



They Come Then, The Birds

Amanda Coogan







Unruly Bodies in Amanda Coogan's 'They Come Then, The Birds'

Kate Antosik–Parsons



Amanda Coogan's performance and installation work, 'They Come Then, The Birds', is an invitation to consider Mary Magdalene, the patron saint of women and sinners, through the medium of the body. As a cultural construct, Mary Magdalene was an enigmatic figure: the prostitute; the penitent; and devoted follower of Christ. While the holy and chaste Virgin Mary was the revered role model of femininity advocated by the Catholic Church, Mary Magdalene became associated with female sexuality deemed incompatible with the dominant, religious-inflected morality. The legacy of Mary Magdalene was imprinted on the Catholic-run reformatory institutions known as Magdalene Laundries that sought to rehabilitate 'fallen women' who labored in penance for their perceived 'sins' such as sexual promiscuity, unmarried motherhood, or even for difficult behavior that transgressed the norms of acceptability. The figure of Mary Magdalene left an indelible mark on the real bodies of the women incarcerated in these institutions. According to Cultural historian Constance Classen:

'When we allow historical figures to be of flesh and blood, we make it possible to relate to them as fellow beings and, therefore, to make meaningful comparisons between their lives and situations and our own...' [1]

1 Classen, Constance, The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch, Chicago; University of Illinois Press, 2012, xii.

Performance art is well positioned to engage with the histories of embodied experiences in Ireland because of its focus on the body as the site of production and reception of the work. ‘They Come Then, The Birds’ activates encounters with the unruly feminine body to provoke an engagement with the cultural meanings ascribed to women’s bodies in Ireland.

Under a vibrant blue sky, a flock of women gather amongst the furze in free-spirited revelry. In elaborate coats of scarlet red or pink with tattered layers of tulle trailing down their bodies they twirl until chests heaving, their supine bodies languish in sweaty exhaustion. With tights covering their faces, these monstrous female figures become a collective mass of unruly bodies. Occasionally a shudder runs through them, their bodies contort and twist, hands outstretched, fingers tense. It seems contagious, this transient moment of euphoria. Twin bards, joined together at the hip, playfully argue and bicker between them. They attempt to recount a story, speaking a corporeal language, each tries to outdo the other with their outlandish telling. A text message received reads: These heaps of furze are built and furnished for human occupation. A figure holds a delicate upturned teacup on a plate. Sneaking an intense furtive glance, she slowly slips the cup from its resting place offering a glimpse inside, revealing a shiny gold interior.



‘They Come Then, The Birds’ is inspired by the Wrens of the Curragh, a group of women who lived on the margins of society near the military encampment at the Curragh, County Kildare in the mid-nineteenth century. These societal outcasts and prostitutes lived in abject squalor in ‘nests’, crude shelters constructed of furze bushes. Described as an ‘infestation’ and a ‘colony’, the Wrens counted amongst their many transgressions sexual immodesty, thievery, trespassing, profanity, intoxication and tobacco smoking. James Greenwood’s eyewitness account into their existence in the Pall Mall Gazette (1867) described their appearance as follows:

‘In their style of dress, no less than undress, they are peculiar. All day they lounge in a half-naked state, clothed simply in one frieze petticoat, and another equally foul, cast loosely over their shoulders…’ [2]

These ‘fallen women’ who lived an existence marked by ‘depravity’ resided in this location for nearly seventy years, the size of the group expanded and contracted depending on the seasons ranging from sixty to one hundred. The Wrens were unique in that they lived a communal existence where they shared food, child-rearing duties, labour and money earned from their sex work collectively, thus proposing a different type of kinship not reliant on the patriarchal, heteronormative familial structure.

2 Greenwood, James, The Seven Curses of London, Boston: Fields, Osgood, and Co, 1869, 217.

The introduction of the Contagious Diseases Acts (1864, 1866, 1869) sought to stop the spread of venereal disease, an ongoing problem for the British military that was of epidemic proportions. However, measures were gendered, identifying prostitutes as the source of the disease, they focused specifically on treatment of women's bodies. The Contagious Diseases Acts permitted for the compulsory inspection and repeated internal examination of any woman suspected of prostitution. In 1869, a 'lock hospital' was established in the Curragh to provide for the forcible treatment of gonorrhoea or syphilis where women could be detained for a period of up to nine months. Lock hospitals incorporated punitive elements, for example, women were required to submit to having their hair cut off before they could enter the wards, and they could be expelled for bad behavior without finishing the course of treatment. Such institutions also aimed to morally reform and civilize these women whilst incarcerated, though they did little to improve their economic circumstances of women's lives. These paternalistic attitudes bear similarities to other restrictions that sought to control women's bodies in Ireland.

3 Luddy, Maria, Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800-1940, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 133.



During the Victorian era, women who engaged in sex work were viewed as 'abnormal women who not only transgressed the accepted code of female morality, but who threatened the social and political order by their excesses.'[4] The hybrid bodies in Coogan's work are also marked by excess: gossamer thin appendages grow from their heads, sensuous bodies burst from beneath their coats. Like Artemisia Gentileschi's rapturous Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy (1623), they embody an intimate pleasure focused inward as they touch themselves, their fingers stroking the long fringes that spill down their coats. Interestingly Maria Luddy notes that while at times the Wrens were treated as individuals, together 'they were viewed as a collective mass of licentiousness. It was their collective existence that was the threat rather than their individual selves.'[5] Likewise descriptions of the Wrens as 'raving savages' or 'dreaded viragos' positioned them as subhuman or non-normative, essentially a monstrous feminine Other. The Wrens of the Curragh were perceived as a threat because their monstrous bodies held the potential as sites of contagion while they cleverly evaded the policing and containment their unruly bodies, subversively organising themselves with communal principals.

4 Spongberg, Mary, Feminizing Veneral Disease: The Body of the Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century Medical Discourse, New York: NYU Press, 1998, 45.

5 Ibid, 61.



The joining together of these bodies amongst the furze in Coogan's performance also references the St. Stephen's Day folk custom celebrating the hunt and the killing of the wren, a diminutive brown bird with a disproportionately loud call. The wren was associated with treachery as it was believed that the wren betrayed to his enemies the hiding place of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr. It was also known for its cunning and trickery for when in a competition amongst all of the birds the wren hid itself in the eagle's feathers and outsmarted the eagle to claim the title 'King of the Birds'. The Wren Boys wore handmade costumes, such as coats and conical head-dresses made of rushes or straw to conceal their identities and carried a dead wren in a cage, or an effigy of the wren mounted on a holly or furze branch decorated with ribbons. Coogan's beautifully fabricated costumes recall the dress of the Wren Boys. As they went door to door the Wren Boys would calling out a version of the rhyme:

The wren, the wren, the king of all birds,
On Saint Stephen's Day was caught in the furze
Although she is little, her family is great,
Rise up landladies and give us a treat,
Or if you will not I will bury her at your gate.[6]

6 'Festival Customs' The Schools' Collection, Volume 0760, p.530. National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin.

The suggestion that while the body of the wren is small, the wren's brood is large in size, makes an interesting connection to the Wrens of the Curragh and the collective body as a potential threat. It was considered unwise to withhold money from the Wren Boys, for if they buried the feathers or body of the wren at the person's door it would bring bad luck in the year to follow. The money collected by the revellers was spent on collective merriment after the day's festivities. This collective, spirited revelry is expressed through the shared gestures of the performers in Coogan's work.

Two slip chocolate bars from their pockets and pass them on to nearby cavorters. These are exchanged across sweaty palms before the gold foil slides against the skin for safe keeping, tucked inside their bras. As they crouch, these animated Sheela-na-gigs reveal a brazen flash of the flesh beneath their coats. One slowly, deliberately raises her hand in warning, touching her finger against the palm of her hand. Another is caught in moment of glorious rapture on the ground. As she rocks back and forth her legs graze the thorny green spines of the furze. With mobile phones outstretched recording videos the others bear witness to this gesture. Occasionally one displays a close-up selfie of her eye on her phone. A text message reads: 'Noli me tangere', Latin for



‘Touch Me Not’, the words uttered by Christ to Mary Magdalene upon his resurrection. A striking figure holds aloft a gold bag, joyously thrusting it into the air. White golf balls pour out, their fall softly cushioned on the grass below. This conclave might be imagined as a fete galante of small intimacies. This cleft in the furze, a place where convivial pleasures shared as together they come then, the birds.

The unruly, monstrous feminine in Coogan’s work is not present singularly in the bodies of the performers but is notable in relation to the physicality of the work. Installed in the gallery, it is comprised of three-screen situated amongst dangerous yet beautiful verdant boughs of furze. Present in this space are the tactile costumes worn by the performers with their dirt stains, dried sweat and body odour embedded into the fabric. These materiality of these proxy bodies make for a compelling experiential engagement. Embodied gestures of touch further mark the physicality of this work. The multiple perspectives of the video are intercut with images taken by the Wrens themselves during the live performance when they paused for ‘selfies’, when their fingertips tapped on haptic screens to send text messages or when held the devices in their outstretched hands to record videos which act as witness to various gestures.

These embodied gestures of touch that run throughout the work prompts us to consider how these engagements with unruly bodies attend to the possibilities of the body.

In probing the cultural legacy of Mary Magdalene, Coogan's work embraces a sensuous embodiment of the monstrous, feminine Other. By finding inspiration in the Wrens of the Curragh, women whose bodies were perceived as a threat because they evaded containment, 'They Come Then, The Birds' imagines the radical potential sited in collective, unruly bodies. While the female body as a site of contagion connects to social discourses around female sexuality, shame and stigma, it also bears contemporary resonances with our present moment where we are painfully aware of our bodies in proximity to one another and our own potential to spread COVID-19 to our loved ones and through our communities. Coogan's work transverses temporalities, it references the historical lives of the past, encompasses folk rituals that are renewed each time they are performed, and it incorporates 'selfies' in which the individual captures their self in the present moment. This work provokes a re-imagining of the meaning ascribed to women's bodies in an Irish historical and cultural context and highlights to the radical potential of performance art propose rich insights into embodied relations.

Dr Kate Antosik Parsons



The Magdalene Series is a programme of exhibitions, interventions, performances and events curated by Maolíosa Boyle and features five of Ireland's leading artists: Amanda Coogan, Alice Maher, Rachel Fallon, Jesse Jones and Grace Dyas. Rua Red commissioned the five artists to research and produce new work in response to Mary Magdalene.

The Magdalene series will explore Mary Magdalene's associations with the incarceration and institutionalisation of women and other themes such as forced labour, morality, shame, reparation and penitence. The series will propose a new world, uncurbed by religious, political or societal doctrine, a world led by the experience of Magdalene and viewed through the lens of contemporary feminism and feminist theology.

Mary Magdalene has been a subject of fascination and curiosity throughout history. She is a binary creation: conflicted and mysterious, noble and humble, strong yet morally weak, beautiful and haggard, passionate yet penitent, erotic and unreserved, reclusive and solitary.

The Magdalene is the earthly, carnal and sensual counterpart to the celestial Virgin. She embodies humanity and humility – she sweats, cries and bleeds.

The Magdalene Series is the culmination of a three-year collaboration between the artists and curator. The process has also included input from leading international theologians, academics and researchers.

Maolíosa Boyle
Curator of The Magdalene Series
Director of Rua Red

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Mary Magdalene Series Artists

Amanda Coogan, Alice Maher, Rachel Fallon, Jesse Jones and Grace Dyas

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