

# A touch of magic?

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CONJURING FOR BEGINNERS is billed as a celebration of visual arts. The celebratory aspect has to do with the fact that the visual has transcended its nominal boundaries in the Project Arts Centre, spilling out from the Dublin gallery space into the performances areas, the adjoining Cube and even the Space Upstairs Theatre. Not that theatre has been supplanted.

Curator Tessa Giblin specifically invokes it in the title, and elaborates in an introduction: “. . . the call for ‘beginners’ warning actors to be on stage before the curtain rises”. The beginners here “are both sculpture and tableaux” with the artists as conjurers. The mechanics of theatre, music, and film feature in the cycle of three pieces by three artists in the Cube – a black cube as opposed to a white cube. Zbynek Baladrán’s brief film *Night of the World* talks us through the emphatic darkness of projected blackness at the beginning of a film, during which we disengage from the outside world and anticipate an imaginative one or, Baladrán suggests, the disappointment of there being nothing at all in prospect.

We then get Janice Kerbel’s *Kill the Workers*, that is, the work lights as referred to by theatre technicians, a slowly shifting narrative of changing light. Then there’s sound installation and performance artist Susan Philipsz’s *I See a Darkness* from 2008. It features her spare, deconstructed solo renditions of the Will Oldham song and Santa Lucia, linked by Ravel’s *Pavane pour une infante défunte*. So far, so thin, but things pick up.

The gallery space features a good, self-contained exhibition that doesn’t particularly relate to what’s in the Cube. Instead, the works there variously allude to images of a tropical island. There are other images and ideas in play but that’s the cumulative effect, and persuasively so. Angela Fulcher’s billowing fabric sculpture tangled in the angular roof supports suggests both parachutes and tents.

Daniel Dewar and Grégory Gicquel’s rough-hewn ceramic and wood sculptures, their repeated motifs drawn from contemporary life, culture and commerce, evoke cargo cults.

That leaves Ruth E Lyons, whose texturally rich *Amphibious Sound* (above) is comprised of dozens of neoprene wetsuits stitched together into a vast, dark, undulating mass, both attractive and a bit repellent, as though it might be an oil slick choking the surface of the island’s lagoon.

The exhibition’s coup de théâtre, though, is appropriately reserved for the theatre upstairs, another black space. Here, in the centre of the room, Sam Keogh has ambitiously built a kind of magic mountain, *Terrestris*, a big hump-backed mound from which slices of matter have been neatly excised. These fragmented blocks are distributed throughout the space, sections of them forming impromptu plinths on which are displayed numerous geodes and crystals and gems and just plain lumps of stuff.

Each little cluster of stones is lit as though we see it in the narrow beam of a miner’s lamp, and there’s the atmospheric crunch of grit and gravel underfoot.

It’s a metaphorically rich work that can be read in various ways, and one that takes a while to negotiate, during which time you can enjoy Keogh’s sleight-of-hand and absorb the implications. They stretch from thinking about the messy business of plundering resources from the earth to artistic alchemy: taking workaday materials and making something magical of them, which is what Keogh does, delighting in artifice and illusion, and highlighting rather than disguising them. Currently completing an MA at Goldsmiths in London, he graduated from NCAD in 2009. The germ of *Terrestris* was there in his degree show at the time. One wonders if the installation will be seen on such a scale again, which is an

excellent reason to get to experience it in the Project before August 11th.

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