

mother's annual 2018

### **Áine McBride work suite**

February – April

#### **Between building and unbuilding**

I first came across Áine McBride's work in the spring of 2017, with the installation of *Habitat HQ* in a ground floor concourse of Trinity College's Arts Building, in Dublin. To reach the exhibition, I tracked out from the neighbouring Douglas Hyde Gallery, down the stairs and by the busy canteen, passing students crouched over laptops or eating packed lunches from perspex containers. Here and there were groups in twos or threes stretched out on the too-few sofas, chatting idly before class or studying their phones. I walked further across the concourse and gradually all life seemed to peter out: what remained was little more than the building's bare bones – redundant desks, bits of equipment, exposed concrete walls, and water pipes. It was into this rather less obviously functional space that McBride had situated her work. All of the sculptures borrowed heavily from the vernacular of unthought, administrated space – either depersonalised behemoth or modernist utopia, depending on the angle of one's approach. Camouflaged by their placement in this decidedly non-art setting, it would have been easy to miss McBride's sculptures – a fact supported by the students' mostly disinterested movement through this temporary exhibition space. What interested me most about *Habitat HQ*, though, was my experience of it in a bodily sense: walking, stopping and pausing to look about in a space really designed only for moving through on the way to somewhere more circumscribed. Reaching one of the floor level sculptures, I stopped abruptly and crouched down to get a better look, while I also caught a worrying glimpse of myself, studying a construction of MDF and plywood – to a lay eye, a discarded piece of furniture or teaching equipment, perhaps – as harangued students rushed past on their way to class. It was clear that considering the objects as *art* required a kind of behaviour at odds with any normal engagement with this space. I slipped into a mode of being, now second nature, but which – through the process of acting in this way – I discovered to be basically incompatible with my location. McBride's sculptures made me deeply self-conscious, but also conscious of the assumptions regarding design and space that govern the majority of our movements through the world.

Taken out of this non-art location, I was curious to see whether McBride's work would carry the same awkward charge; whether they would be able to misbehave, as it were, in a designated gallery space actually designed for misbehaving; whether they would retain some of the weird in-betweenness that so impressed me in their earlier bureaucratic setting. McBride's *work suite*, at mother's tankstation, is the artist's first solo gallery exhibition. Happily, between *Habitat HQ* and *work suite* there is little difference sensible in her approach: the materials – plywood, concrete, steel, Formica, wood, and so forth – remain broadly the same and chosen, presumably, by virtue of their proximity to the banal language of office or post-industrial space. The scale of the works, too, remains for the most part unchanged: McBride's works are not looming or fantastic sculptures, but ones that could easily occupy some office corner without much song and dance; for the most part, I think one or two people could transport them with ease. As with *Habitat HQ*, these new works all initially suggest a rough provisionality, but on closer study are fastidiously made. Certain elements of the work – initially interpreted perhaps as found or scavenged material – are in fact cast from scratch. Such surprises give us the sense that McBride is less looking to recreate certain objects but rather to represent a certain, post-industrial aesthetic, through a focus, or riff, upon particular details. These details are then expanded to create forms that evoke, rather than perform any cogent function. They do not re-present other objects. Rather, they have the "look" of spaces and objects already familiar to us, but estranged from any of the ends towards which they are usually routed, like snapshots of the minor, and sometimes unlikely, joins that bolster contemporary life.

The work at mother's tankstation comprises a series of sculptures alongside a pair of untitled 2D prints: photographs printed onto microperforated PVC. Remarkably, all of the work here has been made over the last few months; and the effect of this is that the exhibition appears, at times, as components of one unified work, rather than individual set pieces. As such, they seem to perform the exhibition's title: a suite *for* working, as much as a suite *of* works. On entering the gallery from the street, the darkened atrium space holds just one work, the diminutive concrete sculpture, *c base* (2018).<sup>i</sup> It has the look of something

fabricated so as to weigh other things down, to keep them stolidly in place. The concrete is a warm and tactile grey; and on further consideration, shows itself to be not one single mass, but several interlocking components, with a smaller L-shaped part hooking onto the broader main form. Hunkering down onto my knees for a better look, it becomes clear that this is not a positive gestalt, but rather a multi-part concrete cast of negative space, perhaps as given by some humdrum packaging, or bits of materials simply propped up together for the purposes of the concrete pour. Here, the space *between* has assumed primacy; and, throughout *work suite* this preoccupation with indeterminacy is further carried through in McBride's treatment of detail. Removed from the context of their environment or function, these details or snapshots become abstract and fully odd. This is a trope also sensible in another smaller work, *b base*, made from a somewhat abject consortium of concrete, timber, jesmonite, steel, unfired clay, and pleather. Like *c base*, it holds only the trace of some kind of function. Mounted on small jesmonite legs, its thick concrete base is weighty; indeed, much too weighty, superfluous given the slender steel pole supported by it. A light mustard yellow strip of pleather is coiled around the pole's peak, and above it is a thinner section of steel, twisted back onto itself in a loop. The metal pole extends up from its weighty concrete base, with a finger's smudge of unfired clay softening its ascent. There is a pathos to these sculptures that is conditional on their very made-ness, on the extent to which McBride strains to create objects that are unmoored from any kind of tangible performativity. Fashioned to echo the tumble-down and broken of contemporary post-industrial space, they speak of the arbitrariness of materiality more broadly.

Working my way further into the gallery space, what seems like the central arrangement of work, comprising four distinct sculptures, opens up. To the left are *t unit* and *L unit*, floor-based sculptures in a range of workaday materials; over towards the right are *floor unit* and the pivotal *Untitled (wall)*, the latter of which partially divides the large gallery space. A second untitled 2D work, detailing a section of classic Brutalist architecture – photographed from below to fully convey its impassive heft – fills out the central exhibition plane. With this collection of work, too, the materials used are forcefully unremarkable: timber, plywood, and mild steel, both painted and unpainted. Faux-marble bargain-basement tiles have been laid like planks to cover the wooden surface of *t unit*, the sculpture's smooth plane only broken up by a flash of yellow tape; just to the left of the sculpture's head – and it is difficult to ignore the work's bodily proportions – a contorted singsong of canary yellow-painted mild steel rushes out from the ground, in a mostly one-sided conversation with the yellow tape. In *floor unit*, again McBride experiments with colour, as a lustrous tailored garment in deep turquoise rests casually on the floor-based work, itself also partially painted a rich cornflower blue. Slipping from the sides of the work, half on and half-off, the article – which resembles part of an industrial uniform – has the result of again prefiguring the body, albeit in a much more direct sense than *t unit*. Though *floor unit* is also roughly bodily in scale, however, it seems that all of the works in *work suite* offer a humanity that is more like a happy accident, mirroring the afterthought consideration of much, so-called functional, industrial space.

Most people, now, spend a good portion of their days surrounded by materials proximate to that of McBride's work. Despite an irrevocable, immaterial turn in labour and production, shiny workspace patinas still generally recede to steel and cheap MDF. In *work suite*, these materials have been disassembled, or appear to have not yet found a final form or function. They are either in the process of forming or being rendered unceremoniously undone. In the exhibition's largest work, *Untitled (wall)*, a pair of vertical wooden planes running alongside one another, partially obstructs our entrance into the central gallery space. It is a partition of sorts, and between its two planes of wood we can also make out a curious gap, too small for us to enter. In a more functional construction, perhaps this is where the necessary electric tributaries would be placed, before being customarily hidden from view. Short lengths of painted mild steel hold the two sheets of wood together, and jutting out from where the steel meets wood are four small flicks of baby blue yoga mat fragments, like maligned post-its flapping in an air-conditioned breeze. Large portions of the wooden structure are latticed, meaning this is as much a structure for looking through as disguising or separating one area from another. We are invited to look at its insides, as we are with the smaller *L unit*, a sculpture sitting towards the centre of the exhibition space, its form in the process of languid unfurling. With both sculptures, then, we are faced with either a moment of building or unbuilding. McBride, it seems, is interested in the potential of this juncture: in the reversibility – either forwards or backwards – implied when these elements of design, when the decision contained in them, or indeed lack thereof, is peeled apart and rendered plain to see. There is nothing essential about the built world, just a series of decisions that

could well have been otherwise. Indeed it strikes me that the *built* world only means that it was built, not that it was thought about.

Perhaps it is being fresh to a new city that means I am now unusually attentive to the details of place, and to the incongruous weirdness that constitutes architectural or spatial configurations still too new to be converted into the unthought. Grappling with a new place, in spatial terms, is much like grappling with a new language: after a time, each is invariably converted into something that no longer requires conscious attention or control. Because it needs to be able to occupy itself with other, more urgent things, the body necessarily twists to fit this new system. What McBride's sculptures do is to reverse this process, and to create space for the re-assessment of quotidian materials like wood, steel, concrete and tile. They become, again, just as weird as they really are: as unwieldy, material solutions to particularly intangible, human problems or desires. Sometimes, the weirdness of this decision can be demonstrated by the solidification of a simple detail: by the way the fleshy materiality of clay sits against the unforgiving sheen of steel, say, or a bin-frame-like structure standing upright like a sparse crown. Materials have their own complexities, their own particular alliances and respective conflicts; to look closely at McBride's sculptures - always complex, and at times mournful and wry - activates these complexities and allows them to ring out.

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