

A Rethinking of Place

I will begin with a reverie of sorts. Ingmar Bergman's 1957 film *Wild Strawberries* tells the story of the Swedish professor Isak Borg, a ruthless and misanthropic man now in his seventy-ninth year. While travelling to receive an academic honour – the pinnacle of his hitherto illustrious career – Borg slips in and out of a series of enigmatic daydreams. He has, as one of his dream's protagonists states, been '*accused of guilt*': this guilt finds form in a series of delirious reminiscences of a past he deemed all but irrelevantⁱ. Borg's journey is two-fold: literal, but also - more specifically - towards the shifting site of memory itself. In so doing, it affirms the hallucinatory character both of memory and cinema itselfⁱⁱ. The familiar pastoral backdrop, captured in the sultry heat of a high northern summer, is rendered strange to Borg, remediated by the disquieting discrepancy of past to present. His memories become distorted and troubling: the countryside too becomes subject to this same process, growing almost threatening in the wake of a rethought past. For Bergman, the place of memory does not sit still: neither terra firma nor solace, but instead a cluster of signifiers being endlessly rethought and remade anew. As William Faulkner once famously wrote: '*The past is never dead. It's not even past*'ⁱⁱⁱ.

There is something of this sensibility within Niamh O' Malley's work. In particular, the film *Glasshouse* (2014) shares with Bergman's aesthetic a kind of intense *dryness*: in it, all moisture appears sucked from the frame, the scene's stillness like that sensation when, just before fainting, the senses become somehow sharpened and attuned. Only here, now, there remains no colour or sound. All that persists is a kind of drought, baited breath: the dizziness of attention. *Glasshouse* calls to mind a hot airless summer's day, almost hallucinatory: the scene, captured in lush cinematic tones, does not appear as though simply in black and white: rather, the colour seems *purged* from the frame, pushed out of it as though by osmosis, bringing with it the air, and the sound. All that is left is the studied process of looking as the camera moves seamlessly from left to right along the glass panes, a rural scene idyll disappearing here and there as the glass veers towards opacity.

Though *Glasshouse* is a slippery work: it obscures and retreats from view, creating an impasse between us, and the intimate garden vista it purposefully disrupts. A site of artificiality, the glasshouse creates the conditions for something not typically possible: similarly, O' Malley's

work creates the conditions for a different kind of looking, by disruption. Here the glass panes have been tampered with, withdrawn and reinserted to control the tonality – and thus our grasp – of the scene. The camera, focusing and capturing, doubles this logic. *Glasshouse* instead presents a *semblance* of looking; a looking that folds the act of making back in towards its process. O’ Malley’s work, in circumnavigating the process of *just* looking – if that even exists – is actively wanting: it works to remake as it sharpens its gaze.

Both *Glasshouse* and the accompanying film work *Nephin* (2014) adhere to the artist’s fascination with place: this has been commented on before, of course. These two works, however, circumnavigate its typical representation. In them, the scene is directly wrought in an attempt to reconfigure the viewer’s relationship to it: panes of glass, moved and manipulated so as to deny the scene’s easy consumption (*Glasshouse*); a small, tremulous black mark atop a pane of glass before the screen, its shudders echoing the camera’s jolting trail around the foot of the mountain (*Nephin*). There is a sense that O’ Malley shirks from a forthright depiction of landscape, instead choosing to imbue the image with a more honest kind of interruption – made real and physical – rendering it both jarring and quietly demanding. Both *Glasshouse* and *Nephin* approach their places obliquely, tenderly denying the possibility of their full comprehension, and instead choosing to make as they look. O’ Malley, I learned, grew up in the shadow of Nephin. The second highest mountain in Connaught, at some 2,646 feet, it would certainly make a striking, if somewhat foreboding, tableau. And yet the places closest to us generally slip towards invisibility, though we might certainly accede to their aesthetic beauty, in the event of some gentle reminder. Still beautiful, but becoming well worn, these places slip off the tongue. To engage it truthfully, *Nephin* needs to be re-formed and imparted with a degree of strangeness.

To go back to *Nephin* as O’ Malley does here is not to be taken lightly, but as demonstrative of a rethinking of that place, an engagement, never passive, that seeks to unravel it as it creates. This unravelling of place is a constant motif of O’ Malley’s. Often, it appears as though she works by a process of *extraction*: particularly in her films, this involves an elimination of each extraneous element; sounds being the first to go; then, gradually, the colour. Nothing is allowed to get in the way of attending to this site at hand. And yet a pure objective looking is unimaginable: a multiplicity of screens and barriers surface, mnemonic or otherwise, blocking access to the thing itself. So too with the barriers, screens and gestures of layering that populate her sculptural works: at each point, the act of looking is broken up and

interrupted, attention thus brought to the intrinsically subjective and bodily process of looking: messy and often incoherent, but perhaps more faithful to the task of representation.

One sculptural work, *Glass* (2013), consists of a large pane of double-sided glass, leaning at a slight angle away from the ground, and held vertical by lengths of steel. Standing at more than human-height, the viewer is free to fully circumnavigate its form. Painted atop one surface – part translucent, part reflective - are irregular black marks that disrupt our full comprehension of the scene. Every view, our bodies notwithstanding, is already marked by a trace: in such a way, *Glass* permits not one pure view back onto the world. Each view, like each act, bears the mark of something – seemingly external - to the frame. For O’ Malley, then, the act of making shares the same problem as that of looking: each desires an impossibly unencumbered viewpoint, from which it might look or make wholly anew. In *Nephin*, this impossibility is made manifest through a visual shorthand that condenses a constellation of subjectivity to a single, slight mark. The minor, the subjective, asserts itself, negating the impulse towards easy and thus unthinking consumption. A kind of positive and productive digression, O’ Malley’s object thus reconfigured contains the seeds of a more authentic form of engagement: be that with place, with memory, or with the responsibility of their subsequent representation.

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ⁱ Ingmar Bergman *Wild Strawberries* (1957)

ⁱⁱ Recently I read Clio Barnard, the director of *The Arbor* (2010) and *The Self Giant* (2013), describe cinema as a ‘*collective hallucination*’.

ⁱⁱⁱ William Faulkner *Requiem for a Nun* (1951) New York: Random House, pg. 92