CRISTÍN LEACH

Foreword

Persistent Presence As (a Form Of) Protest

Lost words, lost recipes, lost women, lost lives, lost stories, lost records, lost names. Jennifer Trouton's *One of Many* is not just a major body of work, it is a world she has conjured and made from a series of interconnected histories. It is a reclaiming of history, an ambitious re-examining and re-presenting of generations of Irish women's experiences and judiciously shared knowledge about bodily autonomy, mostly lost to pub- lic shame. It is a still-expanding show made from hundreds of elements: painted, found, re-purposed, embroidered, rearranged; all pointing to the ways in which abortion procurement has long been a site of precarious negotiation for women on the island of Ireland. It is difficult art to write about because it pushes language away with its near overwhelming, de- tailed, visual punch, all the while inviting you to start a new conversation.

This is a body of work about silence, which understands the need to be quiet when risks and consequences are big. It is a body of work about fear, stigma and shame, and yet finding a way to still own, reveal, and tell crucial stories. The world of *One of Many* is a world of secrets and implications hidden in the wallpaper, hidden on the shelves, hidden in the paint, hidden in the kitchen, hidden in the documented lives of saints. It is a world of complications and communications carried in teacups, a world in which children's wooden toys go hand-in-hand with vintage medical de- vices, bowls of boiled water, clean linen, and disinfectant soap. It's a world of good room chairs and waiting room chairs, of small, packed overnight cases which look like holiday prep. It is a world of Virgin Marys and Bridget's Crosses lurking in the domestic décor. It is a world of hand-embroidered cushions and antimacassars with floral motifs that look only pretty until you step a little closer.

Seven years ago, at the RHA Annual Exhibition, Trouton's painting *I told my mum I was going on a school trip*, hung, inobtrusive, under the stairs in the main lobby of the gallery leading to the second floor. Pulsing with subtle symbolism it waited, daring you to notice it. *I told my mum I was going on a school trip* is a photorealist depiction in oil on wallpaper of a wooden toy airplane and an inverted, mirrored map of the island of Ireland in which each of the thirty-two counties wears a different shade of nostalgia-laden green. Back to back, Trouton's two Irelands take the form of a pelvis, a butterfly, a Rorschach test – that suggestive, psychological projection tool first introduced in 1921, the same year Ireland was partitioned, ultimately into Northern and Republic of.

The 2017 painting sold, but seven years later, the image was back in a new iteration at the 2024 annual show, hanging in the exact same place. Repainted in oil on board as one element of a five-part wall installation called *Mater Hibernia*, the plane, the inverted twin islands and the pelvis shape were now centred in a cruciform, along with three artist-embroidered works and one of her painted wallpaper compositions. That inverted, mirrored island map shape repeats throughout *One of Many*, sometimes painted in muted shades of red, sometimes lurking in the background as an outline, along with other outlined forms: fallopian tubes, pelvic bones, the Pietà.

Trouton began this project in 2015, the year after she gave birth to her son in her forties, sparked initially by her own response to her husband's academic research. His PhD examined records documenting the provision of legal and illegal abortion in Northern Ireland from 1900 to 1968, including closed records held in medical, court, and social history archives. When the UK's 1967

Abortion Act was implemented in England, Scot- land and Wales, the six UK counties on the island of Ireland were left out. In the Republic, abortion is currently permitted under the circumstances described in the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018. In Northern Ireland, the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, which criminalised abortion, remained in place until October 2019. Abortion in Northern Ireland is currently permitted under the circumstances described in The Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2022. Laws change, but the need to navigate this territory for women, and for society, never goes away. Bodily autonomy in pregnancy, on the island of Ireland, is not and never has been an irrevocable right.

Trouton's work is informed by her own experience. She describes herself as one of many who have felt silenced by stigma surrounding the subject of abortion. That's significant, but it is also not the main point of this work. *One of Many* brings together decades of iterative practice by an artist who has always found her sources in archives both public and personal. Trouton recognises the ways in which the story of abortion access is an all-island tale. She uses the Latin name for the whole island, Hibernia. The *I in I told my mum I was going on a school trip* is you, me, her, all of us, if we are all living on the same sea-bordered rock. The island of Hibernia looks like one thing but is another. It is an island of obedient Christians, and of babies, abortions and sex. It is an island of 'don't talk' but 'how to', an island of an Irish solution to an Irish problem, which is no solution at all.

The Northern Ireland archives revealed networks of oral information passed across generations and social groups in every county up to 1968. Publicly recorded debate was skewed by silence surrounding this word- of-mouth tradition. Deeply rooted in the material fabric of home, Trouton's work asks what kinds of stories do we keep in the crawl-space under the stairs? What memories are stored among the hot-press linens? What evidence lies in bedside drawers? What information is held and lost in the photographs, kitchen objects, and everyday patterns of home? Trou- ton is an artist who understands huge significance can sit within ordinary symbols and signs, and that precious knowledge can be made visible and kept hidden at once.

History pointed her to a recipe for an abortifacient tea used by the Ital- ian gynaecologist Trota of Salerno and documented in the 12th century Trotula; medieval Europe's most important compendium of information on women's health and medical treatment. Trota, Trotta, or Trocta may have been more than one woman, a blurring of identity that fits with the Irish his- torical records which show a culture of shared, communally-owned female knowledge. The records show too that, in the absence of legally permitted options, the typical experience of abortion begins with attempts to self-in- duce a termination. Here is one of Trota's recipes:

...take some yellow flag, hemlock, castoreum, mugwort, sea wormwood, myrrh, common centaury and sage. Let a powder be made and let her be given to drink one dram of this with water in which savin and myrrh are cooked and let her drink this in the bath.

Yellow flag is yellow iris. Hemlock is a well-known poison. Castoreum comes from the scent glands of a beaver. Savin is extracted from the poisonous leaf-tips of a particular species of juniper. Trouton understood immediately the symbolic power of images that look like pretty flowers but point to a dangerous and valuable history of ancient traditions of birth control. For the William Morris-style wallpaper and fabric that appears throughout this body of work, Trouton redrew the classic design pattern, replacing each element with a reference to an ingredient from Trota's recipe.

In a series of watercolours called *Mater Natura: The Abortionist Garden* (2020–2021) Trouton depicts thirty-two natural abortifacient plants with botanical precision. The ghosts of anatomical and other images float like watermarks behind aloe vera, yarrow, celery, wormwood, marigold. Throughout this show, knowledge is hidden in pattern, information dis- guised as decoration, secret medicine concealed in beautiful images of chamomile, nutmeg, oregano, parsley, poppy, cowslip, primrose, nettle and penny royal.

This is a world we think we know. Here are the wildflowers we used to pick, or avoid, as children. There are the county maps we traced at our primary school desks. Here are the images of saints handed down through religious, history and art books. There are the female reproductive organ diagrams we learnt to label to pass our teenage exams. These elements appear again in *Mater Natura*, *The Abortionist's Garden (Embroideries)* (2020-2021), and elsewhere, everywhere, throughout this body of work.

Trouton has long been a painter of domestic objects and spaces. The tools of a domestic abortionist are the items she can access at home. Home is a nexus of public-private, internal-external power struggles, a site of endless autonomy debates, a place of birth and death. Most of the women who died while procuring abortions in Northern Ireland between 1900 and 1968 were already mothers. Today, more than half of those seeking abortions are already parents. In *One of Many*, vintage children's bedroom style wallpaper patterns peek out from behind real-life objects arranged on shelves.

She began by embedding the female patron saints, of motherhood, child- birth, purity, rape, abortion, divorce, into her wallpaper paintings: 11-year- old Saint Maria Goretti, Saint Helen, Saint Margaret, Saint Monica, Saint Anne. She brought real-life objects into the mix, both painted and presented in installation arrangements: tea towels, aprons, knitting needles, scissors, knives, mirrors, newspapers, teacups, bowls, books, a Higginson Syringe.

Trouton spent three years painting a large diptych. *The Last Supper: Original Sin* (2024) was intended to be a final gesture, but the artist may not be done yet. As a viewer you might never be finished looking at these two gloriously beautiful, remarkable paintings. The eye flicks from yellow irises in a glass bottle to a bowl of crisp green apples so three-dimensionally rendered in paint they appear hyperreal, as though about to jump from the surface of the canvas. One has already exited the bowl, the only shiny red apple has fallen like a transgressive woman, fallen like 'man', by which we once all meant the whole of humanity. Split perfectly in half, its core reveals a vulval slit, a sideways eye, a heart. In the context of all this symbolism, it's not too much to imply that its curves to apple stem and tail could be said to echo the shape of breasts, buttocks. It sits, silently, accusing, perfectly perched among the fabric folds that trail from the ream that is hung from somewhere outside this constructed scene, and trails along the indoor floor.

This pair of paintings contains endless layers of cleverness and significance, a kind of symbol-saturation, and yet they are so clean, so measured, and they flow so elegantly both within themselves and from one to the other. From the upright energy of the green-patterned wallpaper and fabric to the diagonal flow of the yellow, there are no compositional mis- takes here. Every decision is thought-filled and precise. From the choice of each individual still life element (tea towel, medicine bottles, branded soap, bread, the wooden airplane toy), to the way in which the fabric that is pulled across the table covers a clean, white sheet underneath. From the pomegranates and plums with their erotic insides, curves, and splits to the tiny beavers in the

wallpaper and fabric patterns. Still life apples remain unchanged in their symbolism for millennia, the titles speak for themselves. These paintings speak to us and to each other, wordlessly.

Trouton goes big and she goes small. *One of Many* is home to large com- positions, and handbag-sized works. The installations are detailed, gentle, genteel even, and big, impressive, imposing, at once. *One of Many* is about not brushing the lessons of history back under the carpet. Her colour palette leverages a sense of nostalgia to draw her viewers in before asking them to also consider the uncomfortable realities of the past. She understands the power of subversive symbolism, the pretty containing the hit. She plays with the idea of a stage or set as it has long worked in the tradition of classical still life painting and she is pointing to all the ways in which objects and symbols tell stories without saying anything explicit, or out loud, themselves. She also knows you can read every story in more ways than one. Many herbal abortifacients are also traditional or ancient fertility remedies.

The wallpaper in the paintings is flat, still, fixed; the fabric is falling and pulled, draped and dragged. In *The Last Supper*, ruched and crumpled along the table's edge it speaks of a hand and a body just left. There are no actual women depicted in any of these artworks, instead the material presence of objects, the action of deliberate arrangement, the intent be- hind meaningful pattern speaks for them. Trouton is a masterful painter and not only a painter. As an artist, she is deeply immersed in the cultural, personal, political legacies of these patterns of arrangement and objects, procured and found.

As a realist, still life painter, Trouton has always played with depictions of reality, perceptions of what is true or not, and with the co-existence of both. Paired symbolic fabric and wallpaper paintings are a significant trope within her practice. And she is such a good painter, she can play tricks with your eyes. Shadows which look photographically precise from afar blur back into pigment up close. Stepping in, the play of light on fabric and surface reveals itself as a construct; stepping back, objects rendered in paint appear real. *In Plain Sight* and *One of Many* are titles she has given to mixed media assemblages which have taken different forms, expanded and contracted over the years. She arranges and rearranges elements in the manner of a domestic interior decoration task, in a gallery setting. Here is the wooden plane that appears in the paintings, here are the teacups. Here they are on shelves against wallpapers which are painted. Here is a painting upon wallpaper which is not. As if to contain the sprawling interrelatedness of it all, she arranges the works with a grid of connecting wall-painted lines, pointing once more to the interweaving of the stories, to the shared nature of the experiences referenced and contained in the work.

Here is art that pulls hidden knowledge back out of the archives. Here is apparently quaint, subversively dark, carefully considered work about internal pain and external judgement, about private and public trauma, legacy, nostalgia, love, and law. There is a sense always that Trouton's art resists over-explanation and dissection, the very analysis that its symbolism also demands of her viewers. Her research is rigorous, her practice detailed, her subtexts many, and the presence of her work persistent. None of it is ever just about what you see on the surface. It is not only aesthetically compelling, and beautiful, it is also a pointer to a set of clues. Trouton's art asks for your attention and cooperation in interpreting its multitudinous parts. *One of Many* is a collection of work about true experience, real stories, and facts. It is a delicate arrangement of visual, historical, social, communal and personal references. And it is also a carefully constructed container for the tales that remain hidden, held, private and unsaid. Trouton delves deep when she delves. There is powerful knowledge in the still, stunned silence this work engenders, and there are stories still to be told.