

Review: Gerard Byrne at MK Gallery



Review by Nicola Mann

Case Study: Loch Ness (Some possibilities and problems), 2001-2011.

Gerard Byrne grew up in Dublin in the 1970s. It was a time and place where socio-political realities were filtered through the hazy gauze of influence installed by the Roman Catholic doctrine. The chasm between historical facts and fictions, and their distance in time and space from the present, informs Byrne's artistic repertoire. In his video and photo installation *1984 and Beyond* (2005-2007), Byrne re-staged a 1963 *Playboy* interview series with science-fiction luminaries of the time. The way Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke et al foresee the millennium veers wildly between the far-fetched and accurate, and yet it is the self-consciously constructed nature of the contemporary re-enactment—borne out in bad acting and mistimed interview techniques, which illustrates the simple fact that the past can be even harder to envisage than the future. The artist builds upon his interest in representational critique and the temporal collision of past, present, and future in his first major solo exhibition in a UK public space, *Case Study: Loch Ness (Some possibilities and problems)*, 2001-2011. The culmination of 10 years of research around Loch Ness, the exhibition employs film, photography, installation, and original “eyewitness” accounts of “Nessie” to explore the dissemination of the most elusive of all myths. Byrne's clinical trove of archival relics asks: How can a “monster” survive for so long in the visual imagination and yet remain so resolutely invisible?

The exhibition pivots off of the gallery's central room which the artist lines with small, framed

photographic “sightings” of the monster. A dog’s head peaking out of the water’s surface, a gnarled piece of twisted rope, crocodile-like wooden stumps, and ripples in the water, seem to quietly substantiate the obvious: what we *think* we see, is not always what’s there. Instead, the perennially camera-shy beast resides in the psycho-geographic topography of our visual imaginations, fed by lashings of popular culture conjecture, *Daily Mail* headlines and wishful thinking. By employing an analogue as opposed to digital printing technique, Byrne emphasises the connection to individual touch and interpretation, tying site, myth and the viewer into a web of temporal, tactile identification. The presence of a monumental tree stump in the centre of the room — cut through to reveal growth rings dotted with pins — anchors the exhibition, emphasising not only the visceral physical, but also historical connections with which the artist is engaged. Led by a trail of bark shed petulantly onto the gallery floor, the tree stump’s horizontal visual timeline refracts vertically, like a rash on the architecture’s skin, onto a wispy graphite wall drawing, upon which Byrne plasters a frenzied chronology of sightings of the monster. Glossy black and red transcriptions dating back to 1527 liken the beast to a “submarine submerging,” with a “head was like a terriers,” and a “long neck of swan-like appearance,” illustrating the unwieldy historical progression of the myth, as well as the viewers’ relationship to this transmission. Combined with the faint hum of audio recordings of the quotes emanating from the next gallery, Byrne bombards the viewer with a triptych of narrative modes — photographic, audio, and printed — a technique that serves to highlight the role of the viewer as consumer of and conduit for the dissemination of all modern-day myth.

Byrne expands this idea with photographs of bound volumes of *The Inverness Courier* from 1933. Vivid headlines describe the monster as “Like a black horse” (8 August) or a “Black object with two humps” (October 31st). In tracing the first flurry of monster sightings, the artist suggests a correlation between the myth and the increased use of mass production printing techniques during this time. In this sense, Byrne invokes Brecht’s “alienation” technique, demonstrating, again, the distance between the original “event” and ravenously consumed gossip. With psychic portent, a headline from 12 September 1933 states simply, “Loch Ness Monster – Again,” hinting at an almost resigned acceptance of the legend’s impending legacy — a longevity that fails to prevent each sighting from evanescing into tomorrow’s chip paper again, again, and again. It matters not that the text in Byrne’s newspaper reproduction is too small to read: much like a large chunk of our present tabloid journalism — it’s all about the headline.

In the exhibition’s final room, Byrne laces the gallery walls with an epic display of photographs taken around the Loch over the past 10 years. Large-scale, black and white images of dead deer, hardy swimmers, and the tree stump from the next room, weave together, building the exhibition to a crescendo of whimsical confusion. Despite the fact that the photographs could well have been shot just the week before, the salt and pepper flecks of heroic monochrome landscape photography transport

the viewer back to the 1930s, ravishing them into a dreamlike meditation on historical distance and aura. Black and white is an aesthetic of the authentic, lending the Loch Ness myth the authority of time or what historian Paul Grainge defines as “visual historicism.” Yet, the unmistakable physical presence of Byrne’s wooden photographic subject in the MK Gallery, just feet from its theatricalised alter-ego, complicates this historicization (another Brechtian invocation), thereby blurring the lines between past and present, fiction and documentary, and leaving us suspended between times.

Don’t come to the show at MK Gallery expecting to be titillated by lake-dwelling critters and flights of aquatic fancy: the works are deadpan to the point of frustration, as stark as the dark wooden frames in which he mounts his photographs, and without a slippery saurian in sight. Nevertheless, if you are willing to enter into an intellectual debate about the politics of appropriation and play a starring role as mediator in this discussion, then this is the exhibition for you. For Byrne, the entire world is a stage one way or another.

The show continues until 3 April. www.mkgallery.org

Image: Gerard Byrne: *Towards a Gestalt* – Loch Ness & Fact. Research ongoing since 2000 AD. Image courtesy the artist.

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