

Death and Sensuality

A group exhibition of contemporary Irish artists:

Nina Amazing

Roisin Byrne

Alan Butler

Benjamin DeBurca

Breda Lynch

James McCann

Leo McCann

Tom Molloy

Not Abel

Alan Phelan

Curated by **Jim Ricks**

Mina Dresden Gallery, San Francisco

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Review by **Lauren Hisada**



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Above: Detail of Nina Amazing's Unique Digital Print, 2011,(1/1) at Mina Dresden Gallery San Francisco.

Below: Title of Artwork:

A new 'team building' category was included in this year's beauty pageant and the six year old division was up to the task. The Challenge: work together to combat any world evil of your liking, while still looking FABULOUS. The girls quickly agreed on their tactical theme and strategy, and even developed a cool team named. Hence, the "Sexy Sixes" (or, "SS" for short) were born. The SS decided to combat the prevailing world evil theme of nudity in this challenge, and travelled to the CHI-CaMocha Canyon in Colombia (home of the last remaining teleBOOBtooby colony), to do so.

Used to living a quiet and peaceful existence, the teleBOOBtoobies were in complete shock by the vitriolic attack of the young SS. In dire need of support, they called upon their friends from NOTévilLAND for back up...In no time, Lucy Lawless, Sally Sue, TYRAdactyl et al. were on the scene. Lucy quickly drafted up a battle plan for the crew while she defended herself with her trusty CELEBRAShield collection. Uni-legged-roller-Roxy was trying to think of the perfect time to launch the Paris Stilton stink bomb ...But Paris, on the other hand, was only concerned about who was noticing her VERY EXPENSIVE handbag!?

The SS felt immediate disgust on the battlefield, not only from the sheer sight of the teleBOOBtoobies, but also from obvious lack of personal grooming displayed by Sally Sue and her flexible ent-WHORE-age. "OMG, GROSS!" The SS thought that Sally Sue et al. should at least be happy with favour they were doing, in spraying them with their anal bleaching and fake tan hose defences. "YOU'RE LIKE, WELCOME AND STUFF!", they shouted. Amongst the mayhem, Jemma Smile-Smile remained very proud of her perfect DOUCHEotou carrying form. Kerry and Jamerry worked together, deciding where to launch the next grenEGG attack while holding a sexy gaze into the camera. However, Queen Sheeba felt saddened and could only bring herself to stare longingly into the camera and hope for world peace. Meanwhile, Randy and Rodrigo relaxed and took in everything from afar. Randy: "Roddy, THESE CHICKS ARE FUCKED! Pass me another Buckfast would ya?"



Massage: On the 4th of December 2009 the artist Roisin Byrne placed an order for a neon sign intended to be at all times turned off. On hearing she was in fact the second artist that week to order such a thing she ordered the other artist's instead.
Roisin Byrne, 2010

Neon tubing, clear plexiglass sheet, chains, email correspondence, solicitors letter.

By Lauren Hisada

What is the relationship between death and sensuality? One has to be careful in choosing the recipient for such a question; some may fall into a state of irreconcilable disturbance when simply asked to consider the position that there might, in fact, be a relationship. How could the seemingly diametrically opposed concepts of pain and pleasure (in terms of sensation and action – both given and received) overlap? Interconnect? This nexus between 'Death and Sensuality' was explored by 10 Irish artists in Jim Ricks' curatorial at Mina Dresden Gallery San Francisco.

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The artists, focusing specifically on appropriation, generalise their personal inspirations and preoccupations in order to dissect a larger point of interest for the more heterogeneous American audience: that violence, death, love and sensuality affect every individual on both a subjective and objective basis – they pervade every culture. The consequence of this is that viewing *Death and Sensuality* (fittingly named for the controversial writings of renegade surrealist Georges Bataille) suggests viewing society's mutual points of unification and division. After all, death and sensuality have time and time again proven their uncanny ability to provoke both.

The styles of the artists here are diverse. Each approach varies distinctly from the next and the result is a conglomerate show of talents that range from drawing, to video installation, to collage, makeshift bookworks and more. Any potential for dissonance is effectively eliminated through the collective loyalty to theme and the considered application of each individual's craft, which in turn results in a viewer experience that is both multifaceted and multisensory.

Sometimes there exists a fine line between appropriating art and stealing it. Perhaps some of you will remember the famous lawsuit between photographer Patrick Cariou and painter/photographer Richard Prince, or the repercussions of Jeff Koons' appropriation of Art Rogers' photograph into *String of Puppies* in 1992. The general consensus among the larger art community seems to be that copyright problems can be avoided through precaution and observance for the law. The interesting thing about Roisin Byrne is that she unabashedly neglects both. However, it is her reckless abandon (in combination with almost endearing – or at least amusing – manipulative tactics) that has awarded Byrne a devoted audience of those who enjoy the dual package of 'keep ya guessing' entertainment, and special circumstances in which to evaluate the themes of ownership, integrity and perception.

With *Massage*: "On the 4th of December 2009 the artist Roisin Byrne placed an order for a neon sign intended to be at all times turned off. On hearing she was in fact the second artist that week to order such a thing she ordered the other artist's instead, 2010 (simply titled *The Medium* by original artist Ryan Gander) a broken 'a' in a red neon sign spelling out *Massage* calls into question the connotations – sexual or otherwise – of such a display, while Byrne focuses on

the effect of her appropriating (commandeering) the piece." To be fair, it's not a fresh concept. The origin, for both artists, is media philosopher Marshall McLuhan, the man behind the phrase "The medium is the message," and subsequently the novel *The Medium is the Massage*, but Byrne would still seem the guilty of the two. It's not as overt as her posing as a horticulturist in order to steal plants off Turner Prize-winning 'environmental' artist, Simon Starling, or shoplifting – then ingesting – Swarovski crystals, but the message is communicated.



Lovers, Tom Molloy, 2011
Drawing on paper. Courtesy Rubicon Gallery

Nearby, two tragic and iconic images stand side-by-side in which lovers and family meet death and destruction – all the while maintaining (arguably) their close-knit bonds. In Tom Molloy's *Family*, we're met with a book excerpt: a portrait of Joseph Goebbels with his wife and children, who grin at the viewer with Stepford eeriness, and an accompanying text which details the untimely demise of the children at the indirect hand of their parents. Wholly unaltered, these pages, carefully chosen by Molloy, act solely as an examination of those who bring love, and subsequently death, out of love. It highlights a horrific incident, yes, but also the emotional complexities surrounding death as a 'family activity'.

Continuing the theme of infamous historical figures, *Lovers* is a drawing and near replica of a photograph of Benito Mussolini and his girlfriend Clara Petacci, strung up by their feet to be defiled and stoned following a swift and merciless execution by anti-fascist leader Walter Audisio (the squeamish need not google this execution, please take heed). The implications of such an event are chillingly grisly, as is the content of Molloy's image, but the fact that it's a drawn replica helps to distract from the horror of the scene and instead calls attention to the rose-tinted afterglow of a couple who died in each other's arms (the drawing is, conveniently, rose tinted).

Across the room, another piece beckons. Without a doubt, one of the more arresting works in the show is the video loop *The Logical End of All Media* by young artist James McCann – mind you, visibility has never been synonymous with aesthetic appeal, and certainly not finesse. Watching an obese man toying with his magically endless supply of belly blubber against the backdrop of a warped Rebecca Black (tween-pop one-hit wonder), lazily slurring the words to her song, 'Friday', isn't most people's idea of a good time. Much like a gory train wreck, you may find yourself hopelessly drawn to the gyrating abomination, despite every molecule in your body shouting itself hoarse in frantic protest. In a sense, it is a logical end to all media – this obviously sad picture of twisted eroticism and personified death could hardly reach a more ridiculous culmination. At the same time, Channel 4's modern-day freak show programmes never struggle to pull in an audience.

McCann's other piece, a set of 10 hastily assembled 'zines' entitled *Large Armies with Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, looks exactly as the title would suggest. It must

be said, though, that any humour which stems from its shocking improbability is in danger of being outshone by, what some might view as, a blind lust for the subversive.

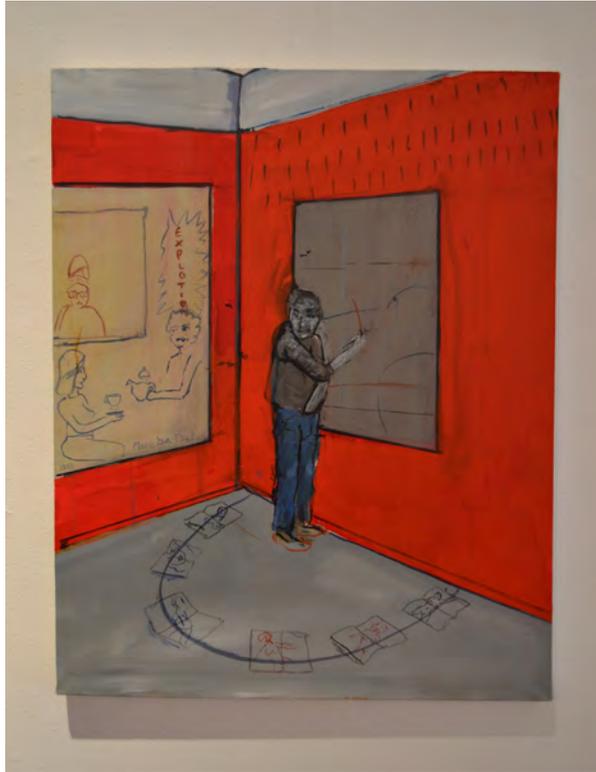


The Logical End of All Media, James McCann, 2011
DVD, 14 min 54 sec

After receiving this comprehensive reminder of the various faces of diseased genitalia, I was relieved to look up and spy James' father, painter Leo McCann's alluring study of synesthetic reds, greys and ochres. These, confined to skewed shapes and tentative lines, provide a voyeuristic glimpse into the recesses of the subject's haunted mind (whether it be McCann's, a Freudian exaggeration of his normal impulses, or an examination of another character entirely). Fear of one's *id*, specifically one's sexual or violent desires and the inability to control them, is explored through the medium of acrylic. Interestingly, although McCann's two displayed paintings, (*Protected Corner*) *Under Arm Alarm* (Table) and *Doing No Great Harm*, were not created

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in conjunction, their semblance of theme and tone would indicate strongly that they were fuelled by the very same internal predicament, or interest – possibly obsession.



Doing No Great Harm, **Leo McCann**, Acrylic and oil on canvas

Here, even though the content of the dreamscapes (the scenes could be more accurately likened to those of a nightmare) is not explicit, guilt and powerlessness tinge the works as evidently as a bloodstain. If they were placed alongside a frenzied Basquiat (it would render them lucid in comparison), they could serve as that brief moment of partial clarity which precedes a mental breakdown.



Watch with Brian the Birth of a Nation, **Alan Phelan**, 2011

Archival paper, EVA glue, toner, varnish, wire, elastic strap, video enabled digital photo-frame, video duration 3:24 minutes. (papier-mâché made from various newspaper titles about the bank bailout in Ireland). Mask: 34.5 (high) x 24 (wide) x 17.5 (deep) cm, Photo-frame: 19.5 x 29 x 3 cm. Courtesy the artist

Yanking subtlety by its elegant neck, emptying its pockets and administering a swift shot to the head before leaving it to rot in some anonymous ditch, Alan Phelan's *Watch with Brian the Birth of a Nation* cuts straight to the chase with his dopey papier-mâché Brian Cowen mask, made from newspaper clippings from the bank bailout in Ireland. It's equipped with goggles – not that you'll need them – so the mask can be worn while viewing the video beside it. Here, Cowen leers on as 'a nation is born', or more specifically, as an apple is expelled from a man's anus on an unrelenting split-screened loop.

There may have been no quicker way to elicit a response, but fragrance can, at times, distract from the point (as is evidenced by some of the 1970s works by performance and fellow 'shock artist' Paul McCarthy). As an intrinsically insular piece, the risk of alienation was already high; perhaps a 1980s-style boudoir soft-focus would have done it more justice.



Romantische Reise Durch Das Alte Deutschland (A Romantic Journey Through Old Germany), Benjamin DeBurca, 2011, Collage. These works were made possible with support from the Arts Council of Ireland.

German-born Benjamin DeBurca – ostensibly the most seasoned of this crowd in terms of craft – needs no soft focus with his aptly titled *Romantische Reise Durch Das Alte Deutschland (A Romantic Journey Through Old Germany)*. A series of expertly collaged illustrated scenes and a peaceful quelling to the fire

of some of the louder pieces, two sets of diptychs delicately traverse the theme as DeBurca infuses his multilayered images with personal resonance. Simultaneously, cleverly carved areas of ambiguity are left open to viewer interpretation.

Opposite, two Jane Fondas (or Cat Ballous, depending on your familiarity with the films of Elliot Silverstein) stare blankly at Brian Cowen (or, more likely, the anal excursion adjacent) with sunken doe eyes. With noose around the Fondas' necks, *Meet Your Doppelgänger Then You Die* by Breda Lynch would be far from comical if not for the anachronistic bouffants and dresses reminiscent of a Western parody. Lynch would seem to have a *doppelgänger* herself, what with all of her drawings materialising in sets of two – each only subtly distinguishable from its partner. A beautiful thing (tangible or metaphorical) that is destined to die, is as old a motif as the ritual sacrifices that entranced Bataille, and as modern and trendy as the mournful music videos of sexpot-du-jour Lana Del Rey.



Installation view with **Nina Amazing** in the foreground.

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Towering above the Fondas, we find Nina Amazing's acid-induced post-apocalyptic battle scene where bright-eyed glamour queen 'SS' babies fight 'teBOOBtoobies' below douche bombs and 'TYRA'[Banks]-dactyls. Despite no discernable knowledge of the mechanisms behind digital art, her chosen medium (the artist is first and foremost a cancer researcher), and no concept of layout or perspective, the magic that flows throughout what can only be deemed an epic, prevails. Unquestionably, the chaotic scene speaks to a war on values and iconography in contemporary pop culture – the flashy art duo behind Goatsilk would be proud – and amazingly, Nina's freshness of thought bypasses all pretense. The ability to maintain innocence in a piece that places you in the same physical space as two bombs constructed out of vaginal douches (*DOUCHEo-tov cocktails, the sculptural element of the work*) is a special talent, to say the least.



Some Kind of Agitprop Monster, Alan Butler, 2010
SD-DVD Version, 2min 24sec.

A parallel dimension where blind eyes are opened to the garish idiocy behind mainstream television thrives in Alan Butler's *Some Kind of Agitprop Monster*, where alien clones of Miley Cyrus and Sarah Jessica Parker (Carrie Bradshaw) collapse under their own unfeasibility. Below the work is an appropriately meaningless bit of Internet slang *GAH!* emblazoned over the Armani logo. This logo, the literal base on which we might evaluate Butler's *Agitprop Monster*, translates not only in its symbolism, but also in its colours, which are based on America's national terror alert system. In an all too perfect arrangement, the imminence of terror appears to be measured on proximity to the screen...



BLINDS WIDE OPEN, Not Abel, 2011
LED sign, lyrics from She by Tyler The Creator (feat. Frank Ocean)

Finally, we find the most outlandish excerpt of reality (and most blatant melding of death and sensuality) brought to our attention by artist group Not Abel. A

red sign, entitled *Blinds Wide Open*, quietly scrolls the lyrics to 'She' by musical artist Tyler The Creator. Here, the themes of psychopathic violence, necrophilia and true love merged to create one surprisingly listenable 'zone out and zone in' rap song, but it must be said that the words, being barely audible in the song, are slightly more forceful when displayed in LED: "I just wanna drag your lifeless body to the forest and fornicate with it but that's because I'm in love with you, cunt." If death and sensuality – as abrasive or antisocial acts – have been banished to the sidelines of modern Western society, rap (and "futuristic rap-rave") seem to have effectively beaten the system. Someone should investigate to see if Patrick Bateman is not ghost writing for Tyler. A succinct end to a show that is wholly unabridged.

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