

Memory / Strata / Threads / Bloodlines: what does it mean to live a life embedded in the earth, finely woven together, with all of her beings?

What does it mean to be a woman, a daughter, a mother, an artist, in a world full of such deepening uncertainty?

It was May this year when I first properly encountered the work of the hands, the head and the heart of Belfast born, London based artist Laura Wilson.

We were recording a podcast with CCA Gallery in Derry-Londonderry, exploring SEAMS, the exquisite exhibition of Laura's work which was on there from March until June 2023.

Despite the reality of the actual season, myself, Laura, weaver Claire Whelan and CCA's director Catherine Hemelryk found ourselves – on that bright white day in May– hurtled into the velvety folds of winter.

We talked of weaving, ancestry, and land; our conversation then hauled us towards the body, colonialism and death; our words then led us back – to evolution, nourishment and (m)otherhood.

We found ourselves, four creative women in open-hearted sharing which springboarded from Laura's brightly universal, welcoming work – back with colour and the garden – given back to the Spring.

This is part of the powerful pull of Wilson's work: the gentle but insistent attention it gives to the very act of being alive.

Encountering her work again now, in actual winter, I am struck by how it responds to organic matters – making, decomposition, birth, death – so subtly, so affectingly.

At the heart of Laura's work sits the work of our everyday lives. Themes of labour, craft, and the body are held to the light in such a true and moving way. I find myself, when I give myself over to her work, considering the lives of female figures from the classical world. I think of Peneope and her weaving; her hands buying her time as she waits for her husband Odysseus's return from his wanderings. More so, though, I think of Penelope's cunning *undoing* (*weaving, then (un)weaving*) and cannot help but see a mirroring in the way Wilson, too, presents the relationship between the artist and their art. Each understands the process itself as holding the power to change worlds.

An exploration of time is at the heart of Wilson's work, and how we move through it as human beings.

*Winding, then Winding*, is, in very material, almost concrete ways, a piece that pays tribute to her maternal blood line through an exploration of the linen trade.

This exhibition marks two life-changing moments in the artist's life; the birth of her child and the loss of her mother, whose handiwork is part of the work. Laura taught her mother to weave, and *Circling* the

piece they worked on together, is on display here for the first time. I am struck by the ways in which art and life weave themselves together so seamlessly sometimes. Laura and her mother have circled and cycled together for all of Laura's life; Laura's mother was there when Laura made her way into the world, and Laura was there when her mother made her way out of this world. But Wilson's work makes me imagine other ways to view life and death. Endings and beginnings are replaced by ideas of ebbing and flowing, this beautiful unending cycle of being; the circle coming back to its beginnings, as well as being carried towards a whole new point in this cycle.

The loss of someone who has been there since our beginning, who in a physical way IS our actual beginning, feels like it could be nothing other than transformative, and I feel honoured that we have been let into these spaces. An invitation such as this, into dialogue about where we are, who we are, and where we are going, feels nothing short of a gift. We are treading here, on the fertile ground that is all that has been, all that is, and all that still will come. We are Persephone, her mother, and the seeds in that ancient story, all in one.

Virginia Woolf spoke of the need for us to tell the '*truth of our experiences as bodies*'.

I think of Laura at her loom, her hands working in between feeding her young child, cooking, eating; how feeding can mean so much more than simply nourishing our bellies. What does an artist need to feel sated, and how does an artist, who is also a mother, find ways to nurture herself?

Wilson and I spoke together about the word *tending* – of its power and tenderness all in one, and she wondered if perhaps the reason some creative women put barriers up regarding having children is because they are told repeatedly that their art would have to come second place.

We spoke about making space, and Wilson shared a conversation she had when pregnant with her son, with her mother, about how she almost felt like she was making another artwork, or creating space like how one would tend a garden, or perhaps even make a garden from scratch. How beautiful this idea of the weaving together of generations; of threads of creative practice; of parts of one's identity – which is at the heart of Wilson's quietly political, deeply affecting work.

Wilson's work takes the everyday, the overlooked, the seemingly mundane – and makes it shine.

Art, mothering, creating, holding, tending, giving; how we make room / (a womb) – for simply BEING...

To sit with the work of Laura Wilson is to be invited back into a space we know like the back of our hand; by heart; inside out, and back to front, but this space, nonetheless, feels like one we are encountering for the very first time.

I have lost count of the number of mothers I have heard say that, when they met the small, naked stranger –who'd made a home of their insides for nine long months – the very moment they set eyes upon that brand new creature, thought: *Ob! It's YOU. Of course it's you.*

This is how I feel about Wilson's work. No matter how many times I encounter it, it is as though for the very first time. When it is, in fact, the very first time, I feel like I am returning to a place I know better than any other.

This is the art of the smallness of life taken and made to shine brightly.

This is the art of the vastness of universal existence made small enough we can carry it with us.

So we can hold it close , when we need reminded of all that ties us together, thread by thread – being to being – in a world so keen on keeping us apart.

Kerri ní Dochartaigh, December 2023