

IT'S STRANGE TO BE HERE...



# IT'S STRANGE TO BE HERE...

Burren College of Art MFA Graduate Exhibition  
17th April - 1st May, 2021

Brittany Baldwin

Shannon Castor

Ellen Ferrier

Letitia Hill

Aisling Jelinski

Sam Kahn





**It is strange to be here.** The mystery never leaves you alone. Behind your image, below your words, above your thoughts, the silence of another world waits. A world lives within you. No-one else can bring you news of this inner world. Through our voices, we bring out sounds from the mountain beneath the soul. These sounds are words. The world is full of words. There are so many talking all the time, loudly, quietly, in rooms, on streets, on TV, on radio, in the paper, in books. The noise of words keeps what we call the world there for us. We take each other's sounds and make patterns, predictions, benedictions and blasphemies. Each day, our tribe of language holds what we call the 'world' together. Yet the uttering of the word reveals how each of us relentlessly creates. Everyone is an artist. Each person brings sound out of silence and coaxes the invisible to become visible.

Excerpt from Anam Cara (prologue) by John O'Donohue



BIRR COLLEGE OF ART  
NEW TOWER CASTLE

## A message from the President

*It's Strange To Be Here*, the 2021 Burren College of Art MFA exhibition is a showcase for the achievements of graduating MFA students Brittany Baldwin, Ellen Ferrier, Letitia Hill, Aisling Jelinski and Sam Kahn, and MFA Art & Ecology student Shannon Castor. It is an opportunity to celebrate the journey that each has made in the Burren. While the exhibition is what artists present to the world, the journey embedded in the exhibited work represents their real achievement. A postgraduate education in the context of the Burren represents a complete immersion, and through this process our graduates benefit from what Burren College of Art most has to offer: focus, commitment, rigour, resourcefulness and imagination. These qualities have been called into being more acutely than ever this year, as students have had to grapple with the disruption and uncertainty resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. Our graduating class have risen to the challenge, completing significant bodies of work despite these challenges.

In her work Brittany Baldwin links the ephemeral quality of feathers and the delicacy of hand-made paper to the fragile yet persistent nature of memory. Ellen Ferrier brings us into a direct dialogue with the rich materiality of the Burren, using locally sourced materials from its flora and fauna to encourage engagement and reflection. Letitia Hill engages our relationship to the land through her large-scale *Corn Dolly Triptych*, that highlights the importance of establishing new connections to the power of the rural landscape. Aisling Jelinski encourages us to think about how we relate to or feel disconnected from the body in her immersive full-colour murals. Also large-scale, Sam Kahn's photographic portraits are activated by her use of thread and encourage dialogue on our relationship to mental health. An avid runner, Shannon Castor brings her direct, daily engagement with the Burren landscape into her paintings and videos, which convey the raw, elemental power of this unique environment.

I warmly congratulate Brittany, Ellen, Letitia, Aisling, Sam and Shannon on the remarkable work that they have produced under challenging circumstances. May the spirit of adventure that brought them to the Burren College of Art continue to provide momentum in propelling them forward with increased skill, vigour, confidence and success.

Mary Hawkes-Greene  
President, Burren College of Art

## Introduction from the Dean of Academic Affairs

*It's Strange To Be Here* brings together the work of graduating Burren College of Art MFA Studio Art students Brittany Baldwin, Ellen Ferrier, Letitia Hill, Aisling Jelinski and Sam Kahn, and MFA Art & Ecology student Shannon Castor.

In evoking strangeness it has, of course, been a year like no other, and as we have navigated the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on all aspects of our lives this cohort of BCA students has shown tremendous tenacity and resilience in pursuing their studies and generating compelling bodies of work. Brittany Baldwin explores memory and vulnerability through the lens of flight, and the deep personal connection to her family history that flight represents. Often intimate in scale, her use of materials including feathers and hand-made paper underscores a fragile sense of materiality, and a tension between the liberating promise of flight and the vulnerability of the body. Ellen Ferrier also engages materiality in her large-scale, interactive sculptural works. There is an inherent sense of play in these works which encourage movement and resonate with tactility. Using materials that are closely associated with the Burren, such as hazel or sheep's wool, the often ambitious scale of the work poses important questions on how we relate to the materiality of our immediate environment in rural Ireland.

Letitia Hill addresses the idea of the rural and our relationship to land, history and the rituals that have informed this connection for generations. Her large-scale Corn Dollies are at once totemic invocations of the reverence with which we once held our natural resources, signifiers of separation from the land and the collective understanding that once bound us to it, and repositories for potential regeneration and the creation of new modes of connection. In her monumental wall drawings and murals, Aisling Jelinski also revisits the iconography of the past. Images of broken and dismembered bodies derived from Greek and Roman sculpture populate fields of heightened colour. These fragmented forms at once reflect embodiment and disembodiment, foregrounding a tension between knowing and recognition of the body and the dislocated, defamiliarised zone of the uncanny.

Sam Kahn creates large scale photographic self-portraits on bedsheets that incorporate the use of embroidery. Upon close scrutinisation the black and white images reveal themselves to be pixelated and fragmented, the use of thread highlighting a sense of binding that underscores them. Here the thread also operates as a signifier of navigation in relation to the topic of mental health, which has particular poignancy in our current climate of anxiety and precarity. Shannon Castor's paintings and video works



encompass her direct, visceral engagement with the landscape on a daily basis. Running the almost 10 km distance to the college from her home in Fanore, she traverses a mountainous landscape framed by the often harsh, unpredictable weather here in the Burren, particularly in the winter. This daily practice of running informs an embodied approach to her paintings and video works, the heightened sense of the sensory activated through colour and motion.

While embodying diverse approaches to research and practice, the work of each graduating student embraces the immersive potential of the visual imaginary. The two years of the MFA at BCA, located as it is in the heart of the Burren, allows students to dive deeply into their work and reflect on their reasons for making it. As such, the MFA is as much a process of self-discovery as it is a process of artistic enquiry driven forward by the desire to push boundaries and take risks. It has been my pleasure to work with this group of dedicated students here at Burren College of Art, particularly as they have navigated the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic with grace, understanding and resolve. As such, I wish Brittany, Ellen, Letitia, Aisling, Sam and Shannon every future success in their artistic careers. As BCA graduates they are well poised to continue their deep engagement with research as making, creating works that foreground the power of our imaginative capacities to understand, navigate and potentially impact the ever changing terrain of the world around us.

Conor McGrady  
Dean of Academic Affairs, Burren College of Art



**Brittany Baldwin** is from Covington, Louisiana. She graduated from Louisiana State University in 2019, with a BFA. Her interest in the natural world led to an exploration in materiality. She is interested in multimedia fine arts practices, and engages in papermaking, painting and sculpture.



**Shannon Castor** is an oil painter born 1994, in New Jersey and currently residing in Colorado and Ireland. Shannon has been the recipient of multiple scholarships and awards such as the Gamblin Paint Award for Outstanding Achievement in Oil Painting (2018) and the Southwest Art Magazine where she was interviewed for the 21 Under 31 series for the September 2018 issue. Shannon recently completed her MFA in Art and Ecology at the Burren College of Art in Ireland to expand her artistic practice and deepen her knowledge about ecology and the surrounding theories. Her work explores themes of agency, perception and ecological awareness through the act of long distance running.



**Ellen Ferrier** is a spatially-engaged, materially-driven installation artist hailing from the majestic landscape of the Blue Mountains, inland of Sydney, Australia. After completing a Bachelor of Interior Architecture at the University of New South Wales in 2013, she directed her creative inquiry to jewellery and object-design. After receiving mentorship from *Studio Suvira*, a small-scale contemporary wood-fired ceramic and public art studio in the Byron Bay hinterland, she then went on to pursue her Master of Fine Arts at the Burren College of Art in Co. Clare, Ireland.

**Letitia Hill** is an Irish American interdisciplinary artist and researcher based in Connemara, Co. Galway, Ireland. Hill's artistic practice is embedded in the process of rigorous research, navigating local histories, herstories, rituals and mythologies. Collaboration with local craftspeople and traditional makers influenced by new technology plays a critical role in Hill's practice. Hill studied at the Santa Fe University of Art and Design in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where she earned a BFA in Studio Art, was the recipient of the Emerging Artist of New Mexico (2016) and received an MFA from the NUIG, Burren College of Art, Co. Clare, Ireland.



**Aisling Jelinski** is a visual artist from Minnesota, USA. After receiving her BA in Humanities & Fine Arts (Art History concentration) from St. Norbert College, she ventured to Burren College of Art for an artist residency and fell in love. Aisling was awarded the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation grant and she returned to the Burren for her MFA. Working primarily in painting – with some printmaking thrown in for good measure – Aisling likes to hoard trivia with the hope she can make connections between varying pockets of knowledge through her art.



**Sam Kahn** was born in Buffalo, NY, graduated from Washington University in St. Louis, and has recently completed an MFA at the Burren College of Art in Ireland. Their current work investigates the concepts and implications of mental illness and the stigma surrounding this topic through black-and-white self-portraiture. These works use the notions of direct and oppositional gaze, as well as integrated embroidery to discuss and investigate the experience of living with a mental illness.



## áit ait - strange place along the N67

*Laura Ní Fhlaibhín*

In an adjacent field to the road, somewhere between Ballyvaughan and the studios at the college, is the place. To be pinned and flagged and marked and added to google maps for navigation and memory making. The place where she hurtles back to involuntarily, returning most acutely and vividly during bouts of sleeplessness, experienced with increasing regularity during this lockdown, the third one.

She finds herself stumbling, disorientated, with all bearings lost, in a field; the place; with an uneven topography and rabbit holes and fresh cow pats. Jolted out of her darkened room in her increasingly insular, shrinking house share, from her marked bedsheets, stained with pixellated images of ghosts. Frozen flashes of her, seeping into the previous image, blurring and bleeding screenprint inks, distortions.

Considering the strangeness of place and language and slippages and confusions. The place; áit, and strangeness; ait, tied together here in this soggy stoney, insulated field. A zone that measures frequencies and audibility, and registers memory and sees ghosts, and insulates sound somehow, voice and utterance absorbed in felted masses and bulges. She would like to store an image of this place, as she can sense it is already transitioning into monochrome pixels, but her phone has lost battery and coverage.

In spite of her fever haze, she can still clearly distinguish a part of an intestinal tubing system on the grass. In her insomnia delirium, she is more intuitive than before. She starts to suck the tubes, cleaning and clearing and opening a circuit with her pressed lips. She tries to remember the ways to make a plait, haptic ways. Plaits build a support system.

She sets to her task; feather watching and attempting to gather them in categories of flight and love bonds. Loaded memory feathers that bring her back further and in doing so, compound distance. It had been her intention to collect the feathers, as many as she could manage, but a lethargy has settled, her limbs are heavy and stiff, and the feathers cloud and blur and tease, escaping her vision. In these fits of fatigue she longs for a radical switch in frequencies and voltage. She wants to arouse herself and turn herself on with the speed of her own body, bounding over the uneven topography of the field and out onto the N67, turning up the frequency and singing-screaming with and in ecstasy and wonder at her moving body and her panting breaths and sweaty skin and redness. Pulsations of longing for her own well body, from before.

The bouts of fatigue and stillness and shock accelerate and encroach, and in turn deepen the pixellation coverage. She decides that from now on, when this episode calms, she will work in bands of colour, as an antidote to the blurs and pixellation of illness. She will register with line and clarity and exhume ghosts. She will be bold and definite and forensic. She will resist frames and will work quickly, directly, piling and loading images to the wall. She will describe the fabric of ghost shadows, repeat the tubing support systems and map the topography of frescoes. These images and impulses will sustain her later, and will carry her through tunnels.

A friend had suggested an ancient shared ritual, hybridised from many places and times, and tuned to the particular frequency of here, in an effort to ease her increasing debilitation and paralysis. Her friends set to work, in a gesture of care and solidarity, firstly gathering straw from many places and then learning the craft of thatching. Building straw to become benevolent giants, towering goddesses that heal and cure. As her episodes became more ferocious and brutal, their work rate quickened and the goddesses grew to ten feet tall.

BRITTANY

BALDWIN



*Iceland 1992, 2021*  
Watercolour, gouache, feathers

**M**ateriality and memory have a large presence in my practice. The materiality of the work is linked to the process; handling materials such as beeswax and feathers can evoke a meditative state. Requiring a stillness and intentionality, the smell and warmth of beeswax - its changeable nature, the softness and lightness of feathers (working with them you almost forget they are there) and their elemental qualities instill an instinctual appreciation for nature when I engage with them. I work with the inherent structural form of the feathers, intuitive to the manipulation of forms, and engage within pre-existing structures inherently found in the materials. The delicate and changeable nature of feathers and beeswax leads to a heightened awareness of the material.

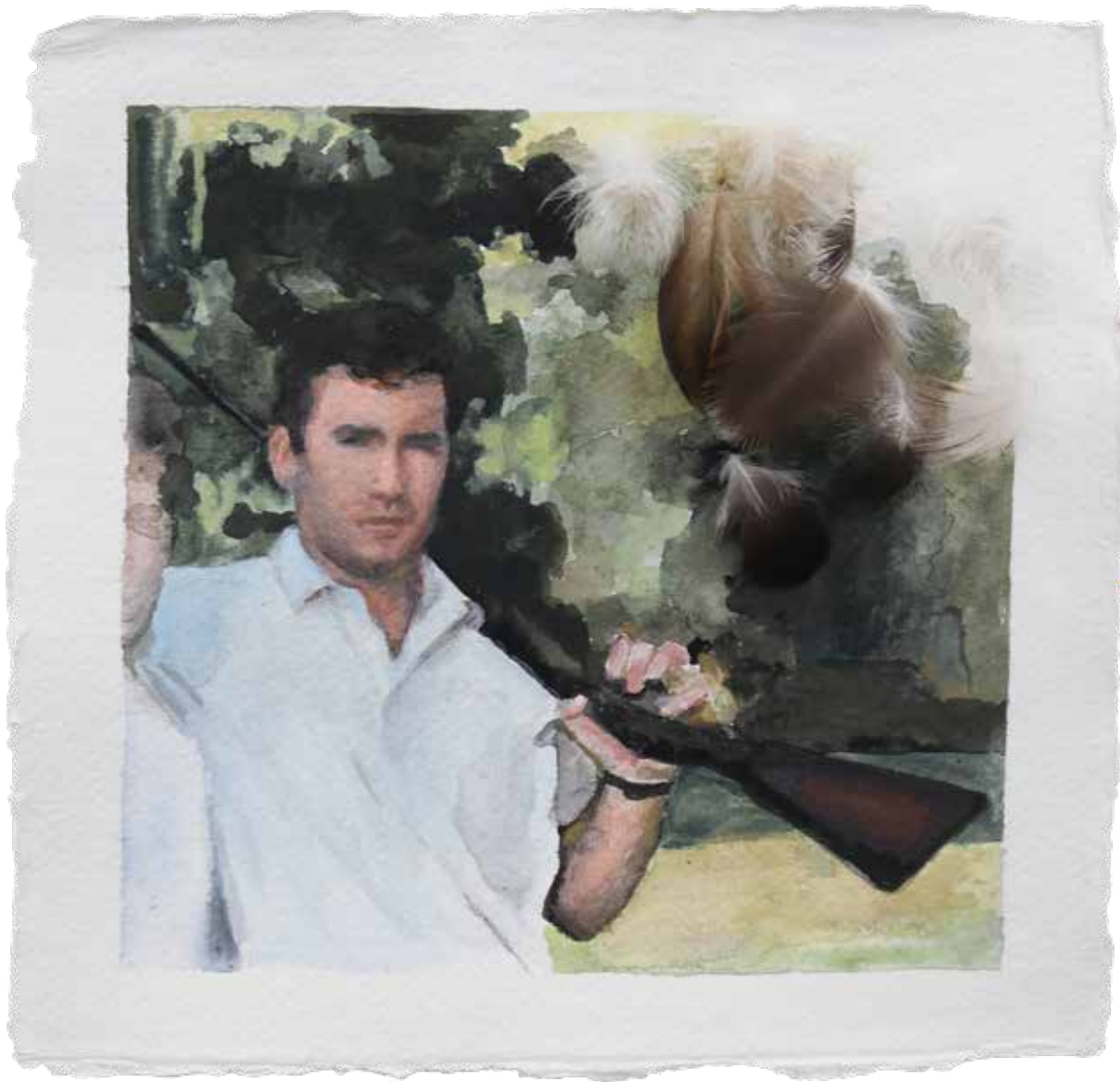
Memory can be malleable, fuzzy or distorted, creating a space in between reality and the ever changing nature of our thoughts and imagination. I'm compelled to investigate the connective potential of memory and enquiry of the natural world. I have drawn from my own memory, family photos, and the history of aviation in my family; I make intentional connections such as my love of the natural world and my memory of my father (a pilot), and bind them together through the concept of biomimicry in the structure of an airplane.

I've recently become interested in exploring muddled memory following my seizure last year or as the doctor put it "an electrical storm in the brain." The strange and distorted world that I found myself in after the seizure is difficult to describe, but I would like to emulate the effect through my work. The materiality of feathers lends itself well to the soft, blurred effect of scattered memory, or familiarity.

Silence can have an echo of spirituality. I hope to generate a sense of stillness and quiet in the work when I enter into these meditative processes. The materials I engage with have their own rich histories from which I explore memory, both my own personal memory and that of the wider currents of the world. I hope to create a space of reflection and quiet for the viewer.

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*Southeast of Disorder, 2021*  
Watercolour, gouache, feathers





*Laurelle's Plane, 2021*  
Handmade paper with beeswax, gold leaf and earl grey tea



*Feather Bound, 2021*  
Mixed media

SHANNON  
CASTOR



*Mt. Gleninagh, 2021*  
Oil on panel

Running is an amplified phenomenological discipline. It is a high voltage experience. At times, it is a wading through figurative and physical wind, rain, snow, and occasionally hail. It is the genesis of my artistic process. Through oil painting I recreate what it is like to run and the internal processes that occur when pushing the body to its mental and physical limits.

Running is how I engage with the environment, how I view myself as an organism within a situated experience, connected to the more-than-human world. For me, running and perception are two in the same. Perception is a state of nuance, an active place of receiving information. Perception is what my work is about.

Moving beyond traditional landscape painting, my work is an amalgamation or emotional stew of what I see. Running is a cinematic experience of my body pushing through space. A tunnel of land with images storing in my periphery. These stored images are combined with my photography to produce a painting – a hybrid image of what was there, what was imagined, and what was remembered.

I use colour as a signifier of this visual combination. It is not a photorealistic depiction, but emblematic of how I process the environment. My palette is constantly swerving, transposing, and shape shifting, echoing my internal to external journeys between dusk and day, subjectivity and objectivity, unreal and real, perception and outcome.

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February 23, 2021  
Night Run, Second Commute - film still

Running Jacket and Shoes Details, 2021



*Installation Details, 2021*

E L L E N  
F E R R I E R



It is my tactile engagement with the world that lures me into ever-deepening relationships and paths of exploration, both as an artist and as a human being. I relish the experience of the body as my primary tool of perception, of learning and of guidance.

Prior studies in architecture, wood-fired ceramics and bodywork practices have cultivated a sensitivity and appreciation of materiality, spatial relations and the power of mindful touch. In essence, these are all acts of encounter, meeting grounds for self and world.

Enhancing awareness of these moments of connection and exchange is what drives my studio practice. I create material playscapes that entice bodily participation and sensorial engagement, enkindling innate curiosity and cultivating awareness of momentary experience. Animal, vegetable and mineral combine with a sort of repulsive magnetism.

*Flesh of the World* presents a conversation of materials discarded, obsolete and undervalued, revealing itself as a ritual gathering of elementals. Locally sourced sheep wool and intestines is contrasted with hand-harvested hazelwood and reclaimed copper pipes – once prized for their material properties and utilised accordingly, these materials are now effectively worthless. Wool costs more to salvage than sell, intestines are used as filler in animal food, remnant building materials are cast aside and abandoned, and in the Burren, hazel encroachment is considered problematic. Through slow and tender acts of care, I transform these materials from the quotidian to the curious, the forsaken to the flaunted, presenting them as something other than what they are, or what we know them to be. In so doing, I call for their reappraisal - enkindling renewed wonderment of, and correlation with the elemental world.

*Flesh of the World* is an invitation to touch and be touched, a gesture of intimacy, and a lure back to the elusive present moment. It serves to acquaint us with materials of the land and of the body, celebrating these lapsed wonders of the earth, yet simultaneously invoking their revival.

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*Flesh of the World, 2021*

Locally sourced raw sheep wool, sheep intestines, hand harvested hazel, reclaimed copper

LETITIA  
HILL



My artistic practice is embedded in a process of rigorous research, navigating local histories, herstories, rituals and mythologies. Collaboration with local craftspeople and traditional makers plays a critical role in my practice, influencing the process of creation and material selection of each work. New technology inspires my perspectives and reinterpretation of traditional methods. My installations pay homage to people past, present and future, celebrating the human condition's universality and commemorating lives lived and tales untold. Through an interdisciplinary combination of painting, sculpture, photography, video and installation, created from a deep sense of empathy, with the intention for providing nourishing and safe environments for stories to be told and heard.

*The Corn Dolly Triptych* embodies the frameworks and methodologies that surround ritual. The triptych shadows the legacy of the harvest ritual through thousands of years of human evolution. The first corn dolly, Renenutet, represents the Egyptian goddess of the harvest – traced back to the tombs of Egypt's 18th Dynasty. The second dolly, Taitiu, the great Celtic earth goddess, honours earth's elemental force and innate abundance. The third dolly, aka Robot Maria, is the radical goddess of the harvest future, imbuing modern industry elements whilst also alluding to a restrictive political, economic, social and environmental paradigm that we currently face.

*The Corn Dolly Triptych* resides in the Temple of the Harvest. In attendance at the Harvestum are members of the Cult of the Corn Dolly, ushing the way for both pilgrims and worshippers from far and wide.

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# ANISLING JELINSKI



*Pergamonium, 2021*  
Acrylic, 37' 4" x 4'

In my studio practice, I sift through pockets of knowledge, making connections between themes of disembodiment, dissociation, the uncanny, and Ancient Greek and Roman sculpture to better understand various aspects of the human experience and my own mind-body connection.

The uncanny is inherently linked to the body. I illustrate fragmented and fragmentary Ancient Greek and Roman sculpture in my paintings to investigate dissociation, the bodies-in-pieces serving as a metaphor for disembodiment. There is a tendency to gloss over the broken state of the sculptures, mentally filling in the gaps rather than analyzing the work as it exists today. Likewise – despite its proliferation in the post-Enlightenment world – the uncanny is somewhat under-researched, with popular discussion focusing on the most obvious displays rather than more subtle ones. I am intrigued by this seeming lack of critical analysis, raising questions about the uncanny and fragmented ancient sculpture in my work.

My palette is highly saturated, with a noted use of rich blues, jewel-tones, and deep black, recalling the polychromatic truth of these ancient sculptures. I avoid any pigment that might be interpreted as stone or flesh as a way to focus on the fragmentary nature of the figures without evoking the abject. I juxtapose mindful, detailed illustration of these forms with intuitive mark-making techniques and elements of chance.

Artmaking is an act of embodiment, allowing me to physically process that which is chiefly mental. By employing what I know of the uncanny, my work creates lingering questions and continual contemplation – what is seen versus what is hidden, what is overlooked or left unaddressed, and a reflection on the experience of the uncanny and (dis)embodiment.

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*Untitled (Agora), 2021*  
Acrylic, 16' 5" x 11'





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My current project intentionally addresses the notion of stigma through the use of black-and-white self-portraiture, while employing strategies of direct and oppositional gaze. I've found that my indistinct image allows for a humanoid space that viewers are then able to project themselves onto, and these images will always remain visibly human with a hint or more of directed gaze, but I do not intend to make many of these images identifiable.

The process of embroidery directly mirrors the process of mental health recovery. The act of embroidery is meticulous, intentional, and requires continuous repeated decisions. Each stitch is placed with forethought and a greater understanding of where this tiny element fits into the larger piece. It is possible to picture what the end product might be, and it requires uncountable tiny stitches before it is realised. The same can be said for mental health recovery. It is possible to imagine what being mentally healthy might feel like, and to even experience it in small moments, but there are countless daily decisions that must be made, innumerable realizations and introspections that allow one to reach the point of mental health. Each decision or stitch is inconsequential in and of itself, but taken together, they form the creation of a work of art or the birth of a stable person.

It is my hope that these photographs/embroideries act as an instigation of meaningful conversation and understanding, both for those that identify with this experience and those who are personally unfamiliar.



3 AM, *awake*, 2021  
Film photograph printed on bedsheet, embroidery thread



7 AM, *still awake*, 2021  
Film photograph printed on bedsheet, embroidery thread



2 PM, *exhausted*, 2021  
Film photograph printed on bedsheet, embroidery thread

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To our beloved family and friends who helped us through times good and bad, with smiles and love and laughter. Without you we wouldn't be here.

Special thanks to Patrick T. Murphy for his warmth and willingness to share words of wisdom and experience. Reminding us that our impact is so much more than a singular perspective.

Also to Laura Ní Fhlaibhín for leading us through strange places with woven words of resonance.

To the community of Ballyvaughan for putting up with our peculiar eccentricities and welcoming us into your beautiful corner of paradise.

In loving memory of Mattie Nilan.

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