

A response to an exhibition
Patrick Hall, Mary Ronayne
& Anishta Chooramun

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IN RESIDENCE
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‘GOING TO THE MOUNTAIN’

He is going to the mountain. There is no shortcut and even though time passes, he never seems to get any closer. He has no way of knowing whether the Yellow Mountain is a hopeful or a cursed place – a cache of gold, a mound of butter, or a heap of dangerous sulphur. He experiences extremes of scale: sometimes this bleak terrain becomes a claustrophobic communal grave, piled high with human skulls; during more optimistic moments, a vast and timeless landscape stretches out towards the ocean, where angels ascend and descend. Like many pilgrims, he carries stones that will be added to the mountaintop cairn. These two white stones embody his commitment to the pagan ritual; he will pray while walking sunwise around the ancient mound. The contemplative seclusion of the artist's life echoes religious devotion, manifesting spiritual visions on a cosmic scale. He locates joy in his struggle, experiencing Sisyphean transcendence through the materiality of stone, by returning to the atomic nature of all things. The stones also act as talismans, protecting against the evil eyes of the all-seeing sorcerers who inhabit this mountain. Perfectly round, the stones bend the malicious gaze back towards them. The artist tells us that the human psyche is like a stone – its smooth bright surface curving upwards to meet the warmth of the sun, before dropping down again into the shadow world. He is aware that pivotal artistic innovations – like the forming of pottery from clay, the separation of metals from ores, or the creation of pigment from oxidized chemical compounds – have magical origins in the alchemy of stone.

She is going to the mountain. Orderly ridges and channels are constructed on the slopes, to maximise arable land. Receding into the distance is the remote village, where an ancient dance form originates. On the highest plateau, she will find the relic mound of a Buddhist stupa. The ancient shrine was rediscovered by nineteenth-century British archaeologists, undertaking a survey of India. Many artefacts were lost, but architectural remnants are preserved in a Kolkata museum, including stone railings depicting the previous lives of Buddha; free-standing ornamental gateways, taking the form of large, round medallions; and panels illustrating celestial dancers, recalling the muses of Ancient Greece. The dance has origins in the oral traditions of nomadic bards and storytellers, as well as entertainment in courts and temples – a practice later banned under colonial rule. This pure dance involves rhythmic gestures, facial expressions, intricate footwork and synchronised hand movements. The upright body is punctuated by the percussive soundscape of ankle bells, while the completion of each sequence is marked with a sharp turn of the head. Empires come and go. Only a low mound remains, containing the foundations of the original shrine complex. She imagines the sacred geometry of the main temple, once occupied by a colossal stone Buddha. As she pirouettes, her whirling transparent veil ripples at the edges. She touches the absent round pillar with her feet, caressing the moonlike surface of the ancient sandstone. Just as modes of spiritual devotion require some element of physical ritual, religious architecture – as a juncture between the divine and profane – can only be activated through relations with the body.

They are going to the mountain. Approaching from opposite sides, they will be reunited on the summit, after more than a decade. Following news of his deployment, portraits were commissioned from an expert miniaturist, who was formally trained in engraving, under a master goldsmith. Symbolising their commitment, these objects of private worship were emblematically worn close to the heart. Her face illuminates the interior of his pocket watch, where it has gradually become a symbol of passing time. No bigger than a medal, the copper disc is coated with layers of metal oxide, which gives way to a silky and elaborate surface, rendered in vitreous enamel. She appears within an opaque foliate surround, wearing a scarlet dress with lace trim. A gauze veil falls tenderly from her dark upswept hair, while the chiaroscuro effect, characteristic of a timely Rococo influence, serves to enhance the brightness of her eyes. Similarly enclosed within the gift of a golden locket, his portrait is accompanied by a lock of his hair. He faces towards the left, wearing a gold-bordered coat, waistcoat and cravat. The clasp frame is surrounded with cut diamonds, symbolising constancy in marriage. Until now, she has resisted the burgeoning cult of widowhood, with its fashion for memorial jewellery and public declarations of grief. With the locket as her compass, she begins the arduous climb.

We are going to the mountain. We are searching for a universal language to explain the condition of emptiness. We do not believe that nothing exists at all – emptiness is distinct from nothingness – rather, things do not exist in the way that we suppose that they do. Phenomena have no inherent self-nature in themselves; they are labelled, existing merely by name, with meaning projected onto them through the magical illusion of cognition. The realisation of one's own emptiness is associated with liberation from suffering and emancipation of the mind. Form, sensation, perception, mental formation and consciousness are all temporary and conditioned phenomena; as they are not 'self', it would be illusionary to cling to them as such. As we open ourselves up to the reality of inconceivable flux, we realise that nothing is permanent. All phenomena are interconnected and exist only in relative terms. We find ourselves circulating around allegories of hope, locating joyfulness in everything – life, emptiness, the failing physical body, even death – whereupon we are released from time and linearity, to travel into the fourth dimension. The artist reminds us that the mystery of death is a tremendous challenge that we all face. However, we do not wait for death to suddenly come over the hill; rather, at the moment of birth, death enters into us. He notes that the purpose of life must therefore be to realise the integration of ourselves, into the whole cosmic phenomenon.



Image Credit:

Gallery Images by Anna Leak and David Smith

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 Forward Looking 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

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For further information or to apply please contact Laura Mahon, email: lmahon@leitrimcoco.ie

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Gallery Opening Times:

10:00am - 6:00 pm Monday to Friday

10:30am - 5:00pm Saturday.