

Tina O'Connell

This abstract work was compelling, communicative and utterly available to the crowd. With something of 'Quatermass and the Pit' and 'The Blob' about it, 'In Dublin' ultimately demonstrated an immersion on O'Connell's part in the ideology of entropy. Remembering that the closure of Rooney's pub was a precursor to the commercial reinvention of an inner city area, 'In Dublin's' conceptual development has echoes in Smithson's astute appraisal of the return of "dead zones to commercial circulation".¹

If there is still a propensity among connoisseurs of art to disappear down rabbit holes in search of artists' interior lives and 'real' intentions, this is an option that O'Connell's work rightly resists. O'Connell's work properly constitutes itself in a cultural framework and engages us all the more therefore.

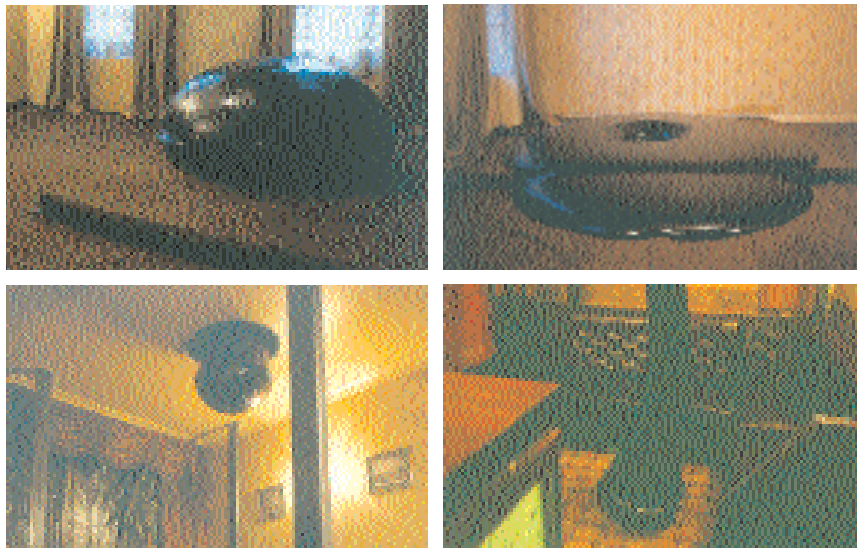
Valerie Connor

¹ 'Robert Smithson: the Collected Writings' edited by Jack Flam, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

² 'Kant After Duchamp' Thierry de Duve, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998.

Image overleaf:
'Peckham Pothole', photo etching, 2004

'In Dublin', bitumen, 1999



Tina O'Connell

Tina O'Connell makes work in a sculptural idiom that directly draws on one of the most tenacious aspects of modern aesthetic theory. Flying in the face of a sometimes overcooked contemporary focus on the figurative, O'Connell's gravitation towards abstraction is as giddily matter-of-fact as it is ardently sublime.

O'Connell's curiosity about her materials involves an uncompromising approach to technique. At the very same time, she is critically aware of the contingencies involved in the exhibition of her images and objects (their installation, display and mediation). These concerns figure in all the situations in which she shows her work. When the time comes, all the discursive and environmental factors at play are involved. While she has explicitly conceived works for art galleries, she has undertaken projects for places other than this familiar ground. She uses organic and plastic processes – using concrete, bitumen, vinyl and acetate, for example – as well as video and photography. Her recent series of 'pothole' prints have introduced an additional technique into her work. Some

of her larger commissioned projects have required her to tackle the ever problematic dynamic of public and private space in municipal and cultural settings.

At a glance, her work often seems to be set at an oblique angle to any obvious ideological issues. But O'Connell has consistently and deliberately pursued a research based approach to practice that has a keen understanding of what is at stake in an appetite for the visual. There is no nostalgia or sentimentality for a dreamy conceptual provenance. By presenting a number of works together in one exhibition, as at the Jerwood Space, her work can be experienced in its greater complexity.

In 'Peckham Pothole', the artist has made a 'natural cast' from a pothole in Peckham. She has contained its form in an acrylic block. With its rectangular framing and its ties with an external reality it is almost like a photograph in the way it holds together as an image. A pothole is very much an 'everyday' thing. But the artist's material intervention makes a representational

'In-Visible III', acrylic, 2002-03,
collection Centre Culturel Irlandais

'Peckham Pothole', acrylic cast, stainless
steel, walnut veneer plinth, 2002



transformation. The final impression of the 'damage' invites us to look at this from an altered perspective. We can justly look from this work to a sympathetic collision elsewhere between a couple of 18th Century British theorists of the sublime and improvers of the natural landscape and a 20th Century American artist. William Gilpin and Uvedale Price crop up in the critical writing of the artist Robert Smithson (1938 - 1973). In one of his last essays, Smithson quotes Price's development of ideas about the sublime (and the beautiful) into the concept of the 'picturesque'. Of gravel pits and flood-torn hillsides, Price describes the "rawness of such a gash in the ground" as "ornamented by the effects of time".¹ 'Peckham Pothole' stops the natural effects of time and cancels out the idea of entropy by fixing its image using industrial material and a machined process.

Thinking through O'Connell's early work and up to the present, there is much evidence of both a sense of history and a sense of humour around central issues of representation and the sensibility of modernity. She succeeds in doing this

without languishing in the comfort zone of pastiche. The kind of methodologies and fascinations that underline Smithson's approach to the modern idea of the everyday and examples of the 'sciencing' of art in history are resonant in the present appreciation of O'Connell's work. The comparison is based more on empathy than equivalence. It's also worth bearing in mind that past work by O'Connell has directly taken on some of the more iconic work of Smithson's friends and peers. Any collectors of Carl André's floor pieces could complement their purchases with O'Connell's bespoke luggage for André's bricks and slabs: designed to deliver the goods from the gravitational pull of global museum culture.

While O'Connell's work may be appropriated into specific notions of the sculptural, as a contemporary artist she is at liberty to use various representational media as best suit her purpose. The writer Thierry de Duve has unpacked how the idea of 'specificity' in relation to the arts has been lost. This conceptual turn has been instrumental in understanding

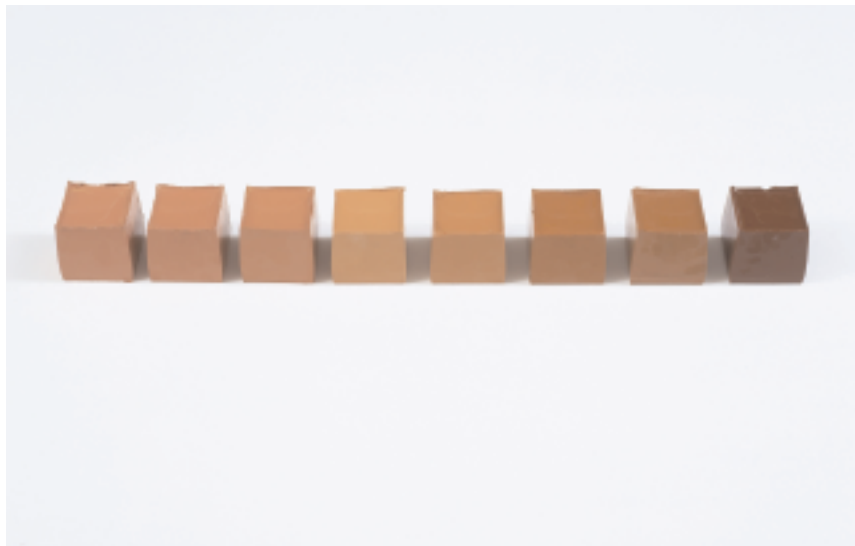
painting, sculpture, music, theatre and so on in a generalized way that rejects the purity of each artistic technique. He charts a history where a new set of ideological principles develop as a priority over the conviction that specific and non-transferable skills are attached to each craft. He argues that abstraction developed as a consequence of this change. Furthermore the idea of art in general or art at large becomes normalised.² Consequently, the idea of the 'artist' gained a new cultural meaning and became a legitimate general category regardless of the practitioner's art form. So it is that Tina O'Connell is an artist at large.

Not unrelated to this is her working relationships with others practised in industrial technologies. O'Connell's work with bitumen is a case in point. Her working partnerships with technicians experienced in the production of this material have allowed her to anticipate what bitumen will and won't do under particular conditions. O'Connell's bitumen works may look like they have a pretty long leash to do their own thing – but she knows how the plot

pans out, how far this stuff will go before it stops. Think of Smithson on entropy: "Equal units approaching divisibility"; "Something inconsistent with common experience or having contradictory qualities".¹ She's figured it out.

O'Connell's 1999 commission, 'In Dublin', was located in a Dublin pub that had just been closed prior to redevelopment of its site. (The pub, Rooney's, also featured as a film location in the movie 'Rat'). One tonne of bitumen was sat into a round hole in a first floor parlour room that was positioned directly over the public bar below. The opening night celebrations were unusual insofar as cash began changing hands as a book was opened by the crowd on when exactly the shaft of bitumen, slowly moving downwards, would touch the ground. The gambling belies the highly social aspect of O'Connell's art. She often invites host institutions to move and relocate her work. This has been the case with her glass spheres. Meanwhile, as 'In Dublin's' column of gleaming bitumen with its slightly crusted cap finally touched the floor, the crowd cheered and clapped.

'Form from Form', colour swatch bitumen, 2004



'Form from Form', black and cream bitumen, 2002-2004

