

***Supernature*: Converging at the ‘soft edges’ of science, nature and the visual arts**

‘Of all the faculties we possess, none is more important at this time than a wide-eyed sense of wonder.’

Lyall Watson *Supernature* (1973)

Following the death of Lyall Watson in 2008, newspaper obituaries across the world struggled to reach a consensus on how best to categorise the author’s eclectic life. While The New York Times described him as a ‘maverick scientific polymath and explorer’, The Telegraph cited Watson’s diverse interests as traversing ‘astrology, paranormal phenomena, alchemy, circadian rhythms, palmistry and dreams’. He was widely credited with ‘bringing science and philosophy to the wider public’ with his New Age books about the paranormal, including the bestselling *Supernature* (1973). Fittingly, Watson once described himself as a ‘scientific nomad’, denoting his position at the fringes of conventional science. Fluctuating between the rational and reasoned, the conscious and unconscious, *Supernature* juxtaposed obscure botanic research with systems of belief garnered from folklore, ethnography, and Occult science, to more adequately explain the mysteries of the natural world, and the human experience within it. In short, *Supernature* probed ‘the space between those things that we understand as normal occurrences, and those that are completely paranormal and defy explanation’.

Adopting *Supernature* as its title, Linda Shevlin’s current body of work occupies a similar position at the ‘soft edges’ of science, nature and visual art. In this instance, *Supernature* is a multi-media exhibition, comprising plinth-based sculpture, audio works and a multi-channel HD film installation, which collectively revisit a number of Watson’s botany-related experiments of the 1970’s. Embarking on a series of controlled studies, Shevlin explored the communicative abilities of plants (*Mrs Hasimoto*, 2013), and the growth patterns of seedlings at the various stages of the lunar cycle (*Lunar Planting Data*, 2013). The project took place during a residency at The Organic Centre, Co. Leitrim, where a purpose-built geodesic dome functioned as a D.I.Y laboratory, a public space for workshops, a backdrop for cinematic projections, and the setting for a short film (also entitled *Supernature*) documenting attempts to cultivate bioluminescent matter as a renewable source of light.

Literary and Filmic Influences

Using Watson's book as a point of departure, other literary devices permeate Shevlin's film, evident in the thematic content, visual language and composition. Providing commentary on the experiments being conducted, sections of Watson's text are relayed by a narrator, while corresponding page numbers are imposed on the film – a literary device reminiscent of Grant Gee's multi-layered film essay *Patience (After Sebald)*, which features readings from W.G. Sebald's semi-fictional memoir *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), delivered via first-person narrative and annotated on screen with page numbers.

The structure of *Supernature* is organised around four distinct 'inquiries' – *Senses*; *Lunar Rhythms*; *Empathy*; and *Searching for Bioluminescence* – which seem to function as distinct yet interrelated 'chapters'. This purposeful compositional device has the effect of altering the expected sequential narrative, producing a series of fully-formed short scenes which are not mutually exclusive, but could happily exist in isolation. New Media theorist Lev Manovich has widely described how, since the 1990's, online platforms and digitised content have intervened in the fixed and linear chronology of film, creating symbolic and experimental structures such as Database Cinema, offering different ways to organise narrative. New paradigms in contemporary film and video art were similarly described by Daniel Birnbaum in his book *Chronology* (2005), which tracks the 'varying degrees of autonomy from traditional, subject-centred models of time' across artists' cinema from the 1960's onwards, stating 'It all starts with an ending, and then it ends again'.

Further filmic devices in *Supernature*, from the b-movie soundtrack, to the white-coated lab technicians featured in the film, bring to mind the dystopian, post-apocalyptic scenarios of cold war, 1960's and 70's New Wave science fiction, which expanded the traditional confines of the sci-fi genre to reject 'hard science' in favour of more literary, artistic and experimental content. The strikingly futuristic architecture of the geodesic dome – a recurrent fixture of the sci-fi genre, often denoting the demise of human civilisation due to air pollution or environmental catastrophe – is used effectively in *Supernature*. The geodesic structure conjures a visual language reminiscent of environmentally-themed films of this era, such as Douglas Trumbull's *Silent Running* (1972), which depicted the extinction of Earth's plant life, and the efforts of a botanist to preserve and cultivate specimens in space. The 1979

documentary *'The Secret Life of Plants'* also features in *Supernature*, directly as a cinematic projection within the geodetic dome, and indirectly as an archetype of time-lapse photography, echoed elsewhere in the exhibition.

Edifice, Circadian & Where We Gather

Evidently, in stylistic terms, *Supernature* is the product of numerous, wide-ranging literary and filmic influences. The thematic content, drawn largely from the natural sciences, focuses broadly on the innate rhythms and cycles of the natural world, and how they adjust in response to external influences such as human intervention and the built environment. A defining visual feature of the film is the dramatic blue-hued lighting, which casts ominous shadows and conjures a paranormal presence. Retrospectively, these technical and conceptual elements seem to have been initiated or explored periodically throughout Shevlin's previous work, including her collaborative practice with artist Padraig Cunningham as the duo Cunningham/Shevlin. The three channel video work *Circadian* (2009) for example, explores artificial lighting as a defining feature of industrialisation, when attempts to diminish hours of impenetrable darkness lengthened the working day, thus denying 'darkness' as a mechanism of daily life central to human biology. Within *Circadian*, the phenomena of bioluminescence believed to be exuded by dead herrings (as described in Sebald's *Rings of Saturn*) first manifested itself as a spectacle of ecological and artistic significance. In a similar vein, *Nocturne* (2009) examined the natural cycles of growth and decay, presented as a phantasmagorical sequence of works.

A recurrent interest in the paranormal previously surfaced in other film works, including *Edifice* (2009). 'Edifice' denotes both a physical structure (such as a large, imposing building) and an elaborate conceptual framework (such as a complex system of belief). Fittingly, the focus of the film was a disused tower (built in 1970's rural Roscommon), which provided a physical point of convergence for two separate yet interrelated histories. Personal accounts were provided by the architect of the tower, whose design for the building was never fully realised, and the president of the UFO society of Ireland, who used this building for sky watches, designating it as a prominent landmark for extraterrestrial sightings and paranormal events in the region. As their stories collide and intersect, it becomes apparent that, in the absence of the architect's vision being accomplished, the tower has become a 'non-place', which now acts as a repository for other people's ideals and utopias. This

robustly highlights the dialogical relationship between human belief systems and the built environment – a recurrent conceptual premise of Shevlin’s artistic practice. In addition, *Where we Gather* (2009) used the shell of an abandoned rural ballroom as a site to reflect on Irish cultural history. The film featured a lone trumpet player and the silhouette of a dancing couple, who appeared as chimerical figures, highlighting a discontinuity between traditional community values and modern society in the local versus global dichotomy – a trajectory which suitably returns us to thinking about contemporary Ireland, using *Supernature* in the Leitrim context as a motif for potential avenues of change.

Self Sustaining Practice

Some believe that the Celtic Tiger building boom (with its centralised, artificial housing estates and hyper-constrictive planning regulations for ‘solo-builds’) discriminated against the ancient habitation patterns of traditional rural living. Some might argue that County Leitrim itself is a complex dichotomy; a palpable divide between the legacy of wastefulness, greed and ruin embodied in the county’s innumerable ‘ghost estates’, and the ideology of ‘utopian living’ brought to the area by the influx of migrants from European cities (during the 1980’s Thatcher-Reagan era), reviving the skills and crafts necessary for self-sufficient, ‘eco-living’. A standoff still endures between multi-national oil company plans for shale gas extraction in the county, and the anti-fracking activists who still campaign against this international (yet localised) agenda. Turf-cutting and wind turbines feature prominently in other ecological debates.

How renewable energy and visions for a ‘post-scarcity’ economy, might feature in artistic discourse, has found new forms in 21st century practice, most notably in the ramshackle, sculptural, ‘D.I.Y’ aesthetic which has gained momentum over the last few years. This reactionary movement channels a desire to ‘rebuild’ after economic collapse, while echoing trends in new-wave architecture, which proffer sustainable housing solutions and eco-living in the context of urban overpopulation and ecological crisis. Set in Chiang Mai, Thailand, French artist Philippe Parreno’s film *Boy from Mars* (2003) featured water buffalo, harnessed to a purpose-built shelter and electricity-generating machine, which produced the power for Parreno’s video camera. The resulting film is spectacle which embodies a dialogue between farming, architecture and art. In many ways, Shevlin’s *Supernature* draws on the visual

language and legacy of such canonical works, creating a filmic portrayal of the places where Sci-fi, Speculative Fiction, documentary and socially engaged practice overlap. Returning to Lyall Watson's theories on the vast, as yet untapped, and still largely unexploited ability of the human mind, it seems fitting to conclude with this quote.

"We are indeed larvae, eating our way through earth's resources in a mindless, caterpillar fashion, but I believe that the imago is already beginning to stir within. When the climate is right, it will break out not as some sort of supercomputer, but as an organic being that will embody Supernature, and look back on technology as a childhood toy."

Joanne Laws

May 2014