

Niamh O'Malley
***Glasshouse* (2014/2020)**
Single-channel video, 30 mins

Curatorial Essay
1–31 July 2020

Sculpture plays a central part in Niamh O'Malley's wider practice, where she employs materials such as steel, limestone, wood and glass. She is interested in the exhibition as an architecture for scrutiny and attention, directing us to observe and filter. Her exhibitions present a considered and purposeful sequence of forms, engineered to encourage a mode of slow looking and consideration of the *materiality* of the sculptures.

Similarly, in her video works such as *Glasshouse*, there is an appeal for the viewer to exercise a mode of slow looking, as the composition of the panes of glass gracefully unfold.

Made during a residency in Denmark, O'Malley happened on rows of old greenhouses whose configuration allowed her to execute lengthy tracking shots. From inside the greenhouses the camera moves across the discoloured and broken panes of glass. Looking across to wild grasses and overgrown weeds, the viewer's sightline fluctuates between clear and obscure, as the sunlight spills onto the surfaces to reveal the layers of dirt and the effects of time. To further enhance this playful quality, the artist has then recomposed and positioned the windowpanes in a 'painterly timeline', either by slicing contours into the glass or by overlaying them, and even by removing the panes altogether revealing moments of absolute clarity amongst the obscure.

The film is an intimate study of glass, a material that O'Malley has worked with for over a decade. Picking up a piece of glass found in her studio, the intention was to film through it so that painted marks floated in front of the camera lens. In doing so, this heightened the 'surface-ness' of the pane, as every finger-mark, insect and piece of dust clung to it, whilst harnessing countless subtly reflections that overlay the footage. The artist explains:

Glass, a sliver of translucency, a conventional component and device of architectural visibility, is by no means invisible. I think of it now as object, whose presence – no matter how slight, thin and colourless, resurfaces the world behind it. It is an image-maker, producing distance and protection and appearances of what it shields.

The work is divided into two sections of moving image, with the left-hand section coming into view first. To begin the camera is still, allowing the viewer to find their bearings and to take in the water stained and dirt covered setting. The slightest gust of wind moves a branch just out of reach and establishes that the camera is active. Only then does the camera begin to move across the length of the windowpanes, and moments later the right-hand view settles into scene. At first the transition between each window of moving image is seemingly smooth, however the viewer swiftly comes to understand that these images are in fact repeated and their sequences reconfigured. Something magical occurs within the black void separating the two apertures, as it serves as a ground for the scene to collapse into and to re-emerge from, reconfigured and changed. From a position of stability, the viewer abruptly moves to a position of uncertainty, causing the illusion to fracture.

The panes of glass themselves both act as a physical boundary and a view onto the world; the effect is one that withdraws from view, forging an impasse between the viewer and the landscape beyond. The intermittent moments of absolute clarity that are permitted when a pane of glass is removed and the viewer is invited to see beyond, calls to mind a longing, 'as distance does what it always does, it compels us to traverse the gap between here and there, now and then.' During the recent 2020 global government restrictions on its peoples, for the artist, in re-examining this work during the current pandemic – 'these spaces, now call to mind a madness and chaos of material stuff, replete with touch and fear', the idea of the open window reconfigured as a potent intrusion, as the world is brought sharply into view.

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