

A VOODOO FREE PHENOMENON - GARRETT PHELAN

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Garrett Phelan, *Ethereal Assemblage – MD-4000 VINTAGE MICROPHONE and Undiscovered Celtic Gold 2500BC – A VOODOO FREE PHENOMENON*, 2014

To wink in the sunshine of learning and religion

- Tessa Giblin, Curator of Visual Arts, Project Arts Centre

Garrett Phelan's newly commissioned project comprises two new video works and sculpture. One of the video works is divided between a storytelling monologue and a dramatically filmed grouping of ambiguous gold objects. The second is a throbbing animation, both hand drawn and computer animated, flicking through many of Phelan's most emblematic images. Real and imagined encounters with ancient monuments and relics here intersect with electronic objects and signifiers, becoming a ruse for a deeper exploration of personal politics, the desire to decipher the world, and the limits of our understanding.

The ancient sites around the world where monuments of prehistory have survived the ravages of time are enigmatic to their core. Their meaning, purpose and authority are beyond our conventional wisdoms, yet scholars from wide fields of study gravitate towards them as places of discovery or as mirrors of their knowledge. One of the oldest surviving sites, the 5,000 year old Newgrange in County Meath, Ireland, sits protected below a large mound of earth, an island-like territory bounded by the River Boyne. Long steeped in folklore, its survival may be due in part to the mysticism that grew around the site throughout the ages. Through orientation and construction, winter solstice sunlight is breathtakingly channelled through an opening above the entrance and into an inner chamber, as the rising sunrays extend over the nearby hills. Druids, archaeologists, astronomers, priests, pagans, politicians, midwives, scientists, artists and mystics have all found elements of their beliefs reflected in neolithic sites – whether they attempt to unlock that meaning, or relish the conjecture and hypotheses such a site attracts.

Investments of imagination in these dark tunnels and majestic stones will conceivably continue. These sites are ancient manifestations of deep history that connect us to time, ecology and wisdom with an unnervingly tangible proximity. They are a portal to the belief systems that have populated human history, but are also portals to people. Lucy Lippard writes in her book *Overlay*, “When I cross a moor on which no tree, habitation or person is visible, and come upon a ring of ragged stones, a single rough-hewn pillar, a line curving away over a hill, a gently rounded mound or cairn of stones, I know this is human-made. I think neither of a boundless nature nor of gods or goddesses, but of the *people* who made these places.”

This mark of man was again traced by Icelandic runic expert Professor Finn Magnusson, at the famous Runamo rock in Sweden. As the sole scholar of the extinct language, Magnusson transcribed and translated the extensive inscriptions on the rock face, presenting an elaborate poetic description of an ancient battle victory to the world. These lines and etchings were subsequently and embarrassingly proven by geologists to be just cracks and shifts in the rock formation over time. And yet, Magnusson’s debunked translations still have a profound influence on Scandinavian literature. As our spiritual and scientific belief systems ebb and flow, the next overwriting the one before it, these stones still remain standing around the world. As John Michell observes of Stonehenge in his book *Megalithomania*, it is as though “it was specially designed to accommodate every notion that could possibly be projected onto it.” A deliberate, enduring tabula rasa to confound the minds of people throughout the ages.

Clearing away the decoding efforts, the unlocking of symbolism or carbon dating of fibres, there is an enormous attraction and liberation brought about by the unknown, by the mystical complexity rather than clarity. Garrett Phelan’s journey through storytelling and the meaning we project onto these manifestations is as serious as it is wry. He understands these sites to be impervious to the cultural baggage we ourselves seem unable to shed, the stones repelling millennia of social, religious or political attempts at conceptual colonisation, and thus standing alone in space and time, beyond meaning.

Phelan uses the phenomena of meaning and purpose attributed to ancient monuments to question the power such ancient relics hold over us. He tunes us into their frequency, contradicting the aura of their ancientness, identifying them as things outside of time, or in his own words, in ‘the absolute present tense’. He views these antiquated things as contemporary precisely because of the repetitive re-incarnation of their meaning – never known and thus never complete, reborn every time they are encountered, remembered or considered.

Ebbing, flowing and overlapping in Phelan’s work are contradicting elements: electronics and nature, the autonomous self and the voodoo-afflicted citizen, the great unknown and the innately known. The electronic field provides Garrett Phelan’s most consistent companion object. The microphone has accompanied decades of his art making, in drawing, radio, sculptures, photography, performance events and video, appearing again and again, as image, tool, prop, device. Phelan sees the microphone as a conduit or mediator, a bridge between the given and the unknown, a device that can distort, distend, transmit and amplify. With a visible, fixed cable, and extended, limitless amplification, the microphone holds a place in his practice that is as much an object as it is a functioning tool. Within his field of

engraved stones, it connects all that is concrete about the stones and their engravings, to all that is unknown in the cavernous blackness around them.

Phelan's approach in *A VOODOO FREE PHENOMENON* also echoes Magnusson's fanciful interpretations at Runamo. Amongst the gold-tinged objects, a one watt FM radio-schematic becomes a language to be decoded, the obscure messages to be received. The effect of the filming recalls the illuminating light of a solstice channelled into a chamber where, as described by John Michell: "a watcher inside the chamber at dawn sees the entry of a thin, bright sunray which strikes the ornamented stones on the back wall and moves steadily across their faces, picking out one by one the various inscribed symbols. The effect is of a moving finger of light, spelling out a story in an unknown language." The roving eye of the camera in Garrett Phelan's video, weaving in and out of the golden objects, revealing the curious electronic markings and creeping through the landscape, moves slowly – like a finger of light – and recalls the sensationally atmospheric and dramatic style of television documentary-making that injects life into the filming of very old things.

The elaborate objects and the monumental experience are, throughout the story, tethered to the presence of the artist's mother. His recollection of his anxious behaviour during his journey to the site during solstice, and his enduring regret for not getting her a place through the lottery-run admissions system, are almost as powerful as his remembrance of the event itself. As the memory of this extraordinary event becomes ever more deeply placed in the past, the emotion behind this most primal of mother-child relationships comes ever more closely to the fore – a naked conflation of the enormity of the unknown and the proximity of the innately known, and marking the sincerity of his desire to relate to both.

To paraphrase Dr William Stukely in his celebration of the Druids' achievements at Stonehenge, who had "advanced their inquiries, under all disadvantages, to such heights as should make our moderns ashamed, to wink in the sunshine of learning and religion", Phelan is also winking in the golden light of these enigmas, but asking, chanting, inscribing, even demanding, can we ever really be free from inherited social practices? From the conditions and belief systems that shape and accompany us through our formative years and thereafter? Can we be free from institutions? Free from symbols? Free from cause? Free from history? It is an agonised position and these are agonised questions. But they are questions asked around the proximity of neolithic stones, of enduring objects which in Garrett Phelan's way of thinking may have achieved this idea of freedom. For they are things *we know in part only*.

Referenced quotes from *Megalithomania*, J. Michell, Thames & Hudson Ltd, London, 1982 and *Overlay*, L. Lippard, The New Press, New York, 1983.