

A Consideration of All Bodies

The Lab, Dublin, 5 March to 5 May

'A Consideration of All Bodies', curated by the ARC LAB curatorial scholar Róisín Hackett, is a disability-led exhibition that attempts to address the complex embodiments of disabled corporeality. Persevering throughout a 5km-limit lockdown, this exhibition remained visible solely through the exterior glass walls of the LAB Gallery in Dublin. Hackett, along with the five exhibiting artists, Declan Byrne, Philip Kenny, Paul Moore, Hugh O' Donnell and Áine O'Hara, have varying degrees of disability or chronic illness, and while the subject of each work isn't always illness centred, together their grouping circumvents the ableist insistence of competency in art practice. Indeed, it strangely feels appropriate that there is limited physical access, considering how debates around 'access' - moving beyond a mere practical conundrum - have defined the field of disability in contemporary culture for so long. The exhibition imposes on the able-bodied the very barriers ordinarily inflicted on those it platforms: those typically left on the outside looking in.

Facing the street, O'Hara's *The Patient will See You Now*, 2020, is a row of the all-too-familiar hard chairs found in civic spaces. These have been set awkwardly at an angle, along a metal bar to highlight the discomfort of waiting rooms; a sculptural remnant of a performance held at the non-profit space A4 Sounds (viewable online) as well as documented in an archival print on the wall. The performance played host to individual conversations between attendants and the artist around personalised experiences of healthcare, and the work provided a pointed commentary on the growing, sometimes insurmountable inadequacies and structural inequities of the Irish healthcare system. Next to this, O'Donnell's *Dyslexic I & Dyslexic II*, both 2021, comprises two chairs, which have been subjected to a complex cycle of destruction and reconstruction, and the resulting dysfunctional objects allude to a fractured sense of self.

Usually a live performer, Philip Kenny delivers his poem *Ode to Sweeneys*, 2020, in a video mixed with footage from the now-closed Sweeneys bar on Dame Street. Kenny, an advocate for autism, describes the cultural community that surrounded the public house and how it was intrinsic to his development as a poet, as noted in the poem's concluding line: 'For a long time unaware of the casual connection spurred on by its simply being there.' Another video available to view on the LAB gallery's website is Paul Moore's work *A Man Walked Into A Bar*, 2020, which employs an immersive augmented-reality headset that the artist wears around a gym. The screen is divided into four different viewpoints of what the artist can see as he moves around the space. As he bumps into walls and tries to sit on a chair, the work highlights differences in perception versus lived reality.



Áine O'Hara, *The Patient Will See You Now*, 2020, installation view

Arguably the most enigmatic work in the exhibition is by Declan Byrne, a non-verbal artist and long-term studio holder at Kilkenny Art Centre. A colourful abstracted series of paintings, *Francis Bacon Inspired I, II and III*, are presented in the gallery with a collage of dyed chips of wood that Byrne made with Hackett in early 2020. Unable to communicate with Byrne in a typical sense, Hackett visited the artist a number of times to gain his trust through working together. The work raises interesting questions around how Byrne is able to practise through the creative and supportive network at KCAT, whose profound visual literacy combined with severe disability challenges cultural perceptions of an artist. (Byrne currently has a mid-career retrospective available to view online at The Other Space, KCAT's virtual project space).

One problem of gathering artwork under the remit of disability is that it can restrict it to the community it seeks to represent, rather than entering more mainstream art debates. Yet, if anything, this exhibition is a community-building project that highlights and supports the exciting work being made at disability-centred spaces such as KCAT in Kilkenny and University of Atypical in Belfast. Indeed, the exhibition is defined by its limits: those faced by artists when trying to exhibit during lockdown and those that disabled artists constantly encounter. In some cases, the work in the exhibition has been determined by current restrictions (for example, only one person is allowed to install an artwork). Coming at a time defined by restriction only amplifies an insistence on being seen - an exercise in being public. But this also expands into a far more wide-reaching and substantive conversation about the supporting infrastructure needed to cater to artists with, as Hackett describes, 'a constellation of disabilities', and the time, training and costs necessary to invest that are currently left wanting.

'A Consideration of All Bodies' uses illness and disability as a commonality as opposed to something that needs to be accommodated in order to be a productive member of society, and as such it raises a number of urgent questions: how we can formulate ideas of belonging that are exclusive of capacity? How can we cultivate a more nuanced understanding of the diverse embodiments that constitute our world? How can we rethink issues of disability and access in a more generative sense? The show also demonstrates the power in creating a space for artists with disabilities by artists with disabilities that doesn't simply reproduce existing biases. For now, I'll remain on the outside looking in, eager to see more.

Gwen Burlington is a writer based in Wexford and London.