

sculpture

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DUBLIN

Patricia Cronin

The LAB Gallery

Even the crudest structure or site can become a shrine. Once connected to an item or individual deemed sacred, it transfigures into a space conducive to contemplation and rituals of remembrance—activities that keep the enshrined, in some way, alive. Patricia Cronin subverts traditional notions of a shrine to memorialize something that is handled, globally, with systemic disdain and a chronic lack of care. The traumatized female body struggles for visibility across cultures and religions while its perils go largely undocumented, unaccounted for, simply unseen. Interrogative as well as commemorative, in its third iteration since the 2015 Venice Biennale, “Shrine for Girls” continued to counter this invisibility. Composed of fabric heaped atop industrial wooden crates, the three sculptures are substantially bigger than a human being—they confront us, commanding approach but also submission. Coming closer, the



TOP: JEAN-SÉBASTIEN DUCHENE / BOTTOM: ROS KAVANAGH, COURTESY THE LAB GALLERY

inter-play between the solidity of the crates and the malleability of the fabric becomes more conspicuous. Coming closer again, we realize that the fabric is not simply cloth, but clothing, and that each pile contains a small photograph. Making a chromatic link between the clothes and the images, which depict girls, we

understand that the pile of saris represents two Indian cousins who were gang-raped and lynched in 2014; the hijabs represent 276 Nigerian Chibok schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram in 2014 (more than a hundred of whom are still missing); and the aprons recall the “fallen women” sequestered

inside the Magdalene laundries prevalent in Ireland (and also present in the U.S. and the U.K. from 1767 until 1996). Bringing a material aspect to feminine absence, producing a site of visibility that resists the “invisibling” of female trauma, is, of course, highly political—as is the juxtaposition of the world’s three major religions, linked together through their gendered violence.

Acting as referents to the victims as well as to the ideologies that enabled their deaths, the sculptures possess an affect of slow release: initially unobtrusive in their softness, the clothes carry a visceral charge. Empty as they are

of bodies, they force us to ask who is missing. Where are they now? Are they coming back? The crates are similarly unsettling, with their evocation of concealment, trafficking, and transport. Literally, they support an absence, and more metaphorically, they embody a willingness—ingrained and implicit—to let these bodies disappear from view and collective consciousness. The LAB, which hosted the Dublin installation of *Shrine for Girls*, is, after all, only a few minutes’ walk from Sean McDermott Street, where Ireland’s last Magdalene laundry closed in 1996. The installation’s proximity to

a building where women were hidden in plain sight reiterates our complicity and disallows contemplation as a passive act. Instead, it becomes destabilizing, obliging us to query if anything has changed since the laundries’ inception or closure: Does the brutalizing, murdering, and absenting of female bodies mean anything different today than it has at any other moment in history? Does it mean anything different in Ireland than in India or Nigeria? The repeated, and continuing, fact of empty clothing, of feminine attire devoid of bodies, would suggest not.

—Sue Rainsford