

Rehearsals

ELLA DE BÚRCA REVIEWS YVONNE MCGUINNESS'S RECENT SOLO EXHIBITION AT BUTLER GALLERY.

UPON ENTERING YVONNE McGuinness's exhibition at Butler Gallery, I am immediately immersed in a world where the past, present, and future enact various assemblies in a symphony of sight and sound. The exhibition, aptly titled 'Rehearsals', is a regional exploration of various themes, ranging from theatrical improvisation and play to political engagement and the fluidity of change in Ireland. These inquiries are encapsulated in two new video works: *Priory* and *Schoolyard*, both made in 2023.

The auditory experience is a standout feature, reminiscent of Brian Eno's ambient compositions. A soundtrack – featuring a blend of organ tones, chirping birds, playing children, distant applause, and a muffled, prophesying orator – transports the viewer to a different realm. The audio is punctuated by short mantras, each spoken three times – foreboding phrases that chronicle a lack of control, an imminent flood, and a fall.

Priory is a large-scale immersive video projection that plays with the senses. Overlapping visuals of fabric blowing in the wind create a sense of chaos and beauty. Members of the Equinox Theatre Company (an inclusive ensemble based in KCAT arts centre in Callan) gather in the ruins of Callan Augustinian Priory, setting up a *mise-en-scène* of chairs and a podium. As we draw nearer, the visuals become more layered, and we see the group perform as audience to a blurry speaker. The echo in the soundtrack is so potent that it obscures the narration. The audience becomes unruly, waving flags bearing images of rocks, and chanting phrases like "The water's coming in." The assembled performers break away individually, each enacting their own spirituality, as the power of the orator's words dissolve.

Schoolyard presents a contrasting, yet complementary vision. Here, a multi-channel installation of different sized screens depicts a moving tableau of children at play. On the largest screen, we see them quickly constructing a 'scene', using sticks, ropes, plastic, and tarpaulin. Their creation is reminiscent of medieval scenes, carved into the cornices of cathedrals, with the children posing on tables, chairs, and ladders as saints and prophets. The piece is punctuated by close-ups of individual children on the smaller monitors, chanting

mantras such as "It's out of control," and "Careful, it's going to fall." Fluorescent colours – a kaleidoscope of vivid greens, pinks, blues, yellows, and oranges – reflect from the screens, creating a mesmerising effect.

While distinct, the two video works share thematic concerns. Both are parable-like, echoing ancient Ireland, while suggesting spiritual approaches to construction and holistic relationships with play. The sense of foreboding in both pieces conjures apocalyptic imagery of biblical floods or other climate related disasters. The older group in *Priory* resonates with a ghostly, communal aura, poetically alluding to the dwindling power of the church in Ireland. I was surprised by the religious potency of the younger group's ad hoc creation, the residue of Ireland's ascetic past still reverberating through new generations in layers and echoes. Both groups reference the structure of ritual.

A significant element in the exhibition is the use of green silk flags, which appear in both videos, while also being physically present in the exhibition, as part of a large-scale fabric assemblage, adding a tactile and grounding element. The flags bear images of rocks in various compositions; some floating singular on the green backgrounds, others assembled into arches, cloisters, and pillars. The vivid green not only roots the exhibition in Irish heritage but also serves as a metaphorical green screen, prompting considerations of Irish culture as something that can be superimposed onto. This feature is particularly poignant when considering the themes of religion and spirituality, exploring ideas of faith as both a grounding force and a framework for personal identity.

'Rehearsals' is a reflective journey, situated in the magical crossover between play, improvisation, legacy, and heritage. It encapsulates a sense of wistfulness, as if foregrounding parts of Irish culture that are disappearing, while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of artistic expression, interpretation, and collaboration.

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Above: Yvonne McGuinness, *Frontier*, 2023, fabric assemblage; **Below:** Yvonne McGuinness, *Schoolyard*, 2023, multi-channel installation; photographs by Ros Kavanagh, courtesy of the artist and Butler Gallery.

