



The St. Brigid's/ Imbolc Exhibit

Curator's Note: Sheelyn Browne and Lisa Gawke

I wanted to present both of these artists together because they play so well as a duet that represents the crossing of all sorts of boundaries: Inside/Outside, Self/Other, individual “I” and the collective “we”, for example. But most importantly, I am interested in the play between a printmaker who works largely in environmental prints tackling history, and an artist who paints gesturally on paper tackling the world of the psyche and its relation to myth. In my critical view, Lisa Gawke’s work explores a profound signification of “dark forces,” as she herself puts it, that call to mind both Yeats and the Celtic Revival’s exploration of the mythic and Marina Carr’s violent feminist reactions to the myths of patriarchy in Irish culture and in Irish dramatic history. Though both are playwrights, Lisa Gawke’s theatricality is undoubtedly part of the significance of her work, and while we might say that all gesturality in visual art has a theatrical character, Lisa Gawke’s theater is both profoundly private and a rupture of our “public” masks. She defines such inwardness as part of the process from trauma to renewal, but the enactment of that makes it an acting outward, a public act of renewal or purgation. Such, I think, has everything to do with Lisa Gawke’s use of blackness and black mark making (the “night” that she describes in her statement has everything to do with this). More, the graphic quality of Lisa’s work, in my mind, calls forth a notion of legibility, of making the forces speak in a language of signs that allows for a wide paradigmatic reading. She “writes” these forces into a kind of calligraphy, one that speaks to such renewal, but also by implication to ideas of erased voices, of erased histories, and of erased Others. It is, in this sense, that I find her work

speaking to issues of feminism and postcolonialism in both Irish and international contexts, though she herself may disavow such connections.

Sheelyn's work, on the other hand, as presented in this show at least, focuses upon the "telling" of history and the re-presentation of one of Ireland's most famous resistance warriors: Grainne Mhaille (Grace O'Malley). In her series on O'Malley and her setting in County Mayo at Carrickahowley, Browne avoids the heroicizing tropes of the idealized Grace O'Malley and presents us instead with a figure who is herself an expressionist cipher: a figure through whom history becomes complex and nuanced. As such, O'Malley does not appear in statuesque display with her clichés intact, but instead emerges into the picture plane as if invading its poise and equanimity. She becomes a pirate in the picturing of history, and therefore also represents a feminism in its intersection with Irish postcolonialism: the figure of woman who refuses to be mastered and who demands to "be seen." Wonderfully, the connection in Browne's work is also personal as Sheelyn is the direct descendent of O'Malley, and so here, too, the personal and the historical (collective) merge to produce a re-working of the myth of O'Malley within the history of Sheelyn Browne. The process of making the prints also implies a rather significant sense of the provisional, such that the heroic portrait we might expect, complete with its own histories of materiality (oil paint and expensive supplies, but also the materiality of the body of the Other) is made replicable infinitely in the print process. Here, process and a larger sense of materiality combine to produce a larger sense of content, one that echoes the multiple histories located in the figure of Grainne Mhaille herself. Again, Sheelyn Browne might find such assessments distant from her work, and so these curatorial notes are offered as another critical perspective that may stand outside of artistic intent, but do not stand outside of artistic implication.

___Robin Savage