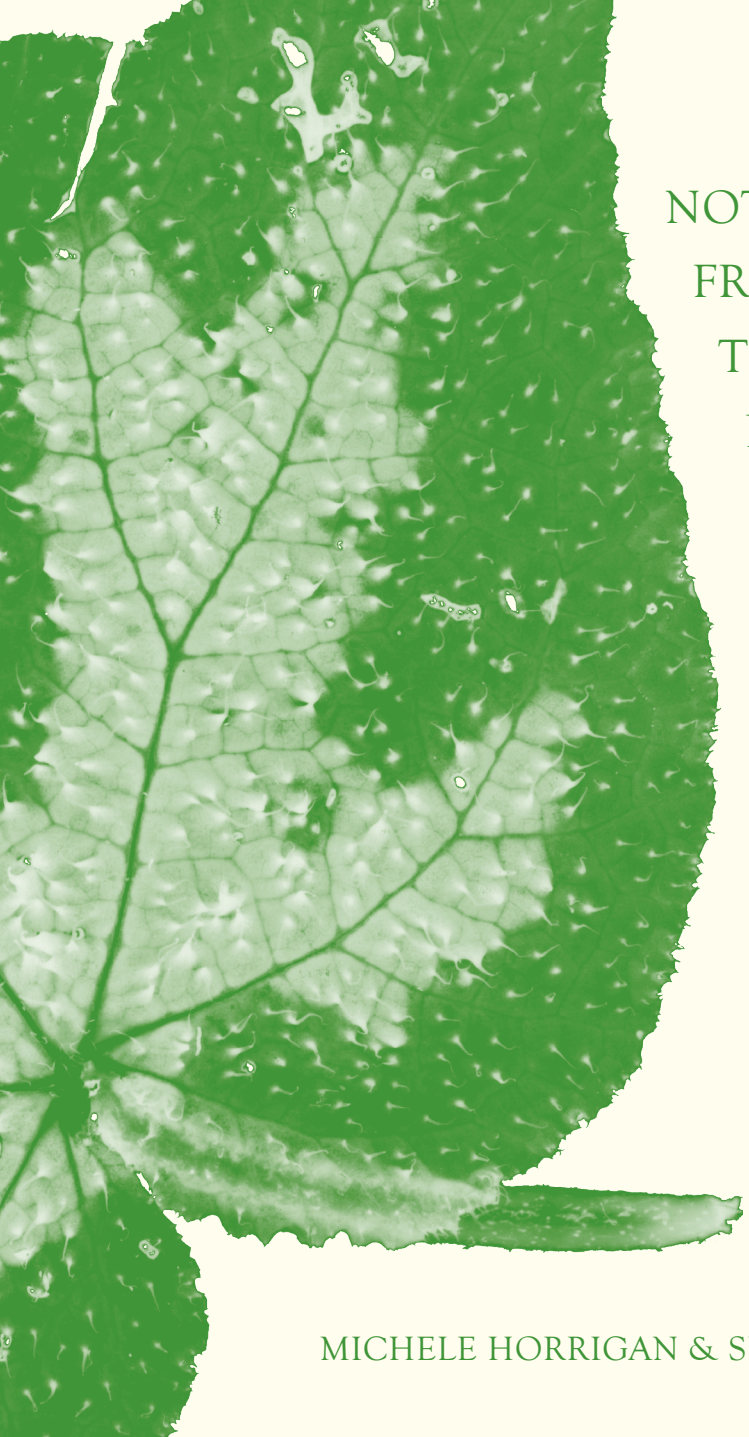
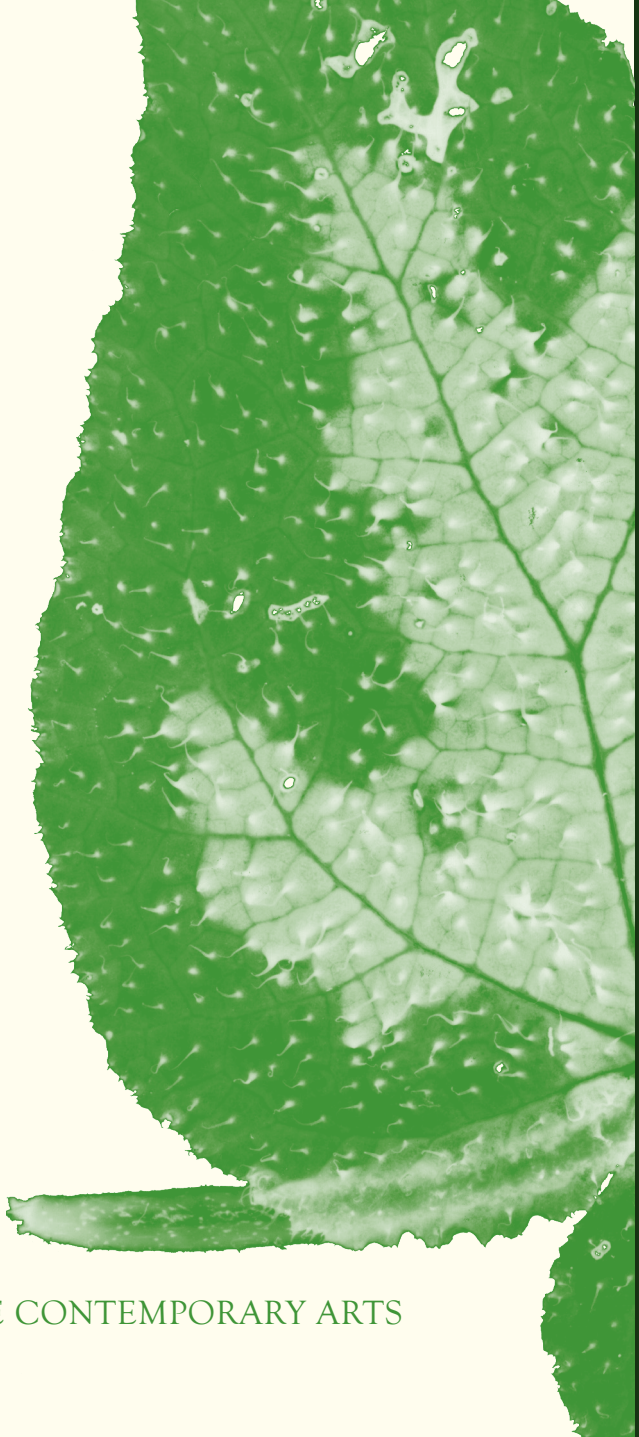


NOTES FROM THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

MICHELE HORRIGAN & SEAN LYNCH



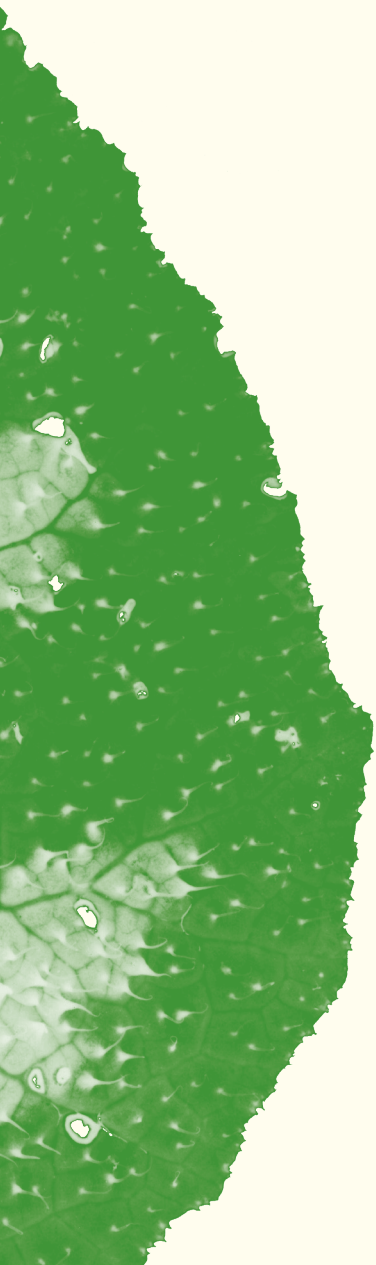
DUNDEE CONTEMPORARY ARTS

NOTES FROM THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

Michele Horrigan
&
Sean Lynch

Part of Stuart Whipps' exhibition
If Wishes Were Thrushes, Beggars Would Eat Birds
12 September – 15 November 2020

Dundee Contemporary Arts



I

> ‘I have this plan,’ Merlin says, ‘that for each formal scientific paper I ever publish I will also write its dark twin, its underground mirror-piece — the true story of how the data for that cool, tidy hypothesis-evidence-proof paper *actually* got acquired. I want to write about the happenstance and the shaved bumblebees and the pissing monkeys and the drunken conversations and the fuck-ups that *actually* bring science into being. This is the frothy, mad network that underlies and interconnects all scientific knowledge — but about which we so rarely say anything.’[1]

II

In late July of this year, Dublin’s venerable Shelbourne Hotel removed four nineteenth century statues from its building. In the knowledge that the statues were representations of African princesses and their attendant slaves, the hotel management announced they took the decision to remove the pieces, which have been in place for 153 years, in light of recent world events and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Despite the prominent location of the hotel in Dublin’s city centre, no one had paid much critical attention to the presence

of the statues either in the past or leading up to the hotel's action. The decision to remove them was likely linked to a short article that appeared on IrishCentral, an Irish-American news website.[2] Noting that the hotel was an important site of battle during the Easter Rising that led to Irish independence and that the state's constitution was later drafted inside, the article concluded that representation of slavery at such a place was 'cretinous', and that 'for shame, must be replaced with true Irish anti-slave heroines'. Despite all this, few images of the statues were to be found online, perhaps signifying what was, up to this point, their low visual register. The Irish media scrambled to find images to accompany news reports, with many resorting to Google Street View screengrabs to show the statues in situ on a surrounding low-lying wall in front of the hotel.

The Shelbourne's actions were initially seen as brave, generally thought of as progressive and in line with global sentiment. That is until Kyle Leyden, from the history of art department at the Courtauld Institute in London, wrote four days later. He first of all gave a gentle prod to the exclusivity of the Shelbourne Hotel, noting that the statues themselves were not unique, they were mass-produced in a Parisian bronze foundry and sold from a catalogue to those who could not afford original work of the nineteenth century. Then he dropped a bombshell — what were thought of as manacles around the enslaved feet could clearly be identified in the catalogue pages and purchase information as anklet jewellery. Leyden continued, 'They are not slaves. They are not shackled. All four wear golden anklets as symbols of

their aristocratic rank. They are all aristocratic women of Egypt and Africa.'[3]

It transpires that a mistake in attribution was made in romantic 1950s literature about the hotel's plush, evocative history that mentioned the statues as slaves, a version since adopted as truth. Marriott International, the hotel's corporate owner, have since stayed eerily silent on the matter, with growing criticism mounting towards what appears as a 'good news story' PR exercise now gone drastically wrong. Dublin City Council, who have a preservation order on the statues, have initiated legal proceedings against the hotel, stating that it believes 'unauthorised development' may have been undertaken. The hotel has four weeks to respond, or replace the statues. If not, the council may then issue a legal notice ordering their replacement.

Academics have called for a forum to interrogate the orientalist fetishisation of African women's bodies as a key component in the cultural project of imperialism, question the supposed neutrality of monuments and ask who ultimately gets to create the dominant organisation of public space[4] — but no one seems to be listening here. Instead, The Irish Times, the newspaper who printed Leyden's clarifications, are offering an online competition where you can win an overnight stay in a deluxe guestroom with three-course dinner, breakfast and free parking all courtesy of the hotel — one imagines this as a pathetic gesture by the Shelbourne to try and claw back some public dignity.[5]

With all of this commotion, other monuments in the city have managed to shun any attention for their dubious origins, such as a statue of Victorian surgeon and explorer Thomas Heazle Parke. As the first Irishman to traverse the African continent as part of Henry Morton Stanley's infamous three-year expedition of the 1880s, he returned a hero. The plaque on the pedestal notes his bravery, as Parke sucked poison from an arrow wound in a fellow expedition member to save his life. Parke's diaries record the purchase of a Pygmy girl, who travelled alongside him for a year and nursed him through malaria. In the end he decided to abandon her as the expedition continued, because her eyes could not adapt to the harsh sunlight after her upbringing in the darkness of the rain forest.[6]

No media outlets or activist groups have, at time of writing, called for any action or dialogue around Parke's statue, its location at the entrance to Ireland's National History Museum and his relationship with this woman. Curator Catalina Lozano's unerring logic, based on her extensive research on post-colonial contexts, is a singular critical intervention in this legacy and the nearby museum: 'Of course, all this has been swept under the carpet of the European nation state. One would hope for some critical distance to these narratives, but they have more or less been left intact… Perhaps, she would have ended up as a specimen in a vitrine, her spirit leaving her body and only a fake grimace left to rewrite her story.'[7]

III

The Shelbourne Hotel's disappeared statues, and those that still survive, are but some of many entanglements that have raged throughout the Western world since our public galleries have slept since March. The strident nature of social space has been pulled apart by an articulation of racial inequality and a pandemic, as we all know.

Stuart Whipps' artwork and exhibition *If Wishes Were Thrushes, Beggars Would Eat Birds*, and the re-opening of Dundee Contemporary Arts, comes at a moment where we are re-entering a changed world. Whipps is a storyteller, moving over, under and around a plethora of subjects that have come to his attention during his travels over the last few years. In the exhibition, Whipps' own voice shepherds along a collection of video footage, archival material and photographs, sent out into the gallery from digital and slide projectors. Monuments, stones, industry and the devil is a rough terrain of the scope of his investigations, although that's far from everything he describes. His approach appears to be deliberately disheveled and uncentred, always on the lookout for surprises rather than finding evidence that might defend some ingrained idea or theory that he started off with. The register of the script is irregular — sometimes it feels like an out-of-control Wikipedia boffin waffling on, while on other occasions you can feel the evocation of a poet's verse or perhaps an arthouse film narrator. Whipps has long been fascinated with such disparity, the turn of phrase, the duality of publicly setting forth the sheer

volume of his research while also giving space to reflect and comprehend the hidden or not so hidden threads of its interconnectedness.

A tradition of the public monument as a chronicle of 'man' and 'his' historical achievements might be negated in this way. In Whipps' Dundee work, it is more like a flexible, mobile shape, ready to appear in the most surprising of places. More often than not, the history books speak of clean lines between geological times, between inventions, between wars, between the ages of human time and space. We are gifted a straight path of evolution up to where we stand today — Whipps is on the look out for the bumps along that road. In his narrative, a collection of diseased stones, once found in the depths of English manor Chatsworth House, are rumoured to have bizarrely exploded and since disappeared. This subsequently leads Whipps on a journey to the Alps and the telling of arguments with the devil about building bridges.

At the other end of the street from the Shelbourne Hotel one can encounter carvings by that great storyteller in stone, James O'Shea. They were completed in 1861 when he returned to Dublin after being fired from a job in Oxford for shaping illicit allegorical carvings on what was then the biggest museum-building enterprise in the British Empire. His disagreements with John Ruskin and the University of Oxford began after he had carved monkeys on the façade of a building whose sponsors denied all of Darwin's theories of evolution.[8]

In Dublin, he got work on the new Kildare Street building, a leisure club for the Anglo-Irish ascendancy, an institution of card playing and sherry drinking with a reputation as the only place in Ireland where decent caviar could be had. Its members were described as having an oyster-like capacity for understanding one thing: that they should continue to get fat in the bed in which they were born. Three monkeys were carved on the exterior lampooning them, rendered playing billiards around a tiny stone table complete with cues, a rest, balls and pockets. By 1954, Myles na gCopaleen weighed in with an interpretation, noting the advantage monkeys have at playing billiards, as the rules of the game do not say what may be done with the tail…[9]

Who owns that tail? Who can swing it through the highways and byways of allegory? The world is full of objects. Even if they are cast in bronze or carved in stone and seemingly frozen from another time, they are also entities that enforce a status quo today, legacies that in turn form societies, and the structures of our lives. If we want those structures to change for the better, the power of storytelling and narrative impulse must be wrangled from the vantage point of the privileged, the throne, or the coiled serpent of the corporation, and placed to somewhere below, deeper, in our own emotive understanding of what it might really mean to be and share together. This is something artists and galleries are well able to do, and why having them back working and open is a very important thing right now.

IV

If Wishes Were Thrushes, Beggars Would Eat Birds begins with a series of images culled from *Miscellanea Structura Curiosa*, a surreal and grotesque eighteenth century treatise on garden design by Anglo-Irish man Samuel Chearnley. In his voiceover, Whipps tells us more:

> It seems likely that the drawings of the *Miscellanea* were originally intended to be published to form what would have been the first book devoted to garden buildings anywhere in Europe. This never happened, on account of the untimely death of Chearnley at the age of about 29. Opening the album in which the drawings are preserved we enter a world of fancy, caprice and wit — fantastical fountains, pagoda-like obelisks and unbuildable bridges, with palatial façades encrusted with sculpture.[10]

Whipps has immersed himself in Chearnley's work during several trips to Ireland, chewing up local histories around Birr Castle where Chearnley worked, and setting up in a limestone quarry to make replica pieces of some of his designs. In *If Wishes Were Thrushes...* drawings of figures on the base of a stone column designed by Chearnley are seen, each puking or pissing.

It is unknown if Chearnley saw all of this as vulgar amusement, or if he had a true belief in the 'expression' of bodily fluids, as someone like Piero di Cosimo did. The Renaissance painter was considered an eccentric character for all sorts of reasons, and the critic Giorgio Vasari wrote that di Cosimo would sometimes stop and 'stare at a wall onto which sick people had vomited, and out of it conjure up for himself battles between mounted horsemen and the strangest cities and vastest landscapes ever seen.'[11] Here is a chance configuration that affords the artist the opportunity to give free reign and see fortuitous arrangements. There exist suggestions that di Cosimo seized on the approach by following Leonardo da Vinci, who recommended artists keep damp spots on their walls and interpret such shapes, all the time exercising imagination and keeping the mind alive.

In this spirit of discovery, Whipps films the process of cutting and grinding limestone to a fragile one millionth-of-a-metre thin section. It's a surface no one has ever seen before!

V

Aughinish Alumina is Ireland's largest industrial site, and Europe's biggest bauxite refinery. Sitting on the Shannon Estuary that flows into the Atlantic Ocean, it began production in 1983. Currently owned by Rusal, a Russian consortium, red rock bauxite mined and imported from Guinea is chemically altered to become white powder alumina on-site, before being

exported to smelters worldwide to become aluminium. In recent years, much media speculation and political rhetoric has focused on the industry, with Donald Trump constantly arguing about imposing tariffs and import sanctions. Every headline changes the market value of aluminium, in turn effecting the amount of material output at Aughinish, which alone accounts for 3% of global output, something that made The Times newspaper lead with a 2018 headline stating that the refinery continues to be 'critical to [the] entire European economy.'[12]

In the mid 1990s, hundreds of animals were dying on farms located in the shadow of the plant. A four-year investigation by Ireland's Environmental Protection Agency found no relationship between deformed agricultural livestock, local health, toxic deposits and harmful caustic emissions emitted through large smokestacks — instead it blamed management practices of local farmers leading to poor nutrition, resulting infection and the death of animals. Independently funded academic reports found otherwise, and inevitably attributed causality to the refinery's activities.

Nowadays, as a major economic driver and employer in the region, the plant has more or less carte blanche from the Irish state to do whatever it wants.[13] An expansive storage area for red bauxite residue mud, a by-product of the manufacturing process continues to exponentially grow on-site, with aggressive rock blasting to extend its size being completed in close proximity to the river estuary. The mud, full of chemicals, was classified as

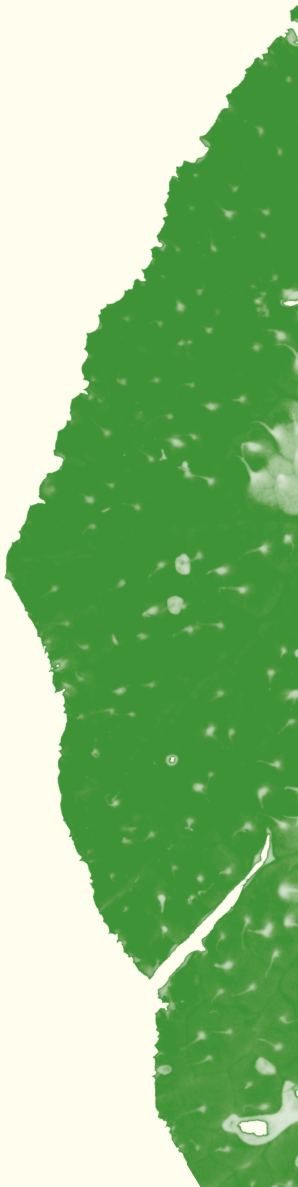
hazardous for years until the EPA began to describe and define it as 'non-hazardous' since 2003. Local farmer groups continue to agitate for clearer regulation, without any substantial acknowledgement or success, as a bureaucratic firewall continues to mute and doubt the strife caused on their lives. On a recent visit there with an environmentalist friend trained in reading and analysing the technical information in the annual report that is only available at the reception area of the refinery, we learnt Rusal are not required by Ireland's EPA to survey the health of any marine wildlife in the vicinity of the complex. The legal requirements of making public real time monitoring of emissions are currently not complied with.

Stuart Whipps arrived at the refinery site one morning in August 2017. He somehow negotiated his entrance there with what must have been a fair dollop of charm on top of an impeccable background story. Asking him about what he said, he recalls that he presented an old college ID card to the security staff, and informed them he was an architectural student from Staffordshire with a passionate interest in the modernist style of an administrative building on the grounds. He was given full access to the building in question within minutes of his arrival and was left to explore it alone. And yes, of course, he could take as many photographs as he wanted. Once inside the belly of the beast, Whipps realised that the building was no longer in use and empty of staff. The sharp spikes of a profit-and-loss graph, quarterly financial returns, strategic planning, optimisation processes or outcome analytics could not been seen anywhere.

The intensity of human catastrophe, in this case a continuing environmental nightmare seemingly conducted today from afar, can never be fully represented. There is simply too much pain handed over onto the terrain, too much violence in the aggression and application of capital here. But we can always hope for a reading of arcane connections or a moment of vision that could illuminate a different method of tackling, of presenting the same material, the same conflict, but as something else. Whipps began to photograph the office plants, mostly of a tropical persuasion, left untended in various nooks and crannies of the office block. In particular, a solitary, rather sad looking begonia is seen. It is in exile there, in an empty administration block, its indignity, as noted by Whipps in his voiceover, compounded by the fact it is called after a bureaucrat, one Michel Bégon, who organized its exportation from modern-day Haiti, then a French colony, to Europe back in 1689:

> As humans reshape the landscape, we forget what was there before. Ecologists call this forgetting the "shifting baseline syndrome." Our newly shaped and ruined landscapes become the new reality. Admiring one landscape and its biological entanglements often entails forgetting many others. Forgetting, in itself, remakes landscapes, as we privilege some assemblages over others. Yet ghosts remind us. Ghosts point to our forgetting, showing us how living landscapes are imbued with earlier tracks and traces.[14]

The image of a begonia leaf is printed on the pages here. In the gallery, leaves are sandwiched between sheets of glass, infused with light and projected through.



NOTES

[1] Robert Macfarlane, *Underland: A Deep Time Journey* (London, 2019), p 108-9. Macfarlane's book, amongst other topics, delves into the philosophy of plant scientist and field biologist Merlin Sheldrake and his complex work at Barro Colorado, an island located in the midst of a man-made lake on the Panama Canal.

[2] https://www.irishcentral.com/opinion/others/statues-slave-girls-dublin, last accessed 17 August 2020.

[3] The Irish Times, 31 July 2020.

[4] Dónal Hassett's letter to The Irish Times, 30 July 2020, noted,

> Over the years, activists in Dublin have worked hard to defend the city's Georgian heritage from the venality of private property developers. Conserving this part of our Dublin's history was a crucial task but it does raise a broader issue about the freezing of our cityscapes in the late 19th century, a time when a very small class of wealthy men dictated the shape of public space. The absence of statues and streets dedicated to women is one consequence of this. The public display of art that exoticises and dehumanises Africans is another.
>
> Public heritage is not sacrosanct. Nor is it the property of private enterprise or self-appointed gatekeepers. It belongs to all of us. This city has torn down and put up statues for centuries. As our society evolves and the population of the city diversifies, there is no reason our public space shouldn't change too. We need to be open to a debate on this.

[5] The competition deadline was 31 August 2020. Incidentally, the image used to promote the offer features the front of the hotel with all the statues present and visible.

[6] 'The expedition crossed Africa on an 8,000 kilometre journey up the Congo and through the Ituri rainforest before reaching Lake Albert. The 'adventure' was financed by infamous Belgian King Leopold II and some believe it inspired Joseph Conrad's 1899 novel *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad shared time with Roger Casement in the Congo where they both reportedly became aware of the savagery involved in European imperialism. In any case, even if Conrad's writing was not necessarily based on this particular expedition, his witnessing of cruelty was not very far from what Stanley's enterprise brought about.' Catalina Lozano, *The Cure* (Askeaton, 2018), p 49.

[7] Ibid, pp 45-51.

[8] For more see Sean Lynch, *A blow by blow account of stonecarving in Oxford* (Dublin, Oxford), 2014. The publication considered O'Shea's work in the context of artisan craft and public space, in an attempt to situate O'Shea as a precursor to the modes and practices of institutional critique. An ensuing exhibition at Modern Art Oxford gave both authors here the first opportunity to meet Stuart Whipps.

[9] The Irish Times, 26 February 1954.

[10] Taken from Whipps' draft script, 29 June 2020. The exhibition's title, *If Wishes Were Thrushes, Beggars Would Eat Birds*, is alluded to on the same document. In a section entitled 'W is for wishes', he evokes the socially complex yet often nonsensical genealogy of the phrase:

> 'If wishes were horses beggers would ride' was also first encountered in Nancy Mitford's *The Pursuit of Love*, but has its origins in the 17th century in a collection of Scottish poems:
>
> *If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.*
> *If turnips were watches, I'd wear one by my side.*
> *If "ifs" and "ands" were pots and pans,*
> *There'd be no work for tinkers' hands.*
>
> Earlier versions of the line included: 'And wishes were

horses, pure [poor] men wald ride.' The first mention of beggars is found in John Ray's *Collection of English Proverbs* in 1605 — 'If wishes would bide, beggars would ride.' William Camden's *Remaines of a Greater Worke, Concerning Britaine*, printed in 1670, contained the lines 'If wishes were thrushes beggars would eat birds.'

[11] Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment* (Yale, 1979), p 46.

[12] The Times, 5 November 2018.

[13] For more see Michele Horrigan, *Stigma Damages* (Askeaton, 2014). The publication's title is typically used as a legal term to describe possible loss or suspected contamination due to heavy industry and environmentally transgressive processes.

[14] Elaine Gan, Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson and Nils Bubandt (eds.), *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Minnesota, 2017), p 7.

ABOUT THE WRITERS

Michele Horrigan and Sean Lynch are Irish artists, whose various projects have been recently been presented at venues such as Tenerife Espacio de las Artes, Santa Cruz; Temple Bar Gallery & Studios, Dublin; Peacock Visual Arts, Aberdeen; EVA International, Limerick; Carnegie Mellon University of Art, Pittsburgh; and Henry Moore Institute, Leeds.

Together Horrigan and Lynch work at Askeaton Contemporary Arts. Established in 2006, the project continues to commission, produce and exhibit contemporary art in the locale of a small town in the southwest of Ireland. A residency programme situates Irish and international artists in the midst of Askeaton, while thematic exhibitions, publications and events often occur.

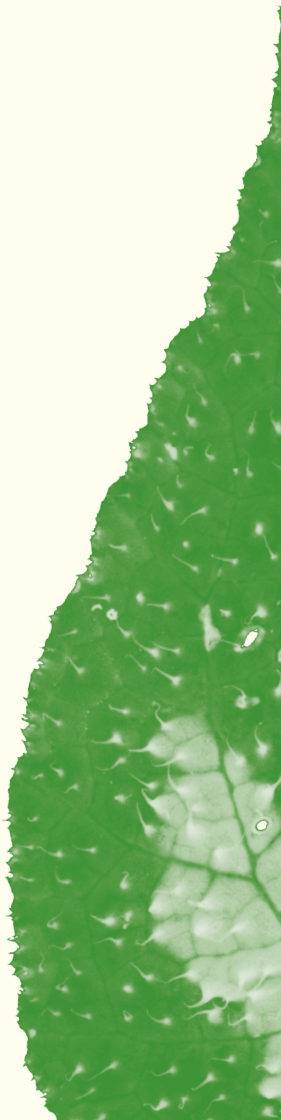
Since 2017 they have worked closely worked with Stuart Whipps, initially as part of *The Expanded Field*, a nationwide programme in Ireland developed through Askeaton Contemporary Arts, culminating in an exhibition at Lismore Castle Arts, Waterford. In 2019 they co-curated *Operating Manual For Spaceship Earth*, an exhibition at the Irish Architectural Archive in Dublin, where Whipps' work again prominently featured.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Stuart Whipps (b. Birmingham, 1979) is known for often making work about things he does not understand or skills that he does not readily possess. This practice of rigorous curiosity and learning has resulted in projects slowly unfolding where the artist has trained in various other professions and disciplines.

At the heart of his exhibition at DCA is an exploration of a selection of gardens, and characters and stories connected to them. Through installation, photography, film and sound, Whipps explores ideas of cultivated landscapes through different timeframes and personal narratives connected to specific sites and materials.

Whipps has undertaken the following solo exhibitions in recent years: *The Kipper and the Corpse*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 2019; *Isle Of Slingers*, Spike Island, Bristol, 2016; *Photo Colour Services*, Ithuba Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa, 2015; *Birth Springs, Death Falls*, Flat Time House, London, 2013; *Why Contribute to -The Spread of Ugliness?*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 2011; and *New Wooabbeleri*, Focal Point Gallery, Southend-On-Sea, 2010. His works are held in several collections including Arts Council England, British Museum, New Art Gallery Walsall, Deutsche Bank and Birmingham Central Library.



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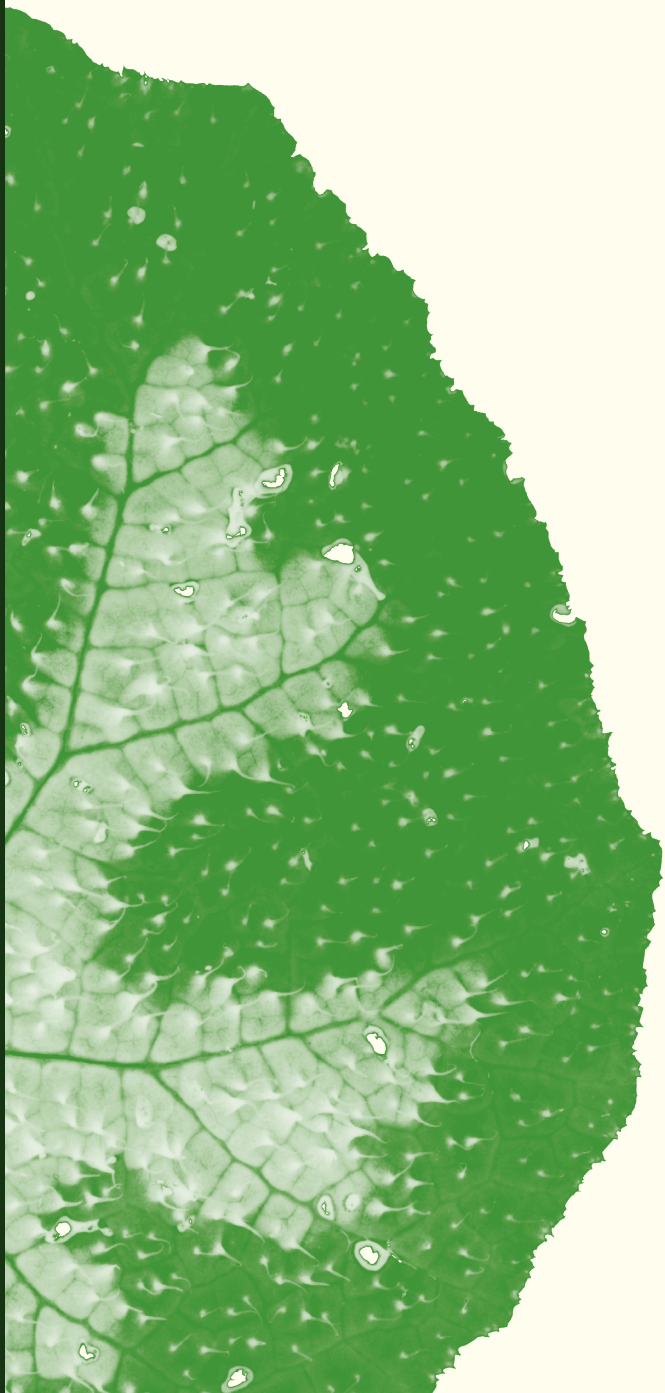

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