



Niamh McCann:
Tiltshift

The Golden Bough
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Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane



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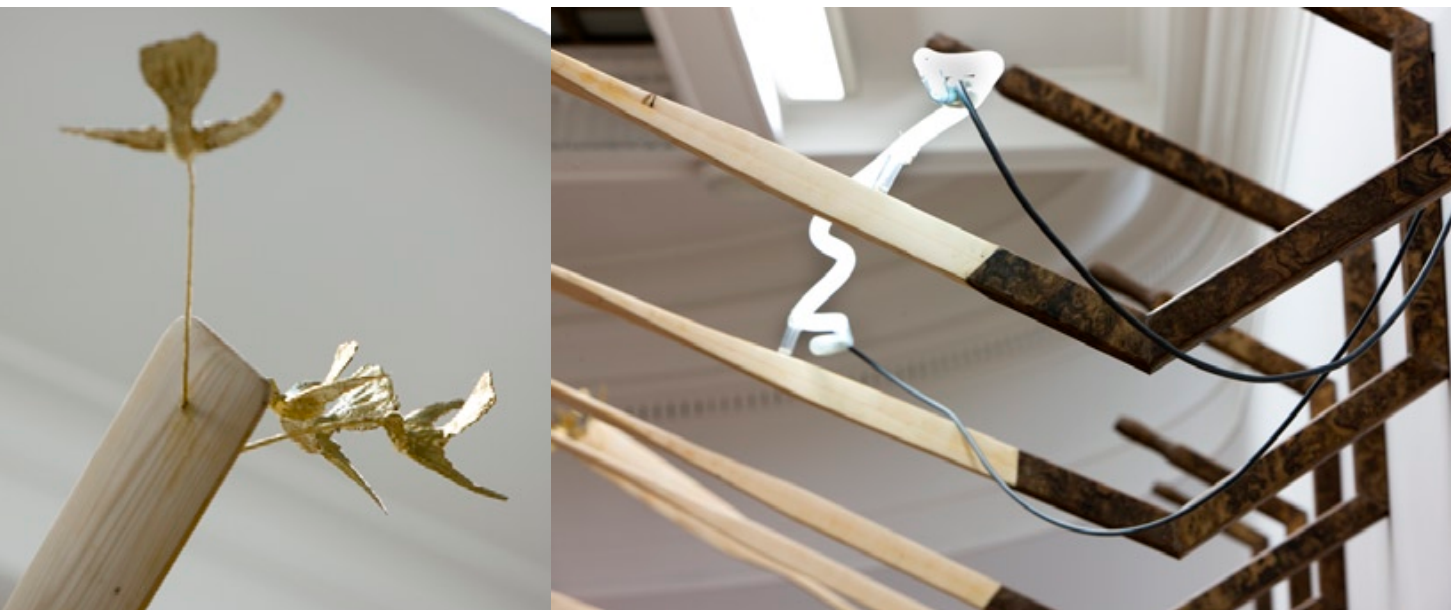
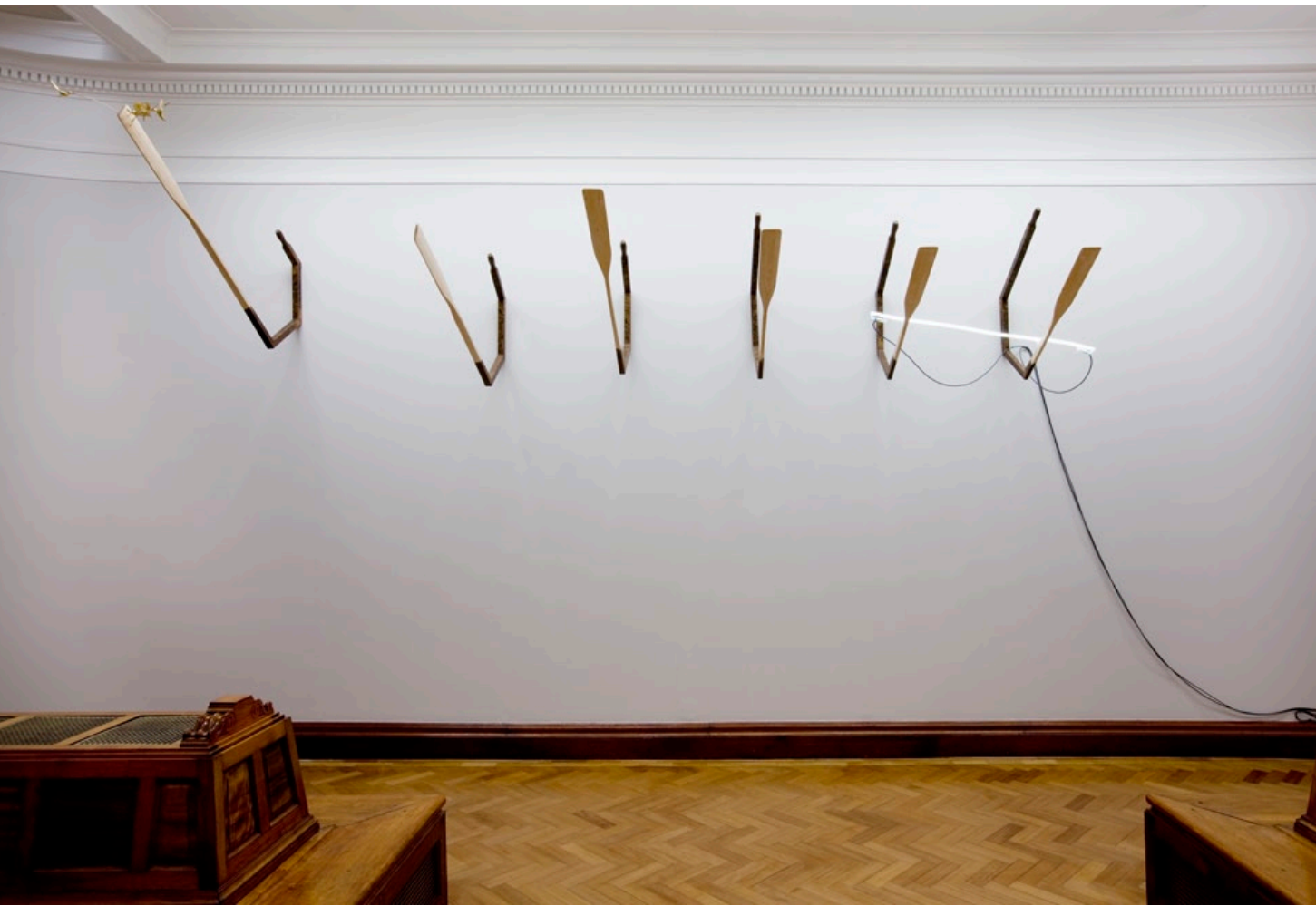
The collective memory and its bearing on the construction of visual historical narratives are at the fore of Niamh McCann's project *Tiltshift*. If collective consciousness relies on the traces of memory, the designation of an image as significant becomes a political act, leading to the preservation of knowledge and the shaping of our cultural memory. It also creates a unitary fiction of what is valued and preserved. What is assigned to our collective memory is often mediated through a framework from a dominant culture, assuming the position of historical narrator. Foucault in his publication *The Order of Things* theorises the connection between power and knowledge, with the dominant culture aiming to foster and maintain overarching narratives that maintain hierarchical structures. This exercise of power as a means of propaganda has implications for the future of a collective memory.

McCann's splicing of iconic imagery from the cold war period for *Tiltshift* calls into question how we construct our current understanding of both the social and the political. The historical tipping points of the Manhattan Project – the design and development of the atomic bomb – of man landing on the moon, and the meeting of Nixon and Khrushchev, are familiar moments captured and stored in our collective psyche.

McCann's layering of these images is indicative of how history impacts on both the present and the future. This, when taken as a whole, leads one to begin to understand the complex nature of our visual memory and, through doing so, begin to question how our visual lexicon is encoded with political tensions. The juxtaposition of found images takes us from the everyday to the universal. McCann's practice has consistently drawn from newspapers, websites and books. Adopting images from these sources, she reconfigures and subverts them to create a more fluid and undefined mode of reading.

McCann's alignment of a geodesic dome, a signature utopian model, with an iconic timber-clad home, an image immediately associated with 1950s America, appears in the series of *Untitled* drawings. The dome refers to Buckminster Fuller's utopian project to provide a socio-cultural alternative to the typical rectangular architecture of the time. The dome crystallized society's dreams of a life liberated from constraints and tutelage.¹ Fuller looked at whole systems as points of transformation, not reliant on isolated components. In a lecture in 1951 he referred to the idea of 'spaceship earth' two decades before NASA transmitted the first images of man landing on the moon.





McCann's counter-positioning of the mushroom cloud with images of man on the moon conjures the dominance of military technology in our quest to compete and progress. While the detrimental effect of science and technology on the earth is a global concern, these advances seduce society with everyday benefits. Similarly, it is within this comprehensive chain of McCann's constituent parts that we are encouraged by visual devices to see its full meaning.

As we propel ourselves forward, the notion of progress is counterbalanced by our knowledge of history. This is taken up in McCann's methodologies. Repetition is associated with visual encoding dating back to philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato. The repetition of the images in *Tiltshift* has a dual function in that it gives the sense of infinity and reveals the syntax of its own construction and self-consciousness. The duality of the progress of science and ideas of sustainability creates a sharp counterpoint in the dialogue between her images.

The use of low-fi materials is consistent throughout her practice. *Tree* reconfigures the traditional oar, appropriating it as a host to a flock of bronze humming birds. Ranciere refers to the relationship between the original and the copy as interplay.² The delineation between production and consumption is blurred within artistic practice; it has become part of the norm to adopt objects that are already in existence and to reposition them in a new context.

The dialogue within and between McCann's works has a layered reading. The adoption of cultural motifs, kitsch and iconic imagery as language is indicative of her continuing exploration of perception, what is fact and what is fiction. The notion of artist as nomad, collecting cultural artifacts and gathering them together to create an imaginative landscape is an undercurrent in her work. The notion of truth and how it is qualified is a constant quest. Her works and their lightness of touch in her use of materials add to their poetics.

In an age where we risk becoming desensitized by the speed at which we consume, absorb and deconstruct imagery, McCann's drawings and sculptures open up the possibilities of interpretation. This playfulness within her work creates an encoded language that distills our view of both the past and the present visual landscape. Her experiences of wandering and her particular points of observations encourage us to rethink the relationship between contemporary art and the media, allowing for the reconsideration of images as not indisputable but precarious, to be used as tools to foster multiple points of entry, creating new and alternative narratives.

— Mary Cremin

1. Claude Lichtenstein and Joachim Krausse, *Your Private Sky: R. Buckminster Fuller, The Art of Design Science*, Lars Muller Publishers, Zurich, 1999.
2. "There is the simple relationship that produces the likeness of an original: not necessarily its faithful copy, but simply what suffices to stand for it. And there is the interplay of operations that produces what we call art; or precisely an alteration of resemblances." Ranciere, *The Future of the Image*, [\[\[CHECK REFERENCE\]\]](#)

LIST OF WORKS

Tree, 2010
Wood, walnut burl, veneer, gold-leaf covered
bronze casts, neon, 250 × 120 × 80 cm

Untitled (Hmmm...) 1, 2010
Watercolour paint, acrylic paint, pencil, photo-rag
print, faux-leather paper, gold-leaf, acrylic-wool,
watercolour wall-drawing, 120 × 180 cm

Untitled (Hmmm...) 2, 2010
Watercolour paint, acrylic paint, pencil, photo-rag
print, faux-leather paper, gold-leaf, acrylic-wool,
watercolour wall-drawing, 120 × 180 cm

Untitled (Hmmm...) 3, 2010
Watercolour paint, acrylic paint, pencil, photo-rag
print, faux-leather paper, gold-leaf, acrylic-wool,
watercolour wall-drawing, 120 × 180 cm

Untitled (Hmmm...) 4, 2010
Watercolour paint, acrylic paint, pencil, photo-rag
print, faux-leather paper, gold-leaf, acrylic-wool,
watercolour wall-drawing, 120 × 180 cm

Untitled (Hmmm...) 5, 2010
Watercolour paint, acrylic paint, pencil, photo-rag
print, faux-leather paper, gold-leaf, acrylic-wool,
watercolour wall-drawing, 120 × 180 cm

Untitled (Hmmm...) 6, 2010
Watercolour paint, acrylic paint, pencil, photo-rag
print, faux-leather paper, gold-leaf, acrylic-wool,
watercolour wall-drawing, 120 × 180 cm

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