

Lustre

Brian Dillon

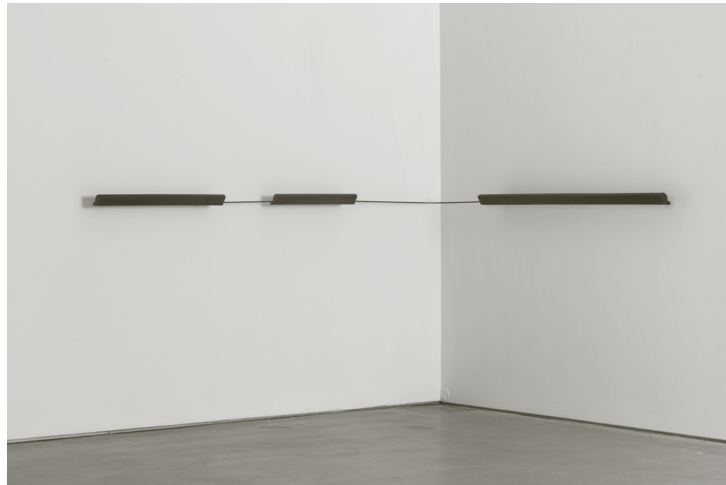
In 1911 the German sociologist Georg Simmel published an essay titled 'The Handle': a reflection on the intimate gap between a work of art and the world of which it is part. Imagine a vase - whether classical, Chinese, or modern and mundane. It is, says Simmel, a self-involved object, but not completely. Aesthetically remote inside its (usually) curvaceous form, the vase joins the universe via its handle, where it 'projects into that real world which relates it to everything external, to an environment that does not exist for the work of art as such.' Simmel does not say much about the real-life hands, bodies or persons by which this manual encounter between work and world comes about. He is not especially interested in the object's maker or its user, but remains at an aesthetic remove: it is 'as if the soul were an arm', reaching but not grasping the inviting curve of the handle.¹

Handle (extended)
2019
Stained and polished
beech, steel
1010 x 16 x 205 mm



Among its contributions to aesthetic theory, Simmel's essay is extraordinary for this overwhelming reason: the fact he has thought so hard about handles in the first place. Things so close to hand are often invisible to philosophical consideration - if not to art. 'The Handle' comes to mind when thinking about the work of Niamh O'Malley, and not only because handle was the title she gave to an exhibition at the Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin, in 2019. Now, on the other side of a pandemic period in which we may all have paid too much attention to things close by, to the limited space available to us - here is a body of work that appears to exist in the reflective void between familiar objects and their alien life in art. In wood, glass, steel and stone, O'Malley has fashioned an array of objects (and some images) that are of this world and out of it.

Consider Holds (2022), for example: one of a number of sculptures employing stained and waxed beechwood and steel. A tower or pillar of sorts made of slim verticals and delicate swells or bows. It is an upright cousin to an earlier work Handrail (2020), where a four-metre-long structure of beech - interrupted, like a series of Morse code dashes - turns a corner of the gallery, offers itself to the hand and snatches the invitation away. There are lines and curves in Holds that seem to promise a code or script of some kind; but the dominating impression (the work is over three metres tall) is of vertical movement or force. The eight ascending wooden hooks that seem made for the hand - could instead designed for something to hang there. In this language of abstract forms, are we looking at Simmel's aesthetic handle, which pegs the material to the spiritual, or something much more ordinary, domestic even?



Handrail (segmented)
2020
Polished beech,
steel
50 x 150 x 3730 mm

The steel and wood armature of Holds stands on a thin black metal base; a similar expanse tops the work off, creating a drastically minimal shelter, something you could stand under - just. There is the suggestion of a tree-like structure, branching upwards from a single steel trunk or stem. Though the title Shelter (2022) attaches only to one work, there is a sense across them all of a minimal (or minimalist) refuge being built. An interior that is at the same time no more than a gesture at interiority: Shelter itself is a mere sketch in steel and glass, a thin platform with snaking supports. It looks at once carefully designed, exquisitely finished, and like an architect's half-hearted or lip-service stab at the idea of near-private shelter in public space: a brief redoubt in which to smoke a cigarette or fumble with your keys. A shelter that is no shelter - once you recognise the form, you will spot such structures everywhere in contemporary architecture.

Glasshouse
2014
Dual channel HD
video synched,
looped, silent



Glass has long been a meaningful material in O'Malley's work: as portal, as frame, a ground on which an image may appear, or as a veil that obscures and hints at the visible world beyond. In her video Glasshouse (2014), discrete panes suggest the frames and movement of film; but the seamless drift across two screens is really a ruse, and they are not synchronized. In Nephtin (2014), the view of a mountain from a moving car is punctuated by a blind spot or scotoma that moves with the vehicle and its real or implied viewer. Shelter, however, adds something to this play with the visible and invisible - with a, frankly, domestic reference. The glass is not just opaque, but decorated with foliage motifs in a pattern commonly called Autumn Leaf. Along with cruder Minster and more elaborate Everglade varieties that O'Malley has used elsewhere, this is the type of glass seen in many Irish homes: used to ensure the privacy of a bathroom, or the near-privacy of a new porch added around a front door. Here, glass announces its presence, and also signals certain levels of aspiration, taste and modernity.

Material and medium, somehow there and not there, glass is a vehicle for visions. In 1921, in a linked pair of very short stories, Virginia Woolf explored and exploited the image-making potential of glass. 'Green' and 'Blue' occupy less than a page each, and describe two decorative glass lustres (like miniature chandeliers) on a mantelpiece. 'The pointed fingers of glass hang downwards. The light slides down the glass, and drops a pool of green. All day long the ten fingers of the lustre drop green upon the marble.'² The mantelpiece is like an ocean, ruffled and shadowed as the light declines. In 'Blue' Woolf imagines a sea monster in the depths of blue light, thrown then onto the beach of the mantelpiece. 'Blue are the ribs of the wrecked rowing boat.'³

The objects Woolf is describing are already archaic in 1921, remnants of ornate Victoriana. But her effects are wholly modern; the lustre becomes an arrangement of colour and form, appearing quite abstract before Woolf lapses into a kind of Romantic image-making: land and seascapes materialising out of light and shadow, a whole theatre in miniature. O'Malley's Shelf (2022) possesses something of this spectacular domestic aspect - though at two metres long it exceeds the marble grandeur of Woolf's fireplace. Shelf resembles a Modernist stage set: backdrop view of an abstract city with bare runic trees, or an interior with folding screen in black steel. It is also, of course, a landscape: according to the artist, the crux of what she does.

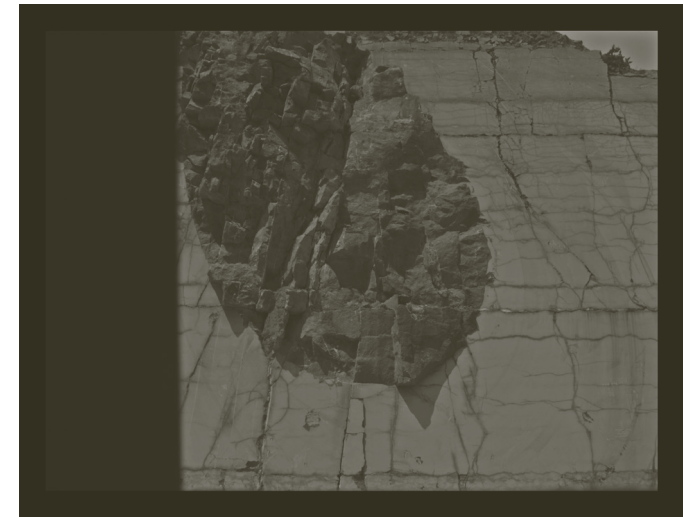
Landscape is not the territory itself but a perspective on the territory: a fact insisted upon in O'Malley's work, from the car-window views of Nephin to the precisely placed elements in Shelf, rising into view from a beechwood horizon. The muted colours are essential, turning these works in glass, metal and wood into something like the opposite of Woolf's colourful fantasias in light and shadow. In her videos, O'Malley shoots in colour and almost always casts the finished work in black and white - the eruption, for example, of a patch or plane of vivid green would convey, she says, too much information. So that when brighter, more saturated or more 'natural' colours do intrude, the effect is of a lurid unreality - best seen here in Hooded Crow where the frame of the image shifts as it tracks the darting beak of a crow at a garden pond.



Production Image
2021
John Kelly of
McKeon Stone honing
limestone

For the most part, these works remain modestly or even austere-toned, in their colours as well as forms that are modelled after those of the city. O'Malley looked at these textures more keenly than ever during the pandemic period. What did she find? A city or streetscape made of apertures and openings, unexpected porousness. Covers (2022), a collection of shallow, rough-hewn limestone mounds on a beechwood ground, has the look of luxe architectural detail but also recalls a set of drain covers, each disc subtly notched as if to be lifted out of place. These Covers might be derived from impressions of the holed or pocketed street. They also compose another landscape: a geology of erratics or drumlins, deposited and then smoothed over by the unthinkable energies of a glacier.

Quarry
2011
Video projection on
black polycotton
9min 56sec looped



It's with Drain (2022), however, that the ambiguous materials of the city, their opening onto and simultaneous concealing of land and landscape, are most resonantly deployed. The drains, so called, are made of Kilkenny limestone, which is quite the wrong material to make an actual drain, far too porous compared to granite. This particular stone - the quarry from which it is mined appears in O'Malley's 2011 video Quarry - is conspicuously pitted with fossilized shellfish: a deep-time reminder that beneath the pavement lies the beach, the seabed, the geological memory of primordial ooze. In the earliest work Placeholder (2020), of which Drain is a successor, the stone grille was made to be walked on as one entered the gallery. The structures have slowly evolved and enlarged, their curves deepened; the present work both recalls a familiar form and transports us to an unreal non-site in which the city, or the street, announces its gaps and voids as if they were monuments. To what? To something ancient and elemental living just below the surface.



Placeholder
2020
Limestone
30 x 1900 x 800 mm

O'Malley's art has always interested itself in the protocols, allurements and deceptions of vision. This has frequently involved moving or still images: the meeting of video and painting, portions of the world processing in elusive series across or between screens. Her moving-image work has been concerned with embodied perception, and sculptures or installations just as fully devoted to the structures and surprises of seeing. Attention paid to her own attention, a scrutiny of the urban landscape so precise or intense that its forms detach and refashion themselves as aloof but fantastical artefacts. Like the handle coming off Simmel's vase and demanding to be seen in its own right, or Woolf's lustre leaving behind the dusty and declining light of the drawing room to become a sort of video in advance of its time. Ways of seizing and of letting be, looking hard at the world and at its habit of eluding us.

1 Georg Simmel, 'The Handle', The Hudson Review Vol. 11, No. 3 (Autumn, 1958), pp. 371-385.

2 Virginia Woolf, 'Blue and Green', in Selected Short Stories (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 44.

3 Ibid, p. 45.