

# United Technologies



## *Lismore Castle Arts, Lismore, Ireland*

Once a year, Lismore Castle Arts invites a curator to organize an exhibition. It's no small task to come up with a show un-intimidated by such a context: an 800-year-old, staggeringly photogenic castle filled with furniture by the great Neo-Gothic architect and designer E.W. Pugin, a plethora of Old Master paintings and ghosts of former inhabitants including Sir Walter Raleigh and Adele Astaire (Fred's sister). Rather than attempting to compete with such surroundings, the curator of 'United Technologies', Philippe Pirotte (Director of the Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland), has cleverly chosen the work of five artists - Stefan Brüggemann, Rita McBride, Corey McCorkle, Jason Rhoades and Ai Weiwei - that respond, with subtlety, occasional sadness and some wit, to the castle's loaded history.

Although immediate connections between the artists might seem tenuous, Pirotte's intelligent curating makes clear certain shared interests - particularly around art, design, architecture, nature and technology - that are manifest in startlingly different forms in the modest gallery space (housed in the once-derelict west wing of the castle) and the greenhouse. Paying homage to the castle's collection of decorative arts, Brüggemann covered the interior of the gallery with silver wallpaper covered with repetitions of the words 'Conceptual Decoration' (also the title of the work, 2009). The wallpaper serves as a somewhat literal backdrop to other pieces in the show, all of which echo some of the ideas spawned from the relationship between beauty and utility that fuelled late 19th-century debates around the role of decoration: namely, that good design is, in essence, a form of problem solving, be it social, aesthetic or moral. More obliquely, the works also allude to Lismore Castle's role as a stronghold of

colonial power, and, by association, its need for vast sums of money and its simultaneous exploitation and celebration of both natural and human resources.

McCorkle's seven gold-embossed walking sticks, carved with designs by J.M. Whistler, lean against the walls; visitors are encouraged to borrow them for a stroll around the lush castle gardens. On the day I visited, the artist was on his knees in said garden, picking wild dandelions - traditionally regarded as weeds - to make wine, which he was storing in the greenhouse in customized glass bottles until it was ready to drink; the secret recipe belongs to his grandmother, who was originally from Ireland (McCorkle is from the US). Similarly, the two works by Ai Weiwei ('Oil Spills', 2006, a series of hyper-real sculptures of oil slicks made from glazed porcelain that follow a path throughout the show, and *One Ton of Tea*, 2006, a fragrant large cube made from compressed black tea) allude to trade relationships between different countries and cultures - relationships that can be both productive and damaging. McBride's photo-relief of an old stone Irish wall (*Wall*, 2009) suggests similar themes from a more mysterious angle: apparently it is impossible to discover what borders these ancient walls demarcated; today, they exist as memorials to a disappeared relationship to the land.

An aluminium scaffolding sculpture by the late Rhoades, *Sutter's Mill* (2000), and a photographic collage of his father's garden (a place of inspiration for the artist) entitled *View from Above* (2000) are the most elegiac works included in 'United Technologies'. A meditation on the false promises wealth often offers, *Sutter's Mill* refers to the Swiss immigrant who single-handedly started the 1849 California gold rush when he found nuggets in his mill: a find that circuitously led to his destitution. It's a work that chimes a note of warning in such salubrious surroundings: castles in the air, it seems to murmur, can only house dreamers.

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