

# Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks: 2011 – Laundry, by Louise Lowe

By staging her play in a former Magdalene laundry the playwright compels the audience to inhabit the haunted spaces of Irish history.

© Sat, Sep 17, 2016, 04:30

Fintan O'Toole

[Follow @fotoole](#)



As a child growing up in Dublin's north inner city Louise Lowe was warned by her mother that if she was bold she'd end up in the Gloucester Street Magdalene laundry. And Lowe did eventually end up in the laundry building on what is now



Sean McDermott Street, formally known as the Monastery of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge. Just a few minutes' walk from O'Connell Street, it closed in 1996 but is inert and intact, a looming relic of a system of mass incarceration. In 2011



Lowe and her collaborators at Anu Productions occupied the building to create one of the most powerful pieces of



contemporary Irish theatre, Laundry.

The dark shadow over modern Ireland is cast by the vast complex of coercive confinement industrial schools, mental hospitals, mother-and-baby homes and Magdalene laundries that contained, from the foundation of the State until the 1960s, an astonishing 1 per cent of the entire population. This system was hidden in plain sight: there were large and prominent buildings all over Ireland, like the one that Lowe and her team occupied, but there was also a wilful ignorance about what went on behind their walls.

Writers did draw attention to parts of this system in works such as Hanna Greally's memoir *Bird's Nest Soup*, in 1971, Brian MacLochlainn's *A Week in the Life of Martin Cluxton*, on RTÉ in the same year, Bernard MacLaverty's novel *Lamb*, in 1980, Mannix Flynn's novel *Nothing to Say*, in 1983, and many others. But it was not until well into the 1990s that there was any real public acknowledgment of the profound meaning of these tragedies for Irish society. And even then the process was slow and painful.

The creation of *Laundry* was part of Louise Lowe's development of site-specific theatre. In 2005 *Tumbledowntown* had led audiences through an abandoned tower block in Ballymun as the structures were being prepared for oblivion, and *Basin* (2009) invited them into Lowe's own family home on the eve of its demolition. *Laundry* was the second part of the four-episode *Monto Cycle* on the continuing history of what was once one of Europe's most notorious brothel districts, dealing with prostitution, the heroin epidemic and immigration.

ADVERTISEMENT

Anu's occupation of real spaces has a consciously ghostly quality. Lowe told Peter Crawley in *The Irish Times* in 2011 of

her meticulous method of devising with the actors specific responses to specific places: “It has to be a forensic response to the space. There’s layers of it. You could respond to a table, an image, a light that might take you to the next place of discovery. It could be anything, the residue of what’s left behind.”

That residue, in the case of Laundry, was the anonymity of incarcerated and enslaved women. Each member of the audience moved through the convent on his or her own, forced to confront directly the presence of these embodiments of a deliberately forgotten history; asked to remember names, to smell the acrid carbolic soap, to feel the raw weight of metal buckets, to decide how to respond to confidences, to appeals, to demands for escape. The individual vignettes were, by turns, almost unbearably “real” and elegantly poetic, harshly confrontational and gently heartbreaking.

The experience was profoundly disorientating and genuinely uncanny in the sense defined by John Banville (see the entry in this series for 2005) as “a thing known returning in a different form, become a revenant”.

Lowe’s work has continued to explore the paradox that the most real physical spaces – streets and buildings – are also the most haunted. In Anu’s 2015 piece, Pals, for example, the National Museum of Ireland at Collins Barracks was forced to remember the history of the complex as a training ground for the Irish soldiers who would fight and die at Gallipoli. But it is not only the past that has its ghosts: Lowe’s work reminds us that the contemporary city is itself full of unseen, disregarded people who hover on the edges of its daily normality.

*Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks is a collaboration between The Irish Times and the Royal Irish Academy. Find out more at [ria.ie](http://ria.ie)*

---

## READ MORE

- » Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks: 2015 – Silent Moves, by Aideen Barry, Emma O’Kane, Ridgepool Training Centre and Scannán Technologies
- » Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks: 2014 – Saw Swee Hock Student Centre, by O’Donnell + Tuomey
- » Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks: 2013 – Parallax, by Sinéad Morrissey
- » Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks: 2012 – Commonage, by Culturstruction
- » Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks: 2010 – Room, by Emma Donoghue

---

## MORE FROM THE IRISH TIMES

Music

2’s albums ranked from worst to best

Stage

Boyzeck in Winter: A male mind sent brutally out of tune

1.2:09

unkirk review: No guts but plenty of glory in Nolan’s heavy calibre war film

Books

riters on Jane Austen: ‘Who can think about men and keep a straight face?’

