

# AILBHE NÍ BHRIAIN



Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's work is rooted in an exploration of imperial legacy, human displacement and the Anthropocene. These intertwined subjects are approached through an associative use of narrative and a deeply crafted visual language that verges on the surreal.

For Lismore, Ní Bhriain presents *Inscriptions VI*, an exhibition bringing together new works in tapestry, print and installation. A large scale tapestry, *The Muses V*, forms the centrepiece of the exhibition. The *Muses* series (2018-25) is a pivotal body of work for the artist – the first created in her now-signature medium of Jacquard tapestry. The series references archival photographic portraits from the mid to late 1800s, from a genre once termed 'orientalist photography'. Supposedly an authentic representation of culture, in reality these images existed as projections of western fantasies of the exotic and the erotic. Ní Bhriain works with collage to draw out the darkness behind the fantasy, fusing the portraits with imagery of excavated landscapes and damaged cityscapes. In bringing these disparate images together, the artist suggests intertwined histories of loss and cultural destruction, pointing to the ongoing fused legacies of colonial and industrial forces. In this exhibition, Ní Bhriain presents *The Muses V* in dialogue with sculptural and photographic elements, extending its motifs into a series of new material and pictorial relationships within the space of St. Carthage Hall.

The exhibition's title derives from the earliest known museological writing in the western world – Samuel Quiccheberg's 'Inscriptions or Titles of the Immense Theatre' (1565), which details the practice of museums and the organisation of the world's objects into classes and subclasses. This was essentially an instruction manual for the creation of private collections, with an explicit Western imperialist agenda. Ní Bhriain's work since 2017 has made reference to this text, as she constructs an enigmatic visual vocabulary to explore the displacement embedded in familiar systems of representation.

#### LCA Exhibition team:

Curator: Paul McAree

Exhibitions Coordinator: Aoife Hayes

Technical support: John Whelan

Image front cover: Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, *The Muses V* 2025, Jacquard tapestry, wool, cotton, 203 x 134 cm. Image courtesy the artist & Kerlin Gallery. Install views at Lismore Castle Arts by Jed Niegzoda.

14 JUNE -  
10 AUGUST 2025  
OPENING RECEPTION  
SATURDAY 14 JUNE, 3-5PM

Lismore Castle Arts:  
St Carthage Hall  
Chapel St, Lismore,  
Co Waterford, P51 WV96  
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#### List of works:

1:  
Untitled (surface #3)  
2025  
Found photo, bitumen, brass frame

2.  
The Muses V  
2025  
Jacquard tapestry, wool, cotton  
203 x 134cm

3.  
Untitled (plant)  
2025  
diptych, pigment print and brass panel in stained walnut frames.  
Each 152.5 x 111cm

4.  
Inscription #16, 2025  
limestone, ceramic, carbon, velvet, brass  
Dimensions variable



# Inscriptions VI

## Ailbhe Ní Bhriain:

### Inscriptions VI

When Belgian physician Samuel Quiccheberg wrote his modest tome, *Inscriptions or Titles of the Immense Theatre* in 1565 he unwittingly penned the first treatise on collecting and museum management in Western history. Extolling the virtues of the Wunderkammer (cabinet of curiosity) Quiccheberg promoted the preservation and arrangement of objects for elucidating stories and inspiring connections, and thus sort the world's objects into classes and subclasses of import and significance. The implied taxonomy gave space for interpretation on what merits value and consideration, but given he wrote this whilst an advisor to Albert V, Duke of Bavaria, it is provident to assume the work supports a hegemonic, imperialist idea of the world. In short, it was directly aimed at the wealthy and the powerful as those deemed worthy enough to define history. By accident or from vacuum, *Inscriptions* became the blueprint for collecting and museums across the world.

This predominant object-oriented world view shifted with the invention of photography in the early 19th Century. From the belly of the industrial revolution, it was almost inevitable that a new technology of representation would emerge and be embraced by a society that was in the grips of unprecedented psychological transformation as it pivoted from an agrarian to industrial existence. Photography allowed not just new ways of reproducing the world but new sights entirely - expanding the collective consciousness and, one assumes, blowing people's minds with the sheer scale of the planet they inhabited. The act of taking or being photographed became shorthand for being up with the pace of modernisation - just a little flex, like those Wunderkammer collectors before them. In the transformation of mankind's image against the tumult of the mechanised age, humanity found a way to fool itself that it retained control.

In the early 20th Century, after the trauma of the first truly mechanical war, technology itself began to be theorised. In the same year as Walter Benjamin's *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, which primarily focused on the implications on artistic endeavour, American philosopher and historian Lewis Mumford published *Technics and Civilisation* (1935), a groundbreaking work mapping the broader cultural implications of the machine age on humanity. Predating the Industrial Revolution by half a millennium, Mumford pinpoints the medieval period as the earliest instance of technology's pervasive influence over man, starting with the invention of the first mechanical clocks (1).

When time itself became fungible (or broken down into sections), it became a commodity to trade. Henceforth, Mumford argued, technology became explicitly linked to capitalism, which has defined its relationship to human endeavour ever since.

What plays across these three examples are the politics of power. Each instance guides towards binary positions: value and worthlessness, truth or falsehood, victim or victor – an inferred simplicity that undermines the complexity of each and every decision. It is precisely in this sticky, in-between, ambiguous space that we find the work of artist Ailbhe Ní Bhriain. In her new exhibition at St Carthage Hall, *Inscriptions VI*, the artist has created a tableau of works that collectively offer a long look at the vanity of cultural imperialism, the shifting sands on which such definitions rest, and the impact of mankind's pursuit of 'progress'.

In central position in St Carthage Hall is *The Muses V*, a new tapestry produced for the exhibition. The Muse here referenced is one of the nine goddesses in Greek Mythology who inspire creativity and knowledge in both arts and science. It is the fifth in a series of works drawn from the same source material, each slightly shifting in their position and manipulation. Carefully balancing her urn apropos goddess style, our Muse is actually an Algerian woman, in an image from a found photograph taken in the late 1800's by a Swiss-born French photographer. Made in French colonial Algiers, this studio portrait (2) is intended to be salacious, typifying an orientalist (3) style where the East was simultaneously exoticised and othered by the colonial West. Already disrupted in form, Ní Bhriain's Muse does not show what is behind her tunic, instead it displays a cavernous centre, in which you can just start to pick out the scenes of a bombed building. Like water pouring from the urn, the insides of the building and of the body spill out, corporeally transforming the source material.

This careful montage is symptomatic of Ní Bhriain's deep understanding of how images work - how subtle disruptions cause fissures that create broader meanings and interpretations.

The use of Jacquard tapestry in the presentation, standing in for technology and its influence, reinforces the arguments within the image. Jacquard was invented in Belgium in the very early 1800s: as the first automated loom, set on a punch card system, it united the mechanic and the organic, a technology that revolutionised cloth production and allowed mass market take-up due to dramatically lower costs.

It also sparked the first notable insurrection against the increasingly mechanised age. The Luddites were loom workers who, fearing for their jobs and economic security, took to sabotage these new looms. Progress of course won out, the Luddites' name only remembered by the very fact of what they feared. The history of the image, colonialist expansionism and capitalist intention is literally woven into the fabric of this Muse.

Positioned in front of the tapestry, alter like, is a raw limestone block, sourced from an Irish quarry. Quarries appear frequently in Ní Bhriain's work, with geological history and the underground seeming to signpost the emergence of modern industrial capitalism. They draw us into a contemplation of what is above and what is below, the deceptive nature of surfaces, and mankind's ability to extract what it needs it from this earth in the aura of progress, until we deplete the planet it of all its resources. (Though the narrative and geography of these mines has now shifted to the Global South, and the mining is for rare earth minerals needed for the latest iPhone).

Nearby, Ní Bhriain has placed two classic urns, echoing that held by our Muse. Such objects, which populate our museums, were often from funeral ceremonies, buried with the dead as a passage to the underworld. Here they stand in for the stories of the subterranean but also the fear of death which, Ní Bhriain suggests, has served as the driving force for much of our progress. Industrial underworlds and imperial legacy collide together here. And we are circled back to collecting and power - these urns typical of those found in museums, looted from the graves of past civilizations.

The two parts of *Untitled (plant)*, a new diptych, are large-scale and seem close to life size of the specimen depicted. The plant could be undergrowth but looks like palm fronds, suggesting again the exotic or colonial, and printed on metallic paper its surface has a lustrous, alchemic quality. The sister to this image, a brass panel, resembles the vessel of printmakers, a plate ready to be etched. As we read each image side by side, the tonal quality of the darker shadows of the vegetation start to transfer across – could this actually be what is behind the photograph? As the palm shimmers back, itself mimicking its metallic counterpart, the work questions what we the viewers, when presented with an absence of information, assert in its place.

Across the room a deep orange velvet, carefully framed, suggests a homage to the Victorian presentation of

Daguerreotype or Ambrotype images, which were often presented in velvet cases due to their fragility. Elsewhere a tiny found image of a landscape is obfuscated by bitumen - a material distilled from crude oil and a staple of printmaking. Confusing in every sense, it soon appears this image is upside-down, an illegitimate landscape. Again, questions abound of how an image is read, what information is passed from object to viewer and how we bring our own subjective narratives to every situation. Impressing the randomness of collections and the choices people make, with this upturned image Ní Bhriain reminds us how fundamentally ludicrous the whole system is.

The connective tissue that binds all of the work in *Inscriptions VI* is photographic enquiry in its most philosophical sense. The question of what is deemed important enough to be immortalised for posterity, and by whom, lies at its democratic heart. As our understanding of the mechanised world undergoes its next phase of evolution and much of human endeavour is superseded, inevitably, by the vastness of interconnected networks, we need artists like Ní Bhriain now more than ever. Artists who consider the implications of technological progress, the future we want, and what past we want to remember.

- Gilly Fox

Gilly Fox is a curator and academic based in London. She has been part of the curatorial team for Hayward Gallery Touring, the UK's largest national exhibitions programme, since 2013.

1 And then ironically, clocks and time itself did not escape technology's grasp as standard time was rolled out in the 1840s thanks to the expansion of the railways, previously local time ruled and was based on the setting sun which changed depending on how west in the country you were

2 Early adoption of photographic studios in colonial countries was notable – appearing almost simultaneously as they did in Paris or Brussels.

3 Occident is the term for Western society. In a synchronistic circular narrative that loops this back to the early days of photography it is also name of the horse in Eadweard Muybridge's famous photographic study in motion, a pre-cursor to moving image.

