

(Catalogue text), 'Aleana Egan: Incorporating the unseen', *And the days run away like wild horses over the hills*, Dublin: Avenue Arts, 2019 (unpaginated)

Incorporating the unseen

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In Aleana Egan's studio, I see an image of a wooden door, hanging open to reveal a small cellar floored with flagstones. The knobby edges of whitewashed shelves protrude from one side of the cellar wall, like a stack of miniature caves. In the shadows of this image, I see metal pipes swaddled in dark material, snaking up and across the wall. Trying to imagine the construction of this cellar space, with its strange curved forms, I find that I cannot move past the construction of the image. It's a photograph—glossy, black and white, high contrast—attached to a paper form, bearing the header National Trust Archive. Completed by hand, the form identifies the location and function of this subterranean space, 'Dublin... Richmond Hill (Monkstown), No 6, basement, wine cellar', the name of the photographer (John David Biggs) and the year the photograph was taken (1980). It bears a code I can't decipher (2/28 Y1) and, like documentation of a crime scene, it exists within a larger system. Nonetheless, there remains something resolutely strange and unclassifiable about those recesses in the cellar wall. Minimally but resolutely decorative, these forms are more than their function.

I recall an episode of *The Wire*, titled 'Soft Eyes', in which two police detectives appraise a crime scene. Moving steadily and purposefully through the scene, the TV detectives use their 'soft eyes' to determine what must be photographed, directing the process of making and cataloguing images as evidence. I'm interested in the difference between the 'soft eyes' of the police detective and the 'wide awareness' advocated by the author and psychoanalyst Marion Milner, an important reference for Egan.¹ Forcing herself to paint around what she actually wanted to paint, Milner sought to expand her sensory experience, rejecting the narrow focus that might be deployed in the service of a specific outcome. For Milner, dreaming, imagination

¹ The texts referenced include Milner, *A Life of One's Own* 2nd ed. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1936, reprinted New York: Puttnam, 1981), and Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint*, (London: Heinemann, 1950).

and perception are deeply interconnected processes of creation. All involve the assembly of fragments into an 'ideal wholeness', like the unseen three sides of a cube that 'we recognise as a solid in our everyday experience of perceptions.'

In many of Egan's works, these everyday processes of imagination and recognition are brought to the fore, becoming attenuated. Her untreated bronze sculptures are suspended somewhere between fragment and whole, with the signs of their making simultaneously preserved and overwritten by the casting process. One of these bronzes, *May Levitt and her daughter Helen (2019)*, hangs on Egan's studio wall, protruding into the interior of the room to roughly the same extent as the stretcher of a large canvas, as though occupying the place of an image that does or doesn't exist. Another work, *shirtwaister and others (2019-)* is a series of projected colour photographic images of women's clothing sourced from a collection in Berlin. Egan's camera focuses only on details, drawing attention to the labour and craft required to produce these carefully finished collars, fabric-covered buttons, and delicately printed patterns. Egan tells me these are lightly worn hand-made garments, examples of 'occasion wear' made to fit specific bodies at particular moments in time. The sequence is devoid of archival framing so that these objects seem to disclose little or nothing of their use. But in the context of Egan's work, these folded entities read as containers for the living bodies that once gave them form, incorporating the unseen.