

Miriam de Búrca: Noblesse Oblige

21 June - 27 July 2024



German Flashflood, 2021
Gold and enamel painting on glass / 24.1 x 31.1 cm

Cristea Roberts Gallery is delighted to announce Miriam de Búrca's first solo exhibition in the UK. *Noblesse Oblige* (21 June – 27 July 2024) features over 25 new works exploring the legacies of systems of coercion, exploitation and extraction in Europe and the US. It includes a series of new drawings about burial sites in Ireland designated for those considered 'unsuitable' for consecrated ground, and glass works made using an historic artform of etching into gilded gold leaf, depicting contemporary landscapes devastated by ecological disasters and recently toppled imperial statues.

These themes raise questions about our need, as individuals and nations, to confront the consequences of unhindered institutional power that is now more destructive than ever.

Noblesse Oblige, a nineteenth-century French expression, refers to the obligation of the upper classes to perform duties that the disadvantaged could not. In a contemporary context, de Búrca uses this title to highlight the responsibility of those born into privilege to examine the lineage of their social and economic advantage over others, calling them to action to restore balance.

Small intricate glass works include, *German Flashflood* and *Norwegian Mudslide, 2021*. Working from imagery found in news reports, de Búrca depicts homes and landscapes destroyed by fires, uprooted by tornados, flooded or swept away by mudslides, the result of colonisers' contributions to the current warming of our planet.

De Búrca also depicts statues of kings, colonists and army generals that have been torn down, hoisted away, shrouded or boxed in. Works such as *Was a Racist* and *Isalop, 2021*, became part of de Búrca's visual vocabulary when the world watched via media

outlets the angry removal of and defacing of statues in urban centres, led by the Black Lives Matter movement.

To make the glass works, de Búrca uses a technique called *verre églomisé*, an artform once popular among the upper and ruling classes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It involves the application of gold leaf onto the rear face of glass. Traditionally intended to produce a perfect mirror finish image, de Búrca allows the gold to crumple, fold and tear creating unpredictable marks and textures.

The warm, other-worldly material of gold does not degenerate or tarnish. It is at once representative of eternity and transcendence and a status symbol that displays wealth, power and opulence. By fusing *verre églomisé* with contemporary imagery, de Búrca is effectively dragging the past with her into the present.

She states, "*I take inspiration from reportage that bears witness to events signifying the current state of systemic and ecological turmoil. Representing these moments from within the aesthetic and material confines of verre églomisé – an artform that harks back to the very power structures that have brought us to this point of existential reckoning – I am joining in the call to confront this legacy, and ultimately to prompt discussion about where we want to take things from here.*"

The exhibition includes fifteen new drawings by de Búrca from her ongoing series which responds to burial sites in Ireland called *cillíní* and highlights some of the darker recesses of the human psyche. *Cillíní* were used for interring unbaptised babies and others considered 'unsuitable' for consecrated ground, exiled to eternal 'limbo'. Unmarried mothers, the mentally ill, unknown strangers, disabled children and suicides were also buried in these unmarked sites. There are at least two thousand unmarked burial sites dotted throughout Ireland, dating from the 1500s to as recently as the 1980s.

De Búrca selects samples of plant life that grow from these grounds, which include geographic, territorial or spiritual boundaries, corners of familiar fields, on hilltops, in bogs and forests, in valleys, on cliff edges, on the outskirts of villages, by the side of a road, under rubble, in car parks, farm sheds and front gardens.

She makes delicate, detailed studies of each small sample of earth. She explains, "*To pick up a sod of grass that has grown on the edges of a cillín, and to examine it, causes me to reflect on the bodies that fed it. I can't help thinking of these sods as representing anatomy; I see hair and teeth and bones, I see the roots as veins. The leaves, grass, sand and dirt have become anthropomorphised.*"

By removing them from their surroundings and paying focused attention to them, I am reversing the order and exposing them as

Cristea Roberts Gallery

43 Pall Mall, London SW1Y 5JG
+44 (0)20 7439 1866
info@cristearoberts.com
www.cristearoberts.com

blind spots which exist in our peripheral vision, like hundreds of holes in our collective conscience."

Through the act of drawing attention to these scenes, de Búrca aims to affect the viewer's understanding. She states, "*They say that change can only come when hurt is made public. Once knowledge and awareness are added to the act of looking, so much more can become visible; the hidden story in the picture begins to appear. Metaphorically,*

I want to bring the viewer to a cillín and tell them what they are looking at until they can no longer unsee it."

ENDS

About the artist

Miriam de Búrca is an Irish artist who grew up between the west of Ireland, Austria and Germany. She studied Fine Art at Glasgow School of Art and the University of Ulster, Belfast, where she was commended with an Award of Excellence for her practice-based PhD in 2010. Legacies of systems of coercion, exploitation and extraction permeate de Búrca's work, explored earlier in film, video and installation, and more recently in drawing and glass work.

Her work has been exhibited internationally for over twenty years, including in Belfast, Dublin, London, Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Lisbon, New York, Chicago, Florida, Montreal and Tel Aviv, amongst others. Her works are in private and public collections including the Arts Council of Northern Ireland; Arts Council of Ireland; National University of Ireland Galway; and Glucksman Gallery at University College Cork.; the British Museum, London; and the Mead Gallery at University of Warwick, Coventry;

Her drawing has recently been published in *The Story of Drawing: An Alternative History of Art* (Yale University Press, 2024); *Landscape and Environment in Contemporary Irish Art* (Churchill House Press, 2022); *Irish Art 1920 – 2020: Perspectives on a Century of Change* (Royal Irish Academy, 2022); and *Vitamin D3: Today's Best in Contemporary Drawing* (Phaidon Press, 2021).

Miriam de Búrca lives and works in Galway, Ireland.
Instagram: @miriamdeburca

Other exhibitions

Miriam de Búrca: Beautiful Apocalypse

Galway International Arts Festival
Galway Arts Centre, Ireland
15 – 27 July 2024

Drawing Attention: Emerging Artists in Dialogue

British Museum touring group exhibition
Hartlepool Art Gallery, Durham, UK
18 May – 24 August 2024

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Press Contact:
Gemma Colgan
gemma.colgan@cristearoberts.com
+44 (0)20 7439 1866

About Cristea Roberts Gallery

Cristea Roberts Gallery is a leading international contemporary art gallery with a particular focus on original prints and works on paper. Since its inception, the gallery has commissioned a significant number editions by a wide range of artists, whilst also representing others for their unique works. The underlying ethos of the gallery has always been artist-led. It was originally founded in 1995 as the Alan Cristea Gallery and changed its name in September 2019 to Cristea Roberts Gallery.

Acknowledged as one of the leading galleries in its field of specialty, the gallery's programme is dedicated to publishing, cataloguing, exhibiting and dealing in original prints and drawings by its roster of over 30 important international artists and Estates. It participates in all the major international art fairs and has a dynamic programme of exhibitions hosted in its bespoke space in Pall Mall, London.

The gallery works closely with international museums on acquisitions and loans, and examples of its editions are held in major public collections around the world including Tate, London, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Visitor information

Tues - Fri 11am - 5.30pm
Sat 11am - 2pm

Closed on Mondays, Sundays and public holidays
Free admission

Travel: Piccadilly or Green Park underground station
+44 (0)20 7439 1866

info@cristearoberts.com
www.cristearoberts.com

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