

Lost, but not forgotten

Marie Brett

Taken from The Lost Children book 2008

Raw deeply felt emotions were revealed.

Intimate recollections and cherished memories of children loved and lost
but not forgotten.

Slowly staff, patients and visitors shared memories
of pregnant girls
of babies born out of wedlock
of family shame
of whispering wards
of watching windows
of hidden underground passage-ways
of the face-less lives
of babies taken and given to new parents.

Tidied up awkwardness,
shadows of the past whitewashed by caring others.

BACKGROUND

LOST CHILDREN / MEMORY DRESS

The hospital seamstress works in the sewing hall of St Finbarr's Hospital and makes tiny white cloth dresses, edged with pink or blue ribbon. The dresses are used by the Maternity Unit for babies who have died. This stark and silent testimony of lives un-lived planted the seed of an idea for the Memory Dress project which developed to explore individual and collective memory associated with dress.

Dress is a potent cultural symbol, a mundane and unobtrusive part of everyday life yet also integrally part of special occasion and memorial rites of passage. Everyone has items of clothing they remember – their own or others and the tradition of creating items of clothing for special occasion has long been imbued with particular care and significance, although it is a tradition in decline in our society where ready-made items are cheap and disposable.

The Memory Dress project was a year long artist residency located at St Finbarr's Hospital in Cork, by artist Marie Brett in collaboration with artist Charlotte Donovan. Staff, patients and visitors shared memories of special moments or people in their lives through referencing an item of dress, and a series of experimental artworks were produced which embodied the memory or commemorated a loved one, which concluded with an exhibition at Triskel Arts Centre.

The Lost Children artwork grew from the Memory Dress project and was made in response to the hospital site's embedded social memory of the infamous Magdalene Laundry [similar]. Over time, staff, patients and visitors revealed memories of un-married pregnant girls brought to the laundry by shamed family and of babies taken secretly at birth and given or sold to new parents.

Particular thanks for assistance in the creation of the work go to the hospital sacristan, seamstress, bereavement councillor, priest and groundsman plus also patients from St Catherine's and St Monica's wards. The work was supported by The Arts Council of Ireland via a Create AIC Award, Cork City Council Arts Office, The Health Service Executive Cork South, Triskel Arts Centre and St Finbarr's Hospital, Cork.

Lost Children has since been selected for the exhibitions:

'Vital Signs' at Dr Steeven's Hospital Dublin [*an Arts Council initiative curated by Michelle Browne*]
'Sileziany' at Młodzieżowy Dom Kultury Gallery Poland [*receiving curator's gold medal*]