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

Hair's breadth

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

THE CRITICS

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 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 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 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.

> **"Implied intimacy and resistance to decay make it ideal material**

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