

## **Niamh O'Malley: Glasshouse**

**Bluecoat Liverpool 10 October to 10 January**

Niamh O'Malley's turn to sculpture marks a probing the strength of glass rather than its fragility. Glass is made substantial rather than slight, loaded rather than neutral. In 'Glasshouse', O'Malley stacks large sheets of thick toughened glass on the floor, leans them against walls, props them up at one end by a single metal rod, balances them on floating shelves and installs them as freestanding windows, walls or overhangs. Her movable props begin to look something like a stage set without actors, pictureless picture frames and see-through walls.

It makes for a serious meditation on the substance of glass as a viewing filter. The show includes three films and is rigidly limited to a handful of materials. Her use of colour is similarly restrained, restricted to largely black, white and grey, with just a breath of blush and smudge of straw here and there along with exquisitely crafted deep brown oak frames.

The limitations she sets herself, as well as the expectations for her work's standard of finish are uncompromising. All edges are rounded, joints snug and edits seamless. There is a perfectionism at play that I wonder at, inspiring an urge to smash one of those panes

to make sharp-edged shards instead of smooth-sided rectangles and lozenges. Perhaps that is all part of the artist's challenge to us.

O'Malley won't let us get that close, however. That is what glass is for: to protect, to separate, to keep you or the elements in, out or at bay. We are so conditioned to treading carefully around glass that our presence in this gallery space almost feels like an imposition. And O'Malley knows it. She positions her panes in such a way as to separate us from the space we are in, to interrupt our movement through the Bluecoat and, to some degree, to isolate us from other people in the supposedly shared space. Like *Glass*, 2014, that frames as well as hinders our entrance just inside one of the gallery rooms.

It is a view I suppose we are all familiar with: watching the world around us from behind panes of highly polished glass, in reverie, procrastination or boredom. We know that glass is a physical barrier but we don't think of it as an optical barrier. O'Malley reminds us that it is, that no matter how slight its intervention in our field of vision, glass is never neutral. Whether you are looking in, out or through, panes of glass – marked, framed, overlapped and polished – act as a constant reminder of physical and ontological separation.

The high sheen of the glass reminds us that however accustomed we are to looking through it, we also see our reflections, we see ourselves looking. But we are just another layer of interruption, just like the accrual of marks, muck, of other external reflections or dust on a screen. All of this calls for constant adjustments in focus. It is nigh on impossible to look through and at as well as on a pane of glass. ‘Resurfacing your perception’, O’Malley calls it, an idea which comes across most elegantly in her film works. *Quarry*, 2011, is built from multiple shots of a working quarry. In it O’Malley slides various textures of glass across the lens as the everyday activity of breaking rock plays out before us. Each time a lens slides left she is asking us to shift our vision between looking directly at and indirectly through sheets of glass. She problematises the process of looking that for most of us, is instinctive. Similarly in *Glasshouse*, 2014 – another film which tracks (from within) the length of a disintegrating greenhouse, looking out onto the wilderness of a garden beyond – we are constantly reminded of the filters through which we are viewing: through metal frames, through shards of broken, dirtied and intermittent glass, through the panning camera lens, through culturally conditioned eyes. The exquisite rhythm and scale of *Glass House* – with its two screens hung flat and lengthways side

by side, separated by a slither of gallery wall – is reminiscent of a train journey and endlessly engaging.

*The Glasshouse* makes us repeatedly aware of the resistance of glass to our penetrative gaze and our culturally conditioned habit of looking through and beyond the surface appearance of things. And that is the point: surface has garnered a bad name for itself, what with its connotations of superficiality and artifice. Now we are always on the look out for the subtext. Looking for the truth that lies beneath or beyond the veneer. Not so O'Malley. Her surfaces are never flat – they always have depth, substance and texture.

**Lizzie Lloyd** is a writer and translator based in Bristol.