

[Marie Brett @ Feelystone]

Interview with artist Marie Brett about her residency experience at Feelystone [monumental stonemasons] as part of the Roscommon County Council [art@work] residency programme

This text is included in the [art@work] Artists Residency Programme 2011 publication

Did you originally see any connection with what the company does and your work?

Yes, I saw very close connections to aspects of Feelystone's work and to my own. Feelystone make memorial headstones and I make artwork exploring the idea of ambiguous loss. Our use of material is very different, I'm interested in notions of the ephemeral, but going beyond the materiality, our conceptual reasons for making work are definitely aligned. I was keen to explore this link with them and question/develop my thinking of memorials as serving a focus for remembering presence, specifically that of a deceased person or event.

What noteworthy or significant stages or experiences did your process go through during the residency?

Being out on the road shadowing the work of Feelystone's 'fitting team' in various cemeteries was definitely significant for me. I wasn't sure if they'd agree to allow me to attend or to record what they were doing so testament to their trust and generosity that they did, and welcomed me as a temporary part of their crew. The cemetery site as home for memorial markers holds status as a 'minded place', physically and metaphorically, for both memory and person and working within its emotive and charged silence is an interesting experience. Encounters with clergy, family, visitors and caretakers in this environment, and their relation to an artist with a memorial mason team, is certainly a different encounter to working in such an environment solo. Further days work and fittings being 'rained off' were disappointing but on reflection I realised the gap served to focus my intent and commitment to post residency work and hopefully a further chapter of collaboration.

Another significant aspect was talking at length with staff who fabricate and sell memorials; those who straddle the intimate encounters of private mourning with public and permanent statements of remembering. I came to understand Headstones by their nature personal, offering windows onto family narratives, also have the potential to reflect fundamental social and cultural junctures. Religion and notions of faith have for years been inherently intertwined with Ireland's use of memorial symbology; currently a massive shift is taking place within the country in relation to religion and how this in turn is affecting a collective memorial expression will be interesting to witness.

Watching the sandblasting of script onto headstones was also a pivotal encounter for me and I'm still exploring ideas about the metaphoric nature of script on stone and the attempt to stem the dissipation of a name or kinship by permanent evidencing.

For me, the residency was a two part deal, both aspects were as important as each other, but perhaps one more hidden...no doubt the chance to immerse yourself within a company's fabric is a brilliant opportunity but equally important is the provision for breathing time and reflection, to allow for the unravelling of ideas and journeying up roads that may potentially be dead ends, to allow for response but without deadline pressures.

In what way did this process of creating work differ to your normal working practices?

Towards the end of my residency, after predominantly utilising video/sound/photography, I decided to make a work in stone... a departure from my regular practice. I'm exploring ideas of memorial related to the inherent tension between the notion of permanence and strength versus transience and vulnerability. Physically this tension is evidenced in the materiality of stone, its perceived strength but inherent fragility and I'm questioning how the ephemeral notion of loss and its implicit transitory nature has need to be anchored perpetually by use of 'everlasting' materials. I'm developing a multiple work in response to Cillínís, the burial grounds of unbaptised children, who at most, may have traditionally had a small boulder rock as marker, without script.

On a parting note it's important to say thank you to Feelystone staff who have been generous in their interest, guidance and help towards my work. It's evident they're an experienced staff in encountering artists and I'm very grateful to gain an insight into their work which has certainly influenced my own thinking and practice.

Interview with director FINBARR FEELY - Feelystone

What were your expectations of the residency?

Our expectations of *art@work* are never fixed we tend to let it flow into whatever we are doing at that time. The Artist then gets a real feel of the workings of our company and slots into our day to day programme.

Was having this artist in residence different in any way to what you expected?

This year was a little different as Marie took a big interest into how we dealt with our customer in the monumental business. There are a lot of different emotions attached to this part of the business and Marie wanted to get a feel for that and translate it into her work. Marie also this year spent time with our teams that work off site in the graveyards to extract information from them.

What do you think were the benefits to the company of having an artist in residence?

We always enjoy the artists time in Feelystone, it makes us look at our business from a different perspective and we can then make changes if necessary.

Did you discover anything new about how artists work?

I have worked with many artists over the years so I know how they work and I always admire the passion they have for their work. Myself coming from a more commercial aspect I can see results and more importantly money coming in on a regular basis whereas the artist has to play the waiting game and that's hard.

Did the artist's work have any effect on how you or the staff sees your own business?

Marie consulted with many of our staff and I always encourage this as they have a mine of information to pass on. I always feel it has a positive effect on the staff and it is great for morale in general.