

## From the Inside Out and the Outside In: Mary Sullivan at Uillinn

By Cristín Leach

Upstairs in the gallery at Uillinn, eighty-nine hand-blown glass spheres sit. This is Mary Sullivan's *Glass Houses* installation, and each delicate globe represents a permanently occupied home on Bere Island off the coast of West Cork: a fragile collective, vulnerable to the precarity of their island-bound location, strong in the community of their island-bound connection. The orbs rest in individual indentations cut into a circular pane of glass, which sits on legs as though it were a table-top. These translucent spheres cluster like bubbles or fish eggs, in familiar company and yet entirely unique. The larger represent multi-occupancy residences, and the smaller single-person homes. They range in diameter from eight to ten centimetres, each as insistently buoyant as the single-breath-blown glass fishing floats of the island's past, which are echoed in their form. The sound of an as-yet-unseen video work seeps into the space.

The delicate clarity of the glass spheres has a different emotional and visual heft to the solid weightiness of Sullivan's steel sculpture which dominates the gallery on the ground floor. *From the Outside In I* is monumental. Its surface formed in rust was born of a month left out in the wind and rain on Bere, Sullivan's own island home. Physically arresting and undeniably enticing, this sculpture takes rectangular form with an inner arch that is human-sized, in that it recalls the proportions of a shelter made for a military guard or sentinel to escape the weather, which has in this case weathered the shelter itself. But *From the Outside In I* is also an occluded gateway. Right through its main arch, Sullivan has inserted a slim steel sheet, an upside-down arc that cuts the portal in half, bisecting the shelter space. It's this intervention that makes it impossible to enter or physically pass through: a negation of the structure by an element of the structure itself.

Sullivan is pointing here and elsewhere in this show to the military history of Bere, which reaches back four centuries and includes the compulsory purchase of the eastern end of the island by the British War Department in 1898. It was a move that turned the east islanders into "tenants at will", subject to eviction with 24 hours' notice, and resulted in the construction of gun batteries, a barracks, and more. By the time British troops left in 1938 and Fort Berehaven was handed over to the Irish government, there had been a continual British military presence on Bere Island since 1798.

Questions of autonomy and freedom abound in Sullivan's work. In 2018, she won the prestigious RDS Taylor Art Prize for her Sherkin Island TU Dublin BA graduate art show, 'At Home, At

War'. That exhibition included filmed performances that edged into the gaps between domestic occupations and Bere Island's occupied past: washing dishes in an abandoned military structure before methodically dropping each one on the floor.

This show dances with the knowledge that border structures can cause us to stay away or to approach, that human-made land interventions can make visible and obscure, that lines made on a map can determine access and keep people out. The military area on Bere was indicated by a red line on official maps, and on the island by limestone pillars; a sudden, new boundary mark on a populated island less than twenty kilometres square. Wall-mounted at Uillinn, *The Red Line I* is a horizontal sculpture of glass and stainless steel that speaks of separation and bonding, and of borders and shorelines too. A line of red silicone runs along the edge where the square tubes of steel and glass meet. The material functions as a kind of visual waterline, keeping them alongside each other, apart. Nearby, *The Red Line II* consists of five pale grey, oblong forms set upright like low, empty plinths, a reminder of the remnants of a territory line the islanders once taught their children to treat as an international border. This is a subtle threshold you must cross to enter the show. It struts across the gallery, arbitrary and deliberate, like any human-made line drawn through space.

'From the Inside Out and the Outside In' is an exhibition about fragility and strength, the borders we abide by and the lines we cross daily, and it is about the everyday job of navigating the ways in which human-made and geographical structures can isolate and connect. Upstairs, her installation *From the Outside In II*, with its slowly opening and closing aluminium blinds, obscures, and reveals an empty cube-like room within. Downstairs, as you walk around *From the Outside In I* it appears to open and close on itself. An apparently solid façade reveals a slit that shuts with circumnavigation. The archway appears, then straight lines align, and rusted edges sync up. It is not an arc de triomphe, not a passageway, not a gate. But it is a hint at the idea and purpose of all of those things. Sullivan's portal speaks to the gradual obsolescence of human structures once erected with clear purpose, now abandoned by human hands. It stands solid and rusting at once, an opening and a non-opening, an invitation to enter and a rejection of any possibility to pass through. It is soft curve and solid line, a reminder of the inherent violence of barriers, and the still possible permeability and impermanence of them.

Upstairs, the video work *Routes/Roots I* and the associated wall-hung wood and metal piece *Routes/Roots II* record Sullivan's necessary journeys to and from Bere over the course of a year, from early January to New Year's Eve, from island to mainland and back. There are three hundred and two trips in thirteen different boats, sometimes six a day. The sea and the sky change daily but the point of

the sped-up timelapse footage is also the repetition, the multiplicity of the journeys with their inevitable start and finish, and the ordinary human labour of it.

In her performance film *The Fine Line*, which gives the show its subtle audio soundtrack, Sullivan fishes from the side of a boat by hand with a single weighted fishing-line. The work consists of a series of gestures that track the repeat actions involved in this intimate act of communal, and self, sustenance: letting the line in and out, unmooring and mooring the boat, leaving the house by foot, and returning. There is a mesmerising cadence to this work, which lingers long after leaving this carefully considered show. Sullivan makes art that is gentle and strong, thoughtful, and determined, about the relationships between landscape, place, and person. She points to journeys and occupations, and amplifies and reveals evidence of both, deftly moving our attention from the past to the present and back again, and from the inside out to the outside in.