outgrowth of Japanese Knotweed that developed in the artist's garden in west Cork? The plant is notoriously difficult to eradicate and can be very detrimental to the surrounding biodiversity. The task was further complicated by the proximity of the shoreline which forbade – if so tempted – the spraying of herbicide. Thus heedful of Anna Tsing's advice that “Somehow, in the midst of ruins, we must maintain enough curiosity to notice the strange and wonderful as well as the terrible and terrifying”, McGibbon set out to find ways to cohabit with this unwelcome visitor: smothering here, cutting there, and experimenting with how to accommodate the harvested plant by making jams and bread, tinctures and chutney, pickle and gin.

If the title of the exhibition echoes Donna Haraway's 2016 publication, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, and her subsequent lecture, ‘Making Oddkin: Storytelling for Earthly Survival’, a table covered with books at the entrance of the gallery offers alternative narratives to the artworks on display.<sup>1</sup> There are books about weeds and invasive species, others on healing and shamanism, and quite a few intriguing titles, at least to this visitor: *Plants in Science Fiction: Speculative Vegetation* (University of Wales Press, 2020); *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (Fordham University Press, 2019); or the wonderfully evocative *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2015) by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing.

Begun as an exploration on how to engage with invasive species, the research has taken on notions of the unkempt garden that eschew the hierarchical control gardening too often imposes, in reducing the garden to a resource for humans. In choosing to make kin with the terrifying, McGibbon has produced a body of work that is playful and sensual, at times discomfiting or awkward, but always thought provoking.

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<sup>1</sup> See: Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); and Donna J. Haraway, ‘Making Oddkin: Storytelling for Earthly Survival’, public lecture, Yale University, 23 October 2017.

