**Middens & Nightscapes.**

Glancing up at the sun by accident, the intensity of its light forces you to look away. You will find that your now closed eyes retain a lurid snapshot of its fierce presence; a lingering trace, not the sun itself, but still, in its persistence, a stark and glowing reminder. Both of the current shows in Luan appear to me to be considering, very much like the sun-gazers shocked retinas, the varying ways that traces might be left, like these fading green dots and streaks dancing behind our eyelids, this remaining glow lasts long enough to be considered, a slowly fading temporal snapshot.

The two exhibitions: MIDDEN and Nightscapes, sit side by side across the entirety of Luans’ three gallery spaces, independent of each other, yet with a serendipity of juxtaposition. They feel connected, complimentary, with the subject matter of both appearing to address a vision of a nostalgia of future archaeology; wherein the idea begins to emerge that the artist is not just the documentarian of now, nor of some recent past, they also position them as potential prophets, reading the signs and foretelling the downward path of progress. Their presentations are redolent of some of the sci-fi writers who arose after the initial explosive advancements of the industrial revolution, writers simultaneously referencing an imagined future and the dark superstitions and fears of the past, where they proposed the idea that ultimately, enlightenment might be consumed as fuel for the machine. (Ref.1).

These artists have taken the time to tell us, in these exhibitions, what the future archaeologist might pine to unearth, the vague links, hints, to how we somewhat nonchalantly allowed for the anthropocene to become an extinction event, whilst we lost patience with the dull rainbow of choice our recycling bins presented; too busy doing, to think. These two exhibitions contain, in some ways a proposed glimpse of the grim remnants of our darkening realities.(Ref.2).

In the Library gallery Ugo Ricciardis’ nightscape images hint at the fleeting presence of humans, their smear of light is there, they blink brightness at a past glow. The ribbons of light stand like scars on the nature of night, they exist to show where people were. A photo struggles to exist without a photographer, yet the traces of humanity are nebulous, they seem more like records of what had happened, rather than what was happening, an elongated moment of human activity, now scorched into the image, like the retinal smudge, but not fading, held, now, perpetually in vision. The people in them stand vague, almost gone, but not quite. In the large images, like Greenman, there is also a sense that we are anthropomorphising and adding structure to nature out of a desire to identify with it. Even the dancer of Fyah Dance moves back and forth through time, advancing and reversing, in an almost familiar ritual, a sense of a vision of lost history.

The MIDDEN Collective: Niamh McGuinne, Sarah Edmonson and Mary Martin, themselves simultaneously gesture towards, and present their works very much as middens. Unveiling discarded remnants, material, chemical, genetic, dug up, unearthed; they are there to be considered and examined. They show a future consideration of a ’Now’ rapidly becoming a ‘What used to be’. Their work shows us how the memory of the present might appear in the future.

The lurid plasticity and sparkle of Sarahs’ worms, rubberised antropomorphs, initially appear like familiar living creatures, the devourers of decay and necrosis, yet they are manufactured from the materials of anthropocene doom, initially hinting at life, they are revealed to be human-made, they mimic organic life, but, in their artifice, also mock it, they become relics of a hope in a hopeless way, they outlive life.

Sarah places them in a moonscape, using the barrenness of our celestial companion as something of an avatar for a dead-earth landscape, proposing the craters and ridges as worm-casts, the midden-reflecting traces of prior activity, and in some ways proposing, once again, a speculative archaeological tableau. When there is almost nothingness, is anything possible? What might then dare to persist? And how will it be spoken of, if even language can disintegrate and dematerialise?

There is often scant comfort in speculation, especially when it is grounded in research and knowledge. The artists in Midden know their subjects, they have looked, they have considered and the lessons in their conclusions may sit somewhat uncomfortably upon our sensibilities. So now, Sarahs’ squirming life forms seem fleshy and queasy, slick and uneasy, embodying the gnawing fears of decay, of death, of the loss of flesh, and the loss of an identifiable world. But, in the instance of realisation, when it dawns that they are actually an artifice, the queasiness can easily be subsumed by a fear. There is a revelation of doom in the moment where plastic worms apparently squirms into life, only for them to then be shown, through the familiarity of their machined uniformity, to be uncanny and artificial; and so, the moon is not cheese or an inviting sand-scape, it is just a dead rocky neighbour onto which we have always projected our hopes and imaginings.

Marys’ paintings propose for us a hybridised future, human identity becoming simply a genetic trace, present and identifiable, but no longer a pure dominant. The forced change of the anthropocene is rinsing us away on tides of petroleum rainbows, translucent husks of mermaid purses and glittering fish scales. Perhaps she is sketching out a design for survival, proposing genetic hybrids, like lungfish, decade sleeping burrowing frogs, dessicated tardigrades (the creatures who present closest the possible capacity to survive Sarahs’ moon): the emergent hybrid taxons, pushing up through the detritus of technological failure, novel chimeras, thriving in their adapted newness.(Refs.3,4,5). Maybe amongst these merpeople stand the archaeologists who will despair at the wilful blindness that informs the vast plastic middens that will stand as our feet of Ozymandias. (Ref. 6).

Niamh, almost central to the pure definition of the Midden, has dissected the idea of it as it truly is, the classic mound of discarded shell, telling the consuming tale of the costal dwellers, but yet, she renders them in ink and paper, and in the strange materials of current technology. She recreates them, and in doing so, she might just be telling us that this is what we are doing; we consume so much of the nature that surrounds us that what remains is the recreations we make in their absence. Once again, like the glanced sun, all that is really left is the suggestion of what once was.

I found both fear and beauty in the two adjacent shows, an aesthetic willingness to cut open the midden-hump and be receptive to whatever might transpire, to document what has been, as a signpost for what might yet come. It is not fully prophetic, but more like a reading of the signs. Meteorologists, sailors and farmers alike, seeing the clouds gather, noticing the wind pushing up under the leaves, know what storm might come next. It all suggests, perhaps, a phasing out of humans, leaving only crude artifacts and plastic shells. I wonder, if perhaps, Marys’ fish-people archaeologists will foreswear carbon dating, and look for the vague lettering of best before dates amongst the persistent plastic middens.

**Paul Roy. 2 November, 2022.**

References:

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