

# The Amulet : Anamnesis

Exploring the Hidden World of Infant Loss



Marie Brett

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an·am·ne·sis

n. pl. an·am·ne·ses (-sz)

1. Psychology A recalling to memory; recollection.

2. Medicine: A patients case history, esp. using patient's recollections

[Greek anamn-sis, from anamimn-skein, anamn-, to remind :  
 ana-, ana- + mimn skein, to recall; Indo-European roots.]

[Attic Greek word meaning reminiscence and/or memorial sacrifice.]

[Irish Gaelic 'Anam', meaning Soul.]

recollection.  
 esp. using patient's recollections  
 in, anamn-, to remind :  
 do-European roots.]  
 nce and/or memorial sacrifice.]

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## The Amulet National Touring Exhibition

Galway, Limerick, Cork, Dublin 2014/15

at

Galway Arts Centre 1.8.14 – 29.8.14

University Maternity Hospital Limerick 25 + 26.9.14

The Atrium Cork City Hall 13.10.14 – 28.11.14

Cork Library Bishopstown 14.10.14 – 24.10.14

Cork Public Museum 4.11.14 – 3.1.15

The LAB Gallery Dublin 15.1.15 – 28.3.15

The Amulet Project 2009/13 resulted in  
the Anamnesis artwork being exhibited at

Sirius Arts Centre, Cobh, Co Cork 7.3.13 – 1.4.13

The Index Gallery, Waterford Central Library 23.4.13 – 3.5.13

Waterford Healing Arts Trust Centre for Arts & Health  
23.4.13 – 3.5.13

with

A Seminar at The Crawford Art Gallery, Cork 7.3.13

&

A Panel Discussion Event at Waterford Central Library 24.4.13

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Exploring the Hidden World of Infant Loss

Marie Brett

with essays by

Annette Moloney • Edelle Nolan • Jenny Butler

JMK • Louise O'Connor [Foott] • Mary Grehan

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## The Amulet : Anamnesis an Introduction

We all have amulets, those special objects often hidden away in drawers and cupboards which mark a significant time, occasion or person in our lives. Particular to infant loss, this poetic artwork titled 'Anamnesis' links photographs of family amulets together with bereaved parent's whispered stories describing their amulet's meaning.

'Anamnesis' is a Greek word meaning to recall to memory or memorial sacrifice. The artwork aims to draw the viewer into a special world of quiet reflection, shedding light on an often hidden aspect of Irish life.

The artist Marie Brett collaborated with bereaved parents to produce the artwork, as part of The Amulet Project 2009/13.

Mothers who collaborated with the artist

Ann Dorgan • Bernice Jones • Cathy Sutton  
Clare Quinn • Helen • Louise O'Connor (Foott)  
Maria Fitzhenry • Marion Gabriel • Mary • Mary

# Symbolic Sensitivities

One Artist's Collaborative Consideration of the Unsaid

## Annette Moloney

Undeniably, we find ourselves living and existing within a time of national and international flux and readjustment – economically, politically, socially and philosophically. This period has possible reverberations for us personally also, as we work within the shadow of ever-present uncertainty. The tremors of social change are felt by many, both individually and collectively.

Built into this predicament, however, lies a unique opportunity to review some of our pre-existing social values, our cultural customs and to honestly discuss and reconsider their usefulness to the times in which we find ourselves. This concept, and its inherent challenges, was explored by President Michael D Higgins as part of his Inauguration Speech in November 2011 when he spoke about this complex situation as an *'opportunity to reflect on where we have come from and on how we might see ourselves into the future.'* He explored the timeframe of his Presidency as one which coexists with the remembrance of key historical moments in recent Irish history. He stated that a *'decade of commemorations lies ahead'* and encouraged us to explore both *'the ethics and politics of memory'* and to *'remain open to*

*the options of either reconciling or accepting different versions of memory, if required.'*

Connected to this, it is worth considering our customs around bereavement and loss and our social skills to honestly deal with the unimaginable, particularly in how we show support for and empathize those affected by pregnancy and infant loss. For some bereaved parents their personal experience can regrettably bring about social situations where other people's discomfort, the uneasy feeling of not knowing what to say or do, can be quite difficult to endure.

Over a number of years artist Marie Brett has developed *Amulet*, a contemporary art project that aims to creatively and sensitively explore the subject of pregnancy and infant loss with bereaved parents and their families. As collaborators on the project, healthcare professionals act as pivotal partners for and with the artist. Through their diverse roles, for example, as bereavement midwives, councilors, nurses and community workers, they broker potential relationships between bereaved parents and the

artist, with the essential proviso that it is the parent who decides to be part of the art project or not.

For the *Amulet* project, the artist's intention to develop an open process for the research, development and production of contemporary art along with the diversity of project partners – parents along with healthcare professionals – forms a '*triangle of relation*'. The project has deliberately focused on the concept of the amulet, a customary keepsake or, more specific to this project, a symbol and signifier of loss. The amulet is explored as an object used to embody the hidden and to give voice to the unsaid.

As the *Amulet* project progresses from a longstanding research phase to an opportunity to present the work in an exhibition format, an admittedly complex transition, a number of questions arise. Marie herself describes the overall project as one that exists on the '*pivot of risk and trust*' and she is both honest and inquisitive about the projects progression. She sees this as an opportunity to question how the artwork, one step removed from the dialogue which informs it, stands up on its own merit. How does the artwork creatively and respectfully embody absence and loss? How does the artwork represent the artist's intention and process along with the hidden layers of carefully negotiated relationships? How can we, both artistically and socially, attempt to reveal the intimate narratives of loss and to sensitively share a very private experience within the public realm? How does the art project acknowledge its own inbuilt tensions?

For one perspective on the role of the object in contemporary art, we can call on curator Bill Arning who comments that, '*The*

*art object today is best understood not as wondrous, but rather as a catalyst for a set of stimulating relationships that make up the art experience.*' While the artworks presented as part of the *Amulet* project do act as distinct and discreet signifiers of loss, they also have the potential to embody the symbolic link between the bereaved parents, the artist and healthcare professionals. They exist in remembrance to those whom have passed, and the latent presence of absence for those left behind. They also act as a tribute to the set of relationships that have accompanied their coming into existence within a collaborative arts project.

In a text titled *Experimenting with Risk* Faisal Abdu'Allah explores the artist's role and clear intentions within a socially engaged collaborative arts project and states that the artist acts as an ambassador of risk. He adds that artists '*...work collaboratively with communities/collectives because they don't want simplistic answers – but are looking to uncover more questions. The fear of incompleteness is the adrenalin that keeps them buoyant. The mantra that whispers in the ear of the creative that to 'first succeed one has to fail'*'. Therefore, we can acknowledge that the tensions inherent in collaborative and participatory arts are not only fundamental but act as reminders of the unresolved nature of both the dialogical process which informs them and also, correspondingly, of life itself.

In her recently published book which examines the historical and theoretical overview of socially engaged participatory art, writer Claire Bishop ends with the statement that, '*Participatory art is not a privileged political medium, nor a ready-made solution to a society of the spectacle, but is as uncertain and precarious*

*as democracy itself; neither are legitimized in advance but need continually to be performed and tested in every specific context*'. This observation, which comes after much exploration of the political and social context in which collaborative and participatory arts project develop, again points to the incomplete nature of projects, with echoes of the social uncertainty that we are, unfortunately, overly familiar with.

Ultimately the bravery of the bereaved parents and their families to be part of the project is also symbolized in the artworks which are presented within *Amulet* as an arts and health project. Their courage to engage with the artists process, to extend their trust, at a time of undoubted vulnerability, demonstrates their aspiration to think anew about their experience of pregnancy and infant loss, within a safely and supported structure.

If we are to be prompted by our President's proposal to use times of doubt and uncertainty to look at ourselves anew, both personally and socially, and to re-imagine ourselves into the future, then, perhaps the forthcoming period of commemoration will also prompt us to review other, more compassionate ways that we can draw on to support and empathize with those who experience pregnancy and infant loss. For us the relative courage to rethink ways in which we can respectfully engage with the topic, whether through a sincere conversation or through a skillful collaborative arts project, is a small task compared to the everyday endurance of life for bereaved parents.

Through their courageous conversations the collaborators within the *Amulet* project invite others into a much-needed dialogue on

how we as a society engage with pregnancy and infant loss and the presentation of this sensitive exchange in the public realm has the potential to effect social change. By sharing their stories, in a supported and sensitive way in collaboration with artist Marie Brett, *Amulet* as a project has the potential to make visible the unsaid and to operate as a tangible model of new social values in action.

[As a society, our experience and engagement with loss and death, even if particularly complex and painful, also presents an opportunity to feel very much alive.]

### **Annette Moloney**

Annette Moloney is a practitioner, curator and collaborator based in Limerick. Her curatorial practice includes talks, writing, mentoring and public art commissions. Recent roles include working as a project manager at the Irish Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale; as Artistic Director of Clare County Council's Public Art Programme and as Public Art Specialist with the Arts Council of Ireland.

# The Amulet Project

## Folklore and Social Change

Jenny Butler

The *Amulet* Project brings together people's personal experiences of loss in the space of an art exhibition. Ten photographs are on display, each showing a memento connected to someone's lost infant. Matched to each photo is an audio clip of the parent speaking. Each story segment reveals something of that individual's subjective feelings but resonates in the surrounding context of shared experience.

An amulet is a small object thought to give protection against evil, danger or bad luck. In the context of the project, some objects were amulets in this sense, such as those created in the project's first phase: crocheted hearts and other items to be buried with stillborn babies. The objects in the photographs being exhibited are rather mementos or keepsakes, amulets of remembrance.

Even though the stories told through words and images are highly personal and belong to that individual, their presentation together is reflective of a particular kind of experience. It is revealing of how people deal with death, of how an object can have an ethereal quality and be special by virtue of that which it represents.

Each photograph is evocative of unique memories of a little life and particular moments in time. The tangible piece is invested with emotion and the associated story of a loved one's passing. These items are often kept in a safe place in the home, taken out almost ritualistically in recollection and honour of the dead baby. To allow for this exceptionally personal and special object to be photographed and exhibited publicly, where others can view it, is a considerably brave thing. Involvement in this project and the emotions expressed also reveal much about changing Irish society.

A consideration of Ireland's social history reminds us that the death of babies was not always given such acknowledgement. Pregnancy, childbirth and other 'women's issues' were taboo subjects that were not freely discussed in Ireland's past. Infant death was a subject not openly talked about and not given very much social recognition. In the past, and especially prior to the 1960s, the death of a baby who was not baptised was dealt with in a way that was very different to any other death in a family. Often, there was no death certificate, no funeral, no coffin and no tombstone. The difficulties wrought by the absence of officially

sanctioned memorial services were compounded by the fact that the burial itself was often clandestine. These deaths were shrouded in secrecy and sometimes indignity, where the babies' bodies were placed in shoeboxes, buried at night out on the landscape.

The places on the landscape where these babies were buried are called *cillíní* (anglicised as killeens) or *ceallúnach*. The reality of the babies' interment in unmarked graves in officially anonymous plots of land had a huge social and cultural effect. The lack of official documentation of the bereavement and the physical segregation of the baby from the rest of society meant that there was no formal record of that person's life. The symbolic exclusion of these short lives from normal social conventions and rituals connected to death meant that, officially and publicly at least, it was as if they never existed at all. The fact that the wider community shied away from discussing infant death must have made the grieving process all the more lonely and isolating for the family. Their grief was unrecognised by society and there was no sanctioned ritual to bring closure. The absence of an official gravesite meant that commemoration of the baby was also fraught with difficulty.

These ever-present but publicly unacknowledged lives, and the social secrecy that surrounded them, gave rise to much folklore. There are stories of babies' souls appearing to their mothers as little lights. Telling stories is itself a form of acknowledgement, perhaps at times a vehicle to express feelings, in a coded way, about loss.

People need to have a focal point for the expression of grief and

a focus for the acknowledgement of a new life, whether that life existed in the womb or for a short time after birth. As the project reflects, bereaved parents keep objects representing those lost little lives. The object is a tangible focus for love and feelings about the baby that is no longer here. The project creates a sensitive forum for discussion, expression of emotion, and wider recognition of infant loss. The sharing of stories means the project provides opportunities to talk about these children and respectfully address the special objects associated with them. It encourages an open, public expression of feelings and memories, which might have been denied in Ireland's past.

### **Jenny Butler**

Jenny Butler is based in the Department of Folklore and Ethnology, University College Cork. She has written on the wake and the social and symbolic roles of women in death ritual in Irish tradition. She is particularly interested in afterlife beliefs and cultural responses to death.

# Amulet

Louise O'Connor [Foott]

*For Sartre, things that are absent are as important as those that are present in defining who we are and how we see the world... Sartre describes how he approaches a café for an appointment with Pierre. He enters the café, expecting to see Pierre. All that is there is mere background to the anticipated meeting. When Pierre is not there, Sartre's relation to the café is altered – all is unsettled, and cannot become fixed and focused because the raison d'être of the café (for Sartre, on this occasion) is missing:*

(Sartre, 1956/1943: 42) in Smith,  
Flowers & Larkin, 2009: 19-20

*Louise describes how she approached a point in her life for a meeting with Laura. She reaches that point, expecting to see Laura. All that is there is mere background to the anticipated meeting. When Laura is not there, Louise's relation to life is altered – all is unsettled, and cannot become fixed and focused*

*because the raison d'être for this point in her life is missing: Laura absent haunts her life.*

Laura absent is the measure these days. Laura absent is the filter through which everything is viewed, the filter that has brought life into sharper focus than ever before, but in so doing has blurred all that went before it. Who am I in this place? How am I? What is this place that is at once the same and yet so very, very different?

“There are no words.”

There are no words when your baby dies – your daughter(s), your son(s). You are neither a widow nor an orphan. You have held death in your body, in your arms, and let it go. There is a silence around your life that belies the dark, heavy weight of emotion screaming through your veins.

When Laura died there was simultaneously an emptiness and intense clarity to words as I tried to voice my loss. There was an absence of the words I needed to convey the enormity of our loss,

but at the same time there was a physical reality to the meanings of words. I physically knew what it was to be heartbroken. My heart ached with a pain I have never before felt. A ‘dead’ weight. And what could it be, only a dead weight?

“All that happened a lifetime ago.”

In the depths of grief, being creative was not an option it was a necessity. Our child had died. Our beautiful creation no longer lived, but the urge to allow her space in our lives lived on. In this place of no words I wrote like I had never written before desperately searching for words to contain how I felt, desperately searching for words to try and explain to others how I felt, desperately searching... I now know more than anything, for Laura.

Words and music were gathered together. Maybe we would find her there. Images and objects were (and continue to be) collected and arranged to somehow capture the essence of a daughter whose physical presence in our lives was so brief, but whose impact and on-going presence in our lives is so overwhelming.

When I heard about the *Amulet* project I was very keen to become involved and have a structured space within which to create something for Laura. I like collaborating and working with people and looked forward to a place where Laura could be a focus. When Laura died very few people gave us gifts for her. Why would they? She was dead. She was all gone. No favourite toys lying around. No stray socks. No evidence of her movement through our lives. I think my interest lay in creating an amulet for

her, creating something new, allowing her space to move through our lives and not be perpetually still.

What I anticipated from the project and how it proceeded were, however, at variance. The *Amulet* project was about identifying an existing amulet rather than creating something new. This was a significant struggle for me. How could I narrow my child down to one object? Here I was struggling daily with her stillness in our constantly moving lives and now I was having to identify just one object from this stillness to represent the child who had quite literally blown my world apart.

As I found words I talked to Marie and explored ideas for amulets that would allow Laura the space I needed her to have and would still fit within the parameters of the project. Much of my response to the project was gut response and words took their time to follow. As an artist it was a struggle to hand over artistic license. As a collaborator it was a struggle to hear Marie’s words and not hear my interpretation of her words. As a mother it was a struggle to allow someone to have opinions about how my daughter be represented. As a bereaved mother it was and continues to be a struggle to allow the art just be art and not be my daughter because, in her absence, she is everywhere.

How do you write about art when the reason for the art is the absence of someone? The death of someone? How do you hold the loss in one hand, in your hand, your heart and step back to explore the art and the process of its making?

Ironically these days I feel like I am always a spectator so stepping

back from a situation should come more easily. I am a spectator on the ‘before’ life that most people are still living. I struggle with the desire for others to understand my new world, the awareness that real understanding only comes from living the life and the relief/ disappointment that comes from this realisation.

“I do not want you to know the pain of infant loss.”

“I do not want to feel alone in this place.”

And so there is the struggle with the art; the excitement of participating in a project that acknowledges my daughter’s life, the real difficulty with the fact that this is art, collaborative art, and the focus is on the artist and the making and the art, much less the need to understand this life and loss. Or so it seems.

On a few occasions I heard this project described as ‘*ground-breaking*’ and, of all my struggles, this was the biggest. Why? I am not sure that words have formed around my gut reaction yet.

Ground breaking is what happened immediately before we buried our child.

The *Amulet* Project is a significant project. Giving voice to loss is always significant. Giving creative expression a role where loss goes beyond words is important and valuable. Giving parents an opportunity to acknowledge their loss through creative collaboration is brave, brave for parents and brave for the artist they are collaborating with. Tentative? Yes. Exploratory? Yes. Ground breaking? For whom?

My experience of the *Amulet* Project was very different from what I initially expected from it. Through the process of considering an amulet and the challenges that came with that, I have reflected more on the place we allow Laura in our lives.

In this unsettled ‘after’ life with its *mêlée* of feelings and words, Laura is a part of our journey onwards. She is in the way we love each other now. She is in how we live. We do not live without Laura. We live with her ever-present absence. And that is not to say our lives are lived with the constant question: What if? What if? What if? It is to say she is present in how we notice each other, how we hear each other. Laura is there in our sadness, but in our happiness too.

She is present in the smell of roses. She is in the air when we wander coastlines together (or alone), in the ripples of tide and sand. She is in the tiny cowrie shells found in a hidden inlet near a remote strand, and she is in the moments spent searching for those shells. She is in the heart shaped stones we all have got adept at finding and she is in the looking for them and the want of looking for them and the offering of these stones to others and ourselves.

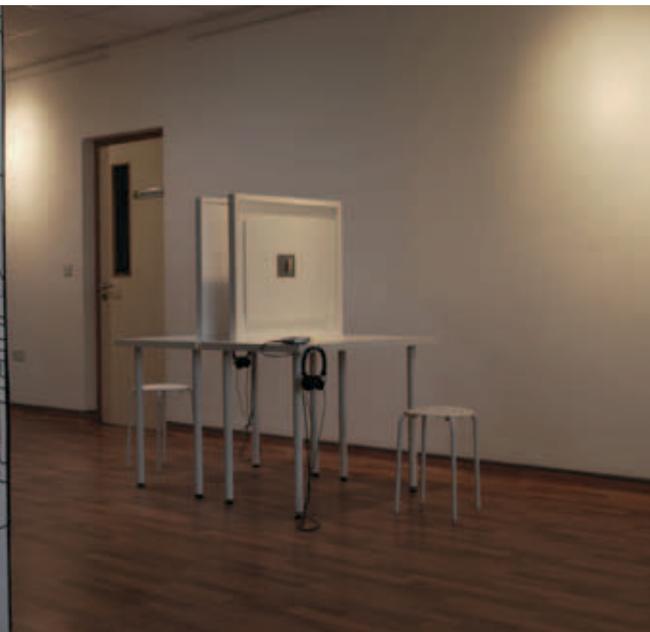
**Louise O’Connor [Foott]**

Louise is a mother, educator, artist and writer

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an·am·ne·sis



*Anamnesis*, Marie Brett  
Index Gallery, Waterford Central Library, 23.4.13 - 3.5.13

*Anamnesis*, Marie Brett  
Waterford Healing Arts Centre, 23.4.13 - 3.5.13

## 23.2.79

‘... My Grandmother was buried, and about an hour later my father and my husband went to the grave, and they put him down at her feet, and the grave was covered in ... and it was never spoken about then after that ...’

Helen



18.10

‘... these little pouches of breast milk  
that I’ve kept for a very long time ...’

Mary



3.03.09

‘... so it felt right to put the wedding ribbon  
onto her little blanket ...’

Clare Quinn



## 6.03

‘... this one now I just kept for myself;  
I suppose it’s my memory of him, still,  
it’s sitting in the press in the kitchen ...’

Mary



## 1.9.10

‘... He said, have you heard this song ...  
he brought it down the stairs and said, *listen to it now, listen ...*  
It was like as if it was just literally being sung for me,  
at that moment ...

*‘She’s laid up in bed with a broken heart’*

It can bring you back like to the literal moment  
when you knew that your baby was not going to survive  
once it was brought into the world ...’

Ann Dorgan



22.7.10

‘... but if I’m having a really really bad,  
just a bad day, where I’m just really upset;  
the butterfly always appears ...’

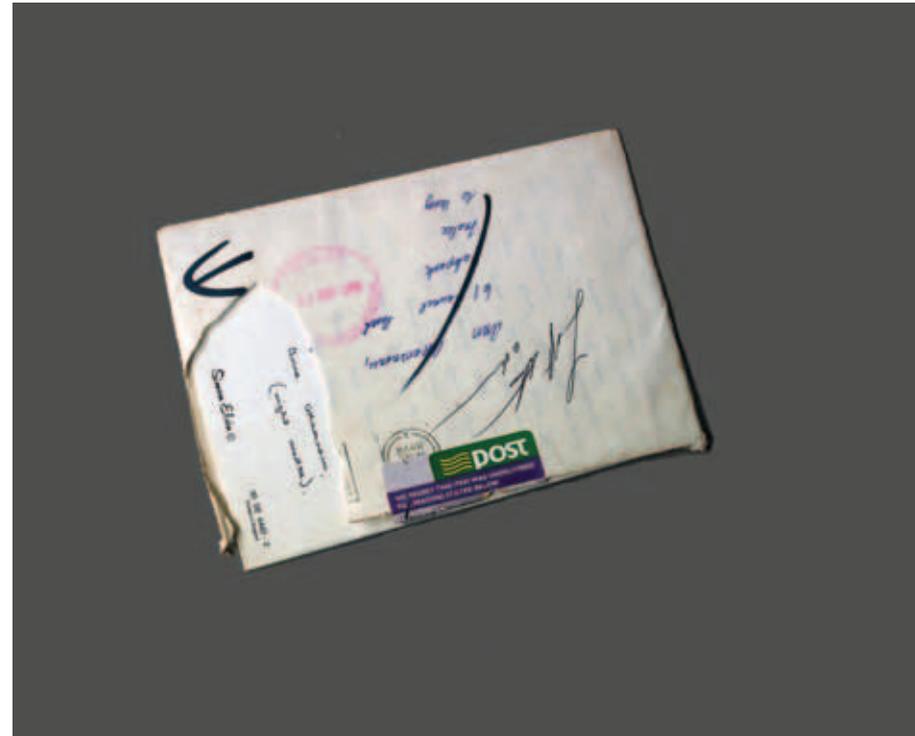
Marion Gabriel



## 8.2.92

‘... This was sent to me from the Night Nurse ...  
I still have a very strong contact emotionally with her  
through the card ... from time to time you’d take it out  
and read it and you’d kind of get a solace from it ...’

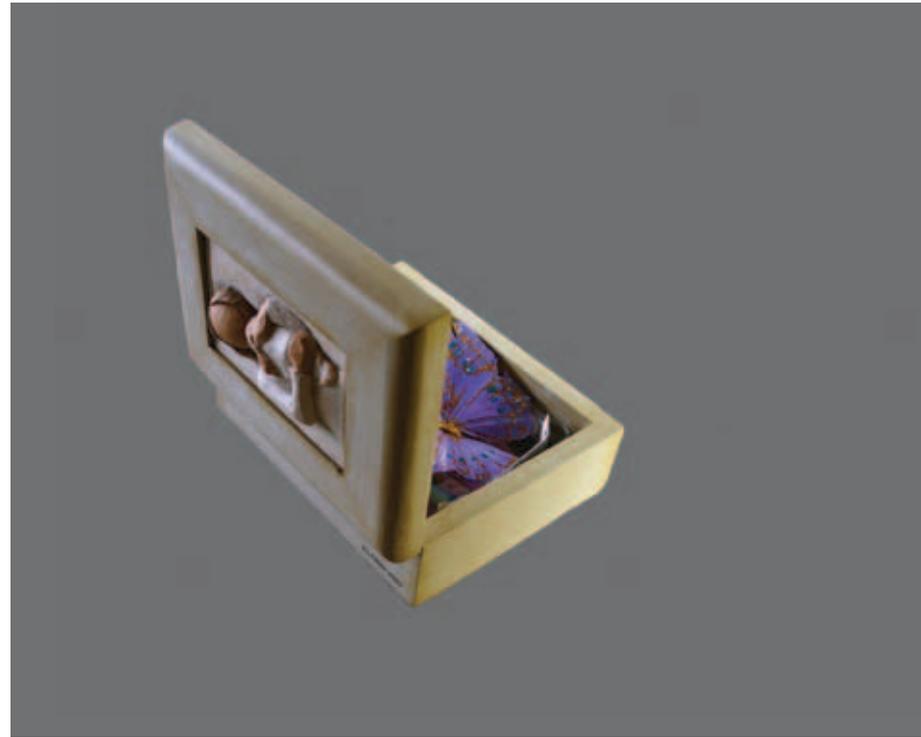
Bernice Jones



11.5.09

‘... it was my heart-beat that she found, not the baby’s, ...  
so we didn’t get a chance to say good-bye to her  
while she was alive ...’

Louise O’Connor (Foott)



17.12.08 30.12.08 18.4.09

‘... two little identity bracelets ...  
they are very significant for me ...  
it helps me feel their presence really when I look at them  
and it’s also a sign that other people acknowledge  
that they are my daughters ...  
They are safe, but not away ...’

Cathy Sutton



## 10.4.02

‘... I’d always decided when I was expecting the twins  
that my wedding dress was going to be used  
as Christening gowns for the girls ...  
I had Holly buried in what was going  
to be her Christening gown ...’

Maria Fitzhenry



# The Amulet: Sheltering a Community of Be-longing

JMK

Belonging is a comforting word – it evokes a sense of being enfolded within a community of recognition and knowing; a deep sense of being seen, known, experienced and wanted by others. It is also a word with an underside – a shadow sense that seeps through the hyphen in ‘*be-longing*’, a word keening of the longing to be.

The *Amulet* project is a shelter for a community of belonging and be-longing. Within the space of its deeply held intention it re-inscribes lost presences within the memorial community of lived beings. Sons and daughters, brothers and sisters whose short lived but deep presence was felt within their mothers’ womb are re-membered into the community of those whose presence was loved, treasured and is mourned in its absence. The singular intimate amulets are crucibles of deeply personal grieving and remembering – each one a unique concentration of love, loss and yearning held within a material repository that conserves for eternity the significance of a short life. The *Amulet* project is the protective shelter within which these heartfelt creative acts and objects of love and remembering can be seen, understood, respected, preserved and protected.

Without the holding space of the *Amulet* project, the amulets are vulnerable –materially, emotionally and symbolically- to harsh light, to insensitive handling, to carelessness and ignorance of how it feels to have loved and lost an infant or unborn child, a living presence within one’s life. For most of the last century in Ireland those who experienced this kind of loss had no shelter – they were neglected and ignored and their babies went unrecognised. A society dominated by a rigid and misogynistic church and state allowed no sheltering space for experiencing, recognising and redeeming loss. On the contrary it harboured a deep hostility towards women’s bodies, minds and feelings – why else did women need to be churched (cleansed) after giving birth? - brooking no space, no language and no community within which women who had lost their babies and the babies that they had lost could receive recognition and honour.

Tessa, a woman I loved dearly was one of these women. On a St. John’s night over forty years ago she felt the heavy pressure of her full term baby straining to come into the world. She knew her baby was ready to be born but women’s wisdom about their own bodies has often been discounted by those with power. She wasn’t listened to and a couple of hours later her baby son Stephen was born dead. He was taken away and buried without a marking while she lay in her hospital bed. Three days later she came home and nobody talked about Stephen again. His absence became a silent wound. Only Tessa spoke of him. She grieved sorely for 33 years and died with a broken heart.

Tessa would have found shelter within the *Amulet*. Stephen would have been re-membered into the community of those who have been. This is what the *Amulet* does – it restores recognition to lost

lives and it surrounds those who mourn with love, recognition and support.

Within the *Amulet* women -and men too- are ‘churched’ in a redemptive meaning of that word. A church is a holy place – a sacred site. What is sheltered within it must be honoured and never defiled. That is the meaning of sacredness. The *Amulet* brings into being a psycho-social, emotional and cultural architecture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century for the shelter of infant loss. It creates a sacred space where those who mourn can go and re-member their born and unborn infants and where those infants can come into being again through recognition – can find a home for the longing to be. This shelter is composed not of the heavy fixed materials of granite, marble and glass. Rather the fluid components of its non-local multi sited structure are attunement, empathy, generosity of heart and artistic vision – raw materials that are conduits of connection between people spread across geographical distances and inhabiting shared emotional space.

The *Amulet* provides a sheltered public space for support and witness of what is profoundly and inexorably intimate, private and personal. It is the gathering place of community support for the personal expression of loss and re-membering of infant presence. And also it is a gateway of atonement and redemption – for the profound socio-cultural neglect that Ireland has visited upon infants who have died and those who have mourned them.

The community that finds shelter within the space of the *Amulet* is composed not only of the parents and families who have experienced infant loss. Within the ether and atmosphere of this

sacred soulful space many people gather who feel empathy with deep loss: – bereavement and loss midwives who support parents and families to honour and express their pain; craftswomen from Ballyphehane who create beautifully handcrafted layettes for infants who have died; artists who are the visionaries and guardians of the *Amulet*; arts administrators, arts and health practitioners and healthcare staff who all work behind the scenes to sustain this deeply nourishing yet fragile non-localised structure; counsellors and support staff from SHEP who ensure that the *Amulet* is a safe space for all involved with it; radio producers who seek to spread the word about the *Amulet* and give the solace of recognition to those whose loss yet remains unseen, unheard and un-witnessed. As the resonance of the *Amulet* ripples outwards and reaches more people, the numbers wishing to enter within its space swells. There is a beckoning quality to this project – it calls to those who long and care for healing and redemption in loss. This is found in the *Amulet* through the solidarity of remembering and through honouring the experience of loss and those who have been lost and call to be restored to presence through memory.

Tessa often talked to me about Stephen – always with deep pain. I never knew what to do – how to leave her know that her loss and her baby mattered. I hope that this piece reaches her wherever she is and that she will know that Stephen is re-inscribed into the community of memorial presence. I am placing it within the shelter of the *Amulet* where I know it will be honoured and protected and where I know they will both belong in their belonging.

JMK

# Deeply Immersed

## Edelle Nolan

Ancient peoples, living from the instinctive and emotional level of their being naturally acknowledged bereavement as part of life. They left traces of it everywhere; huge megalithic burial sites, cairns and small single graves. Archaeologists found objects buried with the dead; precious tokens of finely worked jewellery, ornate food vessels and other elaborate objects which can be called amulets. Why include these talismans in the grave? It seems the physical loss of a loved one creates a void which we try to fill, and although on a logical level this may be a futile effort, emotionally the amulet does offer solace.

An older person leaves many mementos to hold onto; photographs, DVDs, memories of shared experiences, children, grandchildren, close friends, along with a lifetime of work, in the home and community. The bereaved person hearing stories of others encounters with their loved one avails of a treasure chest of second hand memories, a wonderful gift of solace when recounted.

When a family loses a baby which has barely made it into the world

or only had the womb as the home while alive, the expression of grief can be very difficult... it is hard to grieve the ethereal and intangible. Ancient peoples processed their grief by taking time to fashion precious objects from hard to gain raw materials and buried them in elaborate sites; testimony to the importance they assigned to grief. It is hard to believe that in recent history this basic urge to grieve for babies was taboo in Irish culture. This denial of a place to grieve such as a marked grave or a space to openly grieve in the community was a terrible barrier to their grieving process; firstly was the loss of the life, secondly the loss of the potential future with the person and thirdly the loss of a shared grieving process and acknowledgement of the short life lost. Instead they grieved in silence, with no acknowledged graves, no opportunity to speak of the life lost, or acceptance of their pain. It is interesting to note that as society advanced in so called civilisation it seemed to have regressed in emotional intelligence!

A problem shared is a problem halved; similarly a grief expressed is more bearable. This norm by past society to stoically ignore the grief for the very young, forced those grieving to implode all their strong emotions and pain within themselves. As a coping mechanism parents often gained comfort by keeping an amulet special to them in relation to the baby and the loss. They usually kept it hidden to all but a select few. These cherished objects acted as a bridge to help them cross the river of grief throughout their lives especially on anniversaries and special occasions. This Arts and Health project brings to life again the amulet as an aid to the grieving process and a way of marking and celebrating short but poignant lives.

The role of the Arts in the Healthcare context is manifold. It can be for patients, staff or the wider community. It can be in various settings within the hospital, or community. It can be any art form, such as performances of music or drama. Other artists work directly with the patient helping them make their own art, music or poetry. There are artists in residence working on site specific projects with patients or inspired or responding to the healthcare setting including percent for art schemes.

This project is multifaceted in scope crossing so many boundaries by bringing together a community of interest in a deeply respectful and safe way. The artist Marie Brett worked both with midwifery and bereavement counselling staff, with former patients of the CUH hospital, and the parents of the bereaved. She also worked closely with artists and craftsperson's Nancy Falvey and Bernice Jones of BTACI. Also the project was replicated in Limerick and Waterford Hospitals. The artist time travelled in a way by working with families who experienced bereavement a long time ago and those quiet recently within the past two years.

This project is timely as it marks a transition in Irish society which was reflected in the healthcare context. In last few years thankfully, there have been palpable positive change in peoples approach to the grieving of the death of the very young. Nowadays there are individual graves for babies often awash with toys and mementos; communal unmarked graves have been blessed and consecrated by religious orders. There have been many documentaries, films and soap opera characters in popular culture dealing with the subject. Celebrities openly share their grief in magazines, on TV chat shows. The subject is no longer taboo. This project gives

voice in a respectful way to some, who in the past, missed this opportunity. It offers a link to parents from generations past, to those who have quite recently experienced the same grief, but expressed it in very different ways.

Ten artworks of a deep personal subject matter, of something special and significant, were created by the Artist Marie Brett with and on behalf of the parents. There was the opportunity for the parents to deeply immerse themselves in the creative process in a positive, self selecting way. The artwork will be exhibited at various galleries and public locations throughout Ireland. This is a major step forward as it offers viewers in a similar situation an empathic opportunity to share in dialogue about their own experiences. Other outcomes of the project are this book, which will be available during annual Bereavement Ceremonies organised by Maternity Hospitals involved in the project. The book is a tangible object reflecting the nature of the amulet which will create a ripple effect in the wider community helping those without amulets to rediscover their power, and those with amulets to acknowledge it.

### **Edelle Nolan**

Edelle Nolan is the Arts Coordinator of Cork University Hospital Group. Also the founder and Director of Spiral Orchard, an Art & Health company specialising in project design, management, facilitation and evaluation of Arts & Health, Therapeutic Garden and Community Development Projects.

# The Place of Loss in Arts and Health

## Mary Grehan

The theme of loss surfaces through art again and again, even when it is not named as such. As in Patrick Kavanagh's poem 'Memory of My Father', it flows out between the words almost despite itself:

*'Every old man I see  
Reminds me of my father  
When he had fallen in love with death  
One time when sheaves were gathered.'*

Those of us who have lost loved ones can recognise that double take, the way our minds try to bring the lost one back to life. Art does this too. It makes the invisible visible, the intangible tangible and the absent present and so the experience of loss drives us to create.

There is a particular pain around the loss of a child who has died before or at the time of birth. With it comes the loss of dreams dreamt in the lead up to being born, the loss of hope and subsequent to the death, the loss of birthdays and endless other

key moments that did not get to be lived. Parents are left with the helplessness of what might have been.

However the experience of infant loss is not acknowledged through the rituals of death our society usually employs, and so, paradoxically, for the wider community that has not yet forged a relationship with the lost child, the physical evidence of the loss is minimal.

In his poem 'A Part of Ourselves'<sup>1</sup> in memory of his son John who lived for just a day, Peter Fallon tells us:

*'We felt the need grow all night  
to give him a name, to assert him  
as a member of our care, to say he was  
alive. Oh, he lived all right,  
he lived a lifetime.'*

This need for a parent to assert and validate their dead child's life is instinctive and strong, possibly because, in the words of

Peter Fallon:

*' - not to remember  
seems to betray; '*

And so, many parents who have lost a child at the time of birth, preserve an object or space, an amulet, as a physical manifestation of the infant loss. Mothers that Marie Brett has collaborated with in the course of the *Amulet* project have kept photographs, hand made garments, jewelry, and various other items following the loss of their child. The *Amulet* project brings this very personal and intimate object or space into a public arena and in so doing claims a societal acknowledgement for the loss that until now has been shrouded in silence.

What is interesting for me in my role as Arts Director of the Waterford Healing Arts Trust is that this project sits within the arena of arts and health. *'Arts and health is a specific field of work that seeks to enhance individual and community health and well-being'*, bringing *'together the skills and priorities of both arts and health professionals'*. It *'moves fluidly between the more traditional formats of exhibition, performance, public art commission, and other environmental enhancement initiatives within healthcare settings, through to participative and collaborative arts practices that challenge and expand ideas about who makes art and where and how it is shown.'*<sup>2</sup>

While acute hospitals are built on a curative model of care, the reality is that almost half of the population will die in hospitals. Similarly maternity services are designed around the safe delivery

of a child, yet miscarriage and infant loss is an integral aspect of them that calls for compassion and understanding. And so, death and dying is part of healthcare, including its arts programmes, and the culture and practice of healthcare is adapting and expanding accordingly.

Although arts and health practice traditionally takes place in a range of healthcare settings, the *Amulet* project travels from the domestic space through the institution where the artist makes contact with participants to the public space of sharing. Grief and loss cannot be contained by institutional structures and hence it is appropriate in this case that the project follows human experience and need.

In Colm McCann's *'Let the Great World Spin'*<sup>3</sup> Gloria whose three sons were killed in Vietnam tells us of her experience of coming together with a group of women who had also lost children to the war:

*'Funny how it was, everyone perched in their own little world with a deep need to talk, each person with their own tale, beginning in some strange middle point, then trying so hard to tell it all, to have it all make sense, logical and final.'*

Art provides this conversation, a way of talking to ourselves first, before bringing the object to a wider audience. Later the presence of an art object in a public arena, and in the case of my work, in a healthcare setting, provides the context for a conversation beyond a patient's illness or condition, a conversation that reaches in and

draws out what is going on for us as people.

By making the amulet public, Marie is creating a space for these conversations to happen, both through the collaborative process between woman and artist leading to final artwork and in the public exhibitions and discussions thereafter.

When we lose someone we loved, what's left in essence is little more than the memory of an experience and a sense of what might have been that often feels central to our very identity. While at no point does art offer itself as a cure or compensation for grief, the creative act, in this case, the documentation and sharing of the amulets in a public realm, has the potential to extend the understanding and empathy of the wider community around the experience of infant loss.

- 1 *Eye to Eye*, Peter Fallon - The Gallery Press 1993  
& *News of the World*, Peter Fallon - The Gallery Press 1998
- 2 [www.artsandhealth.ie/about/what-is-arts-and-health/](http://www.artsandhealth.ie/about/what-is-arts-and-health/)
- 3 *Let the Great World Spin*, Colm McCann - Bloomsbury 2009

### Mary Grehan

Mary Grehan is Arts Director of the Waterford Healing Arts Trust. In 1994 / 5, she was curator of the centenary arts programme of the National Maternity Hospital, Dublin. She has written widely in the field of arts and health.



*Anamnesis*, Marie Brett  
Sirius Arts Centre, 7.3.13 – 1.4.13



## Layettes : Photographic series

Produced in collaboration with  
Ballyphehane/Togher Art & Craft Initiative, Cork

# The Amulet, project partners

## **MATERNITY HOSPITALS**

**Cork University Maternity Hospital** - Anna Maria Verling (Bereavement & Loss Midwife)  
Geraldine Keohane (CUMH Director of Midwifery), Monica Harrington (A/Director of Midwifery)  
**The Mid-Western Regional Maternity Hospital Limerick**  
Cathy Quinn (Clinical Nurse Specialist, Bereavement & Loss)  
Eileen Quinlan (Clinical Midwife Manager), Margaret Quigley (Assistant Director of Midwifery)  
**Waterford Regional Hospital** - Marcella Celine O'Connor (CMM2, A/N Gynae Ward)  
Mary Frisby (A/Clinical Midwife Manager), Paula Curtin (A/Director of Nursing & Midwifery)

**COMMUNITY GROUP** Ballyphehane /Togher Art & Craft Initiative, Cork

## **ARTS AND HEALTH PLUS SOCIAL HEALTH TRAINING ORGANISATIONS**

**The Social and Health Education Project**, Cork/Kerry/Limerick  
Mary Mangan (Senior Training & Development Officer)  
Pat McCarthy (Coordinator Coisceim Counselling Programme)  
**The Waterford Healing Arts Trust Centre for Arts & Health** - Mary Grehan (Arts Director)  
Claire Meaney (WHAT Assistant Arts Director)

**STEERING GROUP MEMBERS** Anna Maria Verling • Audry Moran • Bernice Jones  
Edelle Nolan • Julie Murphy • Mary Mangan • Nancy Falvey • Pat McCarthy

## **BALLYPHEHANE/TOGHER ART + CRAFT INITIATIVE MEMBERS**

Creating baby layettes and donating anonymously made Amuletic robes  
to Maternity Hospitals nationally  
Anne O'Driscoll • Bernice Jones • Bridie Casey • Charlotte Meaney  
Clair Barry • Dell Flanagan • Doreen Martin • Eileen White • Helen Higgins • Helen Hurley  
Jane Mulchay • Jo Neff • Joan Hayes • Kaye Carroll • Margaret Quinn • Maureen O'Reilly  
Nancy Falvey • Nora Neary • Noreen Fitzgerald • Noreen Daly • Olive Ahern • Paula Buckley  
Phill O'Brien • Rossalyn Moor • Terri O'Brien • Veronica Kelleher

**COUNSELLING:** Nuala Burke - Coisceim - The Social and Health Education Project

**TECHNICIAN:** Nic Piper

## GALLERIES

**Sirius Arts Centre**, Cobh, County Cork

Peggy Sue Amison (Artistic Director) Sarah Iremonger (Visual Arts Liaison)

**Index Gallery**, Waterford Central Library

Mary Grehan (WHAT Arts Director), Claire Meaney (WHAT Assistant Arts Director)

**Sirius Arts Centre - exhibition - private view event for Amulet project participants**

Facilitated by Pat McCarthy

(The Social and Health Education Project, Coiscéim Counselling Programme Coordinator)

Anna Maria Verling (Cork University Maternity Hospital, Bereavement & Loss Midwife)

**Sirius Arts Centre - exhibition - public launch guest speakers**

Edelle Nolan (Cork University Hospital Arts Co-ordinator)

Geraldine Keohane (Cork University Maternity Hospital, Director of Midwifery)

Katherine Atkinson (CREATE, the national development agency for collaborative arts in social and community contexts, project support and professional development officer)

Louise O'Connor (Foott) (Amulet project participant)

Marie Brett (artist)

Nancy Falvey (Ballyphane/Togher Art & Craft Initiative)

**Index Gallery exhibition talk**

Chaired by Mary Grehan (Waterford Healing Arts Trust, Arts Director)

with guest speakers : Marie Brett (artist), Mary (Amulet project participant)

Nancy Falvey (Ballyphane/Togher Art & Craft Initiative)

**Amulet Seminar**

Chaired by Mary Grehan (Arts Director, WHAT Centre for Arts & Health)

with guest speakers: Bernice Jones (Amulet project participant)

Cathy Quinn (Clinical Nurse Specialist, Bereavement & Loss)

Julie Murphy (HSE Cork Arts + Health Programme), Marie Brett (artist)

Seminar co-ordination by: Bernice Jones, Marie Brett, Teresa McCarthy

Assisted by: Emma Klemencic, Grainne O'Connell Walsh, Julie Murphy

Pat McCarthy, Siobhan O'Dowd

Documentary video by Epic Productions

**Marie Brett** is an artist whose conceptual interests frequently lead her to collaborate through dialogical relationships with participants who have direct experience of loss. Marie has received several national and international awards for her practice and her work is held in public art collections in Ireland and the UK.

For further information on The Amulet touring exhibition and arts project please visit

[www.mariebrett.ie](http://www.mariebrett.ie)

[www.amulets.ie](http://www.amulets.ie)

[www.facebook.com/AmuletProject](https://www.facebook.com/AmuletProject)

Cover image: Marie Brett, *Her Pink Shoe*



# The Amulet : Anamnesis

Marie Brett

Artwork made in collaboration with  
Ann Dorgan • Bernice Jones • Cathy Sutton  
Clare Quinn • Helen • Louise O'Connor (Foott)  
Maria Fitzhenry • Marion Gabriel • Mary • Mary

Alluding to the act of recollection - '*Anamnesis*' - explores ideas surrounding the use of an amulet as an object signifier of ethereal farewell particular to infant loss. Through this work the individual's memory is re-imagined as a collective cultural memorial.

'*Anamnesis*' - is a collection of audio-visual artworks made as part of a national Irish, multi-site participatory arts project - '*The Amulet*' – initiated and led by visual artist Marie Brett, as a community collaborative initiative, focussed on the subject of pregnancy and infant loss, giving voice to a sensitive and difficult life experience.