

INSTITUTION Naughton Gallery at Queen's University Belfast

LOCATION Belfast, Northern Ireland

Depictions of Feminine Resilience in the Face of Abortion Stigma

PHOTOS BY MARGARET MIDDLETON



Fig. 1. A worn armchair greets visitors.

One of Many is a quietly powerful installation by Belfast-based artist Jennifer Trouton. This collection of exquisite paintings, embroidery, and found objects uses familiar feminine imagery to represent women's experiences with abortion in Northern Ireland.

Upon entering, visitors see a dowdy Parker Knoll armchair (fig 1). Draped across its back is a linen antimacassar embroidered with "*Mater Hibernia*" (Mother Ireland). Around the words, the shape of Ireland is formed by handstitched herbs traditionally taken to induce miscarriage. A vintage suitcase sits at the foot of the chair. The densely packed symbolism continues throughout the exhibition.

The domestic mundanity of the paintings belies the desperation of the stories behind them: dainty china cups of mugwort tea, Lifebuoy soap, and bloody knitting needles (fig. 2).

As curator Ben Crothers explains, "through the lens of Ireland's history of abortion legislation these objects take on a chilling significance." Abortion was only just legalized in Northern Ireland in 2020, and it remains largely inaccessible. Themes of travel emerge through recurring motifs of maps, suitcases, and toy planes and trains, signifying the journeys of those forced to seek abortions elsewhere.

The design of the exhibition was a collaboration between artist and curator. A network of lines painted on the walls connect the pieces, leaving empty squares suggesting placeholders for untold stories (fig. 3). Taking a cue from Trouton's gentle approach, Crothers placed the exhibition text at the far end of the gallery, letting visitors piece together embedded clues before discovering the exhibition's theme.

Fig. 2. Everyday objects steeped in symbolism.

My 2021 visit to this exhibition coincided with the Texas hearings challenging *Roe v. Wade*. An American living in Belfast, I was unsettled to see an installation meant to remind viewers of an Irish grandmother's sitting room and feel as though I was getting a glimpse of a possible future of the United States. Now that the Supreme Court has ruled that abortion care is no longer a constitutional right, I wonder if we will see a proliferation of exhibitions like *One of Many* in my home country.

Margaret Middleton, independent exhibit designer and museum consultant



Fig. 3. Painted lines connect artworks and hold space for untold stories.

