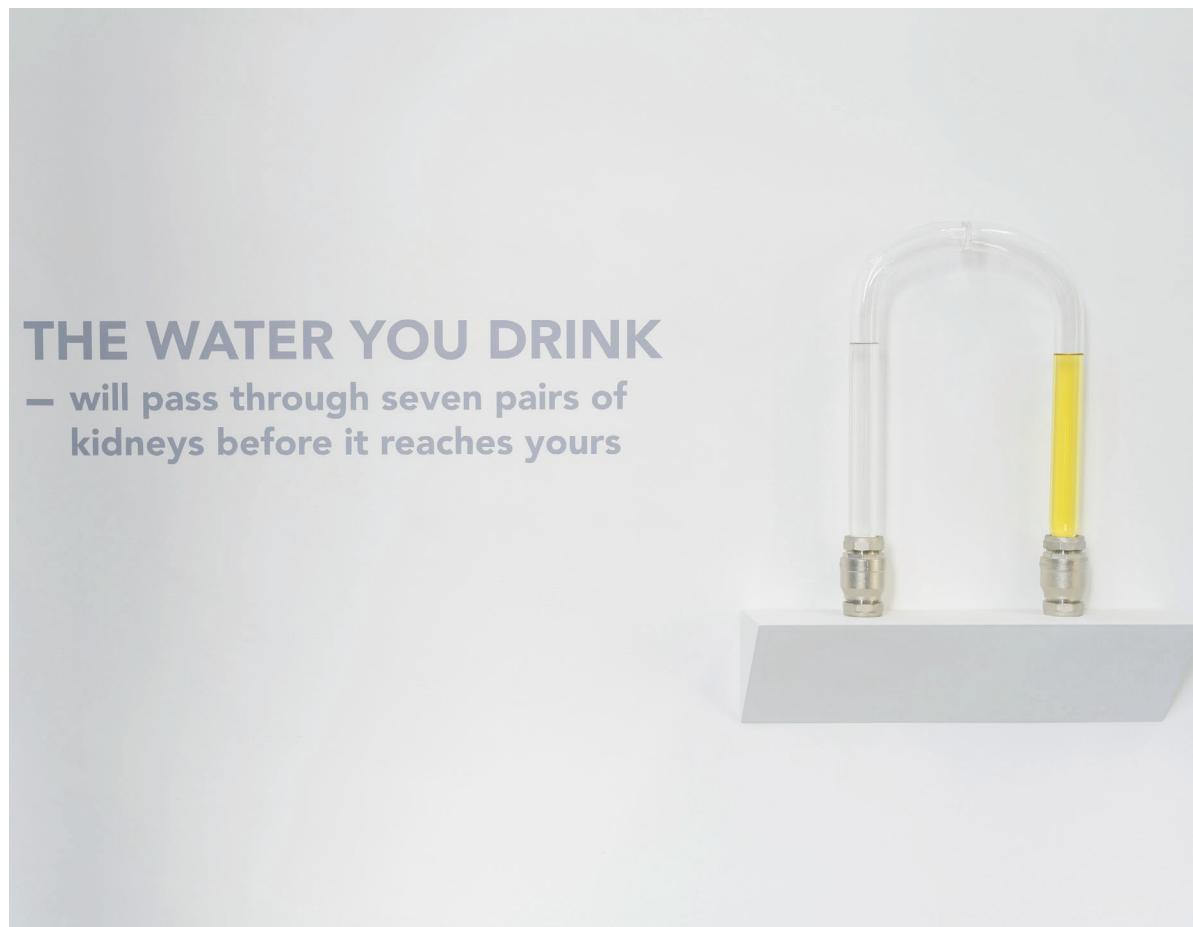


Water – More or Less

SUSAN CAMPBELL REVIEWS MARIE HANLON'S RECENT SOLO SHOW AT THE LAB GALLERY.



Marie Hanlon, *The Water You Drink*, installation view, The LAB Gallery, 2021; image courtesy the artist and The LAB Gallery.

THE TITLE OF Marie Hanlon's recent exhibition at The LAB, 'Water – More or Less' (18 October – 21 December), acquired unexpected resonance with a social-media announcement that the opening reception was postponed due to flooding. Although a short-lived intervention, it underscored the capacity of a fundamental, life-giving substance to be inconvenient and, potentially, destructive.

The subject of the work on show is, unequivocally, the problem of water. Curated by Sheena Barrett, the exhibition takes the form of several installations, each focused on an instance of water stress – an often overlooked, yet precarious aspect of the global climate crisis. Hanlon's interest in "perception in relation to the familiar" informs her handling of this known substance, presented in a range of troubling guises¹. Some, such as flooding, drought and seasonal shortages, already provoke concern, but there are others that many of us tend, or prefer, not to think about.

Encountered in the gallery's double-height foyer, *The Water You Drink* (*will pass through seven pairs of kidneys before it reaches yours*) is well-placed to nudge a visitor out of their comfort zone. Assimilating these words, printed large beside a wall-mounted assemblage, triggers evaluation of the liquids the latter contains: clean and clear on one side of a U-shaped glass unit, and urine-coloured on the other. A jug and glasses on a nearby table are supporting characters to this central action, which references the recycling of wastewater into potable supplies.

Although reused effluent is not an instantly palatable prospect, it reflects the realities of a planet with finite water and a growing human population. This message is reinforced by *Cut-off*, which lines a wall in the principal gallery with domestic taps, each featuring a plexiglass 'flow', complete with naturalistic bubbles. These are knotted and truncated as a likely visual allusion to the challenges and complexities involved in providing running water.

Upstairs, a wall-mounted still image, titled *The Irish Sea*, reminds us that we are surrounded by the substance, while

Drinking the Ocean presents a processed, salt-free sample as a 'silver bullet', alongside an 11-minute moving-image presentation that probes the expensive and often controversial processes involved in desalination.

The gridded form of *When Water Becomes Explosive*, a large-scale 3D installation, is borrowed from an American ball game and made from transparent tubing with aluminium connectors. Its vertical and horizontal elements evoke drilling processes used to extract crude oil, in which high-pressure water explodes rock within the earth, resulting in contaminated waste. While, unsurprisingly, the grid's oil and water contents don't mix, the top-loading of the heavier, dark liquid conveys the dominance of the industry that produces it, especially in the U.S. It also registers the current hierarchical order in which oil is more highly prized – but, Hanlon asks, might this value-system reverse?

The tonal and textural qualities of the encased oil contrast with the predominantly monochrome environment and connect with the materiality of the world beyond. A looped soundtrack, created collaboratively by composer Rhona Clarke, disseminates from a neighbouring room and layers the work's immersive qualities with audio².

When More is Less, an installation in two parts, also brings the outside in, using moving images to revisit flooding events through scenes of submerged fields, cars, bridges, playgrounds and homes. Close by, tiny ladders project upwards from the liquid contents of a small container; a visual reminder, perhaps, of the steep climb required to effectively tackle the global problem of water.

Like many in this existentially charged moment, Hanlon has reflected on what it means, right now, to be a visual artist. Musing, in a blog post, about the viability of 'art for art's sake', she advocates for contemporary practice that does what it does well in terms of social, political and environmental commentary without being subsumed into the disciplines it references.

In taking on a serious and pressing topic she draws on art's



Marie Hanlon, *Cut-Off*, installation view, The LAB Gallery, 2021; image courtesy the artist and The LAB Gallery.

multi-faceted capability to "catch us off guard," "overwhelm or delight," and/or "throw us into perplexed confusion." It also, as in the case of this exhibition, involves reciprocity. Art, she muses, "requires time, it demands a particular kind of engagement, it must be fully experienced, considered, sensed, decoded."³

Susan Campbell is a visual arts writer and researcher.

'Water – More or Less' has since travelled to Uillinn: West Cork Arts Centre, where it continues until 12 February 2022.

westcorkartscentre.com

Notes:

¹See mariehanlon.com/about

²This sound piece was previously developed for Hanlon's exhibition, 'Water Table', at The Luan Gallery, Athlone, in 2018.

³See mariehanlon.com/on-the-loose-post