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AN ARTWORK INSTALLATION WITH LIVE PERFORMANCE

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by Marie Brett & John McHarg

working in collaboration with Camden Fort Meagher volunteer community

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Presented by Cork Midsummer Festival in June 2017

Located at Camden Fort Meagher, Cork Harbour, Crosshaven, County Cork, Ireland



Number 42

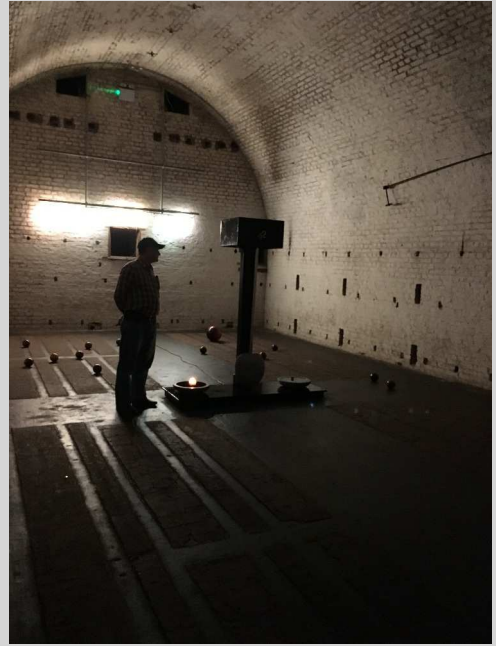
Kinetic sculpture

*Aluminium, stepper electric motor, sandstone, limestone, flame, water,
iron oxide, salt, timber*

Location: The Magazine







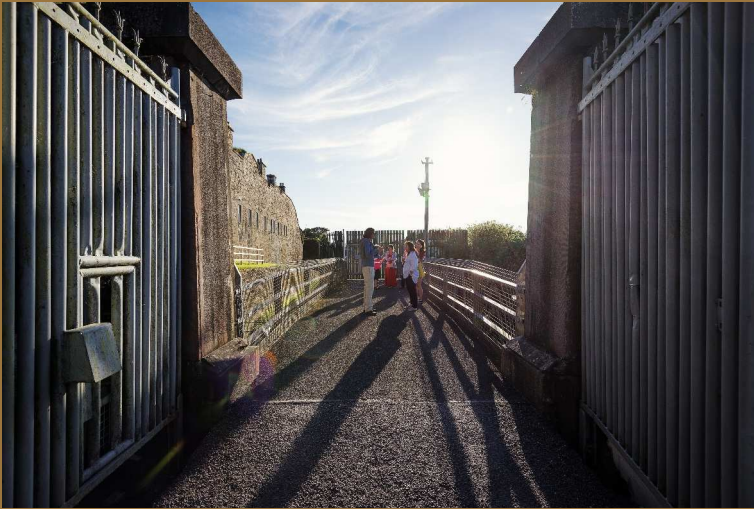
Lilibulero

Live vocal performance and recorded soundscape
Location: The Bright Tunnel with 196 stone steps









Kadath

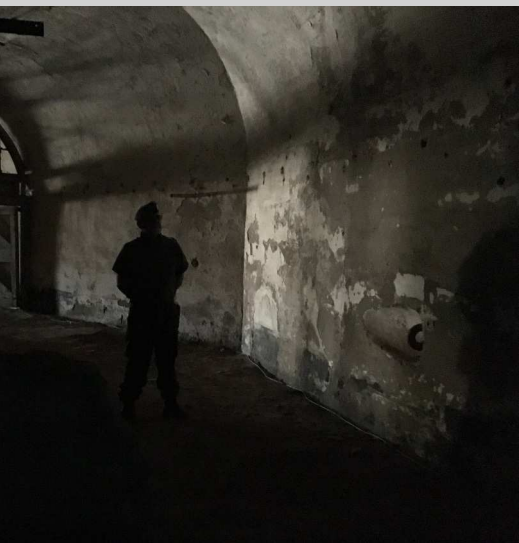
Live spoken word and vocals, digital projection, charcoal and shell drawings, torchlight, flame

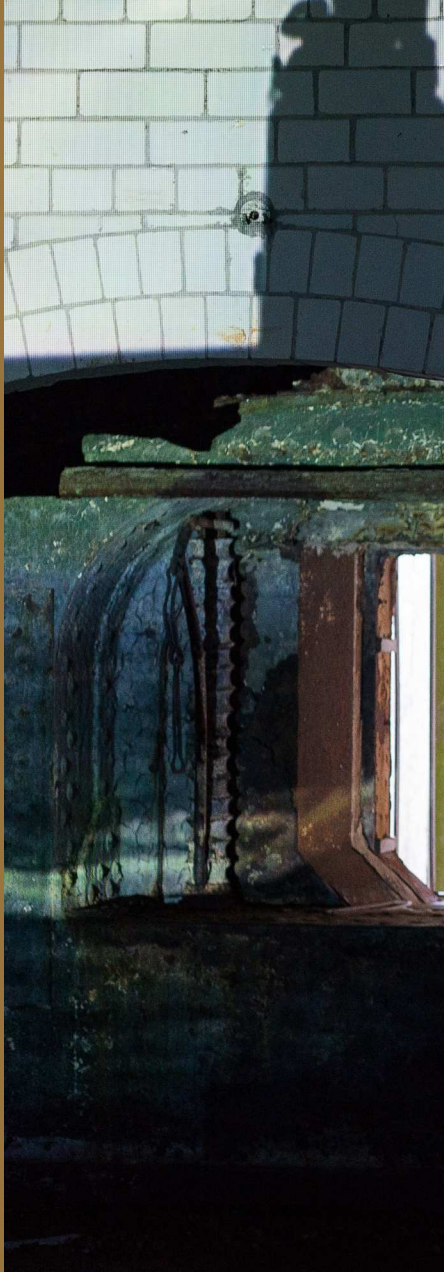
Location: The Engine Rooms













Torpedo : An Art Installation with Live Performance

Torpedo, by visual artists Marie Brett and John McHarg, is a subterranean, site-responsive artwork incorporating kinetic sculpture, sound, film and live performance. Sited in an ex-military coastal fort, *Torpedo* is inspired by ideas of Foucault's Pendulum and The Brennan Torpedo. Darkly torch-lit with film, sound, kinetic sculpture and live performance, this is a highly atmospheric and immersive promenade trail created by artists Marie Brett and John McHarg working in collaboration with Camden Fort Meagher's volunteer community and located through underground tunnels, vaulted ammunition stores and sea-level engine rooms.

Overview: *Torpedo* consists of three experiential artworks created in response to the military architecture, atmosphere and history of Camden Fort Meagher in Crosshaven, Cork Harbour: *Number 42* in the Magazine; *Lillibulero* in the Bright Tunnel and *Kadath* in the Engine Rooms.

Context: The setting for *Torpedo* is Camden Fort Meagher, a dramatic site overlooking Cork Harbour in Ireland. This coastal defense fortification is internationally recognized as being one of the finest examples of a classic coastal artillery fort in the world. It was constructed in the mid 1860's over a ten year period and almost 65% of the fort structure is underground: *Torpedo* is located in this dark, subterranean world. Camden Fort Meagher is currently open to the public at weekends and is fully staffed by volunteers. This volunteer community, from all over Cork County, are committed to sharing the fort's social and military history with the public. Brett and McHarg collaborated with this community of volunteers to create *Torpedo* and the community's presence and contribution is clear throughout. Their response to the site is evident through their personal stories and memories expressed within the artwork, *Kadath* in particular. This collaborative process facilitated by Brett and McHarg, woven in with a visceral response to place, is what led to the creation of *Torpedo*.

Arrival: Volunteers welcome us to *Torpedo* and outline some health and safety guidelines. Each member of our group of twelve is given a small brown envelope, with the instruction to open it only after leaving the fort. After this initial spoken introduction the volunteers act as silent guides to direct us around the fort, without providing an explanation of the artwork. Wearing turquoise T-shirts and orange jackets, their subtle presence and in-depth knowledge of the geography of the fort is evident, yet they do not influence the audience's interpretation of *Torpedo*. Our own individual experience is facilitated by this important gesture.

Number 42 - The Magazine

To reach *Number 42* in the Magazine, we are directed towards a descending external stairway leading us away from the bright sunshine and towards a series of dark underground corridors. This descent from above, into the lower depths of the fort, felt akin to journeying back through the layers of time. We negotiated this labyrinth of damp, musty passageways by following points of light ahead. There was a sense of mystery and intrigue in the darkness, so much more disorientating as we had left the daylight above. The Brennan Torpedo was one source of inspiration for Brett and McHarg, as the first Brennan Torpedo (a guided missile) was designed and built in Camden Fort Meagher. This underwater torpedo had a small light on the indicator mast to the rear, visible at night. We are guided through the tunnels by following torch-light in the dark, a similar experience of navigation. We arrive into a dimly lit, underground vaulted chamber of whitewashed brick known as the Magazine, a space where explosive material was once stored within the fort. This was the setting for *Number 42*, a site-specific installation consisting of a vertical element in the foreground (a pendulum on an aluminium stand, with sandstone and limestone bowls, water and a flame on a base) and a horizontal element in the background (highly polished, richly coloured spheres, one large and many smaller, placed on the concrete and brick ground surface and reminiscent of cannonballs). The swaying pendulum, inspired by Foucault's Pendulum marks time, moving back and forth in perfect rhythm, giving a sense of predictability and calm to the space. The stone used in *Number 42* reflects the use of sandstone and limestone in the fort's construction and the placement of the spheres reflect the pattern of the square wall niches in a more random manner. The aesthetic language and materiality of *Number 42* are clearly informed by the fort. The audience move around the perimeter of the Magazine respectfully, slowly, to observe the artwork before being guided onwards. We emerge into the daylight again as we ascend a stone spiral stairway, which originally acted as a funnel if an explosion occurred in the Magazine.

Lillibulero – The Bright Tunnel

Led briefly over the bright surface of the fort we move underground again, into the Bright Tunnel, a space between daylight and darkness. This undercover passageway, a descending stone staircase with 196 steps and a series of landings, has a vaulted roof and small openings on one side for daylight. Following the contours of the downward slope of the hillside towards the sea, it was a hidden route for soldiers to move between the upper and lower levels of the fort. It can be seen from the café terrace at a high point on the site and is almost invisible, covered in greenery. Entering into the Bright Tunnel we hear a female voice, singing, and then we catch a glimpse of a woman at the lower end of the staircase. Dressed in white, her ephemeral presence draws us in; her haunting and melodic

voice lingers in the air, enticing us to move forward, descending towards her. We follow her voice but we never reach her. The spatial acoustics carry her voice upwards, floating. As we descend we catch glimpses of daylight filtered through small openings covered in leaves, giving a hint of the present day within the past. The song is 'Lillibulero' a British military marching tune with a history on this site, chosen by the artists and the volunteer community for this reason.

Kadath – The Engine Rooms

After our descent through the Bright Tunnel we are guided through a wide corridor space, rough underfoot with a smell of old. This leads us towards the sounds and light of *Kadath* in the Engine Rooms. This area of the fort is normally closed to the public so we are offered a rare glimpse of this space, underground and hidden from view in the right lower battery section of the fort, facing out to sea. The name *Kadath* refers to 'The Dreamlands' (H.P.Lovecraft, 1890-1937), a fictional location and alternate dimension that can be entered through dreams. The Engine Rooms consist of a series of three vaulted chambers (originally gun encasement rooms) opening to the left of a main route which has the sense of an underground city street. Each vaulted chamber has a circular lightwell, giving a hint of diffuse daylight through the greenery above, but not enough light to fill the dimly lit spaces and this allows for the digital projections to light the way. There is one vaulted side chamber and an ascending external staircase to the right of the main route and a small room with an adjacent narrow space at the end of this route. The ground on which we tread is crumbling away in parts, the uneven surface changes from terracotta tiles to earth to concrete (and back again) and slopes upwards as we move through the space.

Kadath is an immersive experience, consisting of the spoken word (performed live by volunteers), recorded sound, torch-light, digital projection, charcoal, scallop shells and raw pigment. We are directed by torch-light and by the guiding presence of the two volunteers. The constantly changing, dynamic digital projections light the spaces of the Engine Rooms, the images fracture as they fall on varying planes and textured surfaces, a richly multi-layered narrative throughout as we hear an overlay of voices, vocals and recorded sound merged with the visually engaging effects.

Rows of carefully arranged scallop shells are laid out in the first vaulted chamber as the projected images and recorded sound fill the space. The second chamber is full of poetic voice as two performers (also volunteers) read their own words full of memory, a sense of place and a hint of nostalgia "*nothing is more memorable than smell*". In the third chamber we see and hear a woman speaking about the fort "*there is peace in this place ... reeking of the mould and mildew of the ages*" and then a man's voice emerges, hidden from view behind a massive, rusted and

disused oil tank. The vaulted side chamber to the right is filled with the sound of male vocals, deep and evocative, almost hymn like. A lone man wearing black and white leans against the wall, behind an open screen. We don't enter, we observe respectfully.

When we reach the small room at the end of the route, candlelit and silent, we are surprised when a white-veiled woman appears at a small opening, solemnly chanting. She disappears again, is this the lady from the Bright Tunnel? We are quietly guided to retrace our steps back through the main route, passing by the three vaulted chambers and the side chamber again, to listen, to look once more, we keep moving and we exit the Engine Rooms, emerging via the wide corridor space into the daylight again.

Conclusion: Torpedo is ambitious in scale, complex in its response to site and rich in content. This reflects a durational, collaborative process of engagement by the artists, both with the fort community and with the dramatic military architecture and history of the site. It is against this backdrop of a highly engaged community-of-interest, a powerful site and Brett and McHarg's deep artistic response that *Torpedo* emerged, all three elements integral to the multi-layered narrative of this experiential artwork. *Torpedo* combines simultaneous complexity and clarity and my experience of the artwork will stay with me long after I leave Camden Fort Meagher. Opening the small brown envelope the next day, the scent of mint leaf brings me right back to the fort and a cerise on grey *Torpedo* badge reminds me that I was part of the fort's story, for a brief moment in time.

By Blaithin Quinn.

An architect and visual artist based in Ireland.

Written response commissioned by Create Ireland.

