



Title

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Cover image: **Fig. 2** *Sophie with Sheets 2*, by Charlotte Prodger. 2015. Inkjet print, stainless steel and glass, 90 by 124 by 3 cm. (Courtesy the artist; exh. Lismore Castle Arts, Co. Waterford).

Contemporary as palimpsest at Lismore Castle

by Frank Wasser • 07.06.2019

Palimpsest is an exhibition currently running at Lismore Castle Arts in County Waterford, a not-for-profit space that was founded in 2005. Situated in the highly decadent and historic gardens of Lismore Castle, the gallery is a leader in the presentation and promotion of contemporary art in Ireland. The garden – which sports sculptures including a particularly wild one by Franz West – and the extensive labour that must surely ensure its maintenance is a mesmerising spectacle.

The exhibition is curated by Charlie Porter, a writer from London who has a longstanding interest in art – he was previously arts editor at *Esquire* and deputy fashion editor at the *Guardian* – and is a jury member of this year's Turner Prize. *Palimpsest* is Porter's first major curatorial project, the ambition of which is suggested by the show's impressive ensemble of artists. In a panel discussion at Lismore between Porter, the artists Hilary Lloyd and Michael Dean (the latter opened a solo presentation simultaneously at Lismore's second space, St Carthage Hall) and Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, a professor in the School of Irish, Celtic Studies and Folklore at University College Dublin, Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, Porter explained that the exhibition began with his love of Charlotte Prodger's work, and that it was his sister who came up with the title. The discussion also featured a comprehensive and impressive breakdown of the etymology of the title from Mac Giolla Léith.



Fig. 1 *Notes on Gesture*, by Martine Syms. 2015. Video (Courtesy the artist and Sadie Coles Gallery; exh. Lismore Castle Arts, Co. Waterford).

A palimpsest is in most cases a manuscript, either from a scroll or a book, from which a text or image has been scraped, washed or erased off so that the page can be reused for another document, much like a traditional exhibition space. Mac Giolla Léith clearly outlined how the word has been understood historically, and how it might be used and understood in the broader context of theory and contemporary culture, evoking unsettling thoughts of the far-right rearing its ugly head across Europe once again. Mac Giolla Léith's example of the many painted-over postboxes (from red to green) across Ireland is a perfect example of how palimpsests populate the semiotics of the everyday.



Fig. 2 *Sophie with Sheets 2*, by Charlotte Prodger. 2015. Inkjet print, stainless steel and glass, 90 by 124 by 3 cm. (Courtesy the artist; exh. Lismore Castle Arts, Co. Waterford).

Porter has selected old and new works and objects that overtly, obliquely and sometimes awkwardly address this conceptual framework. Porter poetically uses the idea of a palimpsest as an analogy centred around language and time. Historical documents related to the local area and the castle grounds are embedded throughout the exhibition. The Reading Room, for example, contains photographs of the castle from c.1895 and photographs of the Lismore Crozier (c.1100), which was discovered in a blocked-up doorway of the castle in the early nineteenth century. In the same room there is a film of an interview with Porter and audio recordings by children from the nearby Blackwater Community School. The oral histories collected by local children from their parents and grandparents, retold for the recordings, could provide the basis for their own exhibition.



Fig. 3 *Camelot I*, by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. 2019. Canvas, 75 by 70 cm. (Courtesy the artist; exh. Lismore Castle Arts, Co. Waterford).

Martine Syms's video *Notes on Gesture* (2015) **FIG.1** invites the viewer to position themselves in relation to the entirety of the space, as the whole of the first gallery can be seen when viewing the work. The sound comes from a small speaker above the screen that unfortunately fails to deliver the same impact as previous installations of the video (bad sound for good video works is an all too common problem in exhibitions). Syms's hyper-saturated meme- and gif-orientated edit, composed of short movements and phrases, examines gestures attributed to African American women outlined in the seventeenth-century text *Chirologia: or the Natural Language of the Hand*. An inventory of hand gestures and phrases are performed by an actor and edited into a seemingly never-ending loop. The work challenges presuppositions of race and gender through edits that render associations arbitrary. The work rhymes perfectly with Charlotte Prodger's work *Sophie with*

Sheets 1–4 (2015). In 2015, Prodger used monochrome 35mm slide film to document a woman’s hands reviewing photocopies, images of male hands in fists and other gestures **FIG.2**. Prodger’s photographs recontextualise the source material, in this case anatomical drawing aids, thereby forming a palimpsest that challenges bodily gesture through a queer lens by taking back the space occupied by the hands in the original photographs. The work exemplifies the artist’s ongoing analysis of the tension between material and language. How the hand might mediate the spoken word or indeed unspoken word is an idea that also permeates three new paintings by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *Camelot 1* **FIG.3**, *Camelot 2* (2019) and *Three Corners* (2018). The three portraits hang opposite Prodger’s works and contain the viewer in a static stare made ominous by the repetition of pose and gesture between the pieces.

Susan Sontag ascertained that ‘the painter constructs, the photographer discloses’, and Zoe Leonard has made a practice of recording the determination of an imperceptibly encroaching nature that knows no respect for the built environment. In her untitled C-Print **FIG.4**, the base of a tree oozes over concrete, spilling onto the footpath.

Nearby, there is a stack of A4 pages that contain a text piece by Olivia Laing, *A letter from the departure lounge*:

So, I’m sitting in Heathrow airport and thinking about the word Palimpsest, which means layers, which means one thing on top of another, but you can still see traces of the original thing through it’.



Fig. 4 *Untitled*, by Zoe Leonard. 2002. C-print, (Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth, London and New York; exh. Lismore Castle Arts, Co. Waterford).

The text is a short, poetic and enigmatic letter to a deceased individual by the name of Nick. While the diaristic content is an interesting contrast to the other works in the exhibition, the referencing of the title of the show in the text seems forced. The piece is tonally similar to her engrossing but by turns arrogant novel *Crudo* (2018), and it is hard to tell whether or not we are reading fiction or non-fiction. Laing's style feels far removed from the suffering and criticality that is oozing out of the writing of Kathy Acker, with whom she blended her own identity in *Crudo*.



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Palimpsest*, at Lismore Castle Arts, Co. Waterford, 2019 (photograph Paul McCarthy).

However, Laing's decision to distribute the text via a stack of pages, and therefore as sculptural object, leans annoyingly against the other works in the show that are connected to a wider context of object-making. As a work of art, it is formally reminiscent of a Felix Gonzalez-Torres's sculptures, as the viewer is invited to take a page until, at last, the object fulfils its 'on the nose' nod to the palimpsest theme, albeit a palimpsest in reverse.

In the twelfth-century tower of the castle, a looped video by Hilary Lloyd shows a cat stroking a sleeping face with its paw. The tower is also occupied by Lloyd's used cat gym **FIG.5**, for which coloured acetate sheets in blue, yellow and red are precariously stuck to the medieval walls, alongside new paintings conveying the letters 'LA' and a cat mask. Lloyd has produced easily the most enigmatic, curious and playful work in the exhibition, which also engages with the lavish domesticity of the castle and its grounds. In the monkey tower (a semi-ruin situated deep in the garden), Lloyd has suspended a circle of carpet from the rafters, a grandiose but shabby sculpture that responds to the tower's last installation, now rotting and peeling, by Richard Wright **FIG.6**.

In the garden, while I was studying Nicole Eisenman's giant plaster

and cement smoking pipes, *Large Pipe* FIG.7, I was joined by a local wearing what looked like a tweed blanket held up by braces. The stranger explained that they were wearing a work by Andrea Zittel. The artist's *Personal Panels* (2019) are made from folded lengths of Irish tweed and can be borrowed by visitors, offering a refreshingly theatrical air to the exhibition.



Fig. 6 Installation view of *Palimpsest*, at Lismore Castle Arts, Co. Waterford, 2019 (photograph Paul McCarthy).

Despite this surreal and enjoyable moment, something is not sitting right. While the works in the exhibition are mostly impressive and generative, there is a troubling lack of material that addresses the most often erased aspects of language and

history. Ireland's violent history as a subject of colonialism and post-colonialism would to many seem an important point of departure in thinking about the curatorial framework of the exhibition. There is not one Irish artist in this exhibition, which is staged in what is and always has been an ostensibly British castle, the current home of the 12th Duke of Devonshire. This reality sits awkwardly with the poetic landscape constructed by the curator and the institution. Furthermore, the fact that many of the artists are represented by the same commercial gallery in London raises questions about the integrity of Porter's selection.



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Palimpsest*, at Lismore Castle Arts, Co. Waterford, 2019 (photograph Paul McCarthy).

Palimpsest is a convincing display of curatorial rigour that contains the ambition of a small museum show both positively and at times negatively, namely the thinly veiled theme and overly audacious venue. The strongest aspect of the exhibition are the works, but it is hard to ignore the elephant that likely dwells in one of the castles many rooms.



Fig. 8 Installation view of *Palimpsest*, at Lismore Castle Arts, Co. Waterford, 2019 (photograph Paul McCarthy).

Exhibition details **Palimpsest**
Lismore Castle Arts, Lismore, Co.
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