

ETHICAL BEAUTY

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Anamnesis means the ability to recall past occurrences. It is a poetic and elegiac word. It is not a word often used in day to day life and for this reason it is an appropriate designation for Marie Brett's touring exhibition *The Amulet: Anamnesis, Exploring the Hidden World of Infant Loss*. Touring Ireland during 2014 and 2015, this exhibition began as a research partnership in 2009, supported by multiple arts and health organisations and developed through a series of artistic collaborations with mothers who had lost a baby prior to, at birth or directly afterwards. Such a special experience, so tragic and life-transforming requires a deep engagement with anamnesis as a creative process.

As a result of developing committed creative relationships with her collaborators (informed and supported by professional counseling) Brett carefully enabled the stories to emerge and facilitated the development of a suitably absolute form of visual representation to commemorate their experiences of infant death. She uses the form of an amulet for each lamented child that is presented within a multi-part installation, incorporating sound works, photographic images and sculptural 'listening stations' placed in an orderly and comforting arrangement within the exhibition space. An amulet is a protective charm or talisman, and in this context the bereaved parent selected an emblematic object or image to function in this way. Each amulet is documented photographically with the resulting image printed on Hahnemühle bamboo fine art paper and framed into the structure of a pristine white desk. A cd player with headphones is attached to each desk housing the sound recordings that contain oral testimonies of the mothers. The entire environment is bathed in a soft low light created by multiple small lamps that focus their luminescent glow on the individual amulet images.

This work functions on many levels. It performs a healing and reparative purpose aiding the bereaved parents to objectify and transfigure their personal grief into a public document. It also transforms private memory into public commemoration, causing the singular and individual experience to become mutual and shared. Autoethnography is a useful definition for this project as a form of self-reflection and writing (or creating) that explores the researcher's personal experience and connects this autobiographical story to wider cultural, political and social meanings. Brett uses direct biographical narratives and by presenting them in multiples within a silently expansive environment succeeds in adhering these stories to the broader oppressive historical conditions in Ireland relating to female sexuality, reproduction, the act of birth and its paradox, death. This autoethnography benefits the individual storytellers in their personal grief by referencing larger issues of social justice emphasised by their often alienated and unsupported privation. It also affirms and articulates a community of experience by showing how this devastating occurrence is shared by others in many different ways.

The French philosopher Luce Irigaray writes about female artists who aim to create beauty in art appropriate to their subjectivities, in response to phallogentric structural and cultural norms of beauty. She explains the tendency to focus on the negative (pain and suffering) is

“for women, an act of truthfulness. It’s also akin to an individual and collective catharsis. . . . Daring to manifest publicly individual and collective pain has a therapeutic effect, bringing relief to the body and enabling them to accede to another time.”¹

The function of this type of work is to register new forms of beauty through inter-subjective and relational engagement enabled through the research process, also through a transcendence (of pain, suffering) effected by the aesthetic and conceptual integrity of the entire work.

The formal and aesthetic qualities Brett has called into operation convey other levels of meaning. The entire installation is reminiscent of a restful sanatorium with its uniform white furniture, muted white light and peaceful silence. We are somehow located in a metaphysical space evocative of the liminality between life and death. Visitors sit quietly at each station listening through headphones to the reflective utterances of each gentle-spoken woman as she relates her loss always through the prism of the amulet which becomes a signpost to the emotion, not the emotion itself. The amulet images are printed as floating motifs on a neutral ground and framed by many tiny perforations made by Brett with a needle into the paper. This mark-making penetrates the surface and acts with a piercing violence that is restrained and specific to each image, and in a secret way mirroring the hidden personal ferocity of each wounding loss.

As *The Amulet: Anamnesis* was showing at the Galway Arts Centre in August 2014, another exhibition opened at Dollard House, Wellington Quay in Dublin that addressed the historical foundations of the taboos around these subjects in Irish life. *Forsaken* by Manix Flynn and Maedhbh McMahon addressed the banished, abandoned women and children behind the walls of Mother and Baby homes, Magdalene Laundries and Women’s refuges in Ireland. Alongside requiem plaques by Flynn, McMahon presents other forms of amulet: hundreds of delicate miniature dresses made from a myriad of antique craft materials, each one dedicated to an individual lost within these punitive systems. They are remembrance objects, exquisite and sinister in equal measure. Imbued with a similar transcendence to Brett’s amulets, they surpass the quotidian and endorse private memory for collective public tribute.

Another artist who has made comparable work is Doris Salcedo from Columbia. Her series *Atrabiliarios* (1992 – 1997) is a series of found shoes sewn with black surgical thread into drywall behind a veneer of cow bladder. When mounted for exhibition, the pieces seem to be hauntingly encased within the walls. The actual shoes in Salcedo’s work belonged to women who disappeared in Colombia where the military has used these tactics of silent abduction to instill fear. The shoes were donated to the artist by the living family members of those who have vanished. The shoes have been transformed into amulets enabling anamnesis. None of those disappeared are ever accounted for and the work serves as a quiet, haunting and tragic meditation on the shadow that the communities live in while enduring these losses.

¹ Irigaray “How Can We Create Our Own Beauty?” in *Je, Tu, Nous: Towards a Culture of Difference*, trans. Alison Martin (London: Routledge, 1993) p. 108

The act of remembering for Columbians in this context is urgent and Salcedo's work performs this necessary political, social and cultural recollection. For Irish women and men, I believe the act of memorial for our unacknowledged dead is also pressing as it serves to relieve a generation from private grief never publicly allowed. It also serves to dignify and reclaim the lost ones, an observance that all individuals who live or who have lived, deserve.

My own public art work *Shelters*, a series of three small refuge architectures installed in 2003 at the sites of Cillíní² in County Clare also attempted this function. Marie Brett has suitably amplified this intention in *The Amulet: Anamnesis* and created a body of work that refuses to forget or hide human loss, however difficult it is to admit. Her work functions relationally and collaboratively in implicating many others in the co-creation of the work. The amulets become objects of mediation between subjects and they open up a space of subjectivity for women in particular. Irigaray stresses this subjective capacity is a necessity to manifest women's full being in the world as equal but different to men. Irigaray also explains how different types of beauty, the corporeal, the spiritual and aesthetic are linked and not abstract.³ She shows how beauty is dependent on political, ontological and ethical concerns and in this sense Brett's work offers us the highest beauty.

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² *Shelters* was commissioned by Clare County Council Arts Office as part of Ground Up, public art project 2003. The three vernacular shelters are still located at the sites of unconsecrated childrens burial grounds in west, east and central Clare. The burial grounds were used up to recent times for the burial of infants or children who died before baptism and were therefore unentitled to conventional interment in Catholic cemeteries.

³ See Hilary Robinson's essay analyzing Irigaray's perspectives on beauty in art. "Whose Beauty? Women, art and Intersubjectivity in Luce Irigaray's Writings." (2000) in: *Beauty Matters*. Brand, Peg Zeglin, ed. Indiana University Press, pp. 224-251