



# Genieeve Figgis



‘Desire: from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century  
to the Digital Age’

Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin  
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# GHOSTS IN THE MACHINE

Review by Gemma Tipton

Encompassing the entire history of human yearning, desire is a vast dark continent. It is a powerful force frequently felt, but seldom understood. Desire pushes us to uncomfortable acts; acts which are often inexplicable once its urgings have left us. But beyond being the subject of a thousand pop songs, what exactly is desire, and what do its fevers mean?

'Desire: A Revision', at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) in Dublin, aims to unpick desire, through themes of politics, the gaze, intimacy, transformation and utopianism. It's a tall order, given that philosophers and psychologists still wrestle with the question of whether it is even an emotion, or actually something physical, rooted in the body. Perhaps, for that reason, a true understanding of desire can only be found in the work of poets and artists: through allusion rather than explanation.

Attempting to address the idea of desire through words: desire implies lack. We do not desire that which we already have, and so sex and money are ideal drivers of desire—you can never really have enough and, once sated, the desire, briefly dormant, returns. At IMMA, a book of James Joyce's private letters are open in a vitrine, to a series of letters to his wife, Nora Barnacle. Joyce's famous novel, *Ulysses*, may have been banned in his lifetime, but his letters take what one's grandmother might have called "dirty language" to an absurd extreme. Reading them feels uncomfortably voyeuristic. True, deep desire is private at heart.

In the main corridor, a series of works from Helen Chadwick's *Wreaths to Pleasure* series (1992-93) are large, circular photographs. Made from household fluids, fruit, flowers and other organic matter, they're a juicy, bright and defiantly monumental opposition to the phallic symbol. This heart of the female is a powerful, alluring and yet unknowable vortex.

Lee Bul's *Excavation* (2007) is a different kind of monument. A large slab of mortar stands atop a pillar, which seems to rise out of crystal-studded rock. On top is a sweeping mass of artificial black hair, growing out of what might be a temple, a castle or perhaps a lighthouse. Brooding, extraordinary,

enigmatic: as a metaphor for the body/mind/soul equation (and the impossibility of ever actually solving it), it's pretty damn good.

Irish poet, Thomas Kinsella wrote of something similar when he described how, "the alien/ Garrison in my own blood/ Keeps constant contact with the main/ Mystery, not to be understood."<sup>1</sup> In this he puts his finger on why desire is so potent. Desire seems to reside in our blood, or perhaps more accurately the blood carries the richer mysteries of our more animal, and possibly spiritual natures.

At IMMA, an extraordinary installation of the work of Irish artist Genieve Figgis sees a pair of the museum's antechambers painted a vivid, verdant green. The centrepiece of the larger room is a canopied bed, hung with heavy drapes. Propped on one pillow, *Kissing* (2019) is an acrylic on wood panel painting of a couple, lost to the world, all tongues and closed-eyed desire. It's an intimate, animal moment, at odds with the formality of the smoothly laid bed.

The artist bought the bed at auction. A 19<sup>th</sup> century cabinet and couch also feature. The cabinet is a repository for a whole series of smaller works: couples embracing, lost in sex, a lone woman masturbating, a small dog. Like the bed, it is a good metaphor for the social container of our baser sides. And yet "base" is too pejorative a description for the pull of what lies beneath our polite veneer: and that is the substance and glory of Figgis' works.

With thick, rich paint, she depicts Regency interiors (surely that most polite of ages), in which figures dance, pause for conversation, enact social scenes. In *Lusty Ladies* (2019), the ladies in question wear high hair-dos, corsets, hold fans, but their faces are distorted, the mask slipped perhaps. All the silk and gilding in the world, all the culture, manners and restraint can't hide what people really are. In *Shadows of Desire* (2019), the figures are silhouetted against the formal background of a grand drawing room. The paint, deftly applied, appears to drip, falter. It is as if the solid occasion of a real moment is failing, bleeding, like ghosts, through time.

Yuko Hasegawa, co-curator of the exhibition (with IMMA's Rachel Thomas) suggests that ghosts reach to the unknown part of our psychology. Ghosts are an emblem of the shadow side of our minds, our darker natures, all that we feel and need, primal drivers that we cannot fully comprehend. Figgis gives us beauty, connecting her highly contemporary painting to a lineage in art history. Matisse, Poussin, Rubens and Brueghel are all referenced. But what she is really doing is showing us ourselves.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Kinsella, *Baggot Street Deserta*, 1958

