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Excavate
Cork Public Museum
Ed Krčma

Excavate was the result of an invitation by Cork Public Museum to the artists of Cork Printmakers to respond to objects and documents from the museum's collection. Breda Lynch, the exhibition's curator, selected twelve projects for inclusion; some were integrated into the permanent display, but most were installed in the temporary exhibition spaces on the ground and first floors. There was both modesty and ambition here, as well as a satisfying range of approaches to the challenge of responding to the museum's invitation.

Several artists chose a major key in which to work, engaging explicitly with images and narratives of huge national and international significance. Subjects such as the Great Famine, the Easter Proclamations and the Republican hunger strikers were confronted head on, and often with a forthright indignance. Eimearjean McCormack's eleven screen prints, for example, united photographs of two 1920 hunger strikers (Michael Fitzgerald and Joseph Murphy), with the words of a third, Terence McSwiney: 'It is not those who can inflict the most but those who can suffer the most

will conquer.' Marianne Keating lines the wall of a first-floor gallery with a quotation from John Waters concerning the Famine: 'An act of genocide driven by racism and justified by ideology.' Formal experimentation is not absent from these works (McCormack's images, redolent of the mournful photographic portraits of Christian Boltanski, shift in scale and cropping, sometimes accompanied by Catholic symbols; Keating's text is repeated in mirrored layers to add a decorative dimension which forestalls and thereby dramatizes the impact of the message once it is comprehended). But in both works the ethical message is the urgent thing, and the job of the visual and textual elements is to provide the vehicle for its conveyance.

Engaging with the same historical subject as Keating but using a very different strategy, Eileen Kennedy's five photo-etchings re-present an original ledger containing the minutes of the Cove Famine Relief Committee. As the (consistently useful) accompanying exhibition text explains, the document comprises a galling litany of endless discussions concerning the price of grain. It exposes a dry, inhuman, instrumentalised system of price-checking and inaction, suggesting a cruelly banal economic and administrative logic guiding that historical tragedy. Kennedy's quiet attention to this document, which she presents in different states of legibility and in different hues, is both arresting and elegiac. As worked over by Kennedy, then, such banal documents are put under erasure yet become differently and powerfully communicative. Both their muteness and aesthetic coherence prevents their slippage into mere historical illustration. Such resonant opacity was also achieved by other artists here, a particularly successful example being Ben Reilly's *Enfield*, which consists of a black wax cast of a Lee Enfield Rifle resting on a narrow black plinth. There it sits: this weapon now strangely lumpen, dead and unfamiliar. What was particularly affecting was the way in which the wax had succumbed, just a little, to the pull of gravity: each end had sagged slightly as it hung over the sides of the plinth, an uncanny deformation of this hard symbol.

A number of artists kept to more traditional pictorial media and elaborated more open, associative engagements not so much with specific historical moments but with certain underlying motivations or emotional states. Included here would be Peter Cleary's lithographs, Sylvia Taylor's reliefs, and Aoife Lanyon's embossed mezzotints. These often reflected Lynch's own somewhat gothic aesthetic sensibility, which was also felt in her selection of Jo Kelley's spooky, grotesque toys, grey and decaying as if exhumed. Lastly, it would be a shame not to mention the extraordinary bit of archival serendipity presented by Brian Barry concerning one mysterious Count Joseph Boruwalski. The diminutive Count, only two feet tall by adolescence, visited Cork in 1800, and his recently discovered memoirs, most copies of



Eimearjean McCormack: Untitled (2010),
Inkjet and Screen-print on newsprint. Courtesy of the artist.

which were pulped almost immediately after having been published, offer a tantalizing addition to Cork lore. The museum holds in its possession one of the Polish dwarf's shoes...

Micro-narratives overlap with world-historical developments; outrage shares a space with playfulness; traditional print media meet more unexpected forms. How well many of these works would fare in the (perhaps only *differently*) exacting conditions of a white cube gallery is perhaps not the point here. What seems important for an exhibition like this is that the work demonstrates its own specific agency and avoids being overwhelmed by the weight of the historical

narratives to which it responds. Artists' keen sense of the excess of material things over their informational content can help slow the common tendency of historians to rush beyond the complex materiality of the evidentiary fragments on which their narratives depend. Much of the work in this exhibition called attention to the weathered, opaque, ambiguous, polysemic nature of the salvaged objects that get pressed into the service of more tidy and coherent historical narratives.

Ed Krčma is Lecturer in History of Art at University College Cork and editor of *Enclave Review*. *Excavate* was on view at Cork Public Museum, 14 October 2010 – 29 January 2011.