MEMORY DRESS
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August 2006 - March 2007

St Finbarrs Hospital
Cork
introduction

One day while visiting the Sewing Hall in St. Finbarr’s Hospital, we noticed and were struck by tiny dresses, edged with blue and pink ribbon, beatifully and lovingly made by the seamstress. The dresses are used by the maternity unit for babies who have died. This stark and silent testimony of lives unlived planted the seeds of the idea from which this project grew.

All hospitals are suffused with the whispering echoes of human agonies and joys. Whilst St. Finbarr’s holds these timeless memories within its walls it also holds a special place in the hearts and minds of the people of Cork. It is the site of the former workhouse and throughout its lifetime has seen innumerable births and deaths.

As artists, we initiated a process whereby individuals associated with St. Finbarr’s Hospital could share the memories of special moments or special people in their lives by creating “dressworks”. Dress is a potent cultural symbol; a mundane and unobtrusive part of everyday life yet also integrally part of special occasions and memorable rites of passage. Everyone has items of clothing they remember – their own or others’. We wanted to examine individual and collective memory associated with dress.

The creation of items of clothing for special occasions has long been imbued with particular care and significance. It is a tradition becoming lost in our society where readymade items are cheap and disposable. This project allowed us to collaborate with participants to enable the creation of unique, evocative artworks which embody a fragment of memory or commemorate a loved one.

We were delighted to be able to work with both individuals and groups in the hospital itself and in the wider community. We greatly appreciated this opportunity for creative collaboration in a most unlikely setting.

Charlotte Donovan & Marie Brett

Memory Dress is part of Triskel’s Artistic Programme in St. Finbarrs Hospital which has been ongoing since November 2004. The Programme is supported by the Health Services Executive, Southern Region and Cork City Council. Memory Dress was supported by the Arts Council’s Artist in the Community Scheme managed by Create.
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OPEN DOOR SESSIONS

The artists hosted several workshops located in the hospital’s Social Centre. These ran throughout the day and into the evening. Patients, staff and visitors were invited to drop by for as long or as short a period as they were able and were offered the opportunity to:

- meet the artists and view work in progress
- be introduced to the Memory Dress Project and discover potential for involvement
- begin to reflect on a personal memory; consider and discuss options to make an artistic response
- explore a variety of materials and techniques and discover their own creativity
papermaking workshops
wire workshops
fused glass workshops
I MADE FROCKS, with body and skirt together. Straight and plain. That’s all cut in one piece, in one length, there’s no join in that. You would have two skirts - one wider than the other. The skirt would go just to your toe, not to the floor. Sometimes, on the tail, at the end of the frock, I’d do a row of them (little fabric rosettes), a row of small ones. I’d be lonesome now, when I can’t do it. Maura Finnegan
WARD WORKSHOPS

The artists worked closely with patients in the ward dayrooms, and occasionally beside beds. They created small, intimate groups or worked one-to-one and together shared personal memories while exploring materials and techniques. The artists then facilitated and supported individual patients to create individual responses in the form of artworks.

Elderly Continuing Care Wards
St. Ann's, St. Elizabeth's, St. Enda's
St. James' St. Martha's, St. Theresa's
MEMORY

I remember my Holy Communion dress, but more than that I remember the shoes. In those days you didn’t get white patent. I had black patent shoes, with white socks. I was so proud of them.

But didn’t it start to rain. I hated the thought of the rain spoiling my lovely shoes, so every few yards, I would stop to wipe the rain off them.

Maura Donovan
Even though it was May, I must have had my poor mother up in the middle of the night to dress me for my communion. It was dark outside when she had me standing on a dining room chair as she knelt in front of me puffing up my petticoats, straightening the hem of my frock and fastening the clasp of my shoes. My memory of standing on that chair being bedecked in white finery is one of elation & excitement. I felt like a princess. The 44 intervening years have failed to diminish the memory. With hindsight, however, the communion frock was a hideous monstrosity - Ger Kennedy

Sitting on the stairs in our house in Patrick's Street, Waterford 1966 I was thinking next year it will be my turn. My sister Karen had gone to Dublin on the train with my Mam & Grand Mother to buy her Holy Communion Dress. It was snowing they weren’t sure if the train would go.

Next year didn’t come. That September Mam reckoned I was growing too tall for Karen’s Dress to fit me the following year, so she asked Fr. Dwirigh if I could make my Holy Communion that year. He said he’d ask the Bishop. The Bishop agreed & Fr. Dwirigh put me through the preparations himself.

The day came – in October – the clocks went forward, we were late… the only child making her communion in Waterford & we were late. Fr. Dwirigh peered down at me from the pulpit as we clip cloppet up to the top of the church during his sermon. Only child in Waterford making her Holy Communion and we were LATE!!!

We went up to my Gran’s for lunch. I was always a tom boy so mam took the dress off during lunch and put on one of my Gran’s cardi’s and rolled up the sleeves. As everyone came in, they said ye are all dressed up. Tis Mailo’s Holy Communion they replied as I sat at the top of the table in my Gran’s cardi with rolled up sleeves.

After lunch we went to Annie Brophy to have our photo taken. (I’d fallen as a baby and all my first teeth had come down as butts!) I smiled for my Holy Communion Photo. Annie Brophy peered out from under the black cloth (behind the camera!) close your mouth DEAR!!! With a mouth like that you have nothing to SMILE ABOUT!!!

Mailo Power

MEMORY
“I had a black pleated skirt and top with inset white lace and buttons up the back. It was a lucky rigout. Whenever I went out in it, I had a good night. I wore it to bits.

About the same time, I bought a blue dress with silver buttons from the fifty shilling tailor. Whenever I went out in that dress, I had a bad night!”

Mary McCarthy
Every year around Christmas I would go with my husband to his work’s dress dance. Men wore dress suits which they would hire for the night. Every year you’d want to wear a different dress and I would make my own. My favourite was a royal blue taffeta with black lace over. I wore it with sandals with a heel – John sprayed them silver at work. It was off the shoulder and I remember Mam would say you can’t go out with bare shoulders showing. So I would wear a stole as I left the house.

Cora Dellahey
St. Philomena’s Ward  Physically Disabled

Eucharia Buckley
...and wondering, wondering

Darling if you’re thinking

now of me....

THE MOON

I see

on my way back,

Lough Corrib and the rocks...

MY GIRL

in the wee red frock

Esther
St. Catherine’s & St Monica’s Wards

Long term Psychiatric Care

The artists did several introductory sessions with the group working in St. Catherine’s ward. Together we explored textiles and paper; drawing, printing and collaging, and the group shared stories, songs and memories.

From this the decision was made to create some group pieces and so in sessions held in the Social Centre - in order to work on a larger scale - three long dressworks were created. The first was covered in drawings and text, the second from handmade paper and the third with fabric and paper collage.
Over time, patients and staff shared memories with us about the hospital; often returning to its chequered and intimate history of the laundry that was once on the site, similar to the Magdalene laundries.

Sometimes it was in hushed groupings outside, flanked by the huge stone buildings and many, many watching windows. Those layers of memory and myth intertwined in both our minds linking the stories of the unmarried mothers and their babies with the whispering wards and the idea of children loved and lost but not forgotten.

We developed a response to these memories, utilising baby dresses, which became the work ‘the lost children’ - babies born secretly at the hospital, out of wedlock; loved and cherished but faceless and lost.

The project involved collaboration with visitors, staff and patients at varying stages of development from early research and development to making/fabrication of the work and then interpretation. One of the patients lovingly named each dress. Several people shared their own experiences, moved by the work.

It was sited outside one of the old workhouse buildings in the hospital as a temporary installation. Once the work was dismantled we emptied the sand and recreated the work for exhibition.

Marie Brett & Charlotte Donovan
Postcards introducing the project were distributed around the hospital inviting participation not only from patients but from staff and visitors. The level of participation varied greatly - from sharing a memory to donating materials for workshops; from making a quick piece at the open session in 15 minutes to developing a work over several months. Some staff created their artwork independently while others worked in close collaboration with one or other of the artists.
“Now the Clergyman doing the Christening, I can see him. He would be late fifties. The type of garments he would be wearing; old type of garments; black and white - you know? He is wearing glasses. Took his job very seriously as well, that clergyman. If something was wrong, it was wrong and no-one could tell him different.

Now all these were put away in a very safe environment, because they were very special. There is good energy that comes off them now. I can feel it.”

Extract from a Psychometric Reading of Marie’s Christening Gown and Bonnet by Medium Dennis McCarthy. Full reading contained in book - 3 Dresses.
The artists created a structured project for seven children attending the DCD Unit. They wanted to offer the children the opportunity to work closely with artists and to give them individual attention. The boys were all given notebooks before the beginning of the project and were encouraged to build up a resource for the workshops by gathering source material - photographs, drawings and interviews. The group then met over four Saturdays and explored different materials and techniques.
On the 4th of July 1966
I gave birth to my first daughter in St Finbarr’s. She was beautiful – she still is. However, in those days, the baby was Christened in the Hospital Church, so my mother and sister took her to the church while I sat in my hospital bed.

When I was 9 years old my mother had some old royal blue curtains, so I gathered some white net and I made puff sleeves and piped them with the blue.

I always remember my first attempt at dressmaking.

I Remember my friend made a summer dress for me back in the fifties.

I loved the dress and wore it going to dances as well as going to the beach on our bikes.

Nancy Falvey

I Remember

Chris Dunlea

Eileen Healy

Eileen Healy
Ballyphehane & Togher ICA

Several members of the local ICA group had attended open sessions in the hospital, and invited the artists along to their weekly meeting. There are over 60 members of the group. The artists asked the women to bring with them scraps of fabric, buttons, ribbons and trimmings and invited them to recreate a special dress and share a memory. The result was a powerful document of moments in the lives of a group of individuals.

17.9.73 - 28.9.73

looking for a white Dress to put on my daughter
She had not received a dress as a present
She was Beautiful it had pink roses

Evelyn Sheehan
I will always remember

my pale blue dress

Dancing in the City Hall
and the Arcadia

with my husband David (R.I.P.)

M. O’Donovan
A black and white checked dress I got for Christmas. It had a red bow neck detail. That Christmas a friend of my mothers got me hair clips to match that dress. She also gave me marzipan cut in star shapes so now every time I see black and white check I think of marzipan stars.

Anne Michelle Phelan

When I was very small, we always wore very heavy woolen vests right up to the end of May. ‘Never shed a clout till May is out’ was strictly adhered to in our house. It was the last day of school before the summer. I think that I was about four. Ma let me wear my summer vest, and glory of glories, a summer dress. The background of the fabric was yellowy green, and on it were bubbles, big bubbles, in blue and green. It crystallised my feelings of being really happy. The dress itself had a tight bodice and puffed sleeves and it had a full skirt. the fabric was crispy cotton. It smelt fresh. I can still remember the warmth of the sun that day.

Maire Hearty

I was about 8 yrs old and it was a warm summers day. I was a quiet little girl and my mother adored dressing me up. I had the most beautiful dresses and I loved wearing them. On this particular day I had put on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt as it was July and we were playing in the garden. However I got bored and decided it would be nice to put on a dress. I trotted upstairs and picked out my red and white candy striped dress, slipped it on and realised I couldn’t tie the big bow at the back. So I went to the stairs to call my mother. She didn’t reply so I went to walk down the stairs and low and behold the ribbon wrapped around my ankle and I went head over heels down the stairs. When I came round with my mother over me with a bag of frozen peas on my ankle, all I could ask her was if my dress was ok!

Fiona Quill
I had a blue dress that smelt of summer. This year I finally gave it to someone with both the legs and the time to wear it. Now that I have neither. My favourite item of clothing is one small, furry shoe which fits snugly in the palm of my hand, and is already too big for my new daughter’s foot.

Conagh

MEMORY

It was disgusting! This dress was blue & green plaid with a big white lace trimmed collar. Vile. My mother tried to wedge me into it & being the little tomboy I was, I was doing my best to escape! Unfortunately I made the mistake of telling her to shut up & that was the end of me. I will always associate that dress with the greasy taste of soap in my mouth! As far as I know I was born in St Finbarrs. Jessica Tobin
Ballyphehane Community Arts Initiative

The Initiative began by teaching Crochet to a small group of women in 1995. Supported by the local Community Development Project it was a way of encouraging local women to get involved in their community.

The group began their involvement with the Memory Dress project in Autumn of 2006. They met and talked together and the women attended various art sessions held in the Hospital as part of the project. The artists soon realised what a wealth of talent the group possessed and decided that together we would make a book as a record of the beautiful garments they have created over the years for themselves and their families. The book contains photographic images, stories and embossments and represents these revived skills recording rites of passage, life, love and women’s bonds with each other.
“Even before she met the boyfriend, my daughter Orla had asked me that if ever she got married, would I make her a crocheted wedding dress. The dress didn’t work out what she wanted, so we compromised and went for a coat instead and put the trimmings on the dress”
“The dress is made from Irish Linen. The first baby who wore it was the first girl in generations. It has been worn by three babies in the family since – traveling back and forth over the Atlantic to America”
Participants

Ailish
Alice McCarthy
Angela Flavin
Angela Hurley
Ann Holton
Ann O’ Brien
Ann O’Callaghan
Ann O’Driscoll
Ann Roche
Ann
Anne
Anne Kiely
Anne Ryan
Anne-Michelle Phelan
Antoinette Blackshields
Barbara
Ben Kingston
Berenice Jones
Betty Busteed
Breda O’Brien
Brenda
Bridie Casey
Bridie Rice
Cass D’Arcy-Lane
Cathleen Bowen
Charlotte Meany
Chris Dunlea
Christine Buckley
Claire Cahill
Clodagh Piper
Cora Donnelly
Dan Hannigan
David Power
Dennis McCarthy
Dolores Flanagan
Dorothy Humphries
Dylan Finn Hannon
Eileen Buckley
Eileen Corcoran
Eileen Healy
Eileen Keane
Eileen O’Callaghan
Eileen O’Connor
Eileen White
Elizabeth
Elizabeth Keneally
Elma Sexton
Erin
Esther
Esther Glennon
Esther Maloney
Eucharia Buckley
Eva Ince
Evan O’Neill
Evelyn Crowley
Evelyn Sheehan
Fiona Quill
Gearóid Nyhan
Ger Kennedy
Geraldine Lyons
Gill Alderman
Gus
Hannah Farmer
Hannah O’Regan
Helen Mooney
Helen Walsh
Irene Neville
Iris Haughton
Jamie Morison
Jean Ryan
Jenny McCarthy
Jessica Tobin
Joan
John Brett
John O’Leary
Josephine Neff
Julie Kenneally
Kathleen O’Riordan
Kathleen Brown
Kathleen Murray
Kitty Condon
Kitty O’Neill
Kwon
Lesley
acknowledgements

So many people have been involved in this project it is inevitable that we will have missed some names. If it is your’s, we can only apologise. Some people gave only their first name, others left no name.

We would like to sincerely thank everyone who has supported, enabled and taken part in the project, It would never have happened without you.

Special thanks to

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Tony Sheehan, Artistic Director of Triskel; the Triskel Board and all Staff & volunteers
All of the patients, staff, relatives and friends of St. Finbarr’s Hospital for their welcome, patience and willingness to participate.

For further information on Triskel’s Artistic Programme in St. Finbarr’s Hospital
www.triskelart.com or call 021 427 2022

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