

in course of rearrangement
essay by Nathan o'Donnell in response to the exhibition by Marielle MacLeman

The title of this exhibition, *in course of rearrangement*, is a reference to a piece of museum shorthand: this text, or some variant of it, is generally used as a placeholder between exhibition displays, explaining to members of the public the absence of any apprehensible museum object.

Marielle MacLeman's work plays upon this sense of in-betweenness, the gap that separates concrete formulations.

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On 2 October 2017, Weaver Park on Cork Street, Dublin 8, opened to the public, the first new purpose-built park to be opened in Dublin for almost a decade.

The name derives from the industrial heritage of the area. The nearby Weaver Square dates back to at least the sixteenth century, when homes for members of the Weavers' Guild were being built. The Weavers' Guild was one of several workers' guilds in the city; at one point in the eighteenth century there were twenty-five in total. Many of them were concentrated around the part of the city now known as the Liberties.

The new Weaver Park makes explicit reference to this industrial tradition – with playground equipment designed to evoke the labour of the cloth workers and tanners. The opening of Weaver Park was a key achievement of Dublin City Council's Liberties Greening Strategy. A few months later, allotment-holders were asked to vacate their temporary Council-owned space at Weaver Square Community Garden across the street, to make way for desperately-needed new housing, demand for which is putting severe pressure on the burgeoning allotment culture in the City.

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The community garden movement is a relatively recent phenomenon, though it has roots in DIY, build-your-own, and garden city traditions stretching back many decades. Over the last few years, clusters of residents across Dublin – as across many other cities globally – have come together to lay claim to derelict patches of land in their neighbourhoods. Not far from Weaver Park, another derelict space has been reclaimed as a community garden, with allotments, a programme of communal workshops, activities like craft fairs and Christmas markets, sharing a large, long-deserted site, railed off, with buddleia – a familiar sight from derelict spaces across Dublin – sprouting around the edges.

These kinds of ground-up occupations of urban waste-grounds, led by local campaigners and activists, are acknowledgements of the ecological value of the kinds of biodiversity that such derelict urban sites represent, as well as the ways in which access to nature contributes to the health and wellbeing of a city's residents. It is not simply the fact of green space; it is also the empowerment of a shared utility, something in which people are able to take collective ownership. At their most radical, these projects verge (whether knowingly or not) on anarchist philosophy, enacting the anarchist imperative to devolve decision-making from state bodies to small, citizen-led collectives, enabling direct localised action in relation to city planning, housing, health, urban design, and so on.

MacLeman's work explores connection between these two histories, between industrial heritage and ecological experimentation. She is particularly interested in how industries decline – and the ways in which they are commemorated, or celebrated, or mourned, or forgotten.

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For the set of works on paper in the upstairs gallery (a series collectively titled *First Cut*), MacLeman has used paper-making techniques to create sheets of sifted grass. The grass, washed through silk and

dried like paper, has in fact been taken from the first cut of the small lawn of Weaver Park. The results are like stencils, geometric cut-outs – in greens and golds – couched onto cotton linters, intercut with gold leaf shapes, to form a single sheet. MacLeman is drawn to the use of natural materials in her work, enjoying their instability. She likes the process of forcing them into decorative arrangements, fighting with them, working against their grain.

These grass and gold-leaf works suggest a number of different visual references. The sloping vertical lines and rounded shapes of *First Cut: Weaver Park I* and *First Cut: Weaver Park II*, for instance, outlined starkly against the white, look like Constructivist arrangements; they are in fact intended (as the titles suggest) to echo the grid-like effect of the new gates at Weaver Park, themselves designed to reflect the weft and warp of traditional weaving patterns. Upon closer inspection, what appear to be clear-cut machine forms are in fact marked by unevenness, inconsistency, traces of the innate recalcitrance of the materials involved. The visual codes – there are suggestions of Constructivism, Bauhaus, Art Deco, the stream-lined precision of the international style – are undermined. Such contradictions, between the natural and the artificial, the hand and the machine, carry through the whole exhibition.

MacLeman's father worked in the woollen and weaving industry, she tells me. She talks about a woollen and worsted book of his, full of patterns. One of the works on paper in the upstairs gallery, *First Cut: Jacques' Plan*, features shapes taken from that book which could also be the plan of a Renaissance garden; the title, as it transpires, refers to Jacques Boyceau, a seventeenth-century designer of French formal gardens (and superintendent of royal gardens under Louis XIII) known particularly for his parterre designs.

Accompanying these wall works are two free-standing brass units, in which some of the grass and gold-leaf geometric shapes have been repeated. One of these units has a flat glass surface inserted on top, suggestive of a department store or museum display case, with objects on top that resemble but aren't quite luxury items or historical artefacts.

Echoing this museum-like display, one of the works on paper, *Saloman's Joke*, makes much more extensive use of gold leaf, spread across the paper, with ink lines and slight delicate incisions resembling the decorative embossed handwork of certain gold artefacts, like one of the Celtic torcs or collars in the National Museum.

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For at least six centuries, maybe more, 'Riding the Franchises' was a Dublin tradition. Originating in a twelfth-century decree, the tradition involved the Lord Mayor routinely 'perambulating' the jurisdictional boundary lines of the city, reiterating the manorial divisions – the 'Franchises' – of the still largely medieval city, in particular the 'Liberties'. By the seventeenth century this formalised procession had a set timetable, taking place in September every three years. It had also been opened up to the various craft guilds, who joined the mayor in a peaceful procession that doubled as a display of their work.

Each of the guilds marched behind a splendid horse-drawn float, on which craftsmen sat working at their trades. The weavers wore colourful woollen wigs, dispensing ribbons and scraps of cloth, throwing them to the crowds; they were joined by characters dressed for the parade, in allegorical costumes, representing characters like, on one occasion at least, Jason and the Golden Fleece.

These processions are referenced in the banners exhibited in the main gallery of the LAB, black industrial netting stretched on hanging frames and free-standing structures, calling to mind not only the traditional guild procession but also the workers' protest, with its own developing set of contemporary craft connotations – think of the woollen pussy hats of the anti-Trump women's marches in the US.

This craft vernacular has come to be a recognisable part of contemporary protest. It makes protest more appealing, presentable, collectible, consumable. In the recent campaign to Repeal the Eighth, the curator at the National Museum, in process known as rapid response collecting, immediately sought donations of banners and other protest ephemera. Even before the referendum, they were being sought for display as a backdrop for an Abbey Theatre production. They were being viewed as commemorative memorabilia long before their use-value had been exhausted.

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In a book published in 1996, Colin Ward argued that there is no such thing as an anarchist aesthetic.* An anarchist aesthetic is, he claims, an oxymoron. He does not deny that aesthetic pleasure *exists* – only noting that it is not uniform, and arguing that if citizens are to be positively empowered, taking ownership over the design of the world in which they live, then ‘aesthetics’ of any singular monolithic kind must be resisted.

Ward, known as the ‘gentle anarchist’, developed over the course of his lifetime a careful, considered, though nonetheless radical anarchism, arguing that bureaucratic framework of urban planning should be dismantled to allow for the wholesale repurposing of the city. His ideas are so closely in line with current thinking about community gardens that it comes as a surprise how long ago they were articulated. His philosophy (of design, education, and ecological urbanism) was based upon the fundamental anarchist principle of decentralisation, devolving authority for people’s environments wherever possible into localised decision-making. The community garden movement has its roots in the same anti-statist tradition. As Ward himself noted, the great heroes of devolved and eco-friendly town planning, Ebenezer Howard and Patrick Geddes, would ‘not be absent’ from an account of ‘the scientific origins of the international anarchist movement’.**

He notes too the significance of a craft-inflected version of radical socialism. ‘As the decades roll by’, he wrote in 1995, after more than four decades of thinking and writing about politics and the urban environment, ‘it becomes more and more evident that the truly creative socialist thinker of the nineteenth century was not Karl Marx but William Morris’***

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Morris’s enterprise foundered for reasons that have become all too familiar: the tendency for craft to become a bourgeois commodity. Economically unviable, Morris’s factories wound up relying on the tasteful patronage of the middle classes. The Arts and Crafts movement was, as a socialist experiment, a contradiction. But the principles at its root – the value of autonomy in labour, the enrichment of life through a common culture, the need of ‘dignified, creative human occupation’ – have not diminished in relevance or urgency. They survive in the writing of anarchist thinkers like Ward; they survive in the ethos of the community garden movement; they survive in the work of artists such as MacLeman.

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The silk industry underwent catastrophic decline in the early nineteenth century, following the Act of Union, and the weavers’ livelihoods were so affected that ‘it was said the Earl of Meath would get greater return on his Dublin Liberties’ land if he ignored rent and turned to “growing grass”****

In the cube space, as you enter the LAB, a set of framed posters are hung with a single command repeated across them, a slogan which takes and subverts this reference, a triumphal encapsulation of the ideas of anarchy, resistance, craft, and cottage industry that pervade MacLeman’s exhibition:

‘TURN YOUR RENTS TO GRASS’.

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In the main gallery sits a floor work incorporating a stepped wooden structure and a 127 x 190 cm rug, *Armand’s Carpet*. The artist talks me through the making of the rug, a complicated process that reveals certain things about the woollen industry in Ireland. The lack of a scouring facility in Ireland means that most wool is exported in its raw state and, as most Irish wool is not considered valuable enough for the internal market, large quantities are exported to China for making carpet. MacLeman took it upon herself to acquire the wool herself, from a variety of sources: a Suffolk Texel Cross, from a person who stockpiles the stuff; a Galway Fleece; and another, from a merchant, variety unknown.

She sent the wool to a spinner in Carlow, who spun, scoured and dyed about a third of it with a synthetic pink dye, according to the artist’s specifications. (The scouring has to happen in Ireland or

it risks admixture with other stock and can no longer be described as Irish wool.) The spinner also mordanted about a third of the wool, to give it what's called bite, and to allow for more intense colours.

The wool was then returned to the artist in Galway. The natural dyes were added at this point; these the artist prepared by harvesting bags of late-season buddleia, sourced from a number of sites (including the community garden on Bridgefoot Street), and using pods, leaves, and flowers to get the range of hues – the golds, browns, greens – that dominate the rest of the arrangement. Finally the wool was wound onto cones at Cushendale Mills in Graigenemanagh, before being sent to a rugmaker in Barrystown (Ceadogán Rugs), who tufted the rug itself.

The whole thing took eight months, all told: a long, involved process dictated by the economics vagaries of the woollen industry. There are, she tells me, craftspeople who could source and scour and dye and tuft a handmade rug alone, using traditional craft techniques. But that wasn't what she wanted. She was interested in the complications inherent in the industry, the practical results of the gradual accretion of trade legislation and cost mechanisms: the obstacles in the system. The tracing of these conditions is as much a part of the work as the finished product.

'I don't even see that rug anymore,' she says. 'I just see all these stages of composition: the residue of its assembly.'

NOTES

* Colin Ward, 'The Anarchist House', *Autonomy, Solidarity, Possibility: The Colin Ward Reader*, ed. Damien F. White and Chris Wilbert (London: AK Press, 2011), 175.

** Colin Ward, 'The Do-It-Yourself New Town', *Ibid.*, 73–4.

*** Colin Ward, 'The Factory We Never Had'. *Ibid.*, 185.

**** Mairead Dunlevy, *Pomp and Poverty: A History of Silk in Ireland* (New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 2011), 119.