

MYRID CARTEN

Preta Act 2

2 June – 15 July 2023

"Join us after the ad... join us after the break... the ad-ver-tise-ments..."

Myrid Carten is a filmmaker and moving image artist originally from Donegal, who is equally 'at home' in the gallery or cinema. In this instance – *Preta Act 2* - a second version of her emotive subjectⁱ, Carten's diptych explores personal narratives, family, legacy, subjectivity and truth, repetition, inheritance and the potential (or otherwise) of escape from all of the above, beautifully crafted through the forms of interview format and hard-hitting factual documentary. Film one, *Preta Act 1*, ostensibly sets a desolate *mise-en-scène*, of a decaying property in rural Donegal, unfurling wet, misted landscapes, dilapidated interiors, childhood, light and dark, cold... but mostly, a moody, brooding sense of immanent *explosivity*. A family home, we presume, in which a roughly cut-up interview takes place, predominantly the content of the second screen; *Sorrow had a baby*, but both are all heavily mixed with vintage footage from Carten's childhood, ambient audio; voice overs, asides and tellingly laid commentaries off.

Daughter: "Mammy, do you know I'm making a film about you?"

Mother: "*Slight pause* - Yeah, you told me about that once, aye." Waves hand in gesture somewhere between benediction, diminishing deflection, and/or, implied intrusion, as in: 'don't point that thing at me now...'

Camera drops to show an abstracted detail of the hem edging of 'mother's' yellow waterproof and a dog-hair-clogged car seat...

Mother: sings to herself (quietly, tunefully):

"Yesterday..."

all my troubles seemed so far away,

*I believe in Yesterday..."*ⁱⁱ

The issues that inherently complicate what could otherwise be a relatively straightforward narrative about a mother and daughter relationship, are that the documented conversations and situations navigate, with almost unbelievable frankness, honesty and incisive intelligence, through personal minefields and *legacy issues* of addiction, mental health, alcoholism, and related trauma. *Voice off*, of 'Daughter' (as a child): "*This isn't a film, this is real life...*" Part real-life, part filmic character, MOTHER*ⁱⁱⁱ, frankly, with almost casual humour, introduces a central dialectic;

Mother: "...Well, they reckon it's an addiction,... that's caused by the same gene as alcoholism..."

but addiction *is* addiction, and every human suffers from one type or another..."

Daughter: "Why are you telling me this?"

Mother: "Aye, in case I pass it on to you... Yes I do... I got very guilty, that you know... that you got my dodgy gene, cause I've... I'm not quite anorexic, I don't think,... I'm more *bi-.....* what's the other one (?), ...bulimic. Yeah, I prefer Bulimia."

Time shifts from present to past and back again, unpicking connections that, bit-by-bit, reveal themselves through the passage of the films. The deliberately bright, clear daylight of the exhibition space contrastingly fronts a sparse reality of two monitors and connected audio system – a relationship of two with everything deliberately on show – that alternates discrete, but inextricably linked, short films; *Preta Act 1* (4 mins) and *Sorrow had a baby* (18 mins).

Throughout, vintage 'home movie' footage is intercut, revealing Carten to be a compulsive *camera-pointer* from an early age. With friends, she films them 'playacting', mimicked fragments of lives of the (received perception of, at least) 'beautiful people'. Like the cliché of reality TV shows, "...beautiful young women show their skills" - including Irish dancing to Beyoncé. A young Myrid Carten casts herself as 'Pamela Anderson', while her childhood girlfriends pose as *Miss California*, *Miss New York* and *Miss Antrim*,^{iv} respectively:

- *What's your favourite food, and why?*

- *Well, I'd have to say Salad, because it tastes great and it's low in calories. And it isn't [sic] got much fat, And I don't want to put on weight!*^v

There's also an undertow of quiet, yet determined competition: *Where's that crown, I really want that crown...*

The penny drops that just *one* of the understated issues at hand, and perhaps the most light-footedly-tread in dialogue, is the relationship of *beauty*, itself, to addiction; to a compulsion, the contemporary mythology of what we look like being a primacy above how we feel. Being 'beautiful' is equated to being 'loved'. Intimacy struggles and families suffer as a consequence. Obsession equals rupture. As the conversation drifts dangerously close, but still with familial tenderness, to confrontation:

Daughter: "I think your version of well-being, or caring, is caring about how somebody looks". Not eating well...sleeping, Taking care...

Mother (returns with obvious impatience): "You were taught *all that* as a child, Myrid. It's up to you to look after your own *fucking* anorexia and not pass it off on me.'

In a remarkably subtle, yet compelling shift from the docudrama form, 'Daughter' appears in the bathroom mirror as if attending to her make-up ritual, and over-voices 'mother'. The lip-sync surrogacy is so uncannily precise, that *playacting* takes an unnerving turn into an expression of indivisibility of mother-to-daughter and vice versa.

Carten's collective title for the show, *Preta Act 2*^{vi}, as she notes in an email text below, refers to a perpetuation of guilt, regret, concurrent to simultaneous anticipation of redemption. The proliferation of Virgin Mary iconography, scattered around the interior of the obviously freezing, near-derelict home in the Donegal wilds, contrast with the 'pure' simplicity of both the virgin myth – comfort/beauty/transcendence – and that of the collective consciousness of our contemporary beauty obsessions. There is nothing glamorous about the wet coal pile outside the house, and the recycled plastic adhesive tub as transporting scuttle – the coal is so damp that little heat is possible, It recalls Danny's parable-like riddle from *Miriam*, included in the first Dublin exhibition; "How can you burn something that is 4/5th sea water and 1/5th stone? Wrapped in a blanket, with merely hot tea and the ineffectual fire in the grate for warmth and comfort, 'Mother' reminisces; "*The first years were good... The first years weren't too bad...*" (?) ['Mother' in a decreasing cycle of certainty]...*No?...Yes?*" Uncomfortable silence with embarrassed noises off. Mother: "*Were you bullied at school?... Daughter: No I wasn't, so I don't think that was the issue here.*"

Myrid Carten, originally from Donegal, was awarded a BA and MA, First Class Honours from Goldsmiths College, University of London. Carten has been commissioned and broadcast by the BBC, funded by BFI and NI Screen, and selected for Galway and Belfast Film Fleadhs. Recent exhibitions include; *My Body is an Exhibition*, Sadler's Wells, London (2021), *The Yalta Game*, RCC, Donegal (2020), *Urgencies* (selected by Willie Doherty), CCA, Derry (2019). Residencies include; ISCP, New York (2020-21), Hospitalfield (2020-2021), Artlink, Dunree (2020), and British Council and ACNI International artist residency, India (2017-2018). Awards include; TBG&S Project Studio Award (2018-19), Fire Station Artist's Studio, Digital Media Award (2018), Arts Council of Ireland, Next Generation Artist Award (2018-19). Myrid Carten's work is in the collection of the Arts Council of Ireland.

ⁱ *Preta (Hungry Ghost)*, a three-screen edited version, was originally exhibited at mother's tankstation, Dublin, 7 April - 4 June 2022.

ⁱⁱ *Sorrow had a Baby*. Originally made as an aemi film commission, co-written with Sabine Groenewegen. Even the film credits appear to conflate reality and fiction: "Mother: Nuala Carten / Daughter: Myrid Carten" / *Yesterday*: Lennon–McCartney, 1965.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*. In the earlier version of the edit from the 'Dublin triptych', MOTHER* ventures: "*There's two schools of thought, in my own head, and two schools of thought out there*". (1.) That "mad" people *do* see, or somehow have privileged access, to things that others do not, *or*, (2.) "*That they are just mad fucking bastards and they see nothing.*"

^{iv} *Players are end-credited in 'Sorrow had a baby' as: Megan Law, Morgan McIntyre and Máirín De Buitlér, respectively.*

^v *ibid*. no.ii

^{vi} Myrid Carten notes: "**Preta** also known as a **hungry ghost**, is the Sanskrit name for a type of supernatural being, common to Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Chinese folk and Vietnamese folk religion. The mythical figure undergoes suffering greater than that of humans, particularly an extreme level of hunger and thirst. *Preta*, often translated into English as "hungry ghost" from the Chinese and Vietnamese adaptations, developed from an initial concept that it was the soul/ghost of a deceased person, but later complicated into a transient state between death and obtaining karmic reincarnation in accordance to the person's 'fate'. In order to pass into the cycle of karmic reincarnation, the deceased's family must engage in a variety of rituals and offerings, often for more than a year, to guide the suffering spirit into its next life. If the family does not engage... the soul could remain suffering as a *preta* for eternity. For further research see **Gabor Mate**, *Realm of Hungry Ghosts*. Mate uses the concept in reference to his work with addicts and addiction. I am particularly drawn to the description of rituals that need to be performed by the family.