



Niamh O'Malley  
The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin  
Rory Prout

There is a blind spot on the surface of the retina, a small area lacking photoreceptive cells where the optic nerve passes through the optic disc and delivers its bundled mass of nerve fibres. Located towards the nose, this blind spot in our peripheral vision is something of which we are nevertheless unaware, thanks to one of evolution's innumerable marvels: we have developed a means to visually fill in this area with local colour and texture. Without this mechanism our view of the world would likely contain a fixed pair of dark smudges, much like those which have appeared in several artworks by Niamh O'Malley throughout her career. O'Malley's 2008 work *Scotoma*, whose title is another term for this kind of blind spot, featured a

video projection in which the entire central section was occluded by a dark, blurred shape. The viewer's observation of the video was then limited to the left and right margins of the projection. Variations of this black and blurred element have continued to both frame and conceal features of O'Malley's films: a miniature and much less obtrusive version of this mark has reappeared in the artist's new video work, *Nephin* (2014), which takes a central position in her current solo show at the Douglas Hyde Gallery.

Screened on a freestanding monitor in the centre of the main gallery floor, the footage in *Nephin* is silent and colourless, following the tendency of O'Malley's films in recent years. Watching it, the spectator is presented with a continuous viewpoint from behind the window of a vehicle as it travels along a country road, close to the artist's childhood home. By this route the camera indirectly approaches the eponymous mountain before being led on a partial circumnavigation of it. The mountain controls the camera's attention and, apart from occasions when the proximity of a roadside ditch washes the whole image in rapidly passing greys, *Nephin* dominates the upper half of the screen. Other objects in the landscape slide from right to left in our visual field at speeds determined by their distance from the camera. After the small dark blind spot in the upper right of the screen, O'Malley's mountain is the most stable element in the film. Its gradual rotation is not obvious in short viewing, so awareness of it is contingent upon the temporal as well as spatial composition of the viewer's experience.

Staging the tension between uncertain types of movement and apparent stillness has been a regular device of O'Malley's video works, often functioning to provoke the viewer's awareness of a specific perceptual mechanism. Another strategy regularly deployed to this end is the use of various glass screens, panels or fragments, which can play a role in the

production of the artist's films or be recruited as materials in various installations in the gallery itself. Again these reflective, transparent, or opaque facets often function to hold up some detail of the viewer's embodied experience and position it alongside the work's more obvious content or subject, and O'Malley's show in the Douglas Hyde is no exception. Coloured and clear glass appear repeatedly: in a way that only slightly alters its traditional function of framing drawings or prints in works such as *Standing Stone* (2014), in which a drawing is tinted by straw coloured glass, to the camera's panning of the geometry of a neglected greenhouse structure in the show's other video work, *Glasshouse* (2014). In this dual-channel video the side of a glasshouse acts as a filter to the camera, filling the screens and sweeping across them at a steady rate. The pictorial movement, again from right to left, is much more precisely controlled than that in *Nephin*, and occasional vertical sections of the structure's framework scan across the video screen almost mechanically. The glass sections that they support, however, are stained or marked to varying degrees

of opacity. Many are broken or missing completely. The result is a kind of visual conveyor belt that alternatively frames, obscures, darkens, or otherwise alters our view of the densely overgrown plants inside the glasshouse.

Several constructed works in the show further exploit the material and optical qualities of glass. *Stand (Pale Straw)* (2014) and *Stand (Rose)* (2014), consist of a pair of coloured panes that stand vertically on the gallery floor, scaled to the human figure. Though transparent, their respective straw and rose colouring, while obviously mediating a view of the gallery, draws attention to the surface quality of the glass itself; it makes the textures of the large screens much more readily visible. Elsewhere, a sequence of works on paper, all simply labelled *Untitled* (2014), offer textural studies in combinations of pencil, watercolour, and monoprint, which seem to take formal cues from the numerous screens and fragments present in the show. For instance, one small pencil drawing on board evokes the slightly rippled glass surfaces of the *Stand* works.



Niamh O'Malley: *Nephin* (2014). Production still, HD video 16:9, silent. Image courtesy of the artist.

While the black smudge in *Nephin*, and to some degree the passage of darkened structural sections in *Glasshouse*, indicate O'Malley's interest in ideas of the scotoma, the attention to texture and colour, as defined by the material properties of glass, offers a subtle, less immediate counterpoint to the blind spots of the videos. After all, it is by generating a perception of colour and texture, in relation with our environment, that we remain unaware of the minor blind regions of our own vision. This fact serves as a simple analogy for a more complex experiential relationship between body and world that is at the root of O'Malley's work.

Ostensibly, the show's subject matter derives from the rural Irish landscape and from O'Malley's childhood home, evident in the picturing of mountains, standing stones, and earthen hollows, and in the use of terms like 'straw' and 'rose' in naming colours. However, the prevailing concern is the artist's larger, ongoing phenomenological project. Though there is some degree of repetition in O'Malley's methods, they are methods which continue to offer subtle inflections of the viewer's observation of otherwise highly familiar environments.

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