

mother's annual 2014

**Orla Barry NOUGHT YTAUGHT TO SPEKE BY CRAFT NOUPER BY KYNDE**

June - July

Unto the Death gois all Estatus,  
Princis, Prelatis, and Potestatis,  
Baith rich and poor of all degree: –  
*Timor Mortis conturbat me.*<sup>1</sup>

In the M Museum in Leuven, beside the gruesome painted martyrdoms and the holy corpse of Fiere Margiret, there is a painted calendar dial. The artist is anonymous, presumed to be from the southern Low Countries, and from the black chaperons worn by the painted women and the two-pointed hats worn by the men, to have made the Dial around the last decade of the fifteenth century. The calendar dial presents a vision of life in its ever-turning minuteness – the twelve signs of the zodiac divided into the labours of the months, divided again into the twenty four hours of day and night and the twenty-four ways in which the planets influence profession and personality, surrounded by a narrow strip with the days and the hours, and all surrounded by the personifications of four planets. Within this closed world, sealed with varnish and faith, these men and women pound grapes with their feet and shovel wood into furnaces. For now, they stand upright, but should the dial be turned, the grapes will be forgotten, the children will be lost, the sheep destroyed, plague and death will come, the planets quietly observing all the while. The shearing felts hanging in the gallery of mother's tankstation in the bright and wet early Irish summer stand on similar ground between certainty and chaos, sure-footedness and falling.

The felts are named for Orla Barry's Zwartbles flock in Co. Wexford – Marilyn, Patsy, Iris and Ivy. These warm, affectionate names – which might seem more at home in an earthy English soap opera than in a field of black-brown sheep, the breed originating in the Netherlands – reflect Barry's dual role as artist and self-professed shepherdess. The felts are springy and dense, dark cocoa brown fading into sun-bleached lightness in places, and with curlicued words surfacing in white – *shaved rapunzel. an absence of rainbows. devour red and yellow.* This space between the cosy familiarity of the felt and these uncanny, fearful words brings us to the precipice of the calendar dial, to that narrow ledge between terror and understanding, hysteria and reflection. *shaved rapunzel.* Looking up, do we see the quivering flanks of a shorn Patsy, both relieved and a little miffed at losing her heavy coat in the summer. Or, looking up, do we somehow feel the convulsing faces of the women in France and Belgium (Barry's adopted home for many years, before a return to Wexford) as their heads were shaved in punishment for being collaborators at the end of the 1939-45 war, while the crowds looked on in righteous glee. These terrors and these intimacies are part of the terrain mapped by Barry. Between the declamatory words in creamy white and the dense body-heat of the felt, these images of animals and humans in wartime and peacetime are packed and woven. Her terrain is mapped through time as well as territory, drawing on long-held traditions of public meaning-making, of strange words and images above us on the wall. Perhaps, across the European landmass, there is a long-held body memory of walking underneath these signs, such as the imperious tympanum at Autun, of seeing the souls being weighed by long-limbed, cold-eyed angels, and of watching the long-haired body of the adulteress being bitten eternally by snakes. At mother's tankstation, Barry has created a hall of such icons through which we are to walk through, look up, and wonder where we stand, or fall.

*Shearing Felts (Marilyn, Patsy, Iris, Ivy)* arrived at mother's tankstation by a somewhat circuitous route. Originally part of Barry's 2013 presentation of *Mountain* at South London Gallery, they were edited from the show as the artist felt that they were 'too porous'. When *Mountain* came to Dublin's Project Arts Centre in 2014, the felts were presented simultaneously down-river in Usher's Island. On the walls of mother's, however, they became part of an exploration of language and labour begun by Michael Snow, whose 1982 *So Is This* was projected on to the gallery walls in the weeks before Christmas 2009. The fraying, flickering beauty of *So Is This*, in all its paradoxically colourful monochromaticity and deadpan humour, touches Barry's work in different ways – the encounter with the word writ large, the word as wrought rather than written, the reader in the palm of the writer/artists' hand. Both confront the materiality of language in different ways, and at different times. The dissolving, shifting words and there/not-there quality of the projected surface reflect the particular cultural moment of 1982, a premonition of the cataclysmic changes to language, to surface and to meaning which would unfold in the subsequent decades. Both Barry's felts and *The Shepherd's Triangle*, positioned in the front gallery at mother's, feel like a bulwark against the dream of immateriality held within *So Is This*, a counterpoint

and counterweight which insist on the heaviness of language, the need for surface and the weight of meaning.

*NOUGHT YTAUGHT TO SPEKE BY CRAFTED NOUPER BY KYNDE* takes its place within the wider exploration of the poetics of language and meaning which is at the heart of Barry's practice. From *Barmaid's Notebook* (1991-2001) to *Year X* (1991-2004), Barry has consistently used language as a way of tracing visceral, bodily experience. In *Wideawake* (2003), it is both the point of resistance to complete collapse, while at the same time allowing the disintegration of the central protagonist to be heard and to be witnessed. Language, for Barry – physical, verbal or textual – is where and how the inner world touches the outside and becomes materialised. From the diary-like intimacies of *Barmaid's Notebook* to the tensile, expansive words of the 'Shearling Felts', Barry negotiates the power of language, testing the necessity of, as well as the danger and vulnerability involved in making words with, and about, the body. While the act of speech and the sound of words and of language are explored in *Mountain*, both *Shearling Felts* (*Marilyn, Patsy, Iris, Ivy*) and *The Shepherd's Triangle* are silent. Rather than being spoken – the gesture of the voice in the air – the words take on the quality of talismans, of directives, and of warnings. They exist outside of the artist's body and the artist's voice to become objects to be encountered and heeded by the viewer.

Such an action – to emblazon a wall with text – has a deep heritage. From the public notices chiseled into the street walls by the Romans, to the stiffly fluttering invectives issued from the mouths of the heavenly angels at Cambridgeshire's Longthorpe Tower, these are serious, public notices, involving the safety or the danger of body, mind and soul. They involve work – physical labour – in their execution. In this, too, Barry's felts take their place within a longer tradition – the long, repetitive and physically demanding work of felting adds weight and import to the words they carry. Barry's shearling felts, hung across the gallery wall, are all the more disorienting because they bring together this tradition of statement-making with strange, carnivalesque meanings. We are directed to do what we know not. We are given a map that is upside-down, that leads us into a maze. And yet these forms, these words, impel us to follow them.

*gather green suck blue. spit indigo and violet. filling egg shells. form is destroyed.* How, then, to read these strange texts? They both command and imply a great deal of physical commitment, from the ingesting of a rainbow of colour, to the performance of a task requiring great dexterity and finesse. Where a reader searches for meaning, for narrative or logic, they are bound to be frustrated. *Shearling Felts* (*Marilyn, Patsy, Iris, Ivy*) can, perhaps, be best understood as that which has been distilled from intense physical experience, from the immense labour of making the felt itself, as well as the work of confronting the difficulty of language and its ability to communicate that which is beyond narrative, beyond comprehension. Perhaps, in the words of John Berryman, "these Songs are not meant to be understood, you understand/ They are only meant to terrify & comfort".<sup>ii</sup>

The presence of *Shearling Felts* (*Marilyn, Patsy, Iris, Ivy*) in the gallery is both surprising and deeply moving. While not presenting a narrative in language, the title of the work reveals the connection between the artist and her flock, and behind that, her move from Belgium back to her farm in Wexford. Within the gallery, a space in which one becomes more aware and attuned to the nature of form, the felts are striking in their emotional and physical investment. Felt, one of the most ancient methods of cloth-making, involves interlocking fibres through moisture, friction and heat. It is an extremely labour-intensive process in itself, even without taking into account the commitment of rearing the sheep. Looking closely at the surface, there is no distinction between the creamy paleness of the word and the dark brown of the background. This close view, close enough to feel the depth and volume, positions Barry as both sculptor and poet, a maker of meaning in form and language simultaneously. Crucially, the felts resist the flimsiness and slipperiness of language in every way. By crafting the words in felt, through so many months and hours of time and work, they are invested with meaning that is sure, bounded and decisive. Both the physical qualities of the felts themselves, and the curving, hand-drawn letters recall the Insular manuscripts of Kells and Lindisfarne – great sheets of vellum taken from the stocks of cattle, with hair and the grain of skin still visible on the page. The difficulty of the language is to be felt here too – the bringing of something out of nothing, the creation and the glorification of the word in all its mystery and beauty, the meditation or *ruminatio* on the voyage of the line itself, regardless of meaning, abandoning narrative to the moment of the word.<sup>iii</sup>

The title for Orla Barry's exhibition at mother's tankstation, *NOUGHT YTAUGHT TO SPEKE BY CRAFTED NOUPER BY KYNDE*, is taken from a thirteenth-century encyclopedia written by the aristocratic, scholastic and worldly Franciscan friar Bartholomeus Anglicus (or Bartholomew of England, c. 1203-72).<sup>iv</sup> This encyclopedia, *De proprietatibus rerum* ('On the properties of things'), recalls the earlier work

of Lucretius, *De rerum natura* – both almost unbelievably ambitious attempts to capture and describe the world in all its complexity, to hold the world in one book. While Barry's work does not necessarily present an intention on this scale, it does, with great seriousness of purpose, attempt to fix meaning and to forge (and felt) a workable, durable language of form, gesture and words through which to communicate. *The Shepherd's Triangle*, positioned leaning against the walls and the aged floor of the front gallery, takes the form of a word-play shard. Life-size, it confronts the viewer with a dizzying, near-Vorticist array of words and choices, each sliding urgently into another. Madman flips into Painter, Prophet to Singer, and Beekeeper to Dreamer. The sharpness of these flips in perspective, together with the uncompromisingly hard-edged letters, reveals a crueler world than that of the felts – the unsentimental hand on the wheel of fortune, the calendar dial, which might spin at any time, sending the hard-won labours of the months into disarray. For all the felt's fluid density of meaning, for all the careful naming of and tending to Marilyn, Patsy, Iris and Ivy, Orla Barry's work recognises the fundamental instability of things in the world as we know them, and works, hard, to form and craft words that will stand and last, and which will be a still point at the turning, wheeling circumference of the world.

Niamh NicGhabhann

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<sup>i</sup> William Dunbar (1465-1520?), 'Lament for the Makers', in Arthur Quiller-Couch, (ed.), *The Oxford Book of English Verse 1250-1900*, (1919 ed.).

<sup>ii</sup> John Berryman 'Dream Song 366', in *Selected Poems, 1938-1968* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), p.158.

<sup>iii</sup> Michelle P. Brown discusses the concept of *ruminatio* in the context of the Book of Lindisfarne as being central to the complex visual reading of Insular art, in which meditation gradually penetrated the layers of meaning with which individual iconographic elements and their combinations could be imbued. She quotes Dom Jean LeClerc's characterisation of monastic reading to illuminate this concept, writing that the reading of a biblical text was, "like a meditative prayer for the reader", in which the reader "weighs all of its words to sound the depth of their full meaning", so that "each word is like a hook, so to speak; it catches hold of one or several others which become linked together and make up the fabric of the exposé". Michelle P. Brown, *The Lindisfarne Gospels and the Early Medieval World* (London: The British Library, 2011), p. 115-116. This reading, while removed in time and context from Orla Barry's artistic practice, nonetheless feels strangely apt as a method of approaching her work.

<sup>iv</sup> M. C. Seymour, 'Bartholomaeus Anglicus (b. before 1203, d. 1272)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/10791>, accessed 7 Aug 2014]