

## To Begin Somewhere - On Ciara O'Connor's 'Grief's Current Shape'

By Cristín Leach

"To unravel a torment you must begin somewhere," wrote the French artist Louise Bourgeois in 1999. The words, produced as part of a series of prints called *What is the Shape of this Problem?*, were accompanied by a hand-drawn image of small, red circles, made with repeat gestures, crowded, busy and thread-like, multiplying and jostling towards the edge of the page. Those overlapping circles are not entirely unlike some of the layered loops formed by free motion machine embroidery in Irish artist Ciara O'Connor's thread-based works. O'Connor's art is remarkable not only in the ways it captures colour, texture, shape and form as textile, but because it also reveals that here might be another way to begin to unravel a problem: by drawing a line with thread, by treating a torment with stitch.

At Garter Lane Arts Centre in Waterford City, O'Connor's exploration of grief invites you in slowly, gently, with hand and machine-stitched drawings of iconic brands of toothpaste, perfume, crisps, alcohol, toys and condiments, set side-by-side with everyday unbranded things: gloves, brown bread, peanuts in their shells, a tea cup, a bowl of soup. Each object seems familiar, but it is clear that they have been chosen because they are both particular in their individual significance and, universal in their everyday nature. A trio of linked compositions, stitched onto unbleached raw linen canvas, *By Numbers I, II and III* are delicate and definite, ephemeral and intensely coloured. Some of the objects are stitched in outline only, others are richly textured as O'Connor exploits the enticingly shiny, jewel-like nature of silky embroidery thread.

She describes them as still life compositions, but they are a kind of portrait too: of her father who died in 2021, her mother who died in 2016, and her brother who died in 2012. They are also intentional, durational meditations in stitch; an attempt, as O'Connor puts it "to slow down and sit with my grief". In the gallery, they become not only about the artists' personal losses but the broader experience of mourning a loved one. The objects depicted set in motion a string of associations that spool out from the particularities of her individual subjects, making space for recollections of grief and loss in the viewer too. Everyone we love leaves object memory associations behind when they are gone, and grieving is a process that takes many forms, as indicated by the show's knowing title, 'Grief's Current Shape'.

O'Connor's first child was born the year her mother died. Having briefly studied painting, she had abandoned her artistic practice for years and travelled for work. Returning to Ireland, she began to stitch because it suited life with a baby: hand embroidery can be picked up and put down, and it is portable and cheap. Then she discovered free motion machine sewing. Now she uses both, working on the image from the back and the front of the fabric, refining the possibilities of both techniques.

Her first solo show after returning to art was 'Brazen' at Garter Lane Arts Centre in 2022. It was an exhibition of work about consent and her experience of sexual assault, elements of which travelled to the Crawford Art Gallery in Cork as part of 'Following Threads', a 2024 curated group show featuring art by Irish artists including Dorothy Cross, Jennifer Trouton, Isabel Nolan and Ailbhe Ní Bhriain. O'Connor said of the 'Brazen' works, "Some stitches fortify, some protect and

some house secrets." It's no accident that she is deploying a medium traditionally regarded as female.

In her hands, a kind of long-stitched cross-hatch has the capacity to depict shading. At times it is almost painterly in its effect. There is an exciting combination of tradition and newness in this 21<sup>st</sup> century take on the art of memento mori. The surfaces in the *By Numbers* works shimmer and glow against the natural linen, revealing unexpected facets and planes: the crinkle of a crisp packet, the light on the curve of a cognac bottle, the shadow on the side of a perfume box. What is left unfinished or undone speaks of the things that cannot be finished when a person is gone, how the pattern they've been weaving of themselves in the world just stops, mid-stitch. The outline-only of a breadboard renders it a ghost object, present but semi-invisible, fading in or fading out. There is audacious determination, together with risk and failure, inherent in this way of making an image. It is not like drawing: there's little room to correct an error. It is not like painting: there is no opportunity to layer over or cover up.

This level of faith, gamble and trust in the process becomes more apparent as you continue around the gallery. On the walls, a series of free motion machine-stitched portraits take their compositions from old family photos, impressions defined by the tightrope dance of achieving a likeness by ploughing a needle through cloth in one brave, unstoppable line. They resemble handkerchiefs stretched flat under glass and stitched with imprints of memory, love and loss. The final one in the series is called *Lovebirds*, a beautiful thready kissing scene, dated by the man's full beard and hair and by the width of his collar and tie; a cigarette in one hand, a drink in the other, his lover on his knee. From the cues all around we can presume they are O'Connor's parents, two people entirely wrapped up in each other, kissing in plain sight. Next to *Lovebirds*, the same man with a toddler on his lap is laughing surrounded by laundry. The title, *Ara, What Would Be Wrong With One More?* is a reference to family lore about how the artist O'Connor became the late-planned one-more-kid in question. Her mum is stylish, mischievous and cool in *Doris With Cigarette and Monkey*, based on a photo taken in a London pub in the 1960s. O'Connor mines the visual records of the family archives to capture her parents as young, carefree, adventurous people, perhaps as she never really knew them.

And then, in the middle of the room like someone putting their foot down, a prosthetic leg, slim and neat in its upright, freestanding incongruity and stitched all over with the most beautiful, eye-bendingly realistic tree-green moss, lichen and leaves. The foot is covered in a peaty brown gossamer sheath of circular stitches, like lace. The sole of the foot treads flat onto a rusted steel circular base, a monument to something important, a pseudo-human mechanical object become one somehow with nature and art through O'Connor's most intimate medium: stitch. The gallery text reveals it's her late father's artificial leg. There's a certain sense of rule-breaking in this work, a nod to maverick energy and a pioneering impetus to do what is unexpected, that seems to speak to O'Connor's feelings about her entrepreneurial father and his legacy. He lost his leg in a coal mine accident in Scotland in 1995 when O'Connor was 15. *Everything I Knew Was His Kingdom* took over 100 hours of free motion embroidery to complete.

Time is an important element in all of this: time passing, time spent making, time spent encountering, time spent processing. 'Grief's Current Shape' includes an animation made from fourteen individual stitched portraits captured and looped together, stop-motion style. It was produced in collaboration with animator Conor Ryan and the artist's cousin Úna who lends her

voice, and with the support of her sister Sharon, who along with her son Conor is the subject of the piece. When Sharon was ten days from her due date in 2010, she was told there was no longer a heartbeat on the fetal monitor and sent home from hospital to wait for labour. The title of the animation, *5 Days*, refers to the period of time between then and the stillbirth of her son.

In O'Connor's short animation, a longhaired woman climbs a set of steps, her left hand on the thin green banister, her right hand holding the underneath of her heavy, full-term bump. The threads are loose, flying out behind from her head, shoulder, waist, ankles and feet. She is a woman made of physical presence and string, gesture and memory, unstoppable body and unavoidable pain. She climbs the steps in an endless repeat motion, head down, heavy tread, focused and determined. We hear a *caoineadh* (an Irish lament), sung with such heart, grace and dignity it becomes impossible to imagine this journey without this sound. *Caoineadh na dtrí Muire / The three Mary's Lament* includes the lines, "*Muise, an é sin an maicín a d'iompair mé trí ráithe? / Well, isn't that the dear little son I carried for three quarters. Óchón is óchon ó. / Woe, oh woe.*" The song and the woman's climb repeat, but she never gets to the top of the stairs. She is preserved forever in the moment while the baby is not yet fully departed from the present but already missing from the future. A child still here yet gone, a fate sealed with a path still to be trod, an unimaginable journey. *5 Days* is impossibly sad, and the sadness deepens the more you watch.

It is a tribute to a tragedy so visible and yet so private, so personal and so communal, so universal and so unique, so unthinkable and inescapable as to be almost indescribable. The repeat loop of the *caoineadh* is a necessary mantra for the time needed to process the emotions *5 Days* unearths: waves of hope, love, sadness, loss, a kind of inevitable acceptance, but above all a realisation of the importance of honouring and marking the unfathomable part of life that this is, an invitation to recognise and share rather than turn away from the particular pain of grief of this kind.

Watching the film with us, from the surface of a large sculptural textile installation hanging nearby, are the stitched faces of a group of seventeen men, now likely all gone – a reminder perhaps that we all become ancestors in the end. *Grand Opening* is O'Connor's most remarkable technical achievement to date in terms of large-scale figurative drawing in stitch. It's based on a photograph of a group of neighbours who communally built Incheese Dance Hall in Sillahertane County Kerry in the 1950s. Crowded around a Maseey Ferguson tractor, they look so pleased, so united in their collective camaraderie. It's such a sharp contrast to the woman's poignant, solo, stoical journey on the screen nearby, and yet there is a clear connection too. Here is a work about family – uncles, brothers, fathers, sons, a big collection of Kerry DNA – and right there in the middle is O'Connor's father, still a kid himself, the future lost baby's future potential granddad. Time moves and passes in strange ways when it comes to love and grief.

You can see the work from the back, walk around it and note the hanging strings and trace the twists and turns, the solo ventures, repeats and track-backs of the thread. This the path the artist's line has had to take to tell the story. The material is transparent like a net curtain, or a wedding veil. The frame from which it hangs is an outline echo of the outside shape of the front of the hall they built. Working in free motion machine stitch, O'Connor captures the lifelike nature of each expression, every elbow crease and collar fold, each quiff of carefully oiled and combed hair. She traces the contours of the bodies like geographical lines: wrinkled foreheads and eyes,

each grin, each proud face filled with the joy of accomplishment that comes with hard labour. It's a moment captured in stark contrast to the Sisyphean nature of the task of the woman who labours alone in *5 Days*.

O'Connor's mother and grandmother sewed, and she is conscious of the reams of legacy inherent in that. She lives in Kerry now again, where her parents originally came from, but there remains something nomadic in her roots and something of the adventurer in her approach. Perhaps this is why machine stitching as a drawing tool particularly suits her. The needle stays put as the hands move the fabric. It's a kind of reverse-method or counterintuitive way of drawing: the point that does the mark-making remains in place while the surface it marks moves. Here is a figurative artist, mining personal experience to explore wider themes of identity, trauma and resilience, making realist pictures with thread. Bourgeois spoke of "the magic power of the needle", by which she meant it can puncture a hole like a weapon and repair damage like a salve. O'Connor shows us how stitch might also offer a way to begin somewhere when it comes to understanding the ever-shifting shape we call grief.

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