



Alan Phelan, Cabbages, 2009-2010, archival paper, toner, EVA glue, polystyrene cone, hot glue each approx 11 x 24 x 24 cms, total approx: 700; image courtesy the artist.

'Cabbages and Things'

Review of Alan Phelan's solo show at Solstice Arts Centre, Navan, Oct 30 - Nov 27, 2010. Text by James Merrigan.



Alan Phelan, Thing, 2010, purple embossed leather remnant, 77 x 84 cms; image courtesy the artist.

+BILLION- Journal #2 — 10th December 2010 James Merrigan
Alan Phelan's 'Cabbages & Things'

Political segregation and land demarcation are two things that the Irish are very good at, it's in the blood. The stone walled fields to the West are quirky remnants of our obsession with land ownership. The current economic crisis is blamed on the banks, but the 'illusion' of ownership of good auld 'blocks and mortar' was the impetus for this crisis. Walking through Navan *en route* to Solstice Arts Centre to see Alan Phelan's solo show 'Cabbages and Things', I noticed lots of people strolling the town footpaths, it was 3pm in the afternoon. Some were wearing plaster splashed workwear, but they were just hanging out - no work here. Later, these images would effect my reception of Phelan's work, but thankfully, his work was not ignorant of the current context that we all find ourselves in; so on with the show!

Architecturally, Solstice Arts Centre is one of the 'kinder' arts centres for the display of art in the country. From the outside, it still has the 'look' of an Irish Arts Centre, in other words, you'll know what it is when you see it, but Phelan's work was at home here.



Alan Phelan, *Thing*, 2010, cotton sheet, 150 x 150 cms (installed), sheet size 210 x 190 cms; image courtesy of the artist.

Words are powerful conduits for latent memories, and the words “Cabbages” and “Things” in Phelan’s title brought lots to the surface. Cabbage is usually an unpalatable word for kids; I can still smell the stuff on the boil from way back then. The word “Things” could be equated directly with art as a hard to define, functionless object? But “Things” for Phelan references the unlikely superhero ‘The Thing’ (Ben Grimm), from the ‘Fantastic Four’ by *Marvel Comics*. Phelan either has an affinity or empathy for the science-fiction fantasy hero, the likes of Darth Maul from *Star Wars* and Odo from *Star Trek Deep Space Nine*, have been chosen ‘art protagonists’ in his previous work. This funky character appropriation is not just for the sake of ‘cool’. These drawn, plastic, computer generated superheroes and villains have a long printed history, in the case of *The Thing* - 1961. Personally, this is Phelan’s best character appropriation. Why? For the very reason that *The Thing* is a printed character which aligns with Phelan’s own layering of political history in his continuing use of the printed newspaper; especially in his previous character busts of Éamon de Valera in *Éamon Often Spoke in*

Tongues, and the previously mentioned Odo in *Barbara’s Boy* (*The Alternate*). Although *The Thing* is an American manifestation from a middle-aged Jack Kirby and Stan Lee, the former admits that the character was shaped by a challenging childhood growing up in New York’s Lower East Side. This is what Phelan brings to the table in his subtle, cut-out invocations of the character. Pinned to the white walls of Solstice Arts Centre, *The Thing* becomes a prophet of torment - a kitsch ‘Turin Shroud’. The best of the “Things” is cut-out in a pink, grey and white striped cotton bed sheet and strewn on the floor; a signifier for an unkept teenage boy’s bedroom, the space where the superhero is born.

Phelan’s display of the ‘Things’ injects a psychological aspect to the work. Unlike other superheroes, *The Thing* cannot hide his deformity in spandex. On the outside he is more villain than hero. That’s why his character development has an added amount of insecurity and self-pity, ultra-human traits. When Phelan cuts the character’s unfortunate facial template into the piece of fabric, which could otherwise act as a mask, there is a paradox between exposure and covering-up. In this instance, he generates a pathos for the “Things,” but what is also felt in the repeated portrait of the character is frustration at the imagined effort by The ‘ugly’ Thing to cover up with a cut-out fabric portrait of himself; everyone is looking!

Above all, there is a natural segregation in Phelan’s title ‘Cabbages and Things’. By

naming all the individual “Things” as “Things” and “Cabbages” as - you get it!; the idea of segregation is compounded. The press-release stated that “The [newspaper] cabbages form a disjointed labyrinth through the galleries [‘some exiting the gallery into the tiled sky gardens’], guiding viewers to the ‘Thing’ works.” The newspaper in everyday life is packaged in a way that utilises the unambiguous impact headline and the aligned columned text for legibility. It is ironic that the newspapers in Phelan's work are ‘shapeshifted’ into illegible but elegant forms.



Cabbage workshops; image courtesy of Alan Phelan.

It's important to mention that the newspaper cabbages were made by local people in a series of fabrication workshops. This seems almost appropriate in the context of Ireland today, which makes this collective act less about segregation, and more about finding a context for art to invite people in.

Reflecting back on Phelan's work at Solstice while walking through Navan's town centre, the word 'readymade' repeated in my head. Since 1917, generations of artists have utilised Duchamp's readymade 'statement'.

Today the readymade has become more brand than statement. However, in Phelan's work, there is a casual placement that has a Duchampian ease. The bed sheets and newspapers could have easily been picked up on the street and pitched in the gallery the same day; and that has to bring a smile to anyone's face.

Thanks to Alan Phelan for images.

Alan Phelan

Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Ireland

Alan Phelan's work proceeds, as Descartes might have, with an attitude of *larvatus prodeo*: advancing whilst pointing to its own mask. The Irish artist's solo exhibition of 16 new and recent works at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, which drew its title 'Fragile Absolutes' from Slavoj Žižek's 2001 eponymous book, sought to build a delicate agitprop vocabulary of toothpicks, papier-mâché and exhaust pipes.

Clubbed Baby Seals (he is not aware how Jews really seem to him? this is not how things really seem to you) (2009) looks like it was a lot of fun to make. Taking its title in part from a sentence in Žižek's book *Organs Without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences* (2004) and reflecting on what he refers to as 'the ontological scandal of the notion of fantasy', the work is a forceful manifestation of how concept can cluster into object to use imperfection as a formalistic vocabulary. Two mashed papier-mâché seal corpses, with cute black-button eyes, loll on white plinths to expose their red-painted entrails. The work refers to a 2007 action by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) in which activists 'clubbed' papier-mâché seals with baseball bats. This action demonstrates, somewhat idealistically, Žižek's understanding of fantasy as an 'ontological scandal', albeit a horrific fantasy, but no less complete in its scope. Phelan's action of displacing the quasi-seals through shifting them from demonstration to fetishism rounds off Žižek's notions with a deft subversion of the subjective (protest) to the objective (art): or is that the other way round?

Mosquito Man Arthur (2007) is a grotesque chimera tied to a political history of printed subversion. Phelan grafts the head of Arthur Griffith onto to the hollow body of a mosquito, complete with useless balsa wood wings. (Griffith was the founder of Irish political party

Sinn Féin and propaganda officer for the IRA in the early 20th century; a typesetter by trade, he produced a plethora of underground nationalist publications, nicknamed 'the mosquito press' by British authorities due to their annoying yet highly transportable printing and dissemination techniques.) As with a number of the works in this show, *Mosquito Man Arthur* slows down the viewer's relationship to the work by using layers of dense text. We are visually instructed to read the surface of the work in an extremely direct manner, and that can take time.

This slow method of observation encourages an inscriptive relationship with Phelan's sculpture, which, at times, can extend to the over-use of interpretive materials on the gallery walls, often heavily layered with socio-political history. In spite of this, *Mosquito Man Arthur* demonstrates just how mutable 'mythological' constructs can be: the work can be understood as an abstract re-presentation (or perhaps re-telling) of the paradigm of the Irish nationalist guerrilla – Ireland is a very small country, but for the resourceful, there is always somewhere (or something) to hide.

It is this obfuscation that bolsters Phelan's formal vernacular, drawing together a wide range of cultural subject matters and permitting them to coalesce into process.

Maria Fusco



Alan Phelan
Clubbed Baby Seals (he is not aware how Jews really seem to him? this is not how things really seem to you)
2009
Papier-mâché made from articles from *The Wall Street Journal*
15x107x97 cm

Alan Phelan
Goran's Stealth Yugo
2009
Mixed media
Installation view





The art of driving

ALAN PHELAN: FRAGILE ABSOLUTES
Irish Museum of Modern Art,
Dublin Jul 23-Nov 1
Tues-Sat 10am-5.30pm Wed
10.30am-5.30pm Sun
noon-5.30pm 01-6129900

The centrepiece of Alan Phelan's exhibition at IMMA is a sculpture commissioned by the museum, *Goran's Stealth Yugo* (above), and it reflects the artist's eclectic approach to a striking portfolio of personal interests, including "political history, cultural

theory, popular culture, masculinity and modified cars".

On a residency in Belgrade, Serbia, Phelan collaborated with car designer Goran Krstic to produce a sculpture closely based on a stage in the car design process, where a structural framework provides an inkling of what the design will actually look like in the real, three-dimensional world. Phelan has disguised the technological product with a "natural" material, actually

fake pine twigs, as used to disguise mobile phone masts. Not so much a car, as one of the writers in the accompanying catalogue notes, as a metaphor. Expect to be led along more labyrinthine referential paths by an artist who loves the by-ways of semiotics.

AIDAN DUNNE

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The View: Darryl Corner

Jan 8 2010 by Our Correspondent, Western Mail
Alan Phelan @ Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff, until January 17

WITH much of Alan Phelan's new work, trying too hard to identify a logical narrative between the pieces on show – or indeed within each piece individually – is going to prove fruitless.

He's often deliberately contradictory. A lot of the work shown as part of Fragile Absolutes has multiple cultural references and meanings, almost to the point of defying description.

While this can be frustrating for some, for others it's the vagueness and spread of these connections that is going to prove engaging.

Equally diverse are the topics covered; modern obsessions like boy racers, and global economics rub shoulders with recent history, particularly that of Phelan's native Ireland.

For instance, a pair of clubbed seals are created from papier-mâché. Phelan often uses photographs as starting points for three dimensional work and in this case it's a reference to a press picture of the famous Canada House protests against the seal culls of Newfoundland. But the paper these tragic – and childlike – seals have been made from is taken from the Wall Street Journal and contains the names of many of the now defunct companies who came to public attention as "victims" of the recent recession.

More papier-mâché is used in the creation of a bust of Irish revolutionary Éamon de Valera. A one time co-owner of the Irish Press, de Valera – again rendered in newspaper – became notorious for his support for religious and social conservatism. Phelan's sculpture depicts him with a curious, long snake-like tongue.

In one room, neat rows of cabbages are arranged in a curious pathway. Cabbages are a humble vegetable and a staple in many parts of Eastern Europe but Phelan's cabbages are made – once again – from newspapers, created during a workshop held here at Chapter. But, of course, these aren't random newspapers but reprints of pages from Dublin papers dating from the early days of the Irish uprising.

Once again, the references – often driven by convoluted titles – are multi-layered but the harder you try to pin down the logic the further it twists away, just out of reach.

Another room is filled with large images grabbed from the TV series World War 1 in Colour. Each has a subtitle taken from the original programme. These images detail the events that led to the outbreak of the war. We're so used to seeing this period in history in emotionally-distancing black and white that its presentation in colour, and arranged like banks of television monitors in a newsroom, suddenly brings it forward in time and prompts parallels with contemporary conflicts.

Anyone looking for neat solutions to Phelan's enigmatic riddles will be disappointed.

These are not crossword puzzles to be deciphered but jumping off points for sometimes complex, sometimes subtle, connections.

What's really refreshing about Phelan's diverse work is his refusal to get bogged down in any artistic tradition. Like many artists today he's almost self-consciously working to avoid classification, working across a broad range of styles and materials. The result is some genuinely engaging and original work.

<http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/columnists/2010/01/08/the-view-darryl-corner-91466-25549644/>