



Giddy with despair

an exhibition of new work by Jennie Moran

Galway Arts Centre
2nd December 2011 - 27th January 2012

Saturday Sustenance: as part of the exhibition, there will be something to eat in the gallery on Saturdays (excluding 24th and 31st of December). It won't be free or expensive.

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Image: Things that can happen in a vacuum, film still, image courtesy Niamh Burke-Kennedy

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Ideas are not like teeth. “Unless ideas are massaged into reality,” modernist industrial designer George Nelson once said, “they evaporate”. Teeth, on the other hand, are incredibly determined creations that after arriving into reality, exist long, long after the decomposition of the mouth and body that bore them into existence. They also cause us pain, something even the most perverse ideas can only aspire to in their liminal dream state. I like to imagine no one suffered toothaches like existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who was overwhelmed by a cavity during his visit to Galway in 1959. He and his adopted daughter Arlette Al Kaim had been flown over from France by film director John Huston and stayed in Huston’s St. Cleran’s estate outside Athenry. Huston had employed Sartre to write the script for “The Secret Passion”, his biopic on Sigmund Freud, but they discovered in Ireland that they were not creatively compatible. As the visit dragged on, Sartre’s moods were spoiled further by that toothache. When the suffering became too unbearable for even Sartre to bear, he decided to see a dentist. Huston offered to arrange an appointment with a dentist in Dublin who could supply an anaesthetic and provide some sympathetic care, but Sartre insisted on being driven to Galway. He walked in to a dental office and asked the dentist to extract the dead tooth. “A tooth more or less made no difference in Sartre’s cosmos,” Huston said. His script for the Freud film was unfilmable. Huston hired a new scriptwriter and dropped Sartre from the project. Sartre died. Huston adopted Joyce’s film “The Dead” just before he died. St. Cleran’s was turned into a

luxury hotel, and then it closed. Three generations of Galway dentists have come and gone. And still, in some landfill, Jean-Paul Sartre’s poisoned tooth sleeps the confident sleep of calcified matter. It will inhabit this earth in physical form longer than any of us.

In 1879 in rural France, 43-year-old postman Ferdinand Cheval conceived of his Ideal Palace after slipping over a stone. The beautiful stone reminded Cheval that in his dreams, he had once built a “palace passing all imagination, everything that the genius of a simple man can conceive – with gardens, grottoes, towers, castles, museums and statues: all so beautiful and graphic that the picture of it was to live in my mind for at least ten years.” A collection of those mysterious stones inspired him to make that vision manifest and the palace he actually built – after 10,000 days, 9,300 hours, 33 years of toil – looks like it only could have been imagined in a dream. John Berger, during a visit to the Palais Ideal, noted sculptures of a pine tree, a calf, a snake, a Roman vase, two washerwomen the size of moles, an otter, a lighthouse, a snail, three friends nestling in coral, a leopard (larger than the lighthouse) and a crow, carved into the palace, though he admits “such a list would have to be multiplied several thousand times in order to make even a first approximate census”. Today, it is crumbling. Across Galway Bay, outside Ballyvaughan, a Tyrolean named Wolfgang Dietl had the inspiration to open a

vegetarian Italian restaurant on the side of Cappabhaile. It was built illegally, and closed down after two and a half years, but as long as that building stands, that initial spark of wonder lives. I visited that building in August. Physically, it is as comatose as a dead tooth, but while its foundations hold, its memory speaks to anyone who’ll listen.

These creations and every creation including that most obscene, glorious one, can be traced back to one trembling moment. What happens in that half-light, that gloaming, where void and creation, negation and inspiration briefly meet and fondle? A conversation, I imagine, and possibly a negotiation. It is well known that ancient Greek mathematician Archimedes experienced his Eureka moment in the bathtub. I like to think it happened like this: the Greek submerged himself entirely in water. He had his eyes shut, but the light of day poured through the water, and he momentarily lay suspended between time and space, darkness and light. It was then that revelation hit him (this revelation pertained to measuring the volume of irregular-sized objects) and the power of his realisation, according to legend, sent him running naked through the streets of Syracuse. Donny Mahoney, November 2011