

From the Court to the Gallery

MEADHBH MCNUTT TALKS TO EVELYNN GLYNN ABOUT THE EXHIBITION, 'HOME TRUTHS', AT ENGAGE ART STUDIOS, GALWAY.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC is here and I'm feeling a severance from art. The anxious brain thinks in terms of survival and escape. And mine is welcoming dystopian news, alleviated by internet humour, in place of my usual creative pursuits. That tug of anxiety in the pit of the stomach is an all too human experience. Sometimes, it's a virus that delivers an invisible threat. Sometimes, it's a person. We might even share a home, a child – a history – with that person. In either case, when we collectively fail to act, it's the most vulnerable who pay the price.

When Leo Varadkar announced recent isolation measures, projects like Domestic Violence Response, Galway, immediately anticipated a surge in calls. Artist Evelyn Glynn has worked in the domestic violence sector for many years. "We've been inundated with calls since the measures were put in place," she says. "Applications for protection and interim barring orders are being heard in the courts but all family law has been suspended. Access arrangements are nightmarish for many women, and for women still in these relationships, the situation is also incredibly challenging."

In an article in *Sixth Tone*, Founder of Hubei anti-violence nonprofit aid, Wan Fei said that reports of domestic violence nearly doubled after Chinese cities went into lockdown.¹ Isolation, stress and financial strain are contributing factors, along with effects on gender equality (evident in SARS, Ebola and Zika outbreaks)². Childcare demands move from paid sectors (schools, crèches) to the unpaid household realm – often falling on the flexible parent with a lower income.³

'Home Truths' – a collaboration between Evelyn Glynn, Engage Art Studios and Galway 2020 European Capital of Culture – comes at a pivotal time.⁴ The exhibition, which was cut short by COVID-19 measures, takes its name from an audio work created by Glynn, featuring testimonies from 15 women who used the Irish legal system to deal with domestic violence. Glynn has worked with testimony before in 'Breaking the Rules of Silence', a collation of oral histories related to The Good Shepherd Convent and Magdalene Laundry. In this project, she has invited artists Blaise Drummond, Alison Lowry, Áine Philips and Ruby Wallis to create individual works in response to the 15 testimonies. The result is a harmonious arrangement of works at war with their own suggestive ideals.

A pale blue river of static silicone by Blaise Drummond floods the space. Joni Mitchell's lyric, "I wish I had a river / I could skate away on" is traced in watercolour on the adjacent wall. The line is separated into two halves, leaving a morbid space in the middle. Elsewhere, luminous wedding dresses by Alison Lowry bear subtly inscribed warnings (their hangers of shattered glass are less subtle), and a looped video by Ruby Wallis shows ruffled and smashed domestic objects. These images *feel* as though they should be dated. Yet they persist with the promise of a heteronormative happy ending. If anything, the precarity of the gig economy and housing crisis has given domestic life a renewed allure. In Áine Philips's performance work, the artist literally papers over the cracks of a table and chair with various bandages. Audio plays in the background. An anonymous voice: "He was definitely capable of killing me. I do have a nice life now... there is life after it... it takes a long time."

"There was something about listening to the audio while in the space that I found moving," says Glynn. "I was absolutely taken with the cohesiveness of the space." The stories are as powerful as they are harrowing, revealing the myriad of legal hurdles faced by survivors pre and post-separation. Despite all of the momentum of the Me Too movement, these 'run of the mill' cases barely break into mainstream discussion. "When we made the application for this project, the focus was specifically on women's experience of the legal system in dealing with domestic violence. It's an area that very few people know about unless they've been through the system."

Though new laws around coercive control show signs of



L-R: Blaise Drummond, *River*, 2020; Alison Lowry, *Lucky to be Alive*, 2020; photograph by Ruby Wallis, courtesy of the artists and Engage Art Studios

progress, Glynn believes there is a long way to go in improving the response to domestic violence. Many testimonies speak of the lack of information given on safety measures. "The testimonies reveal a litany of shocking and inconsistent responses from the Gardaí – women blaming and failing to take statements, enforce orders, present evidence in court, respond to calls..."

Another area in which Glynn sees very few signs of progress is child access. "When access is considered in these situations, there is no linked-up thinking. There is a sense that the relationship is over, and therefore domestic violence isn't taken into account or given priority." One testimony speaks of a father gaining access to his daughter against the child's wishes. The child had told a therapist that she was being abused, but her claim was dismissed by the court, along with the advice of mental health professionals. "Access issues get dragged out for years and the court system facilitates this," explains Glynn. "There is a perception that it's in a child's best interest to have access with both parents, regardless of domestic abuse and little understanding or recognition of post-separation abuse."

'Home Truths' is a brave step forward in bringing light to uncomfortable truths. Critiquing the law is no simple matter. Testimonies are anonymised to protect both the women participating in the project and the project itself. "A lot of that is in camera, so you're in breach of court if you discuss what goes on in family law."

Later in our conversation, Glynn recalls an exhibition from IMMA and the Family Resource Centre St Michael's Estate, Inchicore, in the late '90s called 'Once is Too Much' (28 November 1997 – 15 February 1998).⁵ In one collaborative work, entitled *Her Sanctuary*, a velvet-lined drawer displays fragments of the portrayed owner's private life. In this tiny space (both physical and psychological), her thoughts and identity can breathe and grow outside of policed boundaries. The sacred, liberated moment is magnified to the public within the semi-autonomy of the gallery.

"[The gallery] can be a safe forum to allow for discussion that doesn't take place in the same way in other sectors," explains Glynn. "So much of what women go through in the home and in court is behind closed doors. Very few people

hear about those experiences. So, the women who took part wanted their stories out there. And they were for the most part excited and intrigued by the idea of combining these stories with art."

With galleries closed, we must keep these lines of communication open, and safeguard the autonomy of survivors. "The journey for women escaping domestic abuse is hard. But women do make that journey and come out the other side. I would say to anyone who needs help: reach out, get support and if you need to, call the Gardaí."

For confidential support, call Women's Aid National Helpline (1800 341 900) or Men's Aid Ireland (01 554 3811). A list of helpful services along with COVID-19 updates are available at cosc.ie and safeireland.ie. If in danger, call emergency services at 999/112.

Meadhbh McNutt is an artist and writer based in Galway.

To experience 'Home Truths' online, visit engageartstudios.com.

Notes

¹ Zhang Wanqing, 'Domestic Violence Cases Surge During COVID-19 Epidemic', *Sixth Tone*.

² Helen Lewis, 'The Coronavirus is a Disaster for Feminism', *The Atlantic*.

³ Julia Smith, a health-policy researcher at Simon Fraser University, noted that although all income took a hit during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, "men's income returned to what they had made pre-outbreak faster than women's income." Alisha Haridasani Gupta, 'Why Women May Face a Greater Risk of Catching Coronavirus', *New York Times*.

⁴ 'Home Truths' focuses on the experiences of women, a group disproportionately affected by domestic violence. Two thirds of victims of intimate partner/family homicide worldwide are women (UN Global Study on Homicide, 2013). The issue however spans all genders. In the region of 88,000 men and 213,000 women in Ireland have been severely abused by a partner (Watson and Parsons 2005 for the National Crime Council).

⁵ 'Once is Too Much' included 11 works produced in collaborative workshops involving The Family Resource Centre group (Anita Koppenhofer, Pauline Tunstead, Breda Owens, Phyllis Bolton, Cathy Quinn, Marion Keogh, Rita Fagan, Sharon Dunne, Finola Smith, Nollaig Boyd, Jean McSorley, Mai Norton, Bridie Canavan, Ann Goodwin, Adrienne Boyle, Kate Murphy and Ann McGann); artists Joe Lee, Rhona Henderson, Rochelle Rubenstein Kaplan and Ailbhe Murphy and curator Helen O'Donoghue.