

Text by Cristin Leach Hughes

Abigail O'Brien – With Bread

by Cristin Leach Hughes | Feb 24, 2015 | Quickies, Reviews

“They look like bum-bums,” says the 8-year-old as we enter the second room of Abigail O'Brien's solo show, *With Bread* at Limerick City Gallery of Art. He's got it right, they do. He's talking about the mounds of hand-formed dough nudging up against each other, naked-looking, in the first image on the right in this room. The photograph is entitled Sarah Lucas. The images in this exhibition are named after female artists. They are not, strictly speaking, portraits. O'Brien says she chose and named them thus because an element of each image reminds her of these particular women's work. Lucas and Paula Rego are fleshy, rude-looking photos of raw dough, shaped and just about to go into the oven. Beverly Symmes is air-filled, full of holes, stretching. Tracey Emin is the edge of a flour and liquid spattered bowl, the unmixed remnants. Kathy Prendergast is a pot rimmed with what looks like treacle.

Abigail O'Brien, Helen Chadwick at LCGA

All of these photographs were taken in bakeries in Ireland. The image entitled Rachel Whiteread shows a box-like container on a board about to be shoved through an oven door as an angle poise lamp looks on. The impression is of a specimen entering a body scanning machine. It feels medical, and oddly human, not bakery-themed. Kara Walker is a powdery, wet mess; unmixed. Louise Bourgeois is as phallic as you would expect: a helmet of dough at the end of a wet, shiny roll. Helen Chadwick looks like a puddle of wee although it's probably oil, egg yolk or melted butter. Cindy Sherman is a proofing loaf. Three in a row are named for Shirin Neshat, Alice Maher and Judy Chicago – infamous creator of the vagina plate place settings for *The Dinner Party* (1974-79).

These are images of bread-making with fleshy and bodily fluid connotations, overtones of growth, mess, malleability, mutability, change and alchemy. It's a peculiar idea for a series of “portraits”, with limited possibilities for consistent success, but O'Brien makes it work.

Elsewhere, her silvered sculptures of different types of bread – metal croissants, loaves, rolls, buns, bagels, bread sticks – are displayed under glass like scientific samples. Melba toast and pretzels appear frozen, encased in metal, preserved, like treasures. In her hands, the predictable but varied

results of an everyday chemical process, the process of making bread, becomes almost alchemical.

O'Brien's metal breads are beautiful objects and a reminder of how the work in this show connects to her 2005 Seven Sacraments exhibition at the Royal Hibernian Academy, which included thirty pieces of silver plated bread in as part of Kitchen Pieces – Communion and Confession. Here, all the silvered baked goods are named after worldwide currencies. Another kind of dough. Her Grande Dame video is 2 minutes 46 seconds long and is accompanied by the constant noise of ringing bells. They have a religious connotation, echoing the urgent chiming of timetables in institutions, yet hinting at bicycle bells and a kind of freedom or escape all at once. The footage shows a jar of yeasty, liquid dough, alive and uncontrollable, given the right conditions. It's a good visual shorthand for the kind of jarring reaction society has often had to the unexpected (because it was historically regarded as inappropriate) fecundity of successful female artists. The film ends with a near empty container that looks like an eye hole, a socket. O'Brien casts her subject – ever-expanding dough – as a force of nature. Once started on its path, it grows out of its allocated, confined space vigorously, messily, unapologetically, overtly, abundantly – like the work of these women.

With Bread is at [Limerick City Gallery of Art](#) until 26 March 2015.