

The Politics of the witch

Gwen Burlington

Translated by Gu Qianfan

In the womb-like black box of the Project Arts Centre, a witchy giantess bore down over me and warned, 'Did I disturb ye good people? I hopes I disturb ye, I hopes I disturb ye enough to want to see this, your house, in ruins all around ye! Have you had enough yet? Or do you still have time for chaos? Hah? More? I'll be watching ye, you won't forget us, even if you try and sweep us away, you who survive will mean nought and Temperance knows you'll be sorry.' This is the embodied reincarnation of Temperance Lloyd, who, along with Susannah Edwards and Mary Trembles of Bideford, were the last three women to be hanged in England as witches, in 1682. As an Irish woman, in a post-referendum Ireland, it has a particularly charged resonance. The empowering feeling that the witches are coming out of the woodwork washes over me. Maybe there can be some retribution for the past.

The degrading and brutal history of Ireland's treatment of women, their sexuality, bodies, fertility and autonomy is harrowing and complex. In the post-revolutionary period of the thirties, Ireland saw a rise in Church and State institutional and political influence. These institutions became synonymous with the abuse of women, as well as the brutalisation of vulnerable people in their care. It was witnessed in the legalisation of rape during marriage, birth management systems, symphysiotomy, and anti-abortion legislation. Women were forced into Magdalene Laundries - institutions of manual labour - for becoming pregnant outside of marriage. Their children were then taken and given up for adoption and the women remained in the laundry working for free, many for the rest of their lives in repentance.

Unfortunately these are not just chapters in our history and the flood gates of their exposure have opened. In recent years, a scandal broke over misdiagnosis in cervical cancer testing, historical adoption irregularities were confirmed, a mass grave containing the remains of up to 800 babies and children was discovered in the grounds of a former Catholic care home in Ireland, not to

mention the sex abuse scandals that have rocked the Irish Catholic establishment since the 1990s.

This year has been a year of radical change and a momentous year for Irish women, not least for the centenary of women's suffrage in Ireland. Today in Ireland there is a social movement that aims to break this bond between the Church and State and move towards a more tolerant society. In many ways this movement was instigated through the marriage equality referendum in 2015 and is deepened now by the feminist movement. It is echoed in #metoo and #IBelieveHer campaigns and the increasing demand to repeal the Eighth Amendment, which up until recently outlawed abortion constitutionally.

An extremely divisive, emotional and exhausting debate took hold of Ireland in the months preceding the abortion referendum in which the rights of the unborn and the importance of women's autonomy were argued at length. On May 25th Ireland voted overwhelming to facilitate legislation on abortion, to the relief and surprise of many as the outcome was unpredictable. It was feeling emotionally drained and a little tender so soon after this referendum (as we still have far to go) that I wandered from the bright Dublin streets into the dark solemn space of Jones' exhibition.

First presented in the Pavilion of Ireland at the 57th Venice Biennale, acting as a form of public protest, Jones brought 'The Law of In Utera Gigantae' home to Ireland, opening only weeks after the abortion referendum and closing a month before the Pope's visit – Sandwiched perfectly between Church and State. On August 25th Pope Francis became the first Pontiff to travel to Ireland in 39 years. A very different place to the Ireland of 1979 when contraception, homosexuality, abortion and divorce were illegal. *Tremble Tremble* comes from a feeling of deep political anger over what Irish women have endured at the hands of the Irish state since its formation, which is safe to say, the current zeitgeist of Irish people. It inhabits a moment of transition from protest to legislation.

The title, *Tremble Tremble*, comes from a chant proclaimed by Italian feminists in the seventies, fighting for wages for housework and access to abortion: 'Tremate,

tremate, le streghe sono tornate!' (Tremble! Tremble! The witches have returned). 'In Utera Gigantae' reimagines a law that places the womb of the maternal body above the law and state entirely, positing a new world order where the giant's womb is the site of the only true law. It suggests an alternative original history for women, proposing a present based on this feminine idea rather than male deities and patriarchies. It calls from our wicken ancestors, a law transmitting memory from generation to generation.

Commissioned and curated by Tessa Giblin, it is a thirty minute installation comprised of a mixture of films featuring Irish actress Olwen Fouréré as a central giant figure. The script, which is performed by Fouréré and written by Jones is also projected on large screens. There are muslin curtains with printed images of arms that are pulled in circular motions, as well as sculpture, smoke, light and a sound score created by Susan Stenger. These features combine to create an immersive experience for the viewer. The installation unfolds in stages as the viewers attention is brought to each distinct feature one by one. The curtains are pulled by performers as the hands take you through the exhibition like a hand on the shoulder, moving you through the space. An all-female creation, it is a collaboration of an occult girl-gang come to bring the Irish church and state its comeuppance.

Due to the current charged situation, *Tremble Tremble* becomes particularly emotive and powerful at home in Ireland. Jones has created an atmosphere, intensified by the threshold of change that Irish law teeters on, making the work transformative and forming an aesthetic experience that draws the viewer in and bewilders at times. The artist's work has never been easy to penetrate and this exhibition is no different. The breadth of references include a 3.2 million-year-old fossil known as 'Lucy', the Australopithecus, an ancestor of the now-extinct early human species, Malleus Maleficarum (1487), and draws from Irish fables of gigantism. One message remains clear, "you won't forget us, even if you try to sweep us away."

As a touring exhibition, already shown in Venice and Singapore, it will go on to Edinburgh and Bilbao. Each installation thus far has evolved with its various iterations, taking in the site specific adjustments with each location. In Singapore a burning table was added, in Ireland it features water from the sacred source of holy wells, which a

performer drinks, and a circle is carved into the walls of the space to mark the passing of each loop. The experience of this show in the Irish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, with nearly three and a half thousand visitors per day is in stark contrast to the project arts centre, which has the aura of a place of ritual and meditation.

A unique aspect of Jones' work is how she remains present in the gallery with her work after it is installed. In the Project Arts Centre, she was present in the gallery space, as a performer and also engaged with the people viewing it, if called upon. This everyday presence bears witness to its reception as she embodies the work itself - an admiral commitment not seen that often. Perhaps her presence is necessary in order to aid in drawing its origins out. What remains clear is how the artist has accurately captured the atmosphere of a poignant moment in the making of Irish history, which other artists haven't dealt with as provocatively.

The atmosphere of *Tremble tremble* manifests two-fold. As a socially-engaged and critical artist Jones has successfully captured the anger of a people and a country, ashamed of the long line of atrocities in its past. Yet she has simultaneously created an exhibition that is sophisticated and imaginative, drawing from historical narrative of the past. *Tremble Tremble* is a reminder of how close we are to our histories and how we must remember the An exhibition that left me awed, hushed and not completely understanding but wanting to know more. Wanting to be a part of the spellbound revolution. Wanting to take an active role in changing laws.

Gwen Burlington

In 2013 I graduated from the National College of Art and Design in Dublin with a joint degree in History of Art and Fine Art Media. I then ran away from art for a while because I knew I wanted to write about art but I also knew that was a difficult career path. I worked in a Bank and lived in Vietnam (not at the same time). In 2017 I received an MA in Contemporary Art Theory from Edinburgh College of Art, which cost a lot of money and probably wasn't worth it. I recently moved to London to become a freelance art writer. I like words and using them to tell stories about art. This is me trying to do that.