

2006-3

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Recommended Citation

Kelly, NA. 2006, 'Jaki Irvine', The Silver Bridge, Review, *Art Monthly*, 294, DOI: 10.21427/d72t84

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Jaki Irvine, *The Silver Bridge*

The Irish Museum of Modern Art, 13th December 2005 - 17th April 2006

Made up of a series of eight video projections, *The Silver Bridge*, 1999-2003, was in part inspired by *Carmilla*, a 19th century Gothic novel by Joseph Sheridan Lefanu. Arrows on the wall suggest the viewer's pathway through this first public installation of the work. Such an ordering seems purposefully contrary to the disjointed narratives contained in the piece.

The first projection is visually and aurally arresting: an evening sky scene in which swarms of birds flutter excitedly as their screeching mingles with the noise of their wings. The next room displays a view of the Phoenix Park, Dublin, devised on traditional landscape composition with obvious fore-, middle- and backgrounds. Luscious colour tones add to its pictorial perfection. A single wind-bent tree stands in a golden meadow as a man paces thoughtfully – or listlessly. Nettles wave at the front and re-enforce the audio of whistling wind, while the grey-blue mountain in the distance augments the romantic dimension of this configuration. The next projection slips from close-ups of two stags grazing in a wooded area to a wider shot, which reveals that between the camera/viewer and the stags are a number of white doors. Erect and out of place, the doors bring tensions between natural and man-made worlds to the fore by visually introducing the viewer to ideas of freedom and restraint. As the stags are indifferent to the doors, is the listless man of the previous room oblivious to the beauty of his surroundings or is it that beauty which makes him restless?

In a corridor space two projections in which bats feature prominently face each other. In one, a close study discloses a playful side to the creatures so many find abhorrent. They frolic along the ground and yawningly wrap themselves upside-down, ready for sleep, contradicting the sinister associations that are culturally constructed around them. Opposite these endearing scenes, a woman peers at the bats through the glass wall of an indoor constructed habitat at Dublin Zoo. She glances only briefly at a man who passes by.

A large projection in the next room shows two black-clad women as they dangle beneath the Silver Bridge over the River Liffey in Dublin. They hold and slide by each other, and eventually one jumps down out of the screen's view. Meanwhile at the other end of the room a small projection charts the slow progress of a woman crawling on her stomach along the upper-side of the bridge. The silver tones of both scenes add a serene gravity to the actions shown. Lastly, another projection presents a young woman, waiting, though her face betrays little about her temperament. The video cuts to an overview of where she stands, looking down on a

panorama of a room in Dublin's Natural History Museum. Finally, the viewer sees what she sees. This museum is one of a dying breed, crammed with wooden framed glass boxes containing the tableaux of past taxidermists' work: a relic of Victorian style display, antiquated and marvelous because of it.

The protagonists and situations of these short video loops make compelling viewing. Stags are among the most stately and elegant of wood creatures, their significance rich in mythological connotation and aesthetic awe. Bats, whose presence is protected in Ireland, also induce much imaginative suggestion. Alongside these, a lone man pacing in a sublime setting, a woman expectantly lingering, a casual encounter and the acrobatic figures contribute to a perfusion of meditations on various themes. After the initial startling sound of the shrieking multitude of birds, a sense of climactic anticipation is compounded in each space. Irvine's mixing of the sounds of nature with their technological translation creates an aural accumulation that builds in conjunction with an array of visual material to make the work progressively complex. Wondering what will be evoked next, the viewer is encouraged to consider what divides and connects humans and wider nature. How aware is nature of humankind's relentless observing and measuring of it? Do stags know they are stalked? Are bats aware of the fascination and repulsion they inspire?

Irvine's themes are big: nature and artifice, perception, representation and experience, but mostly the work focuses its elements onto a reflection upon a solitary sort of human condition. The overwhelming sociability of the bats and the gentle companionship of the stags provide counterpoints to the apparent human isolation that pervades even the temporary and tentative partnerships portrayed by Irvine. *The Silver Bridge* is physically immersive, thematically intriguing and, even, emotionally provocative. Given its possession by and exhibition in a city-based national museum of art, this installation provides a major and welcome intervention in quotidian urban life.

Niamh Ann Kelly is an art writer and lecturer at the Dublin Institute of Technology.