JUMP
Cléa van der Grijn

Since 2008, Cléa van der Grijn's work and practice is about unravelling the complexities associated around the culture of death, reconstructed memory and time. Memories real or imagined. Dream.

JUMP is a newly commissioned body of work about understanding the rational, social and emotional circumstances constructed around time and memory. The exhibition consists of a series of new paintings by Cléa as well as an ambitious film work written and Directed by Cléa and created with collaborators; Joseph P. Hunt, Michael Cummins and Ciaran Carty.

A woman stands at the edge of a pier. She wilfully jumps. Slowly she falls through water where time catches her breath. What are the memories between the transitional period of jumping + hitting the water when life becomes momentarily suspended. Alive not dead. What memories would be placed to validate existence. Memories to record. Real or perceived? Fact or fiction?

Commissioned by Mermaid Arts Centre in partnership with four venues and funded through an Arts Council of Ireland Touring Award;

Mermaid Arts Centre (Wicklow) 1st Oct to 3rd Nov 2018, Linenhall Arts Centre (Mayo) 24th Nov to 5th Jan 2019, Courthouse Gallery and Studios (Clare) 18th Jan to 23rd Feb 2019, Solomon Gallery (Dublin) 7th, March to 30th March 2019, The Hamilton Gallery (Sligo) 12th April to 11th May 2019

Cléa van der Grijn studied Fine Art in the National College of Ireland and now lives and works in Sligo. In 2015, Cléa had a 4 month residency in Mexico which marked major turning point in her practice. She created a large scale experimental installation called Reconstructing Memory, which was exhibited in The Model Sligo (2015), Limerick City Gallery of Art, Limerick, Rochester Arts Centre USA and The Solomon, Dublin. (2016). RM was a multifaceted textured exploration of the societal disparities in approaches to death in Mexican and Irish cultures. Film, photography, sculpture, painting and installation were all sensitively utilised in a rich, beautiful and considered exhibition. This new body of work JUMP to be exhibited in five venues around the county is the natural extension of her practice further exploring social and emotional constructs around loss, death and memory.

On Cléa van der Grijn's 'Jump'

Medb Ruane

The journey to Jump

Four neon letters on the wall leading to Cléa van der Grijn's new exhibition spell out the word 'Jump'. The signifier reads like a flashing voice from the void. Part lure, part command, it seems to be urging a passage to an act from which there is no return. The act is death, here, the fictional death of a maiden dressed in white who on film will walk along a concrete pier, look at the lake waters into which it leads and jump. Staggering natural beauty surrounds her yet she appears not to see. The life insisting in every vista points up the poignancy that hers may ebb away.

Throughout the exhibition, paintings of exquisite beauty present images as surfaces and depths of the lake where the fictional young woman's life may end. One shows a graceful hand drifting over virgin blues. Another, a limp foot receding from view. Death is not presented frontally. Instead, its presence is woven so intimately into the visual threads that viewers can create narratives themselves.

The exhibition emerges some ten years after the artist first tackled issues of loss, grief and mourning – and what art can do with them - following her brother Ruriko's death (Momentous, 2008). Writing then, Maurice O'Connell said that "… the project shows the power and dignity in the experiences of loss. …Calm and carefully distanced observations are being made and represented from amidst these moments of loss. It is these considerations and resulting decisions that make this all the more personal and moving." [i]

The loss propelled van der Grijn's practice into a series of investigations that led to a residency in a hospice for the dying and to villages in Italy and Mexico where she explored alternative cultural resonances to her own. Certain emblematic symbols establish an archival continuity from there to here: marigold flowers, a girl in a white dress, the image of a cosmos constructed of locusts or flowers, a patinated death mask cast from the artist's face and a pair of glass eyes with irises blue as hers.

By the time of her touring exhibition Reconstructing Memory (2016), Michael Birchall quoted from Octavio Paz: "The word death is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London, because it burns the lips." Birchall recognised a dimension of civic duty in her practice and likened the work of an artist as an 'observer of specific moments' to the work of an ethnographer.

Catherine Marshall noted contrasting rituals of loss between Ireland and Mexico. "Like communities in rural Ireland half a century ago, Mexicans continue to mark death as an ever-present and even positive experience. ...Instead of pretending it doesn't exist until it, inevitably, happens, [van der Grijn] reminds us

of the importance of death as part of the framework of our mortal, human lives," she wrote. And, Megan Johnston emphasised, 'the importance of interpreting the artist's work as "bearing witness to… death and dying, memorial and shrine, but …asking us to remember, to create, and to imagine as part of the viewing process."

Van der Grijn's decade of investigation is not one long funeral march, however. Her investigation explores transformation, specifically what art and visual culture can do with such fundamental themes. Far from being morbid, her conception of living in the knowledge of death is potentially liberating. We become passionately aware of our freedom to live well only by facing the inevitability of death.

Here, Jump is a further flow – a jumping forward - in van der Grijn's practice leading to a sparer, unplugged composition of material and technical forces. The exhibition counterpoints the artist's meaning-enhancing production of film, neon and paint with the grave theme. It questions memory and desire, remembering and forgetting. It questions art.

Remembering and forgetting – memorialisation as interpretation

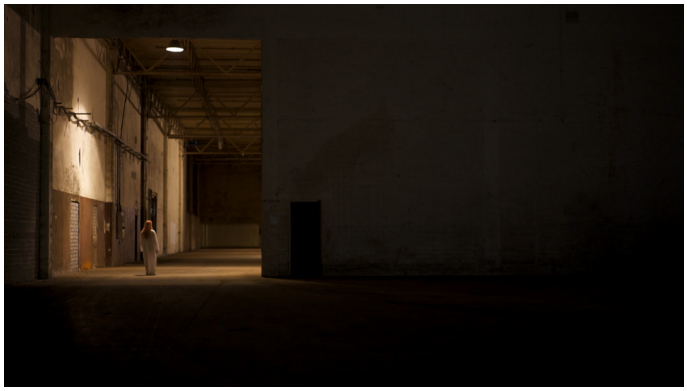
Van der Grijn's work on loss, mourning and grief was provoked by her own experiences of living, as she has acknowledged openly.[ii] Both her brother Ruriko and her colleague and ex-husband Patrick Jolley died young. Days after this exhibition opened at the Mermaid Arts Centre, her friend and collaborator Maurice O'Connell died while still in his '50s. Her practice, then, is a way of putting subjective experience to work through the process of art and rigorously transforming what was subjective into what is encultured. This enculturation rests on subjective experience but is distinct from it.

Death comes into our lives through the deaths of others, whether as close as a parent, child or partner, or observed distantly when we witness victims of disasters, wars or famine. Our first relation to death is probably not fear of our own but fear of being abandoned and of being unravelled by experiences of grief.

Grief is a subjective experience of course and no one will escape it. How we mourn, how we acknowledge our losses, is a personal script written by oneself uniquely. Western metrics of 'stage of grief' which are time-based can elide the depth of loss and despair we may feel. We go through a something we have no words for. We are not the same and never will be. Trapped by language's binary structure, questions of remembering and forgetting, of life and death, become as black is to white or sun to snow. How can we go on? How do we know that our mourning will be over?

After losing his partner, Julian Barnes asked "What is success in mourning? Does it lie in remembering or forgetting?"[iii]Sigmund Freud investigated the question in his seminal Mourning and Melancholia (1917) by tracing the intimate parallels between the experience of losing a loved one and the experience of a pathology. He found that the ego never completely loses the mark of the love object who has been lost. When Freud's daughter Sophie died aged 26 from Spanish flu in 1920, he experienced his own loss as 'insurmountable'.[iv] And, he recognised, his continued deep feelings for his lost loved one, along with his attachment to memories and thoughts of her, in a way kept her, the lost object, alive in his being.

"We know that the acute sorrow we feel after such a loss will run its course", he wrote to a recently-bereaved colleague, "but also that we will remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. No matter what will come to fill its place, even should it fill that place completely, it remains something else. And that is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating a love that we do not want to abandon." [v]



The ‘should’ in ‘how it should be’ implies something honourable, something ethical, in the act of mourning and remembering. Culture and society shape formal aspects and practices, articulating various styles of mourning and burial rites. These formal or outside forces differ widely between cultures and eras, creating a hierarchy of griefs and of the bereaved. Expectations about what is allowed or frowned on are shaped depending on one’s status as defined by the perceived magnitude of the loss or relation to the lost one – colour of costume, public displays, when to resume socialising, etc.

Yet loss is not compartmentalised in the psyche or unconscious. The unconscious, Jacques Lacan noted, knows no time. Your existing experience of loss, even losses considered minor by the culture, can affect how you react or respond to losses in the present. When loss is repressed, denied or not fully worked through, a relatively innocuous event can provoke ill-health and even breakdown, just as a sparrow landing on an old kitchen stool with one frail leg that has withstood years of pressure can cause it to collapse.

The effects of loss are interpreted on a one-by-one basis, with each person subjectivating them via their particular conscious and unconscious experiences. As van der Grijn demonstrated previously, the integration of death with life in Mexican culture provokes personal and societal attitudes that point up a psychological and linguistic poverty around death and loss in western societies. The widespread effects of unacknowledged and unworked-through loss are striking in contemporary western culture, clinician Darian Leader argues.[vi] He believes that many so-called depressive symptoms are actually misdiagnosed and that rather than suffering from catch-all ‘depression’, a person with the diagnosis may be enduring the pain of unspoken, unrecognised, loss.

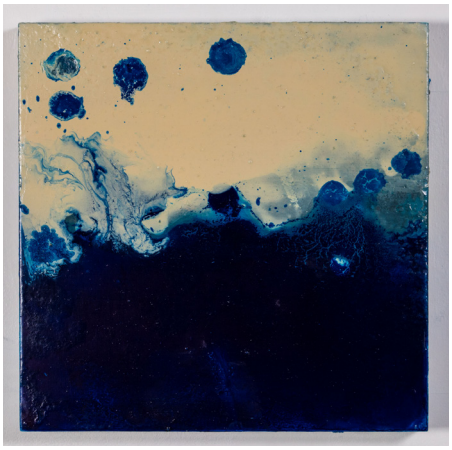
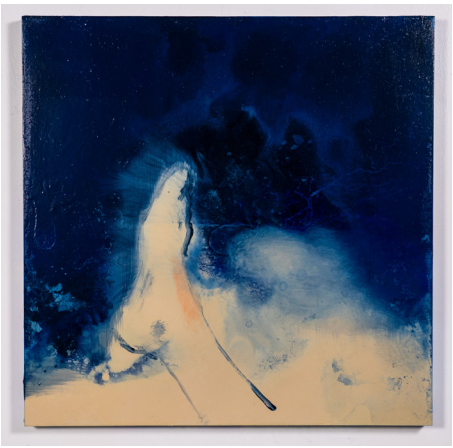
Psychoanalyst Russell Grigg has also examined the clinical implications of mourning. “The rituals of mourning are so important that the noun ‘mourner’ does not refer to a person’s grief, or at least does so only indirectly”, he wrote. “A ‘mourner’ is first and foremost someone performing a ritual – whether attending a funeral or performing any of the other functions associated with being in mourning. …Ethically, mourning is about them (the lost loved one) rather than about us (the bereaved). … [Mourning] is about finding the right way to remember, that is, the right way to commemorate. …The combination of ritual as a community event – funerals, mourning practices, etc. – with the individual’s psychical work of mourning achieves this commemoration.” [vii]

The notion of a ‘right way to remember’ implies a right way to forget. We must forget while also remembering. These contradictory, competing processes provoke psychic conflict and anxiety. Forgetting could imply denial, lack of loyalty, lack of love and so we often try not to. The longer we can remember details such as the sound of a voice, the look of a smile, the scent on a bathrobe, the longer we keep the lost one alive, it can seem.

Mourning is about them but the raw burn of grief is about us. The phrase ‘dead and gone’ catches two moments of our grieving and the suspension in between. First is the knowledge they are dead. Then, painfully, is the felt realisation that they are also gone.

Memories erupt at sometimes unexpected moments – a song, a birthday, tasting a food, a special place, their handwriting in a book. People often report feeling as though they have glimpsed their lost loved one as they walk down a street or enter a room. Our being does not want to admit that the loved one has gone and our desire to not let go can encourage our senses to transform a stranger who wears a lookalike coat or hairstyle into the loved one, even if for a millisecond. One patient grieving his father had a series of dreams where the father was walking out the door of their childhood home as though he was going to work, then was waving to him from a passing car until finally the father appeared as a drawing, which the dreamer realised was not the living man. He had been preparing himself unconsciously to let go.

The process of loss and mourning brings with it a desire to remember and memorialise the lost loved one and one's own relationship with them. Like the dreamer shows above, people create narratives to contain or manage their loss and these narratives construct what amounts to a new interpretation arising from the effect of grief. We reinterpret the loved one while simultaneously reinterpreting ourselves.

The visible and the profound

Themes of life and death inhabit art history, from centuries before Holbein's The Ambassadors (1533) with its anamorphotic skull to years after Damian Hirst's For the Love of God (2007) which cast an eighteenth-century skull in platinum, then encrusted it with diamonds. Pathos-laden vanitas scenes could at least offer viewers the solace of life after death but for van der Grijn the philosophical and aesthetic question in a secular world is more about living than dying, with death proposed as an imperative to live well.

At the level of the visible, the artist recapitulates aspects of art history and her own practice over ten years. This happens through colour and image, both in the paintings and in the film made with collaborators Joseph P. Hunt, Michael Cummins, Ciaran Carty and the performer Renée van der Grijn, daughter of Ruriko. The young girl's healthy, living face contrasts to the skull she will later hurl against a wall. It veils the grim reality that mortality implies. The film's open narratives allow for uncanny possibilities. Angel, ghost or pure fiction? They show the young maiden in the waters, then as appearing to recall a majestic country house and an empty industrial building through which she descends. No doors are open. She is always alone. Dressed in white like an angel (the *angelito* of previous work), she happens upon altars of candles and marigolds that are disrupted by the classical memento mori of a human skull which she hurls against the wall. Is this representation a memory, which is itself an interpretation culled from life events, - or a fictional seduction for us viewers setting up imaginary purgatories and psychical senses of imprisonment and containment? She moves through a forest carrying a cosmos of marigolds, the flower whose "…bright colours and aroma lure the spirits of the dead souls to visit their families for a day", as Niall MacMonagle explained for its connection to Mexican rituals.[viii] That cosmos is shaped like a wrecking ball, which is usually a heavy burden yet here one that can be borne as something both painful and beautiful.

Images of water throughout van der Grijn's paintings and film propose a world of associations about the fictional maiden's journey and what or whom she embodies. Hers is a *de profundis*, a from-the-depths encounter that resonates with the sorrowing of Psalm 130 as well as with Oscar Wilde's 1897 letter from Reading Gaol. The depths could metaphorise isolation and despair. Read via the lenses of Tao, alchemy or ancient astrology, water also associates to life, emotions, feelings. Here, the jumping into water and the sinking and floating in it open a meditation on the moment of death as an ontological frontier where time and memory collide.

Something is being enacted which will lead to a defining insight only she may understand. If, on a literal reading, the maiden's death by suicide is an attempt to produce meaning, to make sense of the impossible, it is a failed attempt. Her own death erases all possibilities for her to experience significance because she will not be able to live in the knowledge of death and to embrace life more passionately as a result. Entering uncanny territories, the fictional maiden read as ghost or angel speaks to the experience of memory as a return to life's events, whether through her own imaginings or as projected by an unseen author.

The yellow golds of the marigold images re-appear in paint as foils to the symphonies of blues which veil the depths. Both are royal colours, with the blues evoking Poussin's (1594-1665) rigorous works, Yves Klein's (1929-1962) infinite ultramarines and more. This once-precious colour's rich material and visual history amplifies its effect here. In ancient Egypt, it was thought to open a dimension into the spiritual world. In the late middle ages and Renaissance, it was considered a sacred colour and was reserved for the robes of the Virgin Mary, partly because of the expense and difficulty in producing it from lapis lazuli. Mary, an icon of female power, creativity and nurturing from pre-Christian times, also points directly to the marigolds: their name comes from Mary's gold.

The wider context of van der Grijn's investigation touches on the contemporary Decade of Commemorations, 2012-2022, which sets out to reinterpret key historical events via spectacle and debate within the public discourse. Jay Winter had argued that studies of the Great War based on traditional frames of reference fell short of interpreting it accurately because they did not accommodate the sheer breadth of human suffering and loss.[ix] Now, encouraging personal testimonies and family stories helps to bring human voices into the grand narratives. Ireland Professor of Poetry Paula Meehan poeticised her specifically Dublin context of forgotten losses and people in the 2016 collection Geomantic.[x] The altered social contexts that result may enable greater intergenerational room (to adapt Yeats's 'great hatred, little room') within which losses can be acknowledged, sacrifices honoured, differences respected and lives lived truthfully.

The final frames of van der Grijn's film show the maiden floating with enigmatically outstretched arms. Is hers a gesture of crucifixion or of welcome? Like Seamus Heaney's last words in a text to Marie, his wife, it may be offering a 'noli timere', a resonant 'don't be afraid'.

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i This and other cited writings on her work are available on www.cleavandergrijn.com
ii Interviews with: Laurence Mackin, The Works, 18 April 2014, RTE 1; Claire Ronan, Vimeo, 1 September 2014; Rebecca Kennedy, thethinair.net, April 2017.
iii Julian Barnes, Levels of Life, London: Jonathan Cape, 2013.
iv Brabant, Falseder, Giampieri-Deutsch, eds. The Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Sandor Ferenczi, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.
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vi Darian Leader, The New Black: Mourning Melancholia and Depression, London: Penguin, 2009.
vii Russell Grigg, 'Mourning Desire', in M. Ruane ed., Lacunae APPI International Journal of Psychoanalysis, Issue 10, May 2015.
viii Niall MacMonagle, What Lies Beneath: Marigold Field IV, Sunday Independent, 28.8.17.
ix Jay Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning, Cambridge University Press, 1998, this ed. 2014.
x Paula Meehan, Geomantic, Dublin: Dedalus Press, 2016.

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www.jumpfilm.net **www.cleavandergrijn.com**