

Gallery

AILBHE NÍ BHRIAIN

by JOSH LUSTIG

Published towards the end of the 11th century, *The Dream Pool Essays*, by the Chinese statesman and polymath Shen Kuo, touched on an encyclopedic range of subjects from mathematics to medicine, architecture to technology. Contained within the book are some of the earliest recorded observations of climate change, and it was these that initially hooked the Irish artist Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, whose work spans filmmaking, photography, sculpture, painting and weaving. “What I like,” Ní Bhriain tells me, “is just taking this nugget from the ancient past and letting it resonate with the present moment.”

Her series *The Dream Pool Intervals*, which is centred around five large-scale jacquard tapestries, is an unsettling reflection of our current moment. One that is becoming increasingly engulfed by anxieties around rising inequality and environmental breakdown.

At the centre of these artworks are staged Victorian portraits, found archival images that Ní Bhriain worked on and manipulated, transfiguring the individuals into spectres. They appear as individuals shorn of their individuality and therefore any remnant of their personal histories. Instead they become emblems of a past whose crimes, and achievements, still resonate with us today. “You see how they’re encoded with the ideologies of that time,” Ní Bhriain says of the portraits she uses. “With people positioned like assertions of superiority and frequently featuring props and backdrops that reference empire.” These found portraits are combined with imagery of the natural world, animals and caves, as well as images of buildings destroyed by war and natural disasters.

The results are haunting. Tapestry is one of our oldest storytelling devices, and these nightmarish tableaux feel at once ancient and modern, much like the jacquard weaving technique that was used to create them. The jacquard technique was also one of the first applications of binary code, essentially functioning as an early computer. “It signalled the beginning of industrialised weaving – a point of real technological progress and real social upheaval,” Ní Bhriain says. “So while weaving on one level seems like this very ancient form of storytelling, there’s also a huge amount connecting it to both the subject matter and the digital mediums I was already exploring.” **FT**

“Ailbhe Ní Bhriain: *The Dream Pool Intervals*” is at Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin, until September 28, hughlane.ie



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IMAGE COURTESY THE ARTIST, DOMOBAAL & KERLIN GALLERY, DUBLIN. PHOTO: LEE WELCH