

Selected Works

Liam O'Brien

In each of Liam O'Brien's bleak, angst-ridden works he places body (and soul) on the line. His digital theatre of the absurd sails close to naturalistic horror of Grand Guignol in which fin de siècle Paris audiences shared the experience of strong feelings with the actor or artist. This is particularly prevalent in excruciating performance such as *To Laugh In The Face Of Futility & I'm Too Drunk To Tell You* (2012) which includes a series of injurious attempts to flee from a lamp post to which he is attached, followed by a public spectacle of binge drinking. These dangerous and seemingly pointless acts of defiant recklessness put the audience on notice with a Marxist critique of the individual's access to freedom in a capitalist society and what O'Brien says is, " ... a fundamental disagreement between how I believe life should be lived and the social values promoted through capitalism." What follows is the basis of a theme running through much of O'Brien's work, futility and the self-conscious inability of his work to, " ... bring about any tangible change in the real world."

O'Brien's standalone video works were never intended to be shown as components of a broad conceptual grouping, however, his CCAS exhibition has provided an opportunity to increase their characteristic angst threefold. The selection of *I'm Too Drunk to Tell You* (2011), *Untitled (Cleanskin)* (2012) and *Whistling in the Dark* (2013) not only covers three years of performance but also focuses on three different body parts, head, hands and feet. They represent a body of work that is touched by the irrational hand of absurdism and neo avant-garde conceptual performance of the 1960/70s in which the human body became a medium for artistic enquiry. Sound tracks from each work, while varying in intensity, generate a disquieting soundscape that heightens O'Brien's all encompassing sense of existential malaise.

The characters of absurdist theatre can find no inherent meaning in life and are often viewed in the context of nonsensical, chaotic actions presented through satire, dark humour and the abasement of reason. In *Whistling in the Dark* (2013) O'Brien's hand becomes such a character as it attempts to drag a proportionally enormous sack across an arbitrary line (road marking) for no apparent reason. As he grunts and moans with heavy burden, rough photographic cut outs of the artist's face reflect expressions appropriate to the task and build an extraordinary tension (given the absence of contextual signifiers). Along the way he "stands" on broken glass and sheds real blood, heightening the sense of agonizing struggle against backdrop of pointless exertion. The character (spoiler alert) does not make it over the line, collapsing before his meaningless goal in the throes of tragi/comical death. As the image changes from this bleak scenario we see O'Brien emerge from the sack and walk away, indicating that this, like so many of his works is self-referential and the hand is the artist.

Untitled (Cleanskin) continues O'Brien's journey of abjection with art that situates the body as object and subject, while rejecting notions of identity for a confrontation with "corporeal reality". The work begins with a formal focus on the artist's bare feet surrounded by

cigarette butts on what could be an urban pavement. Again O'Brien builds tension by placing his body at risk, dropping beer bottles precariously close to flesh that create a cocktail of foam and broken glass - more threatening with each bottle. The references to alcohol abuse that run through O'Brien's oeuvre are highlighted in *I'm too drunk to tell you* which adapts its title from Bas Jan Ader's tearful performance *I'm too sad to tell you* (1971). Austerely dressed, O'Brien walks into a nondescript room, sits down, and apparently intent on obliteration, proceeds to drink shots of whiskey to the threshold of nausea. We somehow know this is not acting but rather an arduous act of self-harm. If there are oblique references to Gilbert and George's *Gordon's Makes us Drunk* (1972) in which the pair write themselves off in amusing British style with gin, there are important differences. O'Brien's public spectacles of drunkenness offer no *Land of Hope and Glory*, no sense of fun or relief from life's stark unrealities. On the contrary, as his ritualistic tests of raw endurance distress the body, the audience's discomfort spreads exponentially.

David Broker 2015