

Information and ideas to explore works from
IMMA's Collection

○ **Strand 7: Iran do Espírito Santo**
Untitled (Keyhole), 1999

○ STRANDS

Prepared by artist Christine Mackey

Introduction

Strands is a series of information sheets devised in response to works from IMMA's Collection, where an artist is invited to develop a range of responses to works selected from an exhibition. The purpose of this series is to provide information and ideas for anyone – adults, children, teachers, lecturers, students – to encourage OBSERVATION, DISCUSSION and MAKING.

Each Strand focuses on one artwork from IMMA's collection and includes the following information:

- **about the artist:** who they are
- **background to the artist's practice:** how they make their work, what kind of work they make
- **for discussion:** some questions and observations about the artist and the work which are intended to prompt further looking, discussion and making
- **key words:** words used in the document which are explained further
- **activities:** a variety of suggestions for further activities and projects in response to the work
- **further explorations:** further information about the artist, artwork and related themes
- **further reading:** some suggestions for books, websites and other resources

These responses have been developed by artist **Christine Mackey** in collaboration with IMMA's Education and Community Department.

Lisa Moran
Curator: Education and Community Programmes

Christine Mackey

Christine Mackey is an artist and independent researcher who employs diverse disciplines, subject matter and tactics in devising works that can generate different kinds of knowledge of place - their hidden histories and ecological formations. Using diverse graphic sources and quasi-scientific methods, her work explores the interactive potential of art as a research and pedagogical tool; its capacity for social and environmental change and as a way of organising diverse knowledge systems for a 'social' model of practice coupled with diverse publics.

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One Foot in the Real World

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Christine has drawn out strands from the current Collection exhibition **One Foot in the Real World**, curated by Marguerite O'Molloy, Assistant Curator: Collections. These responses reflect Christine's particular interests and they are intended to encourage further enquiry and response from individuals and groups, adults and children of all ages before, during and after a visit to the exhibition.

Drawing on IMMA's Collection, **One Foot in the Real World**, includes works that explore the urban environment, the everyday or the domestic. Prompted by the Eileen Gray, Leonara Carrington and Klara Lidén exhibitions which run concurrently, the exhibition addresses the psychology of space, scale and the body, gravity and transformation. Elements of architecture and design recur as points of departure in the works such as bricks, the keyhole, the window, the door and the table.

Iran do Espírito Santo

Untitled (Keyhole)



Untitled (Keyhole), 1999

Stainless steel

Collection Irish Museum of Modern Art
Donation, Artist | 2010

Untitled (Keyhole) is milled from solid stainless steel and mirror-polished, resulting in a quite monumental, yet domestic-scaled sculpture that makes real the negative space of the keyhole.

Do Espírito Santo's keyhole form was milled from a single piece of solid stainless steel. Placed on a metal lathe, a skilled machinist milled the steel perfectly symmetrically according to specific computer-generated design. After the sculpture had been milled to the keyhole form, it was then mirror-polished to perfection. This task is performed by hand and takes over a week to complete the sculpture.

It is interesting to note that although this object has been made with a strong attention to hand-crafted processes, at the same time all signs of this hand production disappear through a finishing process that communicates the hyper-real visuality of the object by exploiting the reflective qualities of steel. The intricacy and complications of this process belie the simple elegance of the final sculpture and its solidity.

The solidified space of the keyhole not only emits light from the polished steel, rendering the surface of the steel similar to a mirror, but this surface also reflects back the exterior space of the gallery and architectural surroundings in which the work is placed while capturing our very presence as we move around the work. In this way, do Espírito Santo playfully dissolves the spatial boundaries between the individual and the art work by creating the conditions for matter and light to interact - the inside reflects out while at the same time the outside reflects in.

Iran do Espírito Santo

b. 1963 Mococo

Brazilian artist Iran do Espírito Santo was born in 1963 in Morrocco. He graduated from the Fundação Armando Alvares Penteado, São Paulo, Brazil, in 1986.

His work deals with structure, design, place, surface, space, light and material and is based on a subtle subversion of **MINIMALISM** through abstracted everyday items. Among do Espírito Santo's favourite materials are glass, stainless steel, granite, marble and sandstone, which help give a timeless feel to simple recognisable objects such as lamps, bricks, boxes, keyholes and tins. His palette is limited almost exclusively to white, grey and black. Do Espírito Santo has exhibited worldwide, including a successful solo exhibition at IMMA in 2006.

Background to Iran do Espírito Santo's process

Do Espírito Santo develops art-works that vary between sculpture, architecture, painting and **INSTALLATION**. Through these diverse **MEDIUMS** he plays with the possibilities of industrial design and the tactile characteristics of different materials combining craftsmanship with modern industrialised technology.

Do Espírito Santo's methods involve creating three-dimensional representations of practical objects such as light bulbs, walls, candlesticks, boxes, lamps, keyholes and tin cans in materials ranging from copper to glass to granite and steel. He transforms the domestic and functional nature of these objects in order to re-invent them as aesthetic icons of pure contemplation. By taking as his starting point, the mundane and familiar objects used in our everyday environments, he challenges our habitual relationships with these objects by making the familiar strange and beautiful.

'Many of the objects that we deal with in a domestic context have been a concept before their existence in the real world. Somehow what I try to do is to go back to their idealization but in a very graspable way, often by using solid and heavy materials through very technical processes', says the artist of his own practice.

His palette, or tonal range, consists of white, grey and black, together with the ambient incidence of light on the surfaces of his works. The positioning of his work in a gallery environment is a very important aspect of his sculpture because of how the unique light conditions in each gallery situation can change how his work is perceived by the viewer. So, in this sense, how an object is experienced by an individual can vary from person to person not only because of the work itself but also because of the surrounding environment in which the work is placed. This is partly due to the reflective qualities inherent in the material that the work is made from but also in terms of how the tactile quality of the material interacts with the environmental conditions of natural and artificial light.

His practice has often been described as 'Seductive Minimalism' because of the way he abstracts or pulls everyday objects from their normal use into illusionistic devices. In this way, his work subverts the strict systems and patterns of pure form deployed by Minimalist artists of the 1960s. Recurring subject matter in Do Espírito Santo's work includes structure, design, place, surface, space, light and material.

For discussion

Why do you think do Espírito Santo was interested in working with the negative space of the keyhole?

Have you ever considered the negative space that surrounds and is part of an object even of yourself?

How does do Espírito Santo change our perception of everyday objects such as the keyhole?

Through do Espírito Santo's work we experience a different relationship between the art object and how we interact with it. How does he achieve this?

What do you first notice about the materials and scale of this work?

Are the materials natural or man-made?

In what way do the material qualities of steel change our experience of the object?

Do you think steel is a cold or warm material?

Central to do Espírito Santo's work is the placement of his sculptures in a physical environment. In what way does the physical environment change and/or alter the keyhole for example?

When you look and walk around the keyhole, what do you see?

Can you describe the surface of the keyhole?

Are there any physical traces of the hands that worked the material from which the keyhole is made?

Why do you think do Espírito Santo wanted to polish the steel almost to a mirror-like finish?

Looking at do Espírito Santo's work, would you now consider the relationship between space as positive and space that is negative as being different?

What might this relationship be?

Can you describe there differences?

Why do you think he makes present that which is absent?

Do Espírito Santo explores the positive and negative space, the idea of external and internal voids. Can you explain how do Espírito Santo uses positive and negative space to express his ideas in his art making?

In many of do Espírito Santo's works he makes an edition of a certain number for each object. Why do you think he does this?

Outside/inside, negative/positive, what other words would you use to describe do Espírito Santo's work?

Key words

ABSTRACT

Describing an object or representation that has been simplified or distorted down to its bare essentials, with superfluous detail removed to communicate a fundamental aspect of a form or concept.

AESTHETICS

The theory of what is considered artistic or beautiful.

CONCEPTUAL ART

Originating in the 1960s, Conceptual Art pushed arts practice beyond the conventional limits of the art object, placing an emphasis on the idea or concept rather than a tangible art object. The ideas and methodologies of Conceptual Art inform much contemporary art practice.

DADA

An international, avant-garde art movement founded in 1916 which used a variety of media, including collage, sound, nonsense texts and absurd performances to protest against the social, cultural and political conditions prevailing in Europe during World War I. Originating in Zurich, the movement spread to Paris, Berlin, Cologne, Hanover and New York.

ENTROPHY

A term used in thermodynamics but also used to refer to natural decay or the breakdown of a social system or the measure of disorder and randomness in a system. What 'disorder' refers to is the different microscopic states in a system - for water for example this would include volume, energy, pressure and temperature.

FORM

The apparent solidity or three-dimensionality of a drawn, sculptural and/or painted object. The composition and structure of the work as a whole.

HYPER-REAL

Artworks that appear extremely realistic to the extent that they trick the eye. ('Deceive the eye' is the literal translation of trompe l'oeil, a French term historically used to describe these types of works.). Hyperreality is a term used to describe an inability of consciousness to distinguish reality from a simulation of reality, especially in technologically advanced post-modern societies. Simulation is characterised by a blending of 'reality' and representation, where there is no clear distinction between where the former stops and the latter begins. Some famous theorists of hyperreality include **Jean Baudrillard**, **Albert Borgman**, **Neil Postman** and **Umberto Eco**

ICONS

Historically an icon was a painting and/or sculptural work depicting a venerated religious figure. It was used as an aid to devotion.

INDUSTRIAL DESIGN

Industrial Design is the use of both applied art and applied science to improve the aesthetics, ergonomics, functionality and /or usability of a product.

INSTALLATION

An artwork made for a specific site or location, which engages with its context and audience.

LANGUAGE

The use of verbal and written text as a medium in Conceptual Art.

MATERIAL

An element or substance out of which something can be made or composed.

MEDIUM

In the arts, media, the plural of medium, refers to the materials, methodologies, mechanisms, technologies or devices by which an artwork is realised. Traditional media include painting, sculpture and drawing and the specific materials used such as paint, charcoal or marble, can also be referred to as media. In contemporary art practice artists use a wide range of media, such as technology, found materials, the body, sound, etc.

MINIMALISM

An abstract art movement which emerged in the US in the 1960s which emphasised the use of simple, geometric forms and the use of modern materials often drawn from industry. Minimal artists rejected the expressive and subjective qualities associated with Abstract Expressionism emphasising the innate properties of materials.

NARCISSUS

A term uses to suggest vanity and self-absorption. It refers to a hunter in Greek mythology who was punished for his vanity by falling in love with his own reflection. He was also transformed into a flower.

NEGATIVE SPACE

The space around and between a three-dimensional object.

PERCEPTION

Perception includes the five senses, touch, sight, taste smell and taste. Perception is our sensory experience of the world around us and involves both the recognition of environmental stimuli and actions in response to these stimuli.

SCALE

The relationship in terms of size and proportion between one object and another. The scale of an art work is often measured in relation to the size of the human figure.

SYMMETRICAL

Harmonious and balanced forms with regular and corresponding parts.

TEXT-BASED

Artwork created using written or printed words as the material and/or subject matter.

TONAL

These are the characteristics of various colour schemes that convey moods (psychological affects) and aesthetic affects.

Activities

CASTING NEGATIVE SPACE

Cast the space inside a miniature room

Although we do not have access to the materials and technology that Do Espírito Santo uses in his work, we can consider using alternatives that reflect do Espírito Santo's methods.

One such material is plaster, which can be used to cast all sorts of different objects and spaces. Casting is a process whereby an object is made by pouring molten metal or other material into a mold.

So what we need to do first of all is to consider how to make a structure that can hold liquid plaster.

Consider making a miniature room/building/interior space. This could mimic a place/room such as your bedroom that you are familiar with or something developed from your imagination.

Find a cardboard box. Make sure all sides including the bottom of the box are intact. Gently fold out the box. This can be easily done as small cardboard boxes are usually held simply together with light glue.

When your box is folded out flat – consider what changes you can make to all of the parts of the inside of the box. Sketch ideas and form initial designs based on your bedroom for example. Design and build inside the cardboard box. In this way what you are doing is adding textured materials to the interior walls of the box.

You can source found materials at home such as rags, bits of wool, types of paper including plastics, sticks and plant materials such as leaves and cabbage leaves. Consider cutting and/or tearing these materials to represent things that you find in your room such as a window, books on a shelf, a picture on a wall and even a wardrobe. Then you need to glue these cut-out materials onto the interior walls of the box. Once you are satisfied with the overall look of the walls, coat the entire box with vaseline. Fold up the sides, and bottom of the box. If you are worried about the sides, add masking or cellotape to hold all sides of the box in place so that no liquid can seep out.

So now your mold is prepared for casting. Mix the casting compound. Instructions should be on the pack. If not, fill a plastic bowl less than half full with lukewarm water. Gently pour plaster into the water making sure there are no lumps. Keep adding plaster until there is a thin layer of powdered plaster sitting on top of the mix. Allow to sit for about five minutes for the surface to absorb the water. Stir plaster gently to avoid incorporating air bubbles into the mix.

Mixed plaster should be without lumps and the consistency of thick cream. Slowly pour the plaster into your mold. After filling, gently tap the mold so that the air bubbles rise to the top. Let the plaster sit for approximately 30-45 minutes. As the plaster solidifies, it will give off heat. A warm mold will indicate that the mold can be removed. After 24 hours the plaster becomes significantly harder.

While the mold can be removed days after the plaster has set, this can make it more challenging to remove the material details embedded in the plaster. Remove the mold and finish surfaces. You can consider leaving the mould as it is and/or adding colour by painting the various details of your mould that are most prominent.

Other alternatives to the box is to consider sourcing a variety of objects such as tin cans, small bags, unwearable shoes – any object that is a container which you can use to cast the interior or negative space of that object.

Activities

DRAWING IN-BETWEEN SPACES

In a painting or sculpture there are areas where there are no forms (the 'empty' areas). In a painting, the areas which have no forms or objects are sometimes also called the 'background'. In sculpture, this means the spaces or 'holes' between forms or within a form such as do Espírito Santo's keyholes. Positive space is the space occupied by forms in a painting or sculpture (the figure in a portrait) and negative space is the opposite of positive space – the spaces not occupied by forms.

Notions of positive and negative space were advanced during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, replacing the more traditional idea of a 'background' which was subordinate to and separate from the subject image – portrait, still life, etc.

As described previously, do Espírito Santo's work is about exploring the 'ordinary object' in new ways. In the keyhole work, he has concentrated this exploration on the negative space of the keyhole – the space where the key fits.

Here, it would be interesting to think about and, more importantly, look for various objects in your home or school. Why not take a walk around these spaces looking at the various objects that are causally laid about such as a stool, table, bags, etc.

Can you see how these objects are positioned in space?

Where are the negative spaces that surround and are in between these various objects?

Rather than drawing the object itself, why not draw the negative spaces or mass around these objects.

Collect a number of these objects and lay them on top and/or next to each other creating a 'still life'. Again consider the negative spaces that these objects occupy rather than the object itself.

Alternatively, if you have access to a camera, why not take a series of photographs of these objects, concentrating on various aspects of the negative spaces and how the light can heighten or dim your experience of these spaces. Concentrate on close-ups rather than photographing an overall image of the objects – here you are practicing how artists abstract or pull particular aspects from an object.

Because you are concentrating on details, in effect, you are creating another view or alternative experience of an object because you are not quite sure what you are looking at .

Further explorations

MIRRORED SURFACES

Many sculptors enjoy using a shiny, highly polished, reflective surface and are entranced with the ability to reflect. They also are interested in how mirrored surfaces play with perception, multiplying and fracturing the image. Mirrors also allow artists to actively engage viewers - this fact might, in part, account for their current popularity among artists.

When viewers can see themselves reflected in a work, the art immediately becomes of greater interest and provides a **NARCISSUS**-like fascination. We all like to look at our own image and become caught up in how we can change the artwork by moving ourselves. As people interact with mirror works, a temporal element is also introduced. With the use of mirrors, other people and the surroundings become part of the artwork.

Mirrors also expand the space visually, and sculptors naturally are interested in this phenomenon since sculpture is, above all, about creating space. There is a number of artists' work that could be explored in relation to do Espírito Santo's practice of creating highly finished artworks. **Lucas Samaras** has had long history of using mirrors in his crafty, obsessively decorated box pieces (begun in the early '70s) encrusted with a variety of materials, including mirrors, as well as his mirror rooms. Viewers could enter this corner structure, which is completely covered with mirrors, and contemplate their various reflections. Samaras' mirrored rooms are very similar to **Tasha Kusama's**, which were created several years before his. Like Kusama, Samaras creates an environment in which mirrors reflect other mirrors to the point of infinity.

Mirrors have long been used in folk art, outsider art, and craft. Decorative works composed of myriad found objects and bits of broken mirrors and reflective glass are common in outsider art, as well as in the ethnic arts and crafts of India Mexico, and other cultures.

Mirrors and mirror-like materials are also used in a variety of ways by interior decorators to expand the space and create visual interest.

Artists also enjoy working with the decorative aspects of mirrors and mirror-like materials. **Robert Smithson**, an artist associated with **MINIMALISM** and Land Art in the 1960s and '70s, used mirrors in his work. In his series of 'Slideworks' created in the late 1960s, Smithson used mirrors to displace and fracture the landscape, installing one or more rectangular mirrors at various sites around the world, which he photographed and then removed. These photographs—composed to show the fractured, reflected landscape, usually a barren and remote spot—are the artwork: there was no audience at the installation sites except Smithson himself and nothing is reflected except the landscape and the sky. These works form part of Smithson's exploration of **ENTROPHY** and time and site and non-site.

Further reading

Selected Publications

Iran Do Espirito Santo, Edited by Paolo Colombo April 2006, Edizioni Electa, Distributed By Trans-Atlantic Publications.

Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin 9th November 2006 - 21st Jan 2007. Pinacoteca do Estado, Sao Paulo (Spring 2007).

Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, Phaidon London, 1998.

Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer (eds.), *Reconsidering the Object of Art 1965-1975*, MIT Press, 1995.

Websites

IMMA

www.imma.ie

www.imma.ie/en/subnav_123.htm (IMMA's *What is_?* programme)

www.moma.org

www.oxfordartonline.com

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www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artMakerDetails?maker=3793&page=1

www.tashakusama.com

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