

Cork Midsummer Festival and The Glucksman present:

Caught in The Furze

Amanda Coogan

Cork Centre for Architectural Education
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*The wren the wren the king of the birds
On Stephen's day was caught in the furze
Her clothes were all torn –
Her shoes were all worn
Up with the kettle and down with the pan
Give us a penny to bury the 'wren'*

Across two lecture rooms in Cork Centre for Architectural Education an installation of seven furze bushes hang suspended above the sterile concrete floor. The flowering, dried and needle-like flora reach down to seven prams sprouting their own smaller bushes while lines of rope diagonally cut the space from ceiling to wall, tensioned with eventuality. The sound of a slow and building composition fills the air and scents of sweet coconut and bog intermingle. On the underside of each pram a mass of fabric and textile spills, torn and worn. Traversing the scene artist Amanda Coogan performs for seven days in a journey of physical potential across this sensory environment of prickly evergreen shrubs.

Caught in The Furze builds upon Coogan's long exploration and use of history, folklore, and myth as mediums for generative artmaking. This type of making can be called a 'fictioning practice' as defined by David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan; a creation and anticipation of new ways of being through assembling, diagramming, and performing. Moving beyond a typical understanding of fiction, this practice queries how narrative shapes our world and the stories we construct to understand, complete, and recreate it. Coogan enacts and communicates the characters of her fictioning practice in a staged deployment of gesture built up through a durational enquiry she has described as a 'controlled instability'.

Contained in one such performative reference are the Wrens of the Curragh, a community of women ostracised from society who lived in the plains outside Kildare in the 19th Century. This group led a communal existence of survival by sharing resources and childrearing, generating scant income through sex work

with the local soldiers of the Curragh military camp. They inhabited the furze bushes of the plains, building nests amongst the bristled branches and undergrowth which somehow sustained them year-round through the harsh seasons. These nests were modestly furnished, beds of hay and turf fires gave small bodily comforts, while pots, cups and saucers were tools for eating and drinking.

Restricted from freely entering the town or market, they were permitted access only on designated days, surviving primarily on potatoes, small amounts of bread and milk, and – on rare occasions when income allowed – strips of bacon. In walls of mud that would become turned over and rebuilt continuously they sought refuge from the society which shunned them and the equal horror of the workhouses, considered by the wrens a fate worse than their wild living.

Their existence is only recorded through the voices of others – notably James Greenwood's eyewitness account in the Pall Mall Gazette of 1867, an article which illuminated the 'degradation' of their living and admonished them as 'raving savages' whose existence expounded Victorian-era vices of sexual promiscuity, theft, tobacco use, and intoxication. These communities of women were not exclusive to the Curragh area and could be found in similar living conditions near military barracks across Ireland:

*'...wandering shameless and defiant through the streets of Newbridge, the by-lanes of Cahir, and the purlieus of Limerick, Buttevant, Athlone, and Templemore.'*¹

The wrens occupied the furze bushes for over 70 years, many only leaving when they became so ill that they would take themselves to the workhouse to die. They maintained a communal way of life in which all resources were shared. No woman was excluded, even those arriving with children – often the very cause of their marginalisation – despite the

additional burden this placed on already limited means. As Greenwood notes:

*'The communistic principle governs each nest, and in hard times one family readily helps another, or several help one; the deeps are not deaf to the voice of the lower deeps. None of the women have any money of their own. What each company get is thrown into a common purse, and the nest is provisioned out of it.'*²

Despite their difficult lives the wrens found a comfort in their community and the subversive possibility of living as and for themselves.

Following the introduction of the Contagious Diseases Acts (1864, 1866, 1869) a 'lock hospital' was set up on the Curragh to control the near epidemic of venereal disease experienced by the British Military. The wrens were targeted by this act, which saw sex workers as sites of contagion, and were forcibly extracted to the hospitals for treatment of gonorrhoea and syphilis alongside a detention of up to 9 months. These institutions also sought to morally reform the 'fallen women' and reassimilate them to civilisation and religion but did little for their economic circumstances. Many women of the lock hospitals were sent to the Magdalene Laundries where they had to endure the subjugative control of church and state on their bodies.

Coogan reignites the story and bodies of the wrens, highlighting their overlooked humanity in her considered motion and the small objects that she incorporates and offers to viewers. The furze, which hangs above our heads, teeters upside down as she in turn flips their story around, retrieving their lives before us.

The wren lives in another fiction of Coogan's performance through the Irish folk tradition of hunting and killing the wren on St. Stephen's Day by young men and boys known as *lucht na dreoilín* or 'wren boys'. Alongside the act of killing the bird, its body was ritually paraded through

¹ Charles Dickens, *Stoning the Desolate*, in *All the Year Round*, vol. 19.

² James Greenwood, "A Night in the Curragh Camp," *Pall Mall Gazette*, 1867.

town on a 'wren bush' often made of holly, laurel or furze. *Na lucht na dreoilín* are bachelors as a rule and disguise themselves in costumes varying from straw and animal skin of horse and rabbit to pyjamas, visiting the houses of their community to seek a 'penny to bury the wren'. Their disguise denounces their humanity to become that of an animal or produce of the land as they seek their owed debt through their customary rhyme. However, in some versions of this rhyme, it is a female body that is evoked, *her clothes were all torn, her shoes were all worn*, inviting a critical reflection on whose body was trapped in the dense, spiny shrub. Across Coogan's durational performance you may encounter a demand for the penny owed or this well-known song sung in sign, a familiar element by Coogan to use Irish Sign Language, her mother tongue, in slow and poetic communication.

Through the prams of this installation Coogan evokes the history of the shawlies, working class women traders donned in black shawls, who often used prams to sell their wares in urban markets such as Cork's Coal Quay and Belfast's Linen Mills. These women sold everything from fruit, vegetables, and clothing and relied on their street trade for survival. Their presence on the waterfront of Cork City is still affectionately remembered in nostalgic renderings of the city. Large black shawls and prams offer many uses outside of their obvious practicalities and become easy locations of concealment, indispensable to lives lived on an edge. Coogan references this in the protrusion and disturbance of objects from the furze prams suggestive of hidden worlds and a defiant manipulation of archetypes.

Following the Street Traders act of 1926 the shawlies ability to work in the city centre was limited. This attempt to regulate street trading in fact further excluded the shawlies socially and economically and contributed to their gradual disappearance. The shawlies history points to the consequence of gentrification and its adverse effect on those existing at the margins of society.

Caught in The Furze, as all performance art, is experienced in the now with attentiveness to the real happening and becoming in front of you. Coogan uses fictioning as a sensory exploration that engages our bodily knowing and understanding of the world. Her performative actions – nuanced in their multiplicity of reference – are documented and disseminated through video, writing, and social media. In Claire Bishop's terms this enacts a 'disordered attention', but not one which is caught in a simplistic split between focus and distraction. Akin to the cacophony of voices which are sung through *Caught in The Furze*, our capacity to bear witness is multimodal and expansive, and meets the demands of

Coogan's performance as it transforms day by day. A 'disordered attention' offers instead a truth of contemporary living – one which is perpetually hybrid and collective, imbued with the many voices of the past, present, and mythologies that create our worlds.

In Coogan's fictioning of these collective histories and myths, she opens new possibilities for understanding and reimagining the voices of these oppressed bodies and their fates – linking shared themes to broader issues of historical trauma wrought by neoliberalism, while reclaiming unruly bodies in action, gesture, and perseverance.

Katie O'Grady
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Co-production **Cork Midsummer + The Glucksman**

Original Composition **Elliot Murphy**

Creative Producer **Susan Holland**

Curatorial Support **Katie O'Grady**

Stage Manager **Bethany Cosgrove**

Production Manager **Tadhg Flynn**

Technical Support **Síomha Callanan + Struàn Bell**

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Photo by Ciara McMullan