

# ArtReview

## The Venice Questionnaire #6 – Jesse Jones

The artist on conjuring Irish fables and feminism in the Irish pavilion



Jesse Jones, *Tremble Tremble*, 2017, production image. Photo: Ros Kavanagh

**A**rtReview sent a questionnaire to artists and curators exhibiting in and curating the various national pavilions of the 2017 Venice Biennale, the responses to which will be published daily in the lead-up to the Venice Biennale opening (13 May – 26 November).

Jesse Jones is representing Ireland with *Tremble Tremble (Tremate Tremate)*. The pavilion is in the Arsenale.

**What can you tell us about your exhibition plans for Venice?**

I have made a new film installation entitled *Tremble Tremble*. The work is inspired by Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch*; and merged with Irish fables of gigantism to imagine a way of thinking through feminism – as a means of magical thinking.

I collaborated with Olwen Fouéré on the film and developed the script through our conversations about female archetypes and the Witch emerges very quickly as an agent of necessary recuperation. We also talked about the pre-history of Feminism and how something more seismic could be represented to speak to a moment before the institution of the law or the State or even the modern world, as we know.

The exhibition itself comprises of film, a large digital movable scrim and sculptures. It is a departure for me to work in this way, so it has been quite challenging but it has brought me somewhere new with the work and I am excited to have a chance to share that.

**There are a huge number of biennial exhibitions across the world nowadays. Do you think the Venice Biennale still has a special status, and why?**

To be honest I don't really attend many biennales. I have probably been to about four, two of which I was in – so I have a different relationship to them. I think mobility is becoming more and more difficult for people and artists. But at the same time the biennale still can represent some sort of global utopia where we have the possibility of a shared cultural vision. That I think is going to feel really important in the years to come with the changes in political lines of division and the rise of more narrow Nationalistic narratives. I hope this sense of a shared cultural consciousness becomes more urgent but I also think we have to politicise that more, especially in these times.

***What does it mean to 'represent' your country? Do you find it an honour or is it problematic***

I think it is an amazing opportunity and an honour, yes. I got so much good feedback from Irish people about Venice even before it has happened. It feels like you are part of a conversation, also the subject matter of my work chimes with the current questioning in Ireland around body autonomy so people are engaged with the ideas, which is great. I think that Ireland is pretty open to cultural dissent overall. Whether or not it gets to impact the political realm remains to be seen. Levels of cultural dissent in Ireland is actually quite high despite the fact that we are often supported by the state. It was in fact, artists, playwrights, poets etc who were part of the revolutionary movement that forged the emergence of our modern state in the early part of the twentieth century so there is a very particular relationship between the artist as public figure in Ireland. The Irish public in a way expects political vanguardism from their artists. It is the media in Ireland that tend to be more conservative and censor themselves in the false ideals of balance, to the point that you might have a homophobic Catholic conservative have the same air time as someone who believes in marriage equality.

***The Venice audience is a diverse group. Who is most important to you? The artist peers, the galleries, curators and critics concentrated around the opening, or the general public, which visits in the months that follow?***

I have been very lucky in the last few years, to have the chance to talk to people directly about my work as they engage with it. As a performer and collaborator I was present in the gallery and performance space during the last two projects – *The Touching Contract* (a collaboration for Artangel with Sarah Browne), and *NO MORE FUN AND GAMES* (an exhibition in the Hugh Lane gallery).

I plan to be present in the Irish pavilion for the weeks following the opening; so I will get to meet people and have a chance to discuss the work. It is the very everyday and direct conversation that means most to an artist. You learn so much about your work and what was effective and what failed by talking to people who experience the work, whether they be curators galleries or the security guards. In fact the security guards often have had the best comments.

***Did you visit the last Venice Biennale? What's your earliest or best memory from Venice?***

I am afraid I didn't, I was super broke but I went in 2007 when Gerard Byrne represented Ireland and it was incredible. It is very awe inspiring to see such ambition and the amount of art, it's very magical, The highlight for me was Tobias Putrih and Luka Melon, *Venetian, Atmospheric* for the Slovenian pavilion. It really encapsulated a thinking around the cinematic as a social structure, so beautiful.

***How does a having a pavilion in Venice make a difference to the art scene in your home country?***

I feel like having the pavilion makes so much difference to our own sense of ourselves and how we communicate what is important to us to the rest of the world. The Irish pavilion always speaks to a moment that is happening or just about to happen; whether it is Gerard's incredible work in 2007 or Kennedy Browne (made up of artists Gareth Kennedy and Sarah Browne) and their investigations of capitalism and globalisation in 2009. Richard Mosse's work *The Enclave* in 2013 also sparked a lot of debate about photography and representation.

The Irish are naturally a very diagenetic people so we always have something to talk about! Venice feels like the centre of that for a moment and it is exciting to be part of that.

***You'll no doubt be very busy, but what else are you looking forward to seeing?***

I am really looking forward to seeing James Richards' pavilion for Wales and one of my favourite artists: Kim Sung Hwan included in the main exhibition. I think Phyllida Barlow is going to be amazing.