



GALLERY AND PROJECT SPACE
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In stitch and in time - reflections on Náire Orthu

The human body is the physical, material form in which we engage, interact with and receive the world. Our senses mediate these interactions. Take a moment: slide your tongue across the ridged edges of your teeth, graze your fingertips together, follow the air from outside your body as it moves deep into your chest. These bodily experiences and processes coalesce and dissolve into our memory-selves. Here our stories are fluid, transmitted on lace-like neurons. Here our stories rest — those that we hold close to attempt to preserve and carry as our body ages or those that we fragment and estrange.

The body is our morphing witness in time and it is slippery. The intricate lace glass works of Ursula Halpin invite us into an intimate – slippery – embodied memory site.

Sinewy strands of stone-grey glass interweave forming tightly held circular crochet patterns. While other pieces sit, their winding open stitched glass fingers reaching into the space around them, they mark an absence and volatility. These objects draw you in close. I want to trace my fingers across their surfaces and feel their histories. The glass strands loop, interlock and cross paths; they perform a complex material and symbolic dance — negotiating raw vulnerabilities and empowered resilience. Halpin asks us to be present, to be in our bodies, and to remember. Barbara Baird suggests “histories are active constructions of the past which play a key role in constructing the present, both discursively and materially.”¹ *Náire Orthu* re-negotiates and draws on family histories, inherited generational trauma and Irish women’s history through a feminist crafting of glass. These are agential objects.

In Ireland women have been denied abortions, coerced into adoptions and shamed for pregnancies out of wedlock. The denigration of Irish women’s reproductive rights and bodily autonomy is both historical and ongoing. Halpin’s title, *Náire Orthu* meaning ‘shame on you all’ in Gaelic, is a haunting reminder of the othering of women in Ireland. The Catholic Church in Ireland has been an omnipresent figure in education, hospital and pastoral care systems which have in turn seeped into social structures and value systems. Reproductive choice is not a new phenomenon; it shifts in relation to social, cultural and political codes. These shifts impact the lives of women. The contemporary woman’s body is framed in relation to medical, legal and societal structures which have historically and traditionally been dominated by men. In western societies, the medical doctor and

¹ Barbara Baird, “The self-aborting woman,” *Australian Feminist Studies*, no. 13 (1998): 324.

anatomist through history have predominately been male. The lawmaker has historically been male. We live in the inheritance of these men. In countries where laws impede access to abortion, women are fighting, online and in person to challenge, and end restrictive laws and systems.² Halpin, through autobiographical making draws the political and personal together in intimately woven threads.

Throughout Halpin's youth in Ireland she recalls moments sitting in her family home with her mother and sisters knitting, sewing, crocheting; "these craft circle moments were a place of solace where unspoken and unconscious healing occurred." Craft has numerous complex histories, but a unifying thread is the sharing, and exchange of knowledge, often between generations. In the making of these works, as part of her honours research, Halpin returned to Ireland and connected with traditional Irish crafting, and the craft objects made by her mother. Halpin links the crafting of these works with Julia Kristeva's process of 'abjection' as matter, which is from the body but repelled and rejected from the self.³ Drawing on the notion of the abject, repetitive crafting and making becomes an active process of positively dispelling generational and lived trauma out of the body and into the object. This is an empowering process. *Náire Orthu* is a sharing of memories that are held close and carried, while also an intimate recognition of memories which one attempts to estrange. Our bodies carry our memory-layers.

Take a moment: follow the lace-glass threads of Náire Orthu.

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² See: repeal the 8th movements in Ireland, and 2016 protests in Poland.

³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), see chapter one, 'Approaching Abjection.'

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