

## Feeling our way; holding you here

The poise and aesthetic restraint of Niamh O'Malley's work holds you, but at arm's length. There is a dissembling single-mindedness to it that obscures a poetic multiplicity. It is quietly assured, as if knowing its own mind, but something about it leaves exposed a chink of irresolution. Congregations of shaped glass panes, metal, wood, stone, and the odd LED screen at once impede, support, and intimate. I wonder where to begin. I reach out, feeling for traction, circling, casting around for points of entry, anchorage, something to hold onto. To help find my bearings, I look to language to translate O'Malley's structures and forms, but before long my sentences become contorted, stumbling over a succession of inelegant qualifying clauses and modifiers. I gather myself, beginning again.

Art critic Isobel Harbison calls O'Malley's work, 'resolutely non-narrative' and yet I've recently found myself seeing her objects as stand-ins for ideas, places, emotional encounters, responses, even narrative scenarios that feel familiar.<sup>1</sup> In *Double Canopy* (all named works 2022), large semi-circles and part semi-circles, edged with cut out slots like Octon construction toys, rest on rods that are grounded by intact and slightly overlapping semi-circular steel sheets. There are two of these elegant, dark matt-grey steel forms, one slightly taller than the other. I can't help but read them anthropomorphically, positioned, as they are, as if in intimate conversation or like concerned parents huddling to tend their young. At up to three metres high though, they tower, only ever gesturing towards, rather than enacting, protection. I'm taken aback by my sentimental reading of work that, on the surface at least, appears quite dispassionate.

This seeming emotional detachment is typical of O'Malley whose work has, over the years, tended to the cerebral. Through it, relationships between film, sculpture, architecture, and painting overlap, sometimes interlocking, sometimes sidestepping. Film becomes sculptural, architecture painterly, sculpture architectural. She has projected films of city scenes onto paintings; filmed gardens at night by spot lit torchlight; obscured landscapes with coloured, painted, and frosted panes of glass; and outlined the corners of rooms with incomplete handrails. Hard, heavy, surfaces abound: folded and powder-coated metal, polished wood, buffed glass, cut stone. Stillness dominates, with movement only ever introduced as an intermittent anomaly in films that favour the mechanical, repetitive and rhythmical. What conjoins these works is a searing analytical attention to the connection and disconnection between the ways that

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<sup>1</sup> Isobel Harbison, 'Of saving, of hoarding, of keeping to hand', in *Niamh O'Malley* (Dublin: Royal Hibernian Academy, 2019), p. 66.

bodies and eyes and minds relate to, and experience, the world around them. Their emotional detachment is in fact deceiving.

Internal furniture like shelves, handles and bannisters have long formed part of O'Malley's repertoire. 'When the foundations of our day-to-day life subside and shift, hindering any attempts at systematic interpretation, we begin to search out handrails, and to welcome the merest hint of structure', writes Maria Stepanova in *In Memory of Memory*.<sup>2</sup> O'Malley's work enacts just such a grasping for stability in spatial frameworks. Time and again support systems dominate, becoming a part of, not just a means of displaying, the work: an enlarged floating shelf; a folded sheet of metal on the floor propping up panes of glass; an entangled gathering of three-metre-long wooden structures – part-bannister, part-row of hooks, part-handle – suspended perpendicularly. O'Malley's work feels like an ode to these structures of support in which the relationships between the laws of physics, a given material, a given room, and a human body are negotiated and accommodated. Hers is a material inquiry but with social and political implications built on necessary contingencies in which one part depends on another. What happens to a society formed of the cooperative interdependence of its constituent parts, a society that elevates, for example, structures of caregiving, facilitation, and support?

Most recently, street furniture has found its way into her work, though the spaces she alludes to remain abstracted. A set of drains runs alongside a window, a row of manhole covers line up, a video of a ventilation unit plays on a loop. These unremarkable objects become suddenly remarkable, almost monumental. *Drain* is made of a beautiful fossil-specked deep grey-black limestone. One side is raised, creating an exaggerated curve that runs down towards the window. In *Covers* staggered rows of gently domed and dimpled circles, large and small, are again made of limestone and set into mahogany-brown wood panels. They are moon-like save for subtle cutout handholds that suggest they might be opened to reveal holes, or something else. *Vent* plays on a freestanding LED screen – one and a half meters square – cut off from the wall. It pictures, close-up, the horizontal slats of a ventilation fan quivering and stilling erratically as the mechanism is turned off and on again, ad infinitum. These works originate from components of the world that support its inhabitation but in each case the components are refined and rendered unusable: 'they are about function rather than being functional,' O'Malley tells me.<sup>3</sup> They are more of an idea than anything else.

Such modifications of our encounters with commonplace objects imbue them with renewed attention, thought and metaphorical weight. It is partly her titles that feel so

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<sup>2</sup> Maria Stepanova, *In Memory of Memory* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2021), p.194.

<sup>3</sup> O'Malley in email conversation with Lloyd 5/1/22.

pregnant with a multiplicity of meanings. I ask her about them: 'I just name things, I don't title them,' she says. It is true that her titles are largely understated and referential: *Drain* is a set of drains, *Shelf* is a shelf, *Double Canopy* is formed of two structures topped with roof-like covers. But then 'Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose'.<sup>4</sup> There is always more to O'Malley's choice of words which carry emotionally and psychologically charged connotations that go beyond apparently neutral descriptors. *Drain*, *Covers*, and *Vent*, speak of the build-up, avoidance, and release of pressure. *Vent*, of course, speaks of ventilation, of the self-conscious inhalation and exhalation of breath (of which in recent times we have become acutely, collectively, aware). *Shelter* suggests temporary or partial refuge evoking homeless shelters, bus stops and children's dens. *Holds* suggests a supportive hand, a storage solution, and enforced waiting. The expansiveness of these possible readings is at odds with the decisive precision of O'Malley's aesthetic choices in which nothing is extraneous; it is this paradox that holds you here.

Laurence Weiner has said that 'if you can keep metaphor out of your work, you allow all different peoples to enter into it'.<sup>5</sup> At first sight O'Malley's work seems reserved, which can be mistaken for aloofness. In fact, it simply stems from a belief in the importance of allowing other people, other readings, other attachments, and other moments into her work. This openness extends to her accompanying exhibition catalogues too. She frequently seeks out textual material that is, as she puts it, 'oblique'. For example, in planning this book, she voiced a desire to include writing that functions as 'a kind of parallel act'. She sees the value in correspondence, in affinities that resonate with, or even orbit, her ideas and thinking. Direct access is not always desirable; sometimes you must go the long way or mill around a while.

The title of the exhibition, 'Gather', is revealing. Among other things, to gather is to hold material in tucks and pleats. It is to bring close, to understand, to bring together (temporarily) objects, people, and ideas. All these actions coexist in O'Malley's work: in folded and concertinaed metal; in nestled collections of materials that are repeated as if being rethought; in individual works formed of conglomerations of separate components. Her approach to exhibition-making similarly involves the bringing and holding together of disparate parts in a mutual exchange between objects and architectural spaces. Exhibitions make work and thinking public; they constitute moments in which bodies, materials, spaces, ideas and sympathies draw near, touch, lean on, depend upon, grasp. Due to her works' refined finish, it is easy to miss the

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<sup>4</sup> Gertrude Stein, 'Sacred Emily', in *Geography and Plays* (Gutenberg Ebook, 2010), p. 108.

<sup>5</sup> Laurence Weiner, 'Lawrence Weiner in His Own Words (1942–2021)' from 20 Questions – Matthew Higgs and Laurence Weiner, *Frieze* 7/12/21 [frieze.com/article/lawrence-weiner-his-own-words-1942-2021](https://www.frieze.com/article/lawrence-weiner-his-own-words-1942-2021), [accessed 9/12/21].

impermanence that is built into them through arrangements that can be added to, reconfigured, and remade. In the lead up to exhibitions she likes to keep things open, with installation plans kept provisional for as long as possible.<sup>6</sup> As a result, she favours leaning, propping, hanging, balancing, and flat-pack assemblages over anything more fixed. Such gatherings are contingent, formed of interdependent support systems that lend the work a paradoxical vulnerability and melancholy around its own inevitable disbanding.

‘Space,’ wrote Georges Perec, ‘is what arrests our gaze, what our sight stumbles over: the obstacle, bricks, an angle, a vanishing point. Space is when it makes an angle, when it stops, when we have to turn for it to start off again. There’s nothing ectoplasmic about space, it has edges’.<sup>7</sup> O’Malley’s objects are replete with edges that outline, overlap, slot into and neighbour other edges. Their meeting points accentuate buffed, pitted, powdered and polished surfaces over which our eye catches and slips. Like Perec’s obstacles, they should not be viewed as simply barriers in the negative. They interrupt movement, usher gazes, draw us in, hold us up, forcing us to slow down, going against the grain of the easy-to-grasp. Entry, whether real or imagined, literal or metaphorical, is curbed, the permeability of surfaces and spaces measured, interiority and exteriority disputed. O’Malley seeks out thresholds between inside and out: windows, glass, holes, drains, vents, and cut-outs. Apertures and perforations – through which air, light, sight, bodies, and thought pass – connect and disconnect. In O’Malley’s hands they are made palpable, made solid, made opaque, made reflective, made translucent, complicating the ways we orientate ourselves in the world, in relation to others, feeling our way to understanding when words are not enough.

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<sup>7</sup> Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), p. 81.