



‘BLACK MATTER: THE TYRANNY OF DISPLAY’

**A response to Marcel Vidal’s
exhibition ‘SILVERFISH’
14 April – 2 June 2018**

**JOANNE LAWS
ARTS WRITER
IN RESIDENCE 2017- 2018**

WWW.THEDOCK.IE #THEDOCKARTS

‘BLACK MATTER: THE TYRANNY OF DISPLAY’

A RESPONSE TO MARCEL VIDAL’S EXHIBITION

‘SILVERFISH’ 14 APRIL – 2 JUNE 2018

J O A N N E L A W S

In his seminal writings on the ‘White Cube’, Irish critic and conceptual artist, Brian O’Doherty, described the Modernist art gallery as a “sacramental” and “isolated chamber”, with the “sanctity of the church” and the “formality of the courtroom” . Given that Marcel Vidal’s solo exhibition, ‘SILVERFISH’, is actually installed in a former courtroom at The Dock, it seems pertinent to consider how existing ideologies linked to place might govern the reception of this ambitious work. In many ways, entering Gallery One feels like stepping into the antithesis of an art space. The customary white walls and clutter-free floors have been hijacked by Vidal, to become co-conspirators in his site-responsive project. Black spray paint obliterates the perceived authority of the pristine walls, while black AstroTurf conceals the polished floorboards, crunching deliciously underfoot. Where O’Doherty remarked that in the Modernist tradition, “works of art conceive the wall as a no-man’s land on which to project their concept of territorial imperative”, the exact opposite is true for Vidal. Here, he treats the space’s existing architectural features as integral components of a larger apparatus. While the individual artworks in O’Doherty’s traditional gallery were evenly spaced, recurring “as reassuringly as the columns in a classic temple”(ii) , Vidal’s artworks merge with the setting, to be experienced all at once, creating what can best be described as a sensory ‘landscape’.

The aroma of aerosols and fresh adhesive permeates the space, while the visual encounter calls to mind the charred remains of a burnt-out building. I’m reminded of the installation *Dream – Spontaneous Combustion* (2008), by Polish artist Olaf Brzeski, in which soot, ash and resin were used to recreate the aftereffects of a paranormal phenomenon, preserving this catastrophic moment with scorched walls and lingering plumes of black smoke. Vidal’s installation similarly alludes to some dramatic ‘aftermath’; his mixed-media sculptures and photorealist paintings are arranged like cataclysmic detritus. The floor-based sculpture, *Night Crawler* (2018), resembles a Sputnik-like satellite or meteorite that has hurtled from space. Metal rods radiate from this lumpen black orb, acting as aerials to the cosmos. Feathers hanging from tendrils appear to have been coated in glossy metallic paint, giving the appearance of small iridescent goldfish.



Elsewhere, *Duet* (2018) comprises two animal hides stacked on top of one another and propped up on a metal pole, wedged into a mound of concrete. It calls to mind the Apollo flag, implanted on the surface of the moon. Amidst so many seemingly industrial materials, fur offers a somewhat extravagant texture. Along with found objects, the artist tends to utilise economic materials sourced from hardware shops, such as rebar, plaster, zinc fittings and expanded polystyrene. His aesthetic choices and approaches to making allow him to interrogate the materiality of his objects; however, in the gallery setting, he manages to develop a language beyond the objects themselves, to connect with broader narratives linked to time and place.

On the existing black marble mantelpiece in Gallery One, the photorealist-style oil painting, *Flags* (2017), is secured with a bright red ratchet strap – a mechanism that conveys not only the weight of materials, but the authoritative classical history of this nineteenth-century courthouse. Given that the painting is monochromatic, it is difficult to identify the provenance of the flags depicted. Multiple stars feature in one, suggesting the American flag, while a single star in the other could pertain to the national flag of China, or even the European Union. A second monochromatic painting, *Handclap* (2017) is mounted on the opposing wall, featuring the exhibition's only figurative element – a pair of clapping hands. Two other oil paintings and a watercolour study feature in the installation and it is interesting to observe how they differ from the sculptural works, in terms of their energy, vocabularies and fluctuating levels of refinement.



Where Vidal's paintings seem quite regulated, adhering to the traditional Flemish technique, his sculptures are arguably freer, appearing like mini-explosions that instil a sense of impending chaos. During a public conversation with Clíodhna Shaffrey at The Dock on 21 May, Vidal conceded that he approaches sculpture very much as a painter. He sees object-making as a way of intuitively expanding his responses to the space of the exhibition. Vidal also revealed that his paintings are largely based on found digital imagery, taken from online sources. Undoubtedly, his selected images reflect the fragmentary nature of online culture – defined by detached and distant engagement, as well as the partial narratives occupying news feeds. In many ways, Vidal's cropped sections and close-ups rely on the removal of information, dispensing with full compositions. This attentive process transports these digital snippets out of their ephemeral world, rematerialising them into the durational realm of painting. Elevated to the status of artworks, these fleeting moments are not only preserved, but scrutinised against art historical trajectories, not least the vast canon of painting.



During the public discussion, Vidal also asserted that his work holds no prescriptive meanings, rather, he prefers to give viewers the autonomy to navigate their own narratives, according to their belief systems or current feelings. I would tend to refute this position, given the widespread geopolitical undertones evident across this installation at The Dock. The overriding aesthetic is one of black matter and destruction: zinc studs and metal spikes channel everything from punkish bondage wear to medieval torture devices; industrial materials echo heavy artillery, armour and shrapnel, conjuring metaphors of militancy and the charred aftermath of war; lunar textures and orbs suggest space travel, hinting at imperial dominance in celestial realms; flags feature as territorial markers, while painterly depictions of laurel leaves further symbolise ancient imperial conquests. To my mind, the use of natural elements, including feathers and animal hide, implies the tribal, shamanistic presence of a colonised and native ‘other’.

Furthermore, I suspect that the pudgy applauding hands memorilised in Vidal’s painting are actually those of the North Korean dictator, Kim Jong-Un, framing this painting both as a snapshot of current geopolitical relations, and as a meditation on how online culture shapes our daily realities. Returning to O’Doherty’s spatial critique of the white cube – which unpicked the apparent neutrality of the “placeless and timeless modern gallery” – we can see how the space for contemporary art no longer operates as an “isolated cell” outside of daily life and politics. For Vidal, the gallery space is neither timeless nor neutral. Freed from the tyranny of display, Vidal’s art objects oscillate at the same frequency as life, while being unequivocally embedded in the bleak contemporary moment.

(i) Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, (Santa Monica CA: Lapis Press, 1986) p14.

(ii) Ibid. p. 34.



Joanne Laws is an arts writer, editor and researcher based in county Leitrim. She has recently been appointed Features Editor of The Visual Artists' News Sheet. Joanne is a member of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) and a regular contributor to international arts publications including Art Monthly and Frieze. She was previously assistant editor for the online resource publicart.ie and coordinator of the Roscommon Visual Artists Forum (RVAF). Joanne won 'VAI/DCC Critical Writing Award 2012/13' for her extended essay 'Commemoration – A ForwardLooking Act'. She has previously developed research reports and policy documents for organisations such as 126 Artist-Run Gallery, Kilkenny Arts Office and Youth Work Ireland. Joanne Laws website www.joannelaws.wordpress.com

Our artists residence programme is designed to support research and offer artists time and space to develop their practice in the privacy of their studios.
For further information or to apply please contact Laura Mahon:
lmahon@leitrimcoco.ie

Photography by Paul McCarthy

THE DOCK, ST. GEORGE'S TERRACE,
CARRICK ON SHANNON,
CO. LEITRIM.
WWW.THEDOCK.IE
Tel 071 9650828

Gallery Opening Times:
10:00am - 5:30 pm Monday to Friday
10:30am - 5:00pm Saturday.