



Hair's breadth

An enlightening exhibition loosely ties together its strands, leaving the viewer with plenty to untangle. By *Cristin Leach*

In an alcove near the altar in the former church that is now the Highlanes Gallery in Drogheda, projected words are scrolling by. "Slight discomfort may be expected," they say. "The skin may turn pink." The words are accompanied by the enticing sound of Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin singing *Je T'Aime... Moi Non Plus*. Gainsbourg warbles as Birkin pants her way towards

THE CRITICS

a climax that resulted in the song being taken off the airwaves. *Je T'Aime* was denounced by the Vatican, but reached No 2 in the Irish charts. The words and the music are artist Abigail O'Brien's contribution to an exhibition about hair. Her installation *Natural Wax*, conceived as a student piece in 1995 but never shown before, features the

Parting glance Bunello's *Girl with Wig*, left, and Clarke's *Down to the Central Earth*, his *Proper Scene*, 1913

instructions from a packet of hair-removal wax, and that famously breathy song, on repeat. As Birkin gasps and Gainsbourg sings "Je vais, je vais et je viens," the soundtrack turns the words on screen into something absurd, and vice versa. "Oh mon amour," says Birkin, as we read: "Always test an area of your arm or leg first."

Over the course of six minutes we are told wax "should not be used on the elderly"; on sunburnt, chapped, sore or loose skin, varicose veins, moles, warts. The text is utterly unsexy; the relationship between the instructions and the song an acute reminder of the chasm between bodily reality and sexual fantasy. *Natural Wax* is an exploration of pain and seduction, a questioning of social norms and expectations (for women, in particular), and a slightly bitter joke. It's a simple but clever addition to a knotty kind of show.

Bristle: Hair and Hegemony gathers, in an unexpectedly wide sweep, artworks and some artefacts connected by their depiction, use or examination of hair. It contains a Rembrandt etching from 1635 (*The Great Jewish Bride*), prints and drawings by Albrecht Dürer, William Hogarth, James Barry, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Harry Clarke, alongside work by O'Brien, Alice Maher, Andrew Folan, Cristina Bunello and Kathy Prendergast. There are 37 exhibiting artists, including a good number of emerging names.

Prendergast made one of the most iconic pieces of 1990s Irish art, and it has a fitting place here. *The End and the Beginning* is a spool wound with three generations of human hair: that of the artist's mother, her own and her son's. It is a memento mori, an almost macabre kind of object, a record of their DNA, their presence and their connection. It is also no more and no less than a wooden spool wrapped in lengths of human debris.

Hair is precious while on our heads, or if cut for a purpose: to be gifted, kept or sold. Hair is waste when it is



chopped, or falls out. How we dress, groom or adorn hair has always been an essential part of cultural currency and identity.

O'Brien is one of the few artists who gets close to the bikini line. The all-pervasive sound of her installation colours our encounters with Bharti Parmar's *Shag*, an intricately hand-knotted rug of 90% human hair that

“Implied intimacy and resistance to decay make it ideal material

is both softly enticing and somehow repulsive. It is the artist's contention that she felt it come "alive" as she made it in 2012.

Kieran Moore offers full-frontal, spread-eagled female nudity, combined with a strangely tender-looking gesture, in a small painting that takes its title from the Old Testament Song of Solomon. *An Heap of Wheat Set* about with Lilies (2010) hangs to brilliant effect next to Beatrice Glenavy's fairy-tale-romance-style *Affectionate Couple* drawing, made a century before Moore's composition.

Locks sent to lovers, baby curls kept in tins, hair forcefully shorn: each piece in this show offers a reminder of the weight of meaning associated with this ordinary, extraordinary stuff. In myth

and tradition, hair has stood as a metaphorical source of human strength or at least a visible external manifestation of it. To remove a person's hair against their will is to reduce their humanity, their status; to induce shame, a punishment. Yet to chop it yourself can be regarded as a statement of strength, self-determination, mourning, withdrawal from the world, or a cry for help.

This show contains a lock of Queen Marie Antoinette's hair, and a plate of curled tresses cut from the head of Irish novice Ellen Gaffney as she entered a convent in the 1930s. Among hair's attractions as a memento are its implied intimacy and resistance to decay. This also makes it an ideal art material.

Joanne Proctor hand-stitched hair collected from her hairbrush to make *Drawing Breath and Nest* (2013), two grisly looking anatomical drawings of bronchial tubes and the female reproductive system. *Glove* (2013) by Jane Giffney contains human hair embroidered into a Carrickmacross lace glove, effectively unsettling notions of decorum and femininity.

Bristle includes a selection of exquisitely made 18th- and 19th-century portrait miniatures from the National Gallery of Ireland collection, with locks of hair encased on the reverse. This is the hair of men, trapped under glass alongside their watercolour portraits on ivory, which were offered as keepsakes, and often worn as jewellery. They are a sudden reminder that there is not enough male hair in this show. East Meets West, Kiran Riaz's 2016 piece about beards, is conceptually sound but not visually compelling enough in this setting.

The show has already attracted record numbers to the gallery. It is a shining example of how works in the national collections can be shared for curated exhibitions. There are also items on loan from the Chester Beatty Library, Irish Museum of Modern Art, the Hugh Lane gallery and the British Council Collection.

Although it includes Harry Clarke's 1913 *Rape of the Lock* illustrations, and David Hockney's for *Fairy Tales of the Brothers*

Grimm, this exhibition is essentially a visual thesis that aims to take hair away from fairy-tale notions and romantic associations and drag it into hairier territory. Cristina Bunello's excellent, subversive *Girl With Wig* (2014) painting is here. There is a rare, ethereal example of Glenavy's early sculpture, a plaster piece called *Glendalough* (1904). One of Alice Maher's *Ombre* drawings, another seminal

work of late 20th-century Irish art, hangs floor to ceiling; a silent, hirsute female form.

Hegemony means domination, supremacy, power. This show explores the notion of hair as a weapon, a method of control, a means of manipulation and self-expression, and an object of love.

Bristle: Hair and Hegemony is at Highlanes Gallery, Drogheda, until Sept 23

SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER | 2017

SEPTEMBER

OWEN WINGRAVE
In association with Opera Collective Ireland & Académie de l'Opéra National de Paris
AN ORPHEUS BY BENJAMIN BRITTEN, CONDUCTED BY STEPHEN GARLOV

Saturday 9 September: Lime Tree Theatre, Limerick @ 8pm
Wednesday 13 September: The Everyman, Cork @ 8pm
Friday 16 September: O'Reilly Theatre, Dublin @ 7.30pm (Fringe Festival)
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SEPTEMBER

WORLD PREMIERE
Gabor Tamas Nagy Conductor: Alex Petrus Percussion
A WORLD PREMIERE BY SAN PERKIN ALONGSIDE ICONIC WORKS BY ELGAR AND BRAHMS

Wednesday 27 September: National Concert Hall, Dublin @ 8pm
Thursday 28 September: CIT Cork School of Music, Cork @ 8pm
Friday 29 September: Cork Orchestral Society University Concert Hall, Limerick @ 8pm

OCTOBER

BACH ON THE ROAD
Peter Whelan Director/Harpichord
Christian Elliot & Ailie Nic Ahtlahti Cello
A FEAST OF BAROQUE CLASSICS FROM BACH, VIVALDI & PURCELL

Thursday 19 October: Glór, Ennis @ 8pm
Friday 20 October: Monkstown Parish Church (in association with the Pavilion Theatre) Monkstown, Co. Dublin @ 8pm
Saturday 21 October: An Grianán, Letterkenny @ 8pm
Sunday 22 October: The Model, Sligo Con Brio Sligo Music Series @ 8pm

NOVEMBER

MOSTLY MENDELSSOHN
Jörg Widmann Principal Conductor/Clarinet
Carolin Widmann Violin
MENDELSSOHN'S MUCH LOVED VIOLIN CONCERTO IN E MINOR WITH SCHUBERT'S SYMPHONY NO. 9 'THE GREAT'

Wednesday 15 November: University Concert Hall, Limerick @ 8pm
Thursday 16 November: St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin @ 8pm

DECEMBER

THE BEST OF CHRISTMAS
Katherine Hunka Director/Violin Ailish Tynan Soprano
CHRISTMAS CLASSICS FROM EUROPE & THE NORDICS

Thursday 14 December: St. Mary's Cathedral, Limerick @ 8pm
Friday 15 December: St. Paul's Church, Mullingar @ 8pm (Mullingar Arts Centre)

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