

MOIRA MCIVER – MIGRATION MEMORIES

There are truths that can be accessed by photography, and other lens-based media, which cannot be accessed as fully by any other visual medium. Yet, not all great work can be explained by rules, as Alexander Pope wrote in his *An Essay on Criticism*, 1711:

Some beauties yet, no precepts can declare,

For there's a happiness as well as care.

This archaic two liner is easily applicable to McIver's series of 35mm photographs titled *Resonance* (1987). It is also connected to her frequent visits between Donegal and Glasgow, including the now closed Paddy's Market. She credits these early photographs as being the basis for the later work in the exhibition *Migration Memories*.

The images of the Donegal sky and the flowing river represent unstoppable energies of nature in a poetic close-up that tests your eye. While, in the photographs of male and female hands, there are two of each, embracing parts of what is visible in front of the camera, they stand as a visual metaphor for being and having contact with, parallel lives. Then instead of a person, there is an image of his or her doing something unremarkable: feeding hens and a duck, or a close-up of a cow's hide as if in between the animal and the carer brushing it. Fish on the plate, and bones arranged into a rectangular frame, as if after a mediaeval banquet – all in a remarkable equilibrium of silence and lived beauty, issuing an invitation to a narrative a viewer may add in the privacy of looking. The hands will appear in other work – somewhat similar, somewhat different.

Orbit (2018) has its roots in a collection of photographic memorabilia and documents. The artist recalls looking at her grandmother's collection of old family photographs (kept in a tin in the kitchen) and noting an ellipse appearing in one mode or another in all of them, be it a stamp or a birth certificate or a medical test result. Making this visible by a gentle intervention over the old material, McIver introduces the geometric symbol of the time the Earth needs to complete one revolution around the sun.

The *Pilgrimage Series* (1996) consists of six images. On the first of them a pair of long-lived hands holding a battered old photograph of a girl in her white confirmation attire, as prescribed by the catholic church anywhere in Europe. Those hands retire onto the surface of the mirror while it reflects trees nearby. In another image the hands hold what may be a gingerbread heart as sold after some confirmation/religious ceremonies. In the next image of this series, the hands are a loving container for numerous partly burned candles – the evidence of how many went through that sacrament.

In the photograph of feet, dirty from walking barefoot, the soles confidently express the whole kneeling, praying body. Two hands caressing a rosary close this series. The sophisticated preparation in a home with an older relative end with that person's blessing and prayer. The intimacy in and during the public ceremony governs this set of images. As if beauty presided over it.

Bainín Dearg (2020) marks the boundary between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, one in black, one in red ink as if uncertain where it actually lies. The red cloth belonged to McIver's

mother who passed away during the recent Covid pandemic. Another break away, this time for eternity. In her comment the artist describes the ease with which the people living here adapted those territorial decisions. Her mother and others from her family lived in Glasgow, travelling "home" over and back to Donegal. And still it goes on. There is a sophisticated link between the red cloth under the images and red thread around fingers of both hands, hands knitting, holding fresh flowers. These photographs are typical of McIver's art leaning towards the poetic. She effortlessly adopts and adapts Leonardo da Vinci's statement that painting is mute poetry.

Although the narrative principle is never abandoned, the set titled *Strata* (2023) feel like a poem about family and their things that have survived. The still image revives the feeling when they have been recalled to join this visibility. In that sense they may recall experiences we find in dreams.

They are also the prelude to the main set of eight images titled *Migrations Memories* (2023).

Bridge of Tears appeals with its respect for nature as well as for a gently playful presence of people in absentia. As if lit up, the white shade of the standing lamp is placed in the golden section of the type used in the Italian paintings of the 16th C. Together with the easy chair they recall a habit of reading in the evenings. The lightness of telling this sad history also includes stories of their ability to cope, after crossing the bridge. The work makes visible a thought from Canto VI Ch3 by Comte Lautreamont, later adopted by Andre Breton to describe surrealism: "a chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissection table". Max Ernst described a surrealist painting as "a linking of two realities that by all appearances have nothing to link them". It is McIver's critique of what happened to her family in the past. These acts by the powers of the day are thus relegated into the dissonance between what happened and what should have been.

In this series, she has invented a technique that makes 'time visible'. By this I mean that the final photographic image contains previous photographs of found photographs. To facilitate the final composition, she has made the *Migration Memories* in stages, each photographed and printed, and again photographed and printed. The penultimate stage is often printed on cloth. First is the story, followed by a found photograph, inherited matter, or object, then a photograph printed on cloth, followed by installation in location for the final image. The result is a composite embracing of documentation and poetic charge in the final composition. Its emotional agency increases by contrasting values of everyday and imagined reality. A block of flats towers above the spiritual privacy of the tomb with a cloth with a portrait of a woman. McIver herself stands behind the "Washing Line" with an older image printed on one of the sheets. The composition is a marvel of both the documentary and the imagination made present together. Making the past present, at times through an interaction with younger members of her family. The high table on the pathway carries a flower as if in conversation with the church and its history. The lamp gives enough light to evoke early evening over the mountain in the *Bridge of Tears* image. McIver looked for authentic history and found it in her family, her predecessors, perhaps mostly her mother, stories and photographs and red cloth and that plate, and lamp and chair ... These things are engaged as full participants albeit in a poetic truth of McIver's invention.

Slavka Sverakova



Moira McIver is a lens-based artist from Northern Ireland. Her work includes photography, video, installation, publication, and public art. She is a lecturer in Fine Art and teaches photography and video within the BA honours Fine Art course, at Belfast School of Art. Her projects are often based on historical events and the interplay between mainstream perspectives and individual experience and recollection. She researches first-hand accounts and popular local myths and stories to explore overlooked and under-represented viewpoints. McIver works across a range of digital and analogue lens-based media to explore how our sense of the physical remains vital to our perception and interpretation of history. She undertook a residency in Glasgow in 2021 as part of an exchange between Street Level Photoworks, Glasgow, and Artlink, Donegal. Her artwork has been exhibited nationally and internationally. In 2022, her work was included in the National Photography Collection Inaugural Exhibition, Dublin and her photography is held in major collections including the V&A (London), the Royal Armouries Museum (Leeds), Golden Thread Gallery (Belfast).

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- Front: *Bainín Dearg* (2020)
 Back: *Bridge of Tears, Muckish Gap* (2022)
 1. *Resonance* (1987)
 2. *Orbit* (2018)
 3. *Pilgrimage Hands, Mirror* (1996)
 4. *Strata, Bogland* (2023)
 5. *Washing Line*. From the series *Migrations Memories* (2022)
 6. *Donegal Hill, Queens Park, Glasgow*. From the series *Migrations Memories* (2022)
 7. *Southern Necropolis, Glasgow*. From the series *Migrations Memories* (2022)
 8. *The Old Chapel, Derrybeg*. From the series *Migrations Memories* (2022)

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Slavka Sverakova (PhD in History of Architecture, PhD in History and Theory of Art) is an art historian who lives in Northern Ireland. She lectured in the University of PJSafarik, in Presov until she was forced to migrate from Czechoslovakia in 1969 when the Soviet (Breznev) communist army occupied the country, and she sought asylum in London. She worked as a lecturer in Leeds university, Duncan of Jordanstone in Dundee, eventually moving to Belfast with her husband Dr Milan Sverak and lecturing at the University of Ulster. She has been a continual support and inspiration for artists in Northern Ireland writing and reviewing artists work over many years including during the Troubles. She continues to write on artists in Belfast and has two current blog pages reviewing artists exhibitions:

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