

98 Conor McFeely
The case of the midwife
toad (the unrepeatabile
experiment)



On entering this exhibition you would be forgiven for thinking you had walked in mid-installation, with the floor strewn with a variety of materials, including large broken slabs of polystyrene and plasterboard, and wall works hung close to the ground. The gallery has of course been carefully installed to look chaotic, like many previous Conor McFeely installations, and on closer inspection patterns and discrete selections emerge that point to a particular kind of order or system.

The title of the exhibition is of great initial assistance, not just the 'Midwife Toad' (which I missed on the way in) but moreover the 'unrepeatable experiment'. Certainly the layout looks unrepeatable or improvised, with blocks of coal-tar pitch spilling over into yellow fragments, ultra-violet strips illuminating fluorescent painted poly, curious blobs on poles, a severed foot in a large bucket, large metal lampshades fallen to the ground, cutlery wrapped in waxy burlap, frantic handwriting animated on LCD screens, rumbling sounds, crumpled paper, a video of a half naked male figure lurching in bed, big photographs of corroded nails, and much more. There was a definite laboratory feel to the installation, albeit a mad scientist's lair that has exploded, with the mess and chaos implying that something had possibly gone terribly wrong. The overall piece seemed to hedge toward alchemy with all the deluded transformative power that such a pseudoscience possesses but this would be wrong. The narrative to locate these works was elsewhere.

A text was provided in laminated form by the stairs, an interesting story of a scientist who experimented on toads to challenge Darwinian evolution. There is lots more to the story but that's all you need to know as later in the text the improvised response to the 'selected' subject is discussed and privileged over it.

The actual details surrounding biologist Paul Kammerer and his Midwife Toad experiments are a parallel narrative that are presented briefly but are still central in understanding the artist's take on this scary moment in evolutionary theory.

A ten-minute bounce around Wiki related sources reveals a far more duplicitous, back-stabbing, Ridley or Barnam & Bailey school of science. The implied credence given to recent reassessments given to Kammerer's work also should cause some pause. His ideas and experiments into inherited acquired characteristics (proven false, but this is also disputed) were leading towards a validation of eugenics – if you can get land toads to breed in water, how long before a perfect race of man could also be constructed?

This narrative as selected subject is, however, not a great aid to understanding the work on display, although it certainly complicates it. The blobs on poles on closer inspection were casts of toads, dispersed throughout the other fragments of walls, ceilings and artefacts from the imaginary laboratory in vivarium. These become the focus of several material treatments – skewered on poles, dipped in wax, painted yellow, hidden under light fixtures, etc. The works do not as such present a riddle to figure out, as the selected pieces of the story are so fragmented that they cannot be put back together in any linear form.

Then again, who ever said that understanding and meaning have to happen in a linear fashion? What is interesting then is that the work defies a conventional form of interpretation. There is a fusion of intuitive and intellectual approaches which is a difficult balance to aspire to. Too much of either often kills the work, locating it in some airy cosmic

realm or rooted in serious bookish research. While McFeely shares elements of the free-flowing material play of Sarah Sze and the equally playful material narratives of Simon Starling, he is clearly not attempting to emulate either.

Instead what is luxuriated in are the fragments of this story, presented not to cause bewilderment but something else. Each arrangement of materials becomes infused with a vague narrative that then implies the inherent complexity of the equation. A wall piece of painted poly and foil in the shape of a mountain is subtitled with the phrase "excursion into the realm of logic and morals." Here the aspiration mountain alludes to the sometimes-distorted higher goals of science, especially if one thinks of those healthy blond Hitler-youth types hiking in the Alps.

With such big ideas and total chaos of materials, one wonders where between allegory and entropy does this work lie? As a twisted take on research-based practice and an ultra-formless art-making practice, these toads certainly provide a challenge, offering a roomfull of arbitrary contradictions, half-truths and visually provocative artworks.

Alan Phelan is an artist who lives in Dublin.

(opposite)
Conor McFeely
from *The Case of the Midwife Toad (the unrepeatable experiment)*, 2007
installation shot, Douglas Hyde Gallery
courtesy Douglas Hyde Gallery