

## Belfast: Conor McFeely at Ormeau Baths

Throughout May, Galleries Three and Four of Belfast's Ormeau Baths Gallery were inhabited by the two installations which comprised Conor McFeely's work *Headfirst*. The materials used in the rooms were similar, reprised in a range of shifting

around various arrangements of: upright metal rods covered in concrete, drilled into the floor; broken strip lights; frames created by inserting items between two sections of perspex, held together with screws.



Conor Mc Feely: *Headfirst*, installation shot, 2003; courtesy Ormeau Baths Gallery

forms, evoking variations on the themes of the study of mental health of the individual, and the sanity of such analysis itself.

On the floor of Gallery Three, three crumpled, waxy paper forms nestled

sponds to the idea of fallen prophets. A criticism of the psychoanalytical gaze was further suggested by a dismembered foot in a frame and a cast of a head atop a plinth, both made of industrial-looking cake. These items

were analogous to arrested movement and a kind of production-like commodification of the psyche, and amusing in their suggestion of an unusual diagnostic procedure.

The skin-like texture and colour tone of the waxy paper, seen in relation to the skeletal rods and strip lights, suggested an interplay of broken-down anatomy and architecture. Not just any architecture, but again the clinical corridors of hospitals (and perhaps more remotely, supermarkets and schools). Whether the body enveloped the building fragments or vice-versa – which extrapolates to a reflection on the relationship of forces between the individual and the engineering of social space – was uncertain, not least because the framework of the Gallery's ceiling slipped into view and so consideration, given the sparse layout of the room.

The paper suggested the material used in building plans, enhancing the diagrammatic aspect of the work, and the play on construction/de-construction prompted thoughts of the artist Gustav Metzger's proposal of 'auto-destructive art', wherein creativity/disintegration are interlocking. Metzger's work has also focused on the re-using of industrial materials and has made reference to scientific methods.

A sense of volatility was manifest through the firefighters wedged between perspex in one of two adjacent wall works. The composition was completed by more paper and a shelving rail devoid of books, pointing to the incendiary applications of knowledge. An unctuous substance

resembling bitumen, which was in evidence on sections of the three main paper compositions, referred to a vaguely carcinogenic form of decay. In the nearby wall sign, a red light upset the duality of white text on black, which read "I did this to see what

feature of intellectual enquiry in the 20th century, including art theory. The sense of (forced) confessional culture resulting from this trend, and its puritan drive, was activated through a projection of Goya's painting *Auto da fé*, which refers to the 'act of faith', a

seemed to reveal the schematics of our absent analyst. A reference to Auschwitz cast a new light on the waxy paper, connoting the skin used by Nazis to create such furniture as lampshades; a by-product of the experiments and slaughter of the death camps.



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Nearby, two signs framed with UV light, which read "I saw this" and "I saw this also," echoed scenarios depicting individuals being subjected to crude optical effects, for the purposes of interrogation, as seen on occasions in 1970s science-fiction films. In his text to accompany the exhibition, the artist highlights an interest in the novels of Philip K. Dick. Finally, a sense of a dis-synchronicity between the real and the represented was evoked by an image of a strip light, illuminated by a mis-aligned actual light.

would happen to my head." Was this the disembodied voice of the artist, or a experimental subject invented by him?

Prints on another gallery wall featured two shots of rubbish burning and a more obscure form pictured against insulation foam, perhaps a phallus or turd? This could have been an illustration resulting from a sinister experiment, thereby linking the idea of analysis to violence and debasement.

The contents of Gallery Four compounded the feeling of being witness to the debris or fallout of the culture of psychoanalysis, and associated forms of pseudo-science, that could be said to have been a key

performance of public punishment devised by the agents of the Spanish inquisition to deal with heretics. It is a well espoused theory that science has become the new religion.

The atmosphere of this room was rendered more critical (radioactive?), more x-ray vision (penetrating?), by the use of UV light and the increased density of material present. Rather than identifying clear zones, the same basic elements incorporated in Gallery Three were spread out in a more chaotic scenario. The addition of parallel lines in yellow paint, like markings on roads, accentuated the sense of accident over design. In contrast, a wall displaying two rows of images, including a foot and flies,

*Headfirst* unsettled the conventions through which order and disorder are calibrated in the realms of mental and social space. The works' emphasis on engaging with conceptual frameworks combined with a focus on the phenomenology of objects. In this way, the building blocks of McFeely's language both translated the exercise of decodification, whilst critiquing it and obscuring it, mindful of the observation that the process of definition is sometimes a stones throw away from the exercise of prescription.

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Conor McFeely: *Headfirst*, Ormeau Baths Gallery, May 2003