

Niamh O'Malley in conversation with Maddalena Iodice



Lightbox (detail), 2023. Installation view at Temple Bar Gallery + Studios, Dublin. Courtesy the Artist and Ireland at Venice 2022. Photo: Aisling McCoy.

Niamh O' Malley distills the world and reconfigures it through precariously poised sculptures and moving-image installations. Acknowledging the subtle tension between the absolute essence of things and their ever shifting nature, she tries to hold them still, to capture them, for a slipping moment. Building upon O'Malley representing Ireland at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022 and her most recent show at Vardaxoglou Gallery in London, we talk about the artistic process, the nuances at the core of her practice and how the body's experience of the spatial landscape is articulated through it.

MI: Ciao Niamh, it's great to be in touch! You are in Mallorca at CCA, right? How is the residency going so far?

NOM: Yeah, so far it's good, it's hot—and the heat is also a horrible reminder of this damaged world. The physical making I can do here is limited, but it's come after a very busy time, so I'm just trying to reset and read and do some very basic drawing and template making, rather than making anything too complex.

MI: It's so important to allow ourselves moments of decompression... Do you usually have a sense of what you want to explore in the context of a residency?

NOM: It depends on the timing, and I haven't had the privilege of a residency in many years as so few of them are family friendly. I've had four solo shows and five group shows since February, so it has been an intense, productive, and quite exhausting period. I think it's important to just slow down for a moment and create space for ideas to happen. However, I will have an exhibition with Grimm Gallery in New York in January, so I plan to make some new work for that, possibly some new shelf pieces, which are really interesting works to think about compositionally, trying to articulate quite complex and layered structures.

MI: I just saw your show at Vardaxoglou Gallery here in London. While walking the intimate space of the gallery I found myself leaning towards the sculptures to see things up close, as if I was looking for some residue of memory. What was the impulse behind the series?

NOM: One of the things I love about producing work is it allows you to make an object that can't quite be named, or that isn't intrinsically knowable. I mean, that seems precisely its point to have a space or a thing which evokes a certain familiarity, but expands our normal relationship to form and object.

MI: The Irish urban and geological topography seem distilled and subtly embedded in your practice. Can you draw a connection between your visual vocabulary and the environment you grew up with?

NOM: I do think our visual vocabulary is built from what we have known and lived within. I grew up in the west of Ireland in front of a big mountain called Nephin. I eventually made a film about that mountain. The film is almost like a chase of it. I circumnavigated it while in the car and tried to keep a dot, that is painted on a piece of glass in front of the camera, on the mountain. The piece is constantly almost failing in its effort. I think a lot of my work is about trying to get close to things but ultimately becoming more aware of the distance. Or trying to make something still, which is ever shifting and slipping. I grew up with this very particular large geological form defining the landscape around me, and I'm quite interested in the idea that maybe that has had an impact, that the spatial configuration of landscape wherever you've begun,

affects you. I did a lot of research years ago into landscape and ideas around geography and sociology, and there are notions around 'prospect' and 'refuge' which really resonated. I like the idea of these biological, physical impulses which relate to landscape, affecting our movement through all kinds of spaces—from urban planning to gallery spaces, but also our homes and how we shape them. Perhaps this imperative also impacts the way we configure and relate to objects.

MI: Were you able to work on Nephin only when you distanced yourself from that specific landscape?

NOM: Yes, exactly. I couldn't make any work about it when I was too close to it. Like most people, things shifted as I grew older and even lost family members. When I go back now—which is often—I feel such a sense of relief at this mountain still existing in this very different time-space. In a very obvious way, Nephin was there long before us and is going to be there long after. Still, in its absoluteness I can never really know it—which creates in me this mixture of comfort and loss. A lot of my works, even the shelves, are precariously poised, things just about held in place, they're not really fixed.

MI: Your notion of seeing something and not being able to name it enhances a sort of tension between the abstract absoluteness of your artworks and the descriptive titles you choose for them: *Drain, Shelf, Sun...*

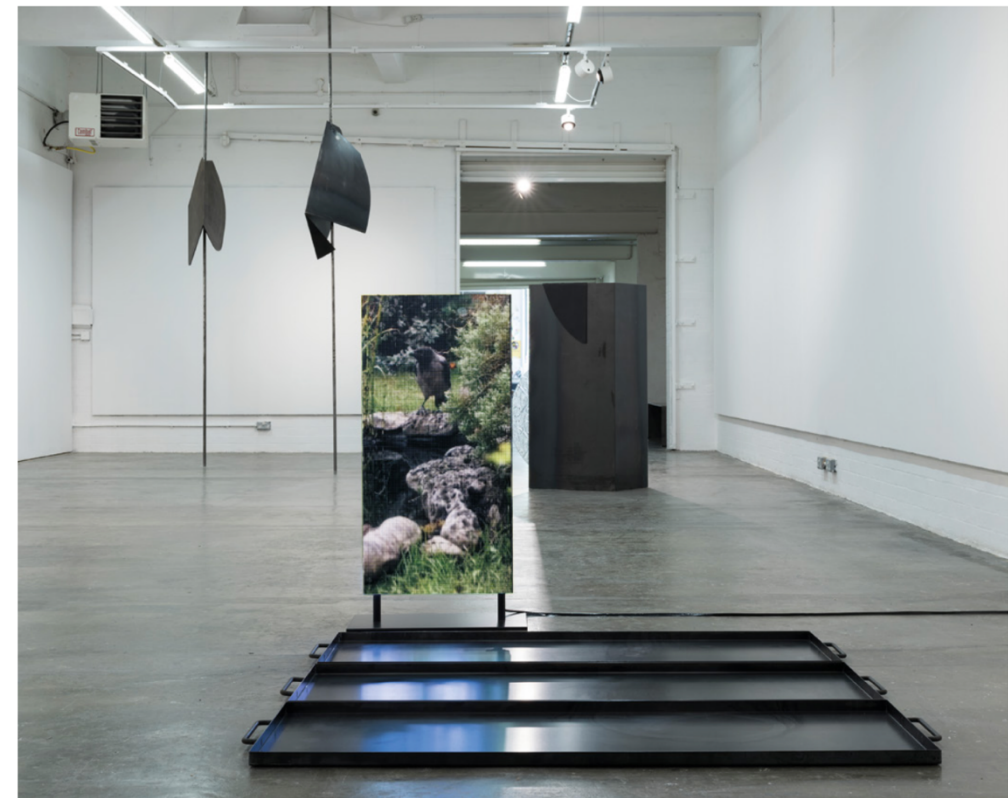
NOM: They are specific, but also open. It sometimes seems to me that words are ridiculous in their attempt at specificity. My recent short video loop *Sun* (2023) was knowingly absurd in its effort to contain something as impossible as the sun in a tiny pixelated LED square. To even call a work *Sun* seems the equivalent of a child putting the sun in the sky when they make an image of the world. There is sort of an implausibility in how we conjure or try to pin things down. And with the shelf... What's a shelf? I quite like one-word titles that appear to be specific and clear, and not trying to be too poetic or directive in their meaning—in failing to live up to that suggested singularity, they also open things up, both in language and form.

MI: Could you expand on the research that drew your artistic discourse towards the interaction between bodies, objects and spaces?

NOM: I think some people work in a very clear project-led or research fashion, but I feel like my work evolves from things as diverse as a book I'm reading, a walk to work, architecture, both urban and rural landscapes, conversations, music—the world! Over the past few years I became increasingly interested in the kind of structures we build as support systems to our environments, be they urban or rural. Things that hold things up, or things that allow drainage, or things that create barriers between one place or another. Shelters, ladders, handles, hooks... I am interested in how those spatial modifications define the body's experiences.

MI: Has this always been your method? I know you did a PhD and I am thinking how Academia is sometimes very formal in the way it requires to back up the work...

NOM: Yes, and it can be quite problematic. I found making work while I was doing the PhD really difficult, because it becomes so illustrative of the texts you're reading. It wasn't the best time for me to speak through visuals. So I know what you're saying, and in some ways I wish I could define a methodology, a sort of safety-net I can refer to if I feel at sea in the studio. But sometimes I actually like not knowing exactly what I'm doing. In those moments, my studio practice is very helpful, a kind of route to re-listening, observing and reading. There's



Installation view from 'Gather' at Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast, 2023. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Simon Mills.

this idea of 'inspiration' or 'intuition', which I find really problematic as if ideas arrive through some sort of magic... But what is actually happening is that over time you've built resources, texts, knowledge, and a library of forms. So, what's compelling to you now is often the stepping stone from a previous work. You're never starting from scratch. If you gave me any space, I would be inevitably drawn to certain things. I like the idea of my work being grounded in the world we're in and it seems logical to me that it has moved from being more ephemeral to more physical. At some point it felt more important to make things, objects—perhaps a need to make something solid in a world that feels terrifying with its pace and instability. This also feels problematic because there's enough stuff in the world already, and I'm constantly battling with this contradiction.

MI: Is this an aspect you are coping with through the repertoire of materials you work with?

NOM: Yes, with the materials I'm using, like wood and stone, I try to choose things that can kind of return to the world in some ways. I keep it local in terms of sourcing, production and collaborating with crafts people. It's more practical and a little gentler on the world. For example, I don't think I would ever ship over a big chunk of marble from Carrara to Ireland, but I might work with that material for a show in Italy. Production processes are truly about relationship building, thinking through the materials and letting ideas develop as I learn more about

them and their specific logic—also thanks to other incredible makers and experts.

MI: This principle of care embedded in your process feels like an important statement in a moment when not to care about the other, being it another person or the planet, is just easier for many...

NOM: Yeah, and I somehow think that care is embedded in the object. I truly do. It is in the material, in its logic, in touch. It's a big thing for me to introduce a new material. I like having a repertoire that I'm working with that I understand in terms of how they function, shape, change, with weather or time. Also, I love the concept of them being quite modular as well, so that they can be in dialogue, as if I am building sentences or paragraphs.

MI: Indeed, is the show at Vardaxoglou Gallery a reconfiguration of pre-existing elements from *Gather*, which you presented at Venice Biennale 2022, alongside new pieces?

NOM: Yes, it is. Although the show came together in a short period, I was able to bring together quite a few recent pieces (including three from Venice) alongside new work. I love having a new space to bring works into, to allow them to speak afresh to each other. I tend to think of shows in a similar way to how I think of the compositional play within the pieces themselves.



Lightbox, 2023. Installation view at Temple Bar Gallery + Studios, Dublin. Courtesy the Artist and Ireland at Venice 2022. Photo: Aisling McCoy.



Blind, 2023. Installation view at Temple Bar Gallery + Studios, Dublin. Courtesy the Artist and Ireland at Venice 2022. Photo: Aisling McCoy.



Nephin (video still), 2014. Courtesy the Artist.

MI: Lowering or crouching my body to look at your work made me think about lines by artist SERAFINE1369, who argues "Is verticality ever restful? Night is horizontal and day is vertical, night is rest and day is movement... wait, is rest opposite to movement, is rest stillness?". I loved how your installation kind of disrupted the predominance of standing still, inviting me to other postures...

NOM: That's really nice. Even though it's not my goal to choreograph the audience in a didactic way, I like that the work does provoke movement. One of the first times it became clear to me that the relation between body and space was something I've always been interested in was not that long ago. I was working in a very large gallery in Dublin, a vast room with strange proportions that is often 'solved' by building walls. I thought about how, if you put one object in the middle of the room, everybody who walked into that space would probably go and stand beside that object, yes to look at it, but also to feel located. So in the end, I was able to put these poles that ran from ceiling to floor as kind of locators and then everything else could function in relation to them. I am always thinking that the work is really activated when it's in relation to the viewing body.



Shelf (composition), 2021. Courtesy the Artist and Artopia Gallery, Milan.
Photo: Riccardo Pascluoco.



Studio composition (vertical fold), 2021. Courtesy the Artist and Artopia Gallery, Milan.
Photo: Jan McCullough.



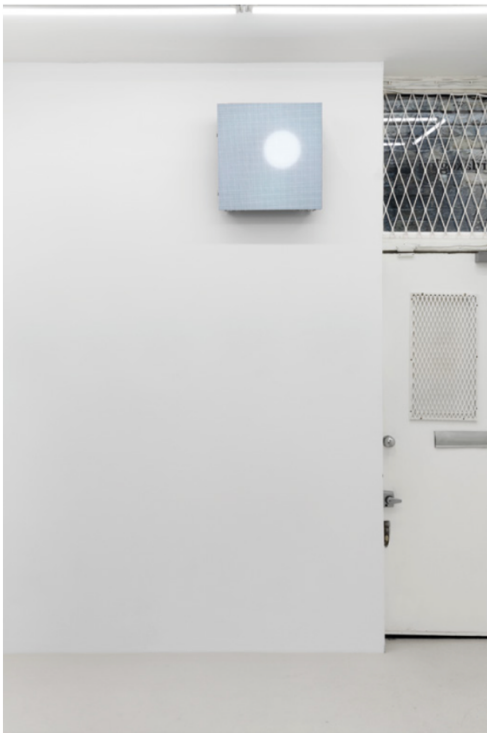
Shelf, 2022. Installation view at The Model, Sligo, 2023. Courtesy the Artist and Ireland at Venice 2022. Photo: Aisling McCoy.



Installation view at Vardaxoglou, London, 2023. Courtesy the Artist and Vardaxoglou, London. Photo: Jack Elliot Edwards.

MI: You mentioned how the concept of intuition and inspiration can be quite problematic... It resonates with an interesting essay by author Octavia Butler where she talks about some impediments of writing, and creative practices. According to her, we should forget about inspiration. "Habit will sustain you whether you're inspired or not [...]. Habit is persistence in practice." Is there a suggestion you would like to give the new generations of artists in relation to artistic practice?

NOM: In my experience, you always need rules or parameters. Normally, they are self-generated or you will naturally encounter limitations, like the architecture that you're working in. It is often budget, it can be material or technical abilities—any of these things, but perhaps they're useful things to try and configure a shape that you can work within or against. As an example, I have to move studios in Dublin at the moment and I may end up with a month or two without a studio, which is really a bit depressing. But because of this, I've been thinking more about being released from the studio habits to perhaps make a moving image work, as I haven't really made a proper film work for a while.



Sun, 2023. Courtesy the Artist and Vardaxoglou, London. Photo: Jack Elliot Edwards.



Installation view from 'Gather' at Temple Bar Gallery + Studios, Dublin. Courtesy the Artist and Ireland at Venice 2022. Photo: Aisling McCoy.

MI: Have there been moments when you felt lost in the work? How would you then anchor yourself?

NOM: I would say that I often feel lost, like several times a day! I don't think you ever get to a point where you've got it all sorted, the work would probably lose its generative joy if that happened. Yes, sometimes I feel like everything disappears, and again, maybe in the same way that my artwork tries to create anchors for the audience, I have to find ways in the studio of re-anchoring myself. Those are the moments when I read back through my notebooks or just do anything, like some simple drawings or going for a walk. Being in the world and seeing what appeals to you, what strikes you, and noticing who you are and what is compelling to you. That act of noticing is the work.

MI: Thanks Niamh for this beautiful conversation! Hope to see you soon in London.

Hold's (detail), 2022. Courtesy the Artist and Ireland at Venice 2022. Photo: Ros Kavanagh.

