

The Amulet Research in a Maternity Hospital Context

An introduction by artist **Marie Brett**

Taken from the book 'AMULET' 2011

When considering why the maternity hospital was chosen as a site of interest to base the Amulet research project in; I think it's worthwhile first to look at the broader field of arts and health, and to consider where the Amulet research project fits within this context. I think the best way to do this is to reference a paper written by Mary Grehan 'The Delivery of Art in a Maternity Hospital' where she says:

"The field of arts and health has, to a large extent, emerged from a perceived relationship between art and healing. This has been realised not only by the art therapies and participatory arts activities in healthcare contexts but also by the creation of healing environments (Kirklin & Richardson 2003) in which the placement of visual art plays a role. However this rationale for art in hospitals may not have the same currency in a maternity hospital in which, despite the medicalisation of pregnancy and childbirth, most of the clients are not medically ill. If the therapeutic benefits of art in maternity hospitals are made redundant by the context, art in maternity hospitals needs to be considered under alternative agendas"

I see the maternity hospital is a site of life changing experience, a site of significance for mothers/families; a window onto the fundamental portals of our existence where life and death converge. The Amulet research project was located in this charged and emotional environment to explore response to the conceptual idea of amulets and their relation to life as well as bereavement. My approach as an artist within the maternity setting was contextual and responsive in nature; Grehan outlines this as:

"One approach to placing art in hospitals is in line with gallery curatorship ...This artwork is not produced specifically for the hospital context and equally could be found in a gallery context. The relationship is directly between the artwork and its viewer and there is divergent thinking around the most appropriate art for this type of intervention. An alternative and more contemporary approach is contextual art practice in which the artist engages with the physical, psychological and social dimensions of the hospital, which in turn becomes the very stuff of the artwork. The artist is afforded the opportunity to forge a relationship, and in some cases collaborate, with the hospital community. 'What exists ... is an unknown relationship between the artist and audience, a relationship that may itself become the artwork.' (Lacy 1995 pg20)"

At its core, the Amulet research explored fundamental issues of life and loss in relation to pregnancy and childbirth with three distinct chapters inherently inter-twined: the initial stage of anticipation, of hopes and dreams for the future, followed by the polar stages of the celebration of new life or the disappointment of loss. It was anticipated that amulets may be used to mark these respective stages and the research did evidence this potential. Significantly though, the project resonated most with the hospital's work connected to the issue of bereavement and the loss of life at varying

pregnancy stages. Incubators and coffins were identified as appropriate sites for amulets to be housed plus additionally layettes were created as deceased babies first and last robes. It has been acknowledged that this conceptual enquiry and subsequent physical manifestation of (art)work was of aid to the hospital's bereavement and loss support service.

Interestingly, the research additionally reached to consider aspects of Ireland's cultural heritage of pregnancy and childbirth with relation to the religious teachings of the Catholic Church regards infant loss, bereavement and the issue of 'limbo'. It is important to note that in recent years Ireland has witnessed fundamental changes in custom and practice in relation to the conceptual and practical handling of infant bereavement; this in turn has impacted socially and culturally on the maternity hospitals environment and inherent set of values, goals and practices.

The Amulet research project has taken place in Ireland at a time of significant social and cultural change; economic, political and spiritual and has been located within in a maternity hospital which, as a site, links medical, social and cultural activity. The project undoubtedly was shaped by these times and this environment; the exciting challenge for the artist in using this research is to embrace change and innovation in response to a cultural heritage that informs identity and collective social mores.