Something Different

by Laura Preston | published 05.09.19

This summer at the Secession in Vienna, three concurrent solo exhibitions by women artists present different temporal registers of the artwork and its exhibition. The shows are not open promotions of rectifying the representation of women, nor are they the curatorial rediscovery of a woman's oeuvre generating quick market value, as is all too commonly seen presently. Rather, each project is a handling of the exhibition by the artist on her own terms, each a space of questioning the limits of the artwork and its dimensions: the exhibition by Fiona Connor, titled *#8, Closed for Installation, Sequence of Events*, is presented alongside Nora Schultz's *would you say this is the day?* and Rosalind Nashashibi's *DEEP REDDER*.

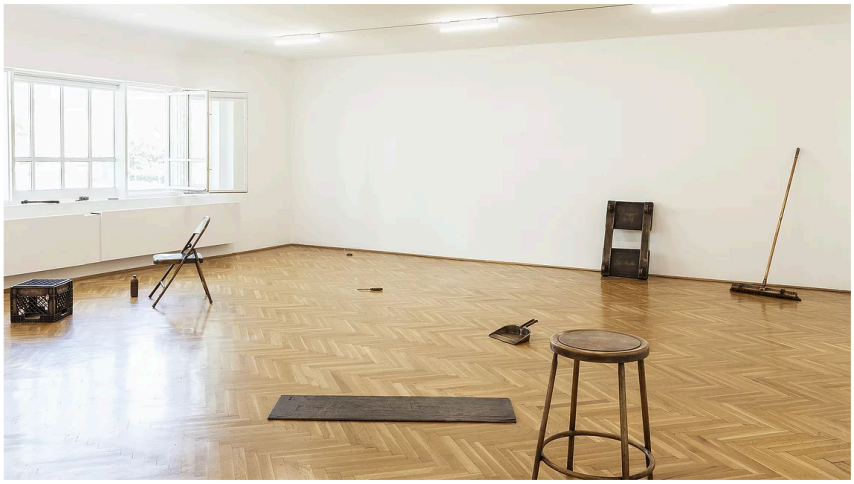
Secession is governed by an artist-collective. Formed in 1897 by a movement of artists known as the Viennese Secessionists, including painters, sculptors and architects, it was the first institution in the city dedicated to contemporary art. Their building was designed by member Joseph Maria Olbrich, a student of Otto Wagner, with an architectural manifesto and sculptural frieze over the entrance in art-nouveau-style and signature gold-leaf dome (interestingly, it was financed by Ludwig Wittgenstein's father). The group advocated for independence from reliance on the conventions of art patronage, museum economies and historicism. As literary critic Hermann Bahr wrote in the first issue of the journal of the group *Ver Sacrum* (Sacred Spring), "Our art is not a combat of modern artists against those of the past, but the promotion of the arts against the peddlers who pose as artists and who have a commercial interest in not letting art bloom. The choice between commerce and art is the issue at stake in our Secession. It is not a debate over aesthetics, but a confrontation between two different spiritual states." The three exhibitions on show today acknowledge these states and this history, providing basis for what has been produced and assembled on-site and off.

On arriving at Connor's exhibition upstairs on the top floor of the newly renovated Secession, you are met by a singular object: a cast painting tray placed on the floor under the exhibition's title in vinyl signage. The original tray was seemingly covered in a cloth, or perhaps it was plastic to preserve the paint, and the handle of a small hand roller extends out. The form as bronze cast is one cohesive surface. Further up, after the second flight of stairs and before the doorway to Connor's room, the wall-based glass display cabinet has been left unlocked and open. On one of the glass shelves is a hand brush, again of bronze, bristles lifelike and left as though someone had been interrupted in their dusting. Into the exhibition space, a room of domestic scale with parquet flooring and a central wide window left open, further bronze tools of the trade and objects of labour are scattered, *somewhat* staged in their positioning – but only somewhat. There is a power drill for fixing screws, a level for hanging pictures, a piece of corrugated card for softening the pressure of kneeling, and a fold-down chair before the window, distanced in such a manner that someone could have put their feet up, momentarily, for some respite in the European heat wave – there is no denial that things are heating up.

The *somewhat* of the presentation of these highly crafted objects is that they teeter on the edge of the theatrical – they look like bronze sculptures made as bronze sculptures. It could also be that there are just a few too many objects on display in this one small space, but this reflexive awkwardness is maybe the point? There is an aspirational quality to this work, but it is difficult to know where it lies. Seemingly, there is a question here of whether such aspirations of scale and solidity are important to attend to at this time. For the show is doing something differently, performatively. It is part of a 'sequence of events' which has

occurred across Europe, the United States and Australasia over the past year, inside and outside the institution proper, entering domestic interiors and offering objects and services, usually small-scale in gesture yet monumental in their making towards questions of improvement, as featured in the exhibition's accompanying publication. 1

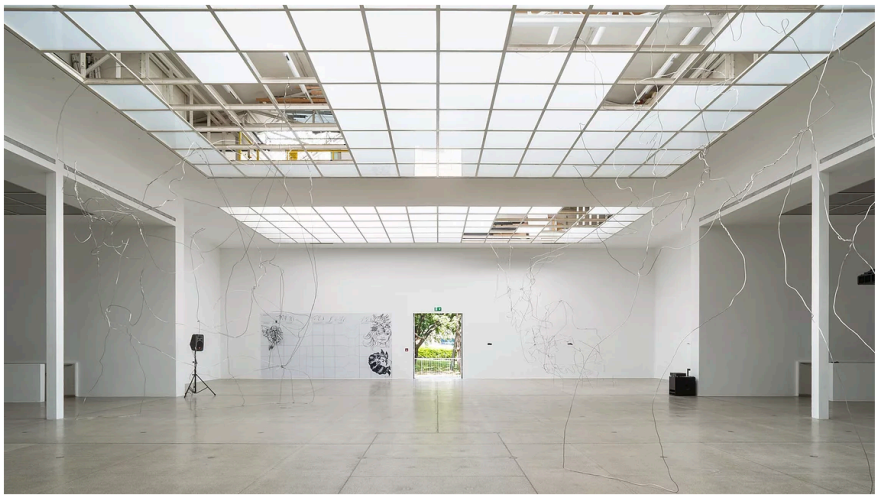
Different again for Connor is the material used to produce the artworks in the exhibition space. Her practice involves, in various states and form, the making of replicas, using objects of everyday use and function. And usually she makes copies true to form, crafted readymades. Connor's communion with materials relates to conceptual art and exhibition design histories. In *Closed for Installation*, the copies have been decidedly cast, making the production apparent. Bronze is also a loaded material. It carries history, it implies weight, monumentality, a colonial fixity as well as the determination to commemorate and to name. Yet, when applied to the temporal register of exhibition production and its labour, the phases of installation (including its de- and re- states), something else happens. It becomes a memorial for that which usually goes unseen, the labour, the work, the action. It is also a memorial for what is to come, closed for reopening soon.



This play with the limits of what is expected from an exhibition is also present downstairs in the main gallery hall with German artist Nora Schultz's *would you say this is the day*? She produced the show at a distance, sending installation instructions for the Secession to complete. It is, as it were, a handing over of authorship to those very persons behind the scenes who are memorialised by Connor in cast bronze. The sent instructions were also, in part, a way to overlay her activities in the studio onto the gallery space – to bring production closer.

Schultz's space is rendered like a three-dimensional sketch of an interior, personal space, like a mind in process. Markedly a large-scale vinyl calendar page with sketches of contorted and imagined figures along its margins is placed on the end wall. This is framed by video projections on either side of the hall: a video recording of a whale watching expedition at sea, moving in and out of focus, trying to catch sight of the haunting spectre of nature past; and opposite, the artist's re-enactment of not being there to watch the whale but to reconstruct the thought of such an experience. It shows in close-up her working with various materials, such as paper, cardboard, and audio, which distorts in its attempt to replicate the experience. Above, some of the distinctive illuminated white square ceiling panels of the gallery have been removed to reveal the storage spaces of the institution, articulating a kind of seepage of infrastructure through thick, long entangled wire. Its curved, looping mess of form extends into the space and carries a physical presence. The back door has been left wide open. The guard sits there.

The artist's absenteeism is something different to previous projects where she took up residence for several weeks at the gallery, staying up late and arriving early to create her exhibiting 'machines' of painting and objects, forging relationships with her install team along the way, whom she would then invite to become a part of the improvisation of activating her painterly spaces. The improvisational is still present here in Vienna, but, I would say, with more open vulnerability to the poetic, which is a bold call for the institution to become uncertain, too – not to show the whale (the name) but to offer insight into a process, collectively produced, which may in fact bring the subject (the artist, the art) all the more closer.



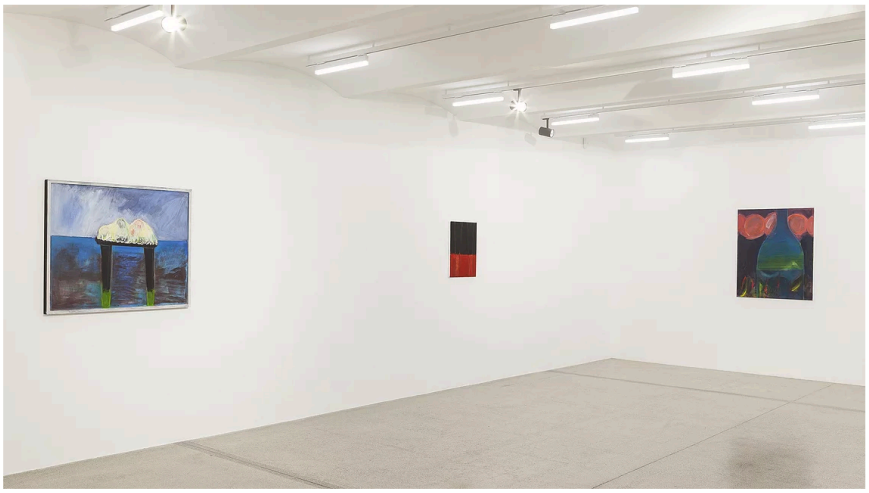
There is a legacy to renegotiating the exhibition format which includes the practices of institutional critique that informed the discursive scene of the West Coast, such as the incisive work of Michael Asher, that infamous teacher at CalArts where Connor went to school and now teaches at herself. He emptied out spaces or filled in institutions with direct reappraisal of their policies. As seen with Schultz's practice, Connor's updated approach is more open to the associative and the strength of the contemporary vernacular. Consider her series *Found Minimalism* from 2012, in which she creates replicas of urban forms, pipes, street fountains... In Vienna, as part of her exhibition project, Connor has made a direct reference to social structure by placing another kind of reproduced object inside a private apartment, this time not of bronze but based on her previous method of reproduction and using a form she regularly references: the work titled *#8* is a replicated noticeboard, a *trompe l'œil* of social news. The apartment is located within the largest social housing project in Europe, built in the early 1930s between the World Wars with socialist intent for better living conditions for all and the covert, political incentive of advocating communism in the face of national socialism on the rise. The building is a complex of monumental statements and resourceful domestic containment – small rooms for keeping the workers not too comfortable at home. Today, such social housing complexes in Vienna are being affected by a closing in of nationalism again: only those with permanent residency status are now accepted onto the waiting list.

The noticeboard is a particularly physical and rather outdated mode of community posting if seen in relation to online social media, yet the format is still used, still applicable, collecting vernacular forms of design, image and text. Connor has replicated one such noticeboard found in the apartment complex to the finest of detail, from the structural fixings – although they slightly expanded during the casting – to the accumulated dust and layers of paper tearaways. It is unusually sited in this intimate space, it is quite large, and it is not generally seen by the public, but this collapse of expectation is again seemingly the point. Connor's copy becomes a kind of relational, inverse study of the Duchampian gesture, a lived-with lifecast that takes institutional critique off-site and into a broader sphere for the purpose of thinking about reconstruction. As a reading of the contemporary temperature, the status is that of 'closed for installation'. The necessary reappraisals to the social system (all that drive for commerce and control) still need reworking.

Back at the Secession and now downstairs (but not quite as far as the permanently cool basement exhibition of Gustav Klimt's *Beethoven Frieze,* where one of Connor's bronzes, a casually folded runaway drop sheet, has been placed wittily beneath the depicted lovers) the exhibition of Palestinian-English artist Rosalind Nashashibi's paintings paralleled with a two-part film work, *DEEP REDDER*, can be found. For some time Nashashibi has been applying her painterly eye to the framing of film images. It is a formal collapse that connects to how she considers film as a social and collaborative experimentation, one that opens up the documentary style to its very fictions and abstractions. Here, her two 16 mm films, converted to digital, form a study of a multigenerational group of people momentarily living in a house in an environment susceptible to the terrain, the weather conditions, and each other. We see the group in the living room, in the kitchen, on the balcony, in the wind, sheltering from the wind. The narrative trajectory of *Where there is a joyous mood, there a comrade will appear to share a glass of wine* (2018) and *The moon nearly at the full. The team horse goes astray* (2019) is as nonsensical and random in its sequencing of scenes as its titles, which have been determined by the use of the divination text of the *I-Ching (Book of Changes)* – so it is somewhat close to meaning.

The impetus of the films is based on Ursula K. Le Guin's science-fiction novella on space travel based on nonlinear time, *The Shobies' Story* (1990). And like Le Guin's story, the double work is seemingly testing through its medium the expectations of social relationships, character roles and the prophecy of the word. The group, narrated by Nashashibi, gather across disparate scenes and speak about what they would become if there was no sense of time. They speak naturally, with all the elements of improvisation, rehearsal and premeditation that conversation involves. There appears to be no answer nor no need to know. In viewing these moving images alongside her paintings, the proposition of no time is seen as a series of cuts and frames that are connected by motifs of communion: the house, the vessel, drinking from the vessel, the members of a cast, the castaways altogether.

Nashashibi's exhibition space is composed as though a dual space for reflection and not knowing. The necessarily dark projection room adjoins the light room of regularly hung paintings illuminated to capture their spontaneous, joyful mark-making. Here, the back door has been unmasked by the artist but remains closed, a yellow hue applied to the side panels of glass, a subtle architectural intervention of improvement, a certain spiritual implication. The recurrences between the films and the paintings speak to me now about memory and its workings; the most potent memories, those most valued are the recall of flickering layers of social connection and shared intimacy – film-maker Chris Marker comes to mind.



If modernism in art was a time of reckoning with loss and postmodernism with the activity of referencing, perhaps the contemporary is very much in the throes of these two states collapsing within an expanded field (as per Rosalind Krauss). The focus for art (when it is necessary, when it is poetic, when it is not posing as art) is shifting and rethinking its aspirations. There still remains promise of other, different structural possibilities and ways out of commercial self entanglement and towards regrouping. When considering this situation alongside and beyond art, the problem is how to keep the possibilities that may be found and which may be applicable for the social sphere as unincorporated, independent but commonly shared.

The images of Nashashibi's communality and renewal loop back through the Secession building to Schultz's questions of arrival upstairs and further to Connor's small monuments for a change of focus to form not quite a closed circle, but rather a circulation of associations between artistic positions under one dome. The current exhibitions at the Secession by these three artists speak to the dimensions of art which may not necessarily be seen nor concretely known and marketed – even, and all the more so, when fixed and cast. Art appears decidedly indirect, set at a distance, authorship deferred, and with this there may be possibility for social potential. Their work is a reminder of the significance of the physical exhibition in these times of necessary communion with points of difference.

1. Fiona Connor's approach to what objects can do for a space is articulated in the publication *Sequence of Events* (2019) which accompanies the show and records the series, with a lyrical text by poet and art writer Leslie Dick. The book also carries a certain objecthood: it is modelled on a flip book of postcards that the artist's father gave her, depicting Japanese interiors; each page can be torn out and sent, posted to an address. There are ten parts to Connor's series and every iteration is represented and given a page in her copy of the book, which similarly can be removed, sent, and offered to another, connecting the work to an architecture of relations. The series includes Henry and Luca's apartment gallery space in Berlin; Kate's railroad apartment in Brooklyn, New York; a door swap between Kimberli and Sylke's house in Los Angeles and Astrid and Flo's apartment in Vienna; and a wall work for Ryan at Fine Arts, Sydney.

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