



LISMORE
REGIONAL GALLERY



DIRT & ASH

FIONA FELL AND KELLIE O'DEMPSEY



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Dirt & Ash displays a dynamic exchange between two mid-career artists, Fiona Fell and Kellie O'Dempsey. The exhibition explores the links between artists' bodies and practices via their respective mediums of clay (Fell) and charcoal (O'Dempsey). The artists work with an expanded definition of these deceptively simple mediums, incorporating sound, video and live art/performance. Within this interrogation however, the purest and most essential characteristics of clay and charcoal remain sacred. The exhibition opens up the artists' processes and allows us to see their work in both its rawest and most sophisticated forms. Instead of being presented with 'the perfect work of art' we see the artists' imperfect struggle to find it.

This is not the first collaboration by Fell and O'Dempsey. It follows a significant installation, *Dirt & Ash, Pieta*, exhibited in Barcelona, Spain, in January 2015. This work (also appearing as a video work in this Lismore exhibition) presents a blackened space and then a wandering line of light (drawn by O'Dempsey using digital projection), exposing Fell cradling one of her ceramic sculptures. The work reveals the usually unseen relationship between artist and work of art, and the work's ultimate dependence on the artist.

These themes are continued in the extension of this first iteration. Expanding on the original installation, the artists sometimes reduce their work to its simplest elements. Works are built, stacked, re-formed and overlapped

through performance and live drawing, exposing the bones of the artists' creative practices. In addition, the artists position their chosen materials as having equal power to them when making their art.

At face value, Fell and O'Dempsey have very different approaches to art. Fell's process is private and studio based. O'Dempsey's performance drawing is a public spectacle. In *Dirt & Ash* they step out of the confines of their independent rituals, exploring each other's practices, and attending to different facets of their own.

The finality of exhibition usually renders the consuming relationship that artists have with their work invisible. We see resolved and finished works - not the artist's battle to tame the wayward ones. We do not see the glistening body of the work, wet, pliable, and filled with potential, breathing and responding to the artist's hand. *Dirt & Ash* attempts to change this dynamic, pulling unborn works out of the studio. Much of the work on display consists of vestiges from the opening performance. These remnants, accompanied by video, projection, and sound from the live performance, mean that the ghost of that event is clearly present.

Fell's relationship with her work has always been one of the most interesting aspects of her practice. Her work is alive to her. When she is working towards a show Fell's ceramic sculptures call out to her night and day. In her studio she pushes and prods them into being, wrapping them in plastic and spraying them with water to stop them from hardening before they have met their



potential. She tries to rescue works she has touched too much and to come to terms with inevitable traumas that take place in firing.

More recently, Fell has integrated her figurative ceramics with a more abstract, material-driven approach. She has begun to dissolve her rigid material of fired clay, incorporating it in other states that we would not usually see in traditional ceramic practice. In *Involuntary muscle*, wet clay has been manipulated in plastic, two heavy forms descending in perpetual flux. In *Intra/active (experimental exchange)*, sandpaper which is a by-product of her process (used to painstakingly surface her sculptures and then cast aside) is brought out as finished work. The hard work of sanding is embedded in them to create unconscious drawings. They accompany automatic ink drawings by O'Dempsey. Both sets of drawings appear to embody the forces and feelings of their creation.

O'Dempsey's approach to drawing also interrogates the parameters of her medium, but in reverse. In her work the temporal act of drawing is entirely public. Her process applies drawing as an immediate practice, shared with and influenced by her collaborators and audience. O'Dempsey's lines (applied with both experimental and conventional artists' tools) are laid down with a grace and confidence that comes from 1000s of drawing hours. In her performance work she bravely shares the vulnerability of missteps usually hidden or overcome in a completed work.

With Fell, the body is present in the figurative nature of her ceramics, and in the new work, in the clear physical associations of her materials. For O'Dempsey, it is there through the performative nature of her work. O'Dempsey's large scale work is energised by her own body and those of her subjects (usually collaborators with whom she is performing – for example; dancers, musicians and fellow visual artists). In her live performances her moving subjects instruct the fluidity of her lines, forcing pace, and preventing any fussiness from entering the work. When figurative references to the body disappear (the work frequently becomes purely about mark making), the body remains in the scale and physicality of O'Dempsey's marks. Her drawings speak back to her body, the reach of her arms, the velocity of having to build up marks quickly, and the exhilaration and exhaustion of performing.

O'Dempsey's finished performance drawings could be regarded as powerful and meaningful relics, referencing the dance of drawing at the centre her work. In the lead up to this exhibition she completed a number of drawing sessions in the studio with Fell, taking back this public nature of her process. Like the drawings of her performances, *Ash I-III* are fresh, spontaneous, but they are done without her usual audience watching on. Improvisation, happenstance, and the drama of the performance have no part in these works. Nor does a predesignated timeframe for completion of a drawing. They are private studies of her friend at work. At the exhibition opening O'Dempsey pulls Fell with her into the public domain, reversing the exchange just described.



In her video work, *Negative Time – Echo*, O'Dempsey comments on the never-ending nature of drawing. Played forward and then in reverse, this work shows the artist laying down marks, drawing a figure from her imagination. The artist exits and re-enters the frame eight times through the duration of the video. At one point she re-enters and appears to commence undrawing the image. The work raises the question, 'where does a drawing start and where does it end?'. This speaks to the temporal nature of the artist's work and of life more broadly.

During the opening performance, O'Dempsey has responded to the exhibition and space. She has drawn and painted directly onto the walls of the gallery with Fell's clay slip. Slip is not a drawing medium and it is not a medium O'Dempsey has used before. It asserts itself with a dry mat finish, different from the innocuous wet marks when first laid down. Stubborn but elemental, the artist must work with what the material is, not what she wants it to be. Elsewhere in the gallery we see *Ghosts*, responding to *The Vulnerable*, Fell's tableau of sculptures and found objects. This work, drawn directly onto the wall in chalk prior to the performance, demonstrates the eloquence of O'Dempsey's drawing. The projection on the back wall also evidences this.

For these projected digital drawings O'Dempsey has responded to Fell's body in the exhibition space, using moving marks to advance our vision and help us see with an artist's eyes. The work emphasises and overlaps with what is being made by Fell, as she manoeuvres

reconstituted studio experiments in the exhibition space. Fell has combined her clay with various medical equipment and industrial trolleys, emphasising the idea of her tending to her work (intensive care). The 'body' of her work becomes a living, breathing thing. Her commitment to her work, and the unfair demands it could be seen to place on her means their relationship is tender at sometimes, inhospitable at others.

In *Intra/Venus* the two artists pour their mediums of clay slip and ink into 10 metres of intravenous tubing in a cathartic closing gesture. Black ink and white slip travel through the great tangle of tubing. It embodies a drawn line and is an expression of the materials forming the lifeblood of the artists' practice. They hereby blur the hard-and-fast distinction between artwork and artist, animate and inanimate and dramatize their questioning relationship with their work and materials.

Before exhibition an artist's work evolves, its future uncertain. Exhibitions can falsely freeze a work of art into completion, obliterating past and future possibilities. *Dirt & Ash* alters this dynamic, and lets us into the work mid process. It is territory filled with contradicting feelings of possibility and doubt, excitement and anxiety. The works' momentum is suggested by endless options for adjustment and rearrangement, loss and survival. This sets it in perpetual motion, spinning broader metaphors for life.

essay: Kezia Geddes, Curator, Lismore Regional Gallery





Images:

cover: Fiona Fell and Kellie O'Dempsey, pre-production still, *Dirt & Ash*, 2018;

back: Kellie O'Dempsey, pre-production still, *Dirt & Ash*, 2018;

inside fold: Fiona Fell, pre-production still, *Dirt & Ash*, 2018;

inside left to right: Fiona Fell, *Pause*, 2018, digital image, dimensions variable;

Fiona Fell, *Caution and control*, 2018, clay and plastic, 23 x 53 x 27cm;

Fiona Fell, *Connection*, 2018, clay, plastic and found object, 98 x 60 x 43cm;

Fiona Fell and Kellie O'Dempsey, pre-production still, *Dirt & Ash*, 2018, digital drawing

by Kellie O'Dempsey over studio experiments by Fiona Fell, 2018;

Kellie O'Dempsey, *Ash III*, 2018, charcoal and graphite on Hahnemühle paper, 106 x 79cm;

Kellie O'Dempsey, *Ash I*, 2018, charcoal and graphite on Hahnemühle paper, 106 x 79cm

Images courtesy the artists. Photographer Raimond de Weerd

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