

‘Going Beyond the Dead End’ The work of CJ Mahony

By Cherry Smyth

Sculpture for CJ Mahony is about making spaces – the exaggeratedly restricted space which mimics the stereotypical woman’s social and domestic place and the expansive, large scale, all-encompassing space which challenges and reaches beyond this.

Mahony uses both approaches for a destabilising experiential effect by either drastically confining spatiality or by inserting an alien object into the architectural infrastructure itself, undermining and questioning its form. Each project spins on the axis of function and dysfunction – a newly built shed that cannot provide shelter, a wall that is punctured by an invading snake of plywood, a blocked doorway or an exposed panel of insulating foam. She’s alert to the resonance of low-tech natural materials harnessing the textures of chipboard, plywood, rough sawn timber and 70s panelling as her materials.

In ‘Dark Room’ 2007, Mahony rapidly built a breeze block labyrinth on the site of a burnt-out building. The blank encroaching walls offered two directions down a tight, dark corridor, one spectator at a time. One led to a dead end, while the other forced the participant round three more corners until they came upon a glass window in which they met their own reflection – and another dead end. The deliberate narrowing of the passageway, as though the building was responding to the human presence, required most bodies to squeeze sideways. While some participants felt hemmed in, electrified by claustrophobia, others relished facing the giddy confounding of their own expectations in the dark, just as some of us watch psychological horror to rehearse and prepare for a fearful state of mind, while others avoid its re-enactment for fear of being stuck there, unable to return. The insistent clicking of a lighter as a soundtrack in the space emphasised the sense of unease – was it a shutter clicking as infrared photographs were taken, or a noise from someone trapped inside?

I'm reminded of Belgian poet and artist Henri Michaux describing a visit to a foreign movie in an out of the way cinema, in which he experienced life as danger itself pouring from the screen, alternating between anticipation and dread. He is so taken up by the defenceless experience of being fully and spectacularly animated that he's convinced that an amazingly new form of filmmaking has been invented. Instead violent pain soon makes it clear that a migraine has distorted his perception of reality and his physical relationship to viewing the film. 'Physical become psychic: only thus (there could be no other way) had that unprecedented rightness been achieved.' (1)

Artists like Mike Nelson, Gordon Matta Clark and Gregor Schneider have also explored this 'unheimlich' moment, and like them, Mahony resets the terms of architecture on her own terms. She takes a disused space and reanimates it in a way that plays on the cues of psychological horror without ever delivering anything more horrifying than the imagination of the participant and our stored mechanism of fight or flight when faced with fear. 'Dark Room' gave the participant the chance to go beyond their comfort zone, to travel through different levels of experienced reality. Mahony plays on our experiences of not fitting into the work physically to evoke the metaphorical instances of not fitting in. By invoking physical inhibition, the work invites the opportunity to think about psychological, sexual or emotional inhibition and the confines we, and others, place on how we think and behave.

The idea of configuring art as intellectual inquiry as much as visual display is investigated further in 'Dissolution of Identities' 2006. Here Mahony built a thick snake of plywood that tunnels through the doors and walls of several studios like an invasive form of energy disrupting the designated physical space, charging up to the ceiling and back down again. Off-setting the tension of the advancing, masculine screw-like form against the feminine flesh-like pinkness and malleability of the Far Eastern Plywood, the piece strongly suggests that gendered approaches to how we think and get in and out of thinking ought to be re-routed, corrupted and re-spatialised in our brains.

Mahony's exploration of scale, from recreating claustrophobia in the narrow, to suggesting the expansiveness of the open-minded in the huge, her revitalisation of everyday construction materials as tools for aesthetic expression, and her hands-on methods, situate her as a promising and ambitious new artist whose work delivers a strong emotional impact. That all her works are short-lived and subsequently destroyed acts as a powerful antidote to the over-consumed art object of the current market-led contemporary art world.

- (1) Henri Michaux, from 'A Crowd Come Out of the Dark', in 'Space, Displaced', Bloodaxe, 1992

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