

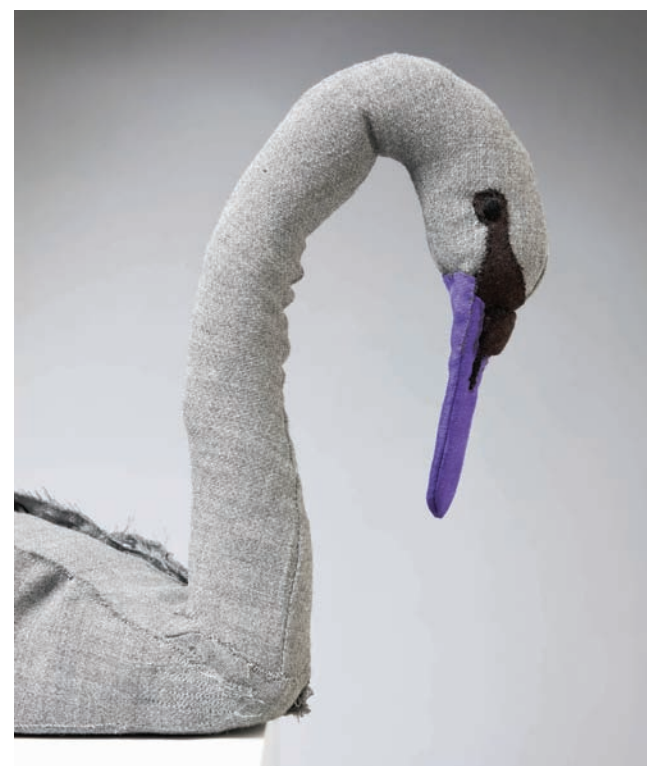
## HOW IS IT MADE?



Isabel Nolan *Uplift* 2009 balsa, jesmonite, paint, toughened glass, MDF object 50 x 16 x 16 cm base 31 x 40 x 30 cm



Isabel Nolan *A better life*. 2009 balsa, jesmonite, paint, toughened glass, MDF object 45 x 35 x 50 cm base 75 x 40 x 60 cm



Isabel Nolan *A fanaticism of sympathy* 2009 mixed fabrics, paint, MDF swan 28 x 40 x 17 cm base 90 x 60 x 12 cm

## Apparent Meaningfulness

ISABEL NOLAN DISCUSSES THE ROLE OF INTUITION IN HER STUDIO PRACTICE.

**OFTEN** when exhibiting new work I find that it cannot be contained in a satisfactory net of expository words. Not the works or the exhibition. One explanation (or excuse) for this is that it can seem pointless and constraining to speak about the kind of event or object that is failing to some degree if it doesn't 'speak' for itself.

Soon after 'On a Perilous Margin' at the Kerlin Gallery (27 Nov – 23 Dec 2009) had closed I was trying to marshal my thoughts and experiencing this difficulty in finding the words to describe why and how the show came to be. (I was about to meet someone to discuss it.) An image of a stick-person-me standing beside the edge of a big, imperfect circle came to mind. Sometimes stick-person is busy working in the centre; sometimes stick-person paces the perimeter, or moves back and forth across the boundary line. This imaginary circle encompasses all the different backstage activities that constitute being an artist for me: the drawing, reading, painting, and sewing, thinking, sculpturing, etc. I made this circle myself and yet at that moment I was outside of it, trying to remember how and why the work got made.

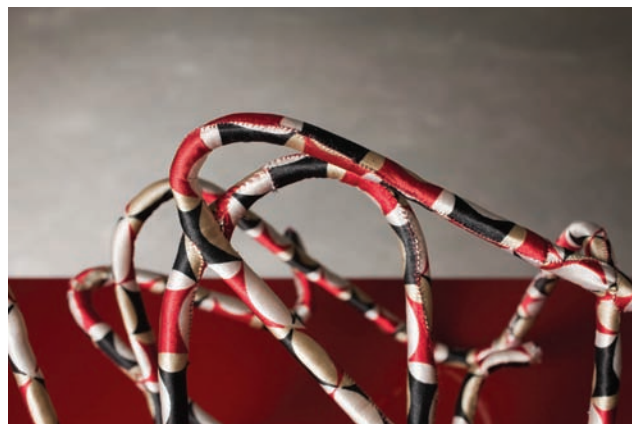
Being consequent upon a studio practice that is at times very reliant on intuition, this tricky relationship to one's own work is perhaps not so surprising. Broadly speaking, the up-side of this method of working is that instincts honed over a long time, uncertainty as regards desirable outcomes and intellectual flexibility are important for creative practices which are predicated (to draw a pointed distinction that is in practice quite spurious) on engendering rather than finding or achieving results. A work that seems successful in this instance emerges during the process of working. Intuition, experience, etc., (and sometimes visitors to the studio) will persuade me that here is a form that has got 'something'. This form is no longer inert; it is a moment of significance. It is not merely a prop, rather it performs/manifests certain mores that I believe are important to iterate.

One facet of this was alluded to in the press release accompanying the exhibition; I quoted C.S. Lewis who, railing against critics of the liberal arts, wrote "... the man of radically servile character will never understand. He will ask, 'But what use is it?'". Making work in the manner described can be a matter of defending endeavours that are 'other' than simply functional or useful, not didactic (or even educative?) and not productive according to the principles of capitalism. This is (sort-of) following in a long tradition of creative research and work that stands largely on qualities or merits that refuse to be bound to the need to be useful or applicable in practical or socio-economic terms. The value of this kind of work is difficult to articulate without invoking hackneyed terms, but it has the potential to speak to us in innumerable ways and to produce things, research, information sensations or feelings that are compelling, important, worrying, unexpected, beautiful and exciting.

Whilst making work, the times when I precisely know the 'why' of a particular piece are relatively short-lived. Usually this feeling can last a few hours, maybe a few days, and occasionally for a longer spell – waxing and waning over a matter of weeks. In these times I know how to proceed with the making of the object(s); be it the beginnings



Isabel Nolan *Something special in remembrance, 1881* 2009 watercolour and waterbased oil on canvas 50 x 40 cm



Isabel Nolan *In a space, intimately unrelated* 2009 Metal, mixed fabrics, plaster, toughened glass, MDF object 26 x 30 x 30 cm base 91 x 50 x 40 cm

or the end stages – the logic of the work is apparent to me and it deems the work be one way and not another. These times feel very good. This way of working is hard to rationalize or explain and often I have the sense that the work underway at any given time is, metaphorically, just beyond my fingertips. Setting about making meaning out of form, or form into meaning, and further, making meanings that are relevant to the thinking you do; that perform the ideas that you hope to communicate, is not a straightforward process. I do this by physically crafting things, reworking them, messing them up and remaking from scratch; discarding certain things altogether, and returning to others after long intervals when they may have seemed inert. In doing this I

have moments when the energy or rationale of the object becomes clear and the next step gets made (sometimes rightly, sometimes not).

The logic of making an exhibition is somewhat distinct from this process. After all, my stick-person 'backstage' circle is just a tiny circle contained in, overlapped and contiguous with innumerable other circles of activity: including the temporary rings drawn around a number of works to make an exhibition. A different order of intuition and reason necessarily come into play, and combine with an important moment of collaboration and discussion with other people, to bring the works into a performative relationship that makes a bunch of things into much more than the sum of its parts.

At the moment (my mind is changeable) I think that most of what gets said about an artwork by its maker is a matter of anecdote. "It is about the..." "I saw this and thought of that", "I read so – and – so and it led me to..." This is no doubt often very interesting and insightful but I am wary of the word 'about'. What concerns me as an artist and as a viewer is effect. (I presume it is the same for most interested parties.) The question to be asked of an artwork is not, "What is it supposed to mean?" or "What is it about?" but rather; "What is it doing?"

I hope that the works in 'on a perilous margin' emerged from the process of being made to seem purposeful but recognising the contingency and profound instability of their meaning; perhaps by being evocative but inscrutable: that they are objects or images that aspire to meaningful connection but are (perhaps painfully) aware of the limits of communication.

Other things I can say about how the show evolved are of a much more anecdotal nature. It is hard to escape narrative and even the most abstract or 'unfamiliar' object takes on a set of anthropomorphic adjectives – I see various works as friendly, sad, playful, aspirational; thwarted, anxious, or excited. Someone told me the works were fiercely tentative – I like this description.

In the last few years I've made a number of paintings based on artworks, three were included in the show, *Sad time 1862*, *Sad time 1439*, and *Something special in remembrance, 1881*. I've done this because I had very strong responses to these works, sometimes in the flesh and sometimes as reproductions. These reactions stayed with me and I puzzled for a long time as to why they produced such powerful emotions. Not having reached a satisfying conclusion I decided to make correlative objects that would simply attest to those feelings.

Many of the titles of the pieces are taken from fiction – I try to put words with works that will add to their apparent meaningfulness and facilitate their need to communicate, titles that will lead but not dictate responses, that don't close down the works or turn the objects into illustrations.

The struggle to find words can make it seem as though the work has escaped your grasp, and that its meaning is now exclusively the business of any audience it may have. Maybe what is important at this time is to both reflect and to start working again (perhaps leaving the apprehension of the finished work to its audience) and to trust that your intellectual or material compulsions will lead to or even make new lines to follow. Hopefully stick-figure-artist moves around and through, and in and out of many imaginary circles.

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