

Isabel Nolan

Isabel Nolan: *Unmade*
The Return, Goethe-Institut, Dublin
16 November – 21 December

For *Unmade* Isabel Nolan wrapped 144 steel pipes of different lengths in fabric of various colours (cool greys, black, lemon-yellow) and patterns (meandering flowers, ticking). This is shown as a floor piece entitled *Festina Lente Rug* (all works 2012), but it allows for other configurations, too, some of them shown in seven black-and-white photographs along one wall. The elements of *Festina Lente Rug* are laid out in a way that is too purposeful to be scattered, but not purposeful enough for the whole to be patterned itself. This diligent casualness is quite an achievement, even suggesting an ethics (the old saying *festina lente*, or ‘hasten slowly’, appears inscribed on a Georgian panel above the cornice of the gallery). In the small gallery space, one therefore picks one’s way across the floor pursued by the suspicion that the work has halted only momentarily.

Each configuration of these elements is a carpet of sorts, yet uncoupled from the form’s typical materials. A cautious analogy: each configuration has the density of a proposal or wish. A final element is a shin-high, black, roughly spherical polystyrene and plaster ball, *Thoughtless*, which sits in the corner of the gallery like a quiet but potentially clumsy guest. *Thoughtless* attests to Nolan’s interest in the nocturnal life of objects and reminds one here that a sense of order comes more from groping than grasping.

It is this groping towards order that drew Nolan to the nocturnally fashioned ‘rugs’ of Marie Lieb, a patient admitted to Heidelberg psychiatric hospital in 1894 with ‘periodic mania’. Two photographs on the far wall (originally published in German psychiatrist Wilhelm Weygandt’s 1902 textbook *Atlas und Grundriss der Psychiatrie* and now in Heidelberg’s Prinzhorn Collection of art by psychiatric patients) show the floor of Lieb’s room on different occasions after she had torn strips of fabric and arranged them into a carpetlike pattern of stars, flowers, crosses, triangles, oblique borders and what might be letters. Nolan writes that each gives ‘only the bones of a carpet’. Whether Lieb’s motivation was territorial claim or somnolent doodle, what one feels most vividly is that these skeletal carpets are incomplete and the result of a slow and deliberate process, and so connect to *Festina Lente Rug*.

Treated as the expression of a psychiatric disorder, Lieb’s ‘rugs’ relate to outsider art and art brut. Nolan gives them a different context, as seen in the seven photographs: as an archive of motifs titled *Spare Rug for Marie Lieb* and as a homage to philosophical thought in *Travel Rug for Philosopher and Theologian Giordano Bruno (b.1548–d.1600) Who Hypothesised That the Universe Is Infinite*. A third example, *Rug for Not Right Now*, exemplifies the loose matching of pattern with purpose seen in all the other arrangements: an enquiry into an elusive sense of order. Ernst Gombrich wrote in his essay ‘Raphael’s Madonna della Sedia’ (1956): ‘I feel that we ought to know more about the way complex orders are created.’ With these latter configurations, in particular, Nolan responds to this request.

TIM STOTT

Olinka

Olinka, or Where Movement Is Created
Museo Tamayo, Mexico City
11 December – 15 April

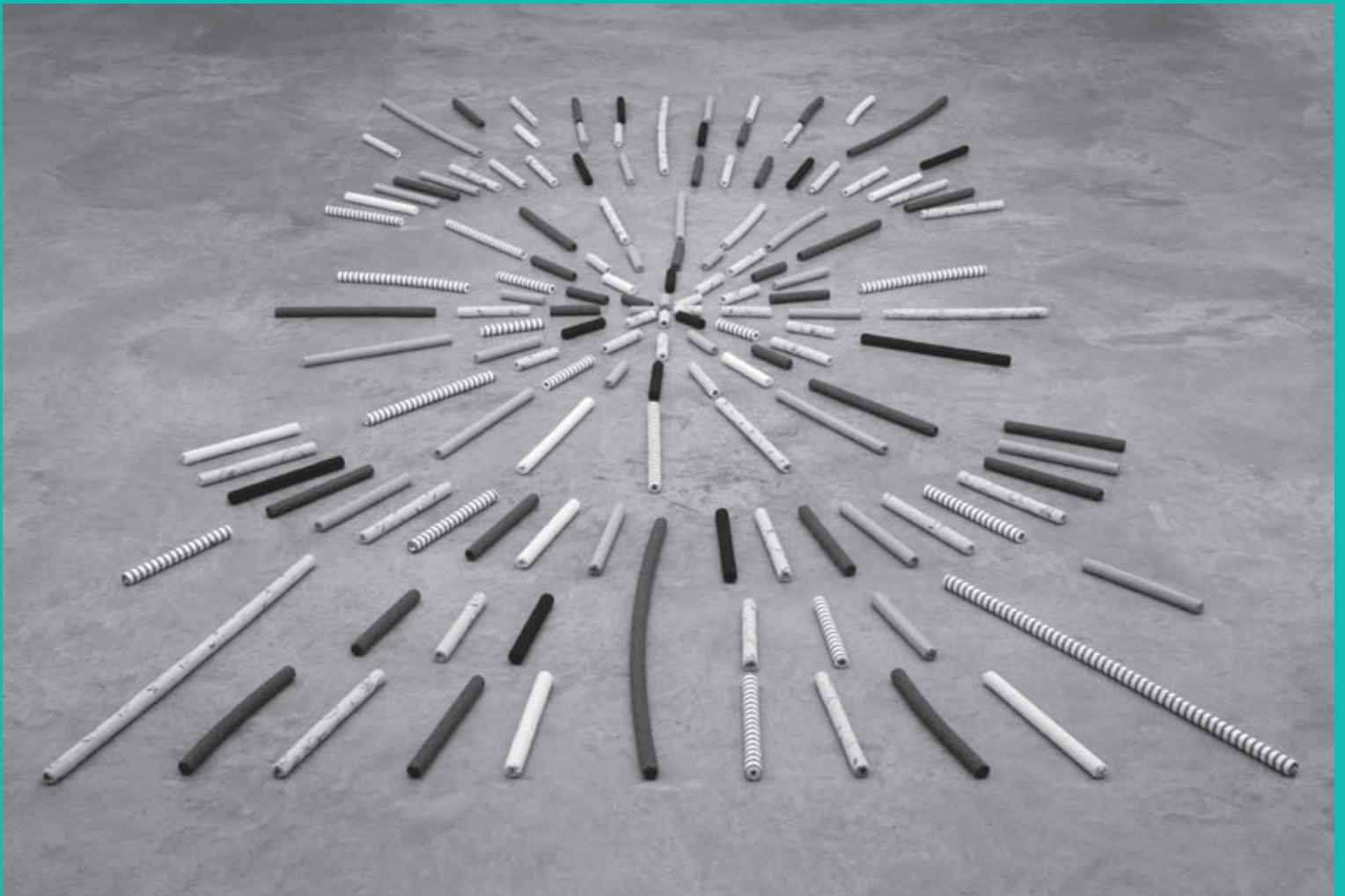
Suffice it (barely) to say that this show, curated by Adam Szymczyk, functions simultaneously as a Benjaminian thesis on history, a solid but debatable treatise on curating and a historical drama, this last replete with a breathtakingly beautiful heroine, so rich and compelling that one leaves eagerly awaiting the Hollywood biopic. Who is this magnificent creature? A certain Nahui Ollin (Carmen Mondragón) – a muselike provocateur of legendary beauty who, during the 1920s and 30s, was a poet and a painter of the Mexico City art scene. She was also – briefly – the mistress of Dr Atl, renowned Mexican painter of volcanoes, who gave her the tumultuous Aztec sobriquet Nahui Ollin (meaning ‘four movements’ and symbolising earthquakes). And despite its title – *Olinka* (also ‘movement’, ‘earthquake’ in Aztec), which was Dr Atl’s name for an imagined utopian city of culture – this exhibition’s muse is clearly Nahui Ollin, on both intellectual and symbolic levels. And that’s because she, something of a *force majeure*, could be said to embody the notion of history as a nonlinear phenomenon generatively formed by volcanic events, which disrupt and reconfigure the past, thus gesturing to its fundamental instability.

This inspired reading of history features a heterogeneous selection of works by a handful of Szymczyk staples – among them Paulina Ołowska, Thea Djordjadze and Danh Vo – who have all produced works specially for the show; by several Mexican artists, such as Mariana Castillo Deball and Tercerquinto; and by European artists based in Latin America; as well as historical paintings and ephemera by Dr Atl and Nahui Ollin herself (in the form of paintings, watercolours and books of poems – not to mention photographs of the woman). Discreetly interspersed among the works are A4-size wall quotations culled from philosophy, poetry and literature (sampling the likes of Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Bolaño and Emily Dickinson), which contextualise as much as they distract from the viewing experience. A series of original typewritten pages, in which Dr Atl describes his utopian vision of Olinka, can also be read on the wall.

I have mixed feelings about this exhibition. That it took me basically half my word count to get through its imperfectly told premise is distinctly symptomatic of the extent to which the curating dramatically overshadows its contents. The conflation of research and art is equally disconcerting, for the simple reason that aestheticisation of the former does little but exalt the author of the exhibition.

Now, to contradict myself, I like this show for the same exact reason that I find it problematic: rarely has curating felt as thoughtful, personal, totalising and – I dare say – like a work of art. This is by no means to imply that Szymczyk does not seem to love the art on display here, but that it is anything but in the service of his curatorial vision cannot be doubted for an instant. If the last Documenta marked the absolute apotheosis of the curator, then this exhibition could be said to function as an epilogue, potentially ushering in an age of curatorial decadence.

CHRIS SHARP



Isabel Nolan
*Travel Rug for Philosopher
 and Theologian Giordano
 Bruno (b.1548 - d.1600) Who
 Hypothesized That the
 Universe Is Infinite*, 2012,
 black-and-white photograph,
 42 x 30 cm (paper), 18 x 27 cm
 (image). Courtesy Gracelands,
 Limerick City, and Kerlin
 Gallery, Dublin

Mariana Castillo Deball
 (see *Olinka*)
Ligero, Invisible, Mudo,
 2011, India ink on cotton paper,
 35 x 70 cm. Courtesy the artist

