

PROJECT PROFILE



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ACCORDING to the Alzheimer's Society, 850,000 people in the UK suffer from dementia, a disease with far-reaching social and economic impacts, yet one that is little understood among the general public. Visual artist Sue Morris's multimedia installation, 'The Unfamiliar Familiar', explored how dementia affects the individual and how it can render the familiar as threatening and unsettling. Working in Nazareth House – a care home in Derry that was vacated in 2013 – the artist used materials found on site, as well as digital fabrication techniques, to create an immersive experience that challenged the viewer's visual perceptions.

Rebecca Strain: Can you tell me about the origins of your recent artwork, 'The Unfamiliar Familiar'?

Sue Morris: I attended a residential at Void, Derry, back in April 2016, after applying to an open-call from the Dementia Services Development Trust (DSDT) based in Stirling, Scotland. The weekend residential brought together a poet, composer, filmmaker, theatre practitioner, photographer and visual artists like myself from the UK and beyond. We were interested in making work that could challenge assumptions and raise public understanding of dementia. I was attracted to the programme because it chimed with preoccupations that run through much of my work, allowing me to explore historical and personal narratives connected to the real and the unreal, the known and the unknown. I also have an interest in mental illness and how change and damage to the brain can affect how we perceive everyday situations. I find ideas of alternative realities quite compelling. Funding from the Arts Council Northern Ireland then enabled me to develop the work further.

RS: What is immediately striking about your work, are the atmospheres you create that often confront the viewer with quiet, yet unsettling, propositions. Can you offer insights into your research interests and working methods?

SM: I have never been afraid of confronting emotional content head-on and I tend to work across different media in an intuitive, organic way. My selection and use of materials is an intrinsic part of feeling my way around a subject matter. I'm drawn to the mundane and ordinary,

but by changing certain elements – such as scale, context or placement – particular objects and materials can become incongruent and disruptive at a psychological level. The use of light to project startling shadows became particularly significant in this work.

RS: The installation was presented across the Nazareth House building. Why did you select this particular site for the work?

SM: Initially, I began making work at home. I was interested in building structures that would disrupt space. At that time, I was looking at networks and systems and became interested in Sierpinski tetrahedra – three-dimensional fractal structures constructed from triangles. These structures seemed to conjure associations with nerve cells, as well as patterns of thought, behaviour and speech. By placing these structures in everyday spaces – such as stairwells, bathrooms and wardrobes – there was a strange unsettling; a disconnect between these quite formal, mathematical structures and their domestic setting. As the work expanded, it became clear that I needed a larger, alternative space, but I consciously avoided white cube or warehouse-type spaces. Nazareth House in Derry operated for over 120 years as a care home for the elderly before finally closing its doors in 2013. I pass the building several times a week and became intrigued by it. The building has a fascinating mix of the domestic and the institutional. It immediately felt like the right setting for the kind of work I wanted to make. After a meeting with the Choice Housing association, who recently purchased Nazareth House, they agreed to my working there in the interim period before redevelopment. The building has been a significant driving force in the development of the work.

RS: You used the building as your studio for almost a year and you know every nook and cranny. How did you decide which spaces you would use to install specific artworks?

SM: I don't see the building as a studio; rather it is an intrinsic part of the work. I spent the first couple of months trying to navigate and document the building, which is spread over four floors and has had several new extensions over the years. These additional wings, corridors and staircases seemed to defy logic. There was a disconnect between different areas and levels of the building; between the old and

the new. I often found myself going backwards to move forwards around the building. I attempted to draw up some floor plans. This self-imposed map-making, along with photographic documentation, began to reveal rooms and spaces where I wanted to make and install work. I think it is also significant that I have been working there alone. It allows for a heightened intimacy with the space: nowhere is off limits.

RS: Printmaking techniques feature heavily in this work, as they do across your wider practice, but here there is a shift away from analogue methods. What was the motivation behind introducing digital printing technology?

SM: I was thinking about repetition. Also running through the work is an exploitation of transparent, opaque and reflective materials. I'm lucky to have a FabLab nearby, at Derry's Nerve Centre. This allowed me to access laser-etching equipment to produce a series of etched panels on mirrored and transparent acrylic sheets. It opened up the kind of images that I might use and the surfaces I could etch on. The resulting plates were the finished artworks, rather than a matrix to print from.

RS: I noticed a lack of text in the show, except for the installation in the linen closet that used text in situ. Did the geometric structures in this work relate to text or language in some way?

SM: Signage and labelling is interesting in terms of dementia. It can be used as a coping strategy; as a visual reminder of where and what things are. In Nazareth House, I came across a lot of labelling – vests, pants, nighties and in one cupboard, gentlemen's sheets! In the closet you refer to, I paired pre-existing labels for facecloths, towels and sheets, with white, linear, geometric structures, creating a dislocated reconstruction of folded linen. These structures (which evolved from the Sierpinski tetrahedra mentioned earlier) weave throughout the rooms in different states and guises. In that way, they are a kind of code for what follows.

RS: There was always a possibility that this work would not be seen by anyone except you. When it became possible to open the doors, did you have any personal doubts or were you completely committed to audiences engaging with this work?

SM: I was always aware that there was an inherent risk of the work not being seen by anyone except the security men and occasional surveyors who had cause to enter the building! However, my intention was always to find ways of getting the public in, to experience the installation directly. After some discussion, Choice Housing agreed to my opening Nazareth House to the public on Culture Night (22 September), with the proviso that I insured, organised and managed the event myself. Additional funding for the event was provided by the DSDT. Moving work into the public realm always comes with anxiety about how the work will be received, especially given the sensitive nature of the subject matter I was exploring.

RS: There was an overwhelming turnout for the event, and both the site and the subject matter seemed to strike a chord with visitors. However, it was only accessible for a few hours, with groups of visitors being taken around the various rooms by guides. How do you think this viewing method impacted the audience experience?

SM: The turnout was extraordinary – over 200 people within three hours. It really drove home to me how site-specific work can become a potent force, when it reaches out to community. The audience was very diverse. Many had previously worked in Nazareth House or had visited friends and relatives in the care home. Stories were exchanged and experiences with dementia were disclosed. There was a sense of openness and engagement with the installation that I don't think would have happened in a gallery setting.

RS: Is this the end of the work or are you taking it further?

SM: Alongside the installation, I have been working on a four-channel video, *Doing, Redoing, Undoing*, which documents the experience of the building from the perspective of a fictional resident. This is scheduled to be shown at the 16:9 Gallery, Lawrence University, Michigan, in spring 2018.

Rebecca Strain is a Donegal-based artist.

Sue Morris is a Derry-based artist.

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