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‘How Things Turn Out’,

Irish Museum of Modern Art, February 27 - May 26, 2002

How Things Turn Out occupies two locations, the first floor of the west wing and the ground floor of the east wing, a layout that prompts reflection upon the museum’s curatorial practices. The exhibition is identified within the catalogue as a ‘fresh look at current art production in Ireland’, the latest instalment in the ‘projects strand’, which apparently brings ‘cutting-edge international artists to Irish gallery-goers’. By situating the exhibition within the context of the low profile ‘projects’ series¹, the organisers are perhaps attempting to distance How Things Turn Out from recent survey shows of Irish art, such as Shifting Ground.

A reflection on the museum as site and institution is also evident in several of the works on show. In a series of video, painting, slide and text works Isabel Nolan explores the interconnections between artistic practice, reading and writing, pointedly contrasting fictional and national identities. Much of her work is concerned with questions of address and certain pieces even seem to recall the museum’s own ‘interpretative’ materials.

Both Eoghan McTigue and Garrett Phelan foreground the specificity of IMMA as national cultural institution and relic of colonial militarism, with McTigue’s monumental images of national flags also providing an obvious counterpoint to the feminine domesticity of Ann Marie Curran’s photographic essay ‘Celibacy’. The text of Phelan’s video installation ‘Scum of the Earth’ explicitly references IMMA’s former role. It is composed of clips from ‘Johnny Got His Gun’ (1971), an anti-war film about a wounded soldier who communicates his desire to die by tapping out Morse Code through the movements of this head. Previous adaptations of this narrative have included a Metallica music video², in which the soldier’s anguish is expressed in verse, but the message communicated in Phelan’s piece remains deliberately opaque.

¹ Since the first ‘Projects’ show in 1997 the strand has included a range of group and solo exhibitions such as Hannah Starkey, Vantage Point, Olafur Eliasson and Calum Innes, several of which have taken place in ground floor rooms used in How Things Turn Out.

² ‘One’, taken from Metallica’s 1988 album ‘...And Justice for All’.

Heather Allen also disrupts expectations, closing off access to her assemblage of projections, flyers, lights and sound equipment. While handwritten diagrams and lists placed outside the barrier seem to signal work in progress, the artist's absence is clearly permanent. These materials are the residue of a live event, a performance on the opening night, and the artist's 'notes' are simply props.

Gerard Byrne's installation, 'Why its Time for Imperial, Again', is characterised by a similar concern with the conventions of display. Using a National Geographic 'advertorial' for the 1981 Chrysler Imperial as a film script, Byrne stages an open air dialogue between Frank Sinatra and Chrysler CEO Lee Iacocca within a post-industrial landscape of disused factories, railways and scrap yards. His film is screened on a monitor, set on a raised platform and surrounded by framed photographs of the National Geographic on library shelves. The interplay between exterior locations and museum interior reinforces a possible subtext, the displacement of manufacturing by the information economy.

How Things Turn Out is dominated by a concern with the transitory and the ephemeral and this may account, at least in part, for its undoubtedly fragmentary quality. Ultimately, however, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that a series of commissioned projects, perhaps involving fewer artists, might have provided a better insight into current art production in Ireland.

Artists in the exhibition: Heather Allen, Gerard Byrne, Ann Marie Curran, Seamus Hanrahan, Eoghan McTigue, Isabel Nolan, Garrett Phelan, Walker & Walker.