

Banbha McCann, and/or land, *Architecture Ireland 318*, July / August 2021

and/or land

On the intersection
between art and
architecture

by Banbha McCann MRIAI



It can be challenging to capture the somewhat intangible feelings provoked by our built world. Following an emotional response to visiting Katsura Imperial Villa in Kyoto, Japan, I turned to Bruno Taut's haiku-like reflections, from his visit in 1933: 'Courtyard and entrance to the Katsura Palace. Lizards motionless. Architecture bare, pure. Moving-innocent-childlike. Fulfilment of today's expectations. Courtyard'.

Like Taut, the artist Áine McBride extracts elements from our built environment, focusing our attention on the often overlooked. Familiar architectural and built elements, rendered uncanny, provoke a reconsideration of our relationship to the man-made world.

and/or land, commissioned as part of an open call for the 39th Limerick EVA International (2020), is not immediately apparent; a grey hoarding encloses a dilapidated building on a city street. On initial reading, there is nothing to distinguish it from the many enclosures in our cities which contain building sites or wastelands. However, there are subtle signals to the viewer that something different is at play; a considered layering of reflective Perspex inserted into the hoarding mirrors the surrounding street, interspersed with tightly cropped black and white photos of a torso layered in jumper and jacket. These images are intimate and disarming, provoking a desire to expand the frame, to see the rest of the body and its context.

Passing through the hoarding reveals a gravelled forecourt to the Limerick Sailors' Home, built in 1854 and lightly restored in 2010. The two-storey, four-bay building has an air of romantic dilapidation about it. A ramp leads to the central entrance door. The ramp draws attention; there is something not quite right.

An elegant steel handrail lines one side of the ramp – so far so normal – but one of the rail's verticals is incomplete, amputated from the top bracket. The ramp is paved with off-the-shelf concrete pavers, but they have been over-worked, cut into smaller sizes to create a bespoke composition. The mundane material has been elevated but appears incomplete; spacers are still in place and a wooden pallet sits to one side of the ramp holding additional paving slabs. This pallet acts as a plinth for a curved steel object which shares the materiality of the handrail yet is seemingly without function, looped rather than linear. Is it a left-over piece or a more intentional, ornamental sculpture? A yellow electrical cable lies on the gravel, severed from its source and its destination. Is it left behind from construction? Still in use? Another sculpture?

Artist Áine McBride

Location Limerick Sailors' Home

Photography Jed Niezgodna

A Platform Commission for the
39th EVA International



Now that our attention has been shifted and focused, the whole forecourt becomes ripe for questioning: where does the artwork begin and end?

In conversation, the artist described how they first selected the site and, consequently, how the work was created in direct response to its context and need: 'The construction of a ramp stemmed from the practical need to replace an existing ramp but this practicality also offered a way of producing a work that combined and complicated sculpture and architecture, and engaged with their relationship to use value, materiality, purpose, etc.'

The work was started in the artist's studio, and elements were made there, but many decisions were made on site during construction as McBride physically engaged with the materials. They describe the stripping down of the site; a gate was removed and fences either side of the building repositioned, the site cleared of litter and levelled with gravel. Where weeds were kept, they were tamed. 'This overgrowth is made to appear pristine or natural in some way'.

At Katsura Imperial Villa, nature is meticulously manipulated to appear wild. Garden historians David and Michiko Young note that at the heart of the Japanese garden is the principle that a garden is a work of art: 'Though inspired by nature, it is an interpretation rather than a copy; it should appear to be natural, but it is not wild'.

Like McBride's work, this interpretation, rather than exact representation, allows us to see it afresh, awakening our emotions and amplifying our response to the universal experience of our built environment.

Bruno Taut's parting reflection on Katsura describes this refocusing of the eye: 'It achieves a beauty that is completely non-decorative but functional in the spiritual sense. This beauty makes the eye a sort of transformer of thought. The eye thinks ... in that it sees'.

On completion of EVA International, the ornamental sculpture was removed but the functional interpretation of a ramp remains. McBride describes the act as a 'decommissioning' of the work – a further complication of art and functionality.

The work and the artist are not shy to leave us with a sense of unease, questioning our definitions and the boundaries between art, architecture, and our experience of these disciplines, while also creating a moment for pause, provoked by the minute considerations of a potentially overlooked environment.

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