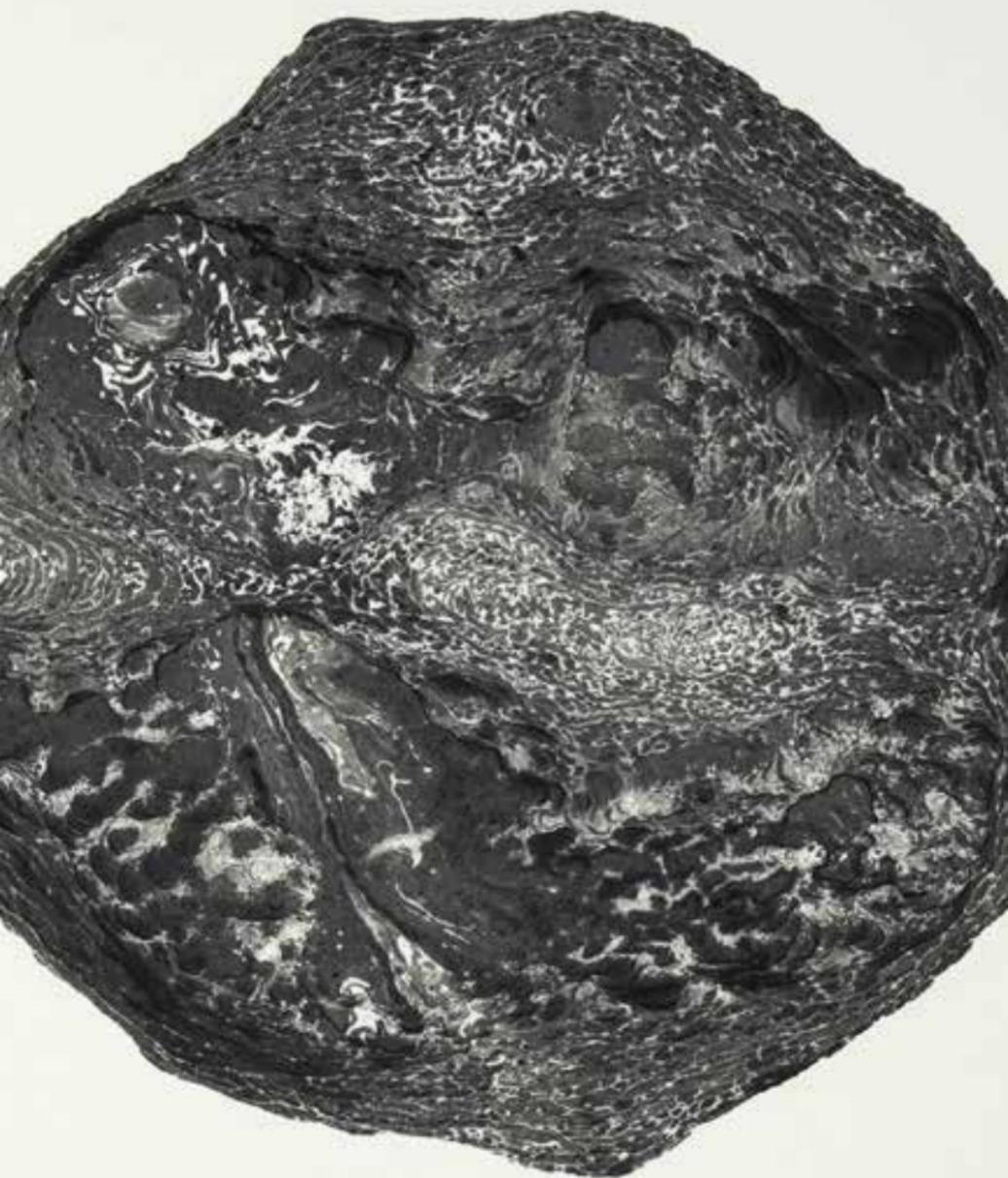


With Other Matter
Joanne Laws



A text in response to:
With Other Matter, part one



Robert Dunne, *Composite*, plaster, wood, paint, steel, 90 x 270 x 120

With Other Matter

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A text in response to:

With Other Matter, part one:

Dorota Borowa, Martina Coyle, Robert Dunne, Betty Gannon,
Kathryn Kelly, Catherine Kelly Desmond, Dave Madigan,
Darran McGlynn, Ida Mitrani, Nollaig Molloy, Noel Molloy,
Ciara Roche, Celine Sheridan, Sinead Smyth

Roscommon Arts Centre

29th January - 12th March, 2022

With Other Matter
Joanne Laws



The gardener digs in another time, without past or future, beginning or end. A time that does not cleave the day with rush hours, lunch breaks, the last bus home. As you walk in the garden, you pass into this time – the moment of entering can never be remembered. Around you the landscape lies transfigured. Here is the Amen beyond the prayer.¹

In his 1992 memoir, *Modern Nature*, Derek Jarman chronicled the creative challenges of establishing a garden in the inhospitable coastal environment of Dungeness in Kent, overlooked by a nuclear power station. Gardening seemed to anchor Jarman in the latter years of a largely nomadic life, while helping him to process his HIV diagnosis and the loss of so many friends during the AIDS epidemic. His poignant observation that “the gardener digs in another time” draws a distinction between the different temporalities of man and nature.

Against the backdrop of Covid-19, nature and green spaces became therapeutic outlets. The early weeks of the global pandemic were the stuff of dystopian fiction. International news reports showed apocalyptic scenes of mass graves and Hazmat suits. Cities became the sites of mounting contagion. Time was punctuated with daily death tolls and periodic updates from government officials, who addressed the nation with the solemnity of wartime. Human life as we knew it seemed to grind to a halt; and yet, still the flowers continued to bloom.



Dave Madigan, *Souls*, oil on canvas, 80 x 120

Amid travel restrictions, shuttered businesses, deserted streets, virtually no traffic, and noticeable reductions in pollution levels, mammals, insects, birds, and other wildlife seemed to reclaim urban habitats. As our ears attuned to the morning amphitheatre of birdsong, we began to learn of the importance of ‘rewilding’ as an intervention to restore ecosystems and slow down climate change. I remember thinking that perhaps it’s not the landscape that needs to be rewilded, but us humans. Local authorities stopped cutting verges and began planting wildflowers instead. We vowed to postpone the mowing of lawns in early summer: *Excuse the weeds, we are feeding the bees.*

‘With Other Matter’ opened in late January 2022 at Roscommon Arts Centre (RAC), the same week that most Covid-19 restrictions were officially ceased by the Irish government, tentatively ushering an end to the pandemic. This group exhibition brings together selected artists who set about documenting and recording the infinite strangeness of lockdown – its spatial limitations, sparseness, and lack of human contact, as well as the mundane rhythms of life, confined to one’s immediate vicinity. Collectively the presented artworks examine the materials in our environment that fold into our bodies and affect us in subtle or obvious ways. The exhibition title resonates with American political theorist, Jane Bennett’s concept of ‘vibrant matter’, which considers the agency and ‘thing-power’ of inanimate objects and non-human forces.

Ciara Roche, *Hooker's Green Interior 2*

I caught a glimpse of an energetic vitality inside each of these things, things that I generally conceived as inert. In this assemblage, objects appeared as things, that is as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics.²

The prolonged closure of studio spaces during lockdown meant that many artists had to dramatically alter their processes to suit the confines of working from home. Indeed, a defining feature of the pandemic was the merging of professional and domestic lives, as the interiors of people's homes were revealed to us in unprecedented ways. The exhibited artworks closely examine the familiar textures of the domestic realm, as if magnifying seemingly banal microdetails, like architraves and other architectural fixtures, that go unnoticed in ordinary life. Across the assembled works, we observe the quality of light, as it spills through blinds at dusk or sunrise, casting shadows across empty rooms. Also documented are textures of the natural world – from plant life, moss and foliage, to encroaching weeds and blossoms. The ubiquitous appearance of flowers – whether fresh, wilting, or fake – seems to act as *Memento Mori*, marking the tragic proximity of death throughout this period. There are further simulations of nature through the use of Astroturf as a sculptural material, while other artworks trace a slow and durational exposure to the elements.



As the ‘charmed suspension’ of the first lockdown gave way to a merging of the biological and the political, it became clear that global pandemics are a permanent facet of burgeoning climate catastrophe, caused by unsustainable human relations with nature, such as intensive farming practices and habitat destruction. ‘With Other Matter’ provides an opportune moment to reflect on the last two years, while emphasising the role of the arts, not only in soothing existential vulnerabilities and healing that trauma, but in making visible the enormity of this period in modern human history.

Joanne Laws is an art writer and editor based in County Roscommon

(Endnotes)

- 1 Derek Jarman, *Modern Nature* (London: Vintage, 1992) p30.
- 2 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010) p5.

About Roscommon Arts Centre's Visual Art Writer In Residence

Visual Art Writer's Sue Rainsford and Joanne Laws are the Roscommon Arts Centre's Visual Art Writer's in Residence for 2021/22. During this time, Joanne & Sue are invited to write critical texts on selected exhibitions and projects happening across the county. The intention of this residency is to allow writers to experiment with their writing style and explore new ways of disseminating their work. Their writings will be available at Roscommon Arts Centre and online as they are published.

Joanne Laws is a visual art writer, editor and researcher based in county Roscommon. She is Editor of The Visual Artists' News Sheet, where she commissions and develops new writing for an Irish arts readership. Joanne is a member of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) and a regular contributor to international arts publications including Art Monthly, Art Review and Frieze. Joanne was Assistant Editor of the monograph Derek Jarman: Protest!, published in 2020 by IMMA and Thames & Hudson. Among other professional commitments, Joanne currently serves on the board of directors of Leitrim Sculpture Centre and is programme extern for the Fine Art Department at Sligo Institute of Technology.

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