



Dr Róisín Kennedy, Aoife Ruane and Niamh McGuinne inspecting Bharti Parmar's Shag carpet



FRUIT STALL.

Fruit Stall, from Darley's Comic Prints, dating from 1777



Affectionate Couple by Beatrice Glenavy



The Rape of the Lock by Harry Clarke

# Let the hair sit

A fascinating new exhibition in Drogheda takes a sweeping overview of hair through the ages

Ros Drinkwater  
Fine Arts

**C**rowning glory or utter anathema? What part of the human anatomy has caused us more grief than hair? Men weep for the lack of it. Women face the shock of spotting the first grey, and in later years, the battle with those tough little devils that sprout on the chin.

A new exhibition, *Bristle: Hair and Hegemony*, provides the big picture. Given

the amount of time hair has been around, it's a hefty undertaking, but curators Dr Róisín Kennedy, Niamh McGuinne, and Highlanes Gallery director Aoife Ruane, have tackled the project with the dedication of humpbacks nailing the sardine run – no follicle has escaped their scrutiny. The idea for an exhibition was McGuinne's. "What got the ball rolling was when Niamh told me about the saint who miraculously grew a beard to avoid marrying the man her father had picked out for her," said Kennedy.

Kennedy, in turn, took the idea to Ruane; and two years on, the result is a heady brew of scientific, political, literary and aesthetic contexts in which hair plays a central role.

"Early on, the decision was made to have both historical and contemporary works," said Kennedy. "Once research got under way, what became very evident was how the representation of hair has

been used by artists through the centuries to comment on society, from Hogarth in the 18th century, to 21st-century artists exploring feminist issues.

"So, in addition to commissioning new work and borrowing a range of contemporary art from emerging and established artists, the exhibition presents art from major public collections, the National Gallery of Ireland, Chester Beatty Library, Imma, Dublin City Gallery, the Hugh Lane, the British Council Collection, the Arts Council of Ireland and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, as well as the Drogheda Municipal Art Collection and private collections."

Spanning five centuries, exhibits range from representational art (James Barry's *King Lear* and Cordelia, Harry Clarke's illustrations for *The Rape of the Lock* and Beatrice Glenavy's *Affectionate Couple*) to 21st-century surrealism (Kieran Moore's *Scary Solstice* pencil sketch; Helen Chadwick's gruesome *The Birth of Barbie*; Jane Giffney's *Glove*, constructed from human hair and Carrickmacross lace; and *Shag*, a human hair shagpile carpet, hand-knotted using traditional wig-making techniques by Baharti Parmar).

Adding a touch of levity is Ana Maria

Pacheco's screenprint series, *Hairy Legs* of the Queen of Sheba.

Hair as a symbol of social standing is portrayed by Matthew and Mary Darley's hand-coloured prints that show the absurdity of female wigs that could be more than two feet high.

They couldn't be washed, so they swarmed with insects; and fatalities occurred when wigs made contact with candlelit chandeliers.

Early 20th-century popular culture gets a look in, with picture postcards of Circassian ladies whose excessively curly hair made them star attraction in circuses and traveling fairs.

Bringing us up to date, *Natural Wax*, a specially commissioned video by Abigail O'Brien, reveals the physical pain and risk involved in the currently fashionable process considered by many women today as an essential precursor to sexual activity.

The seven Brazilian sisters who imported the procedure to Manhattan in 1987 must have spent three decades laughing all the way to the bank, but I can't see a place reserved for them in heaven.

*Bristle: Hair and Hegemony*, Highlanes Gallery, Drogheda, Co Louth; [highlanes.ie](http://highlanes.ie)



Mettlesomeness by Saidbhín Gibson