

*Thoughts from Top Withens*

*An exploration of narrative in art*

WUTHERING HEIGHTS

have just returned from a visit to my

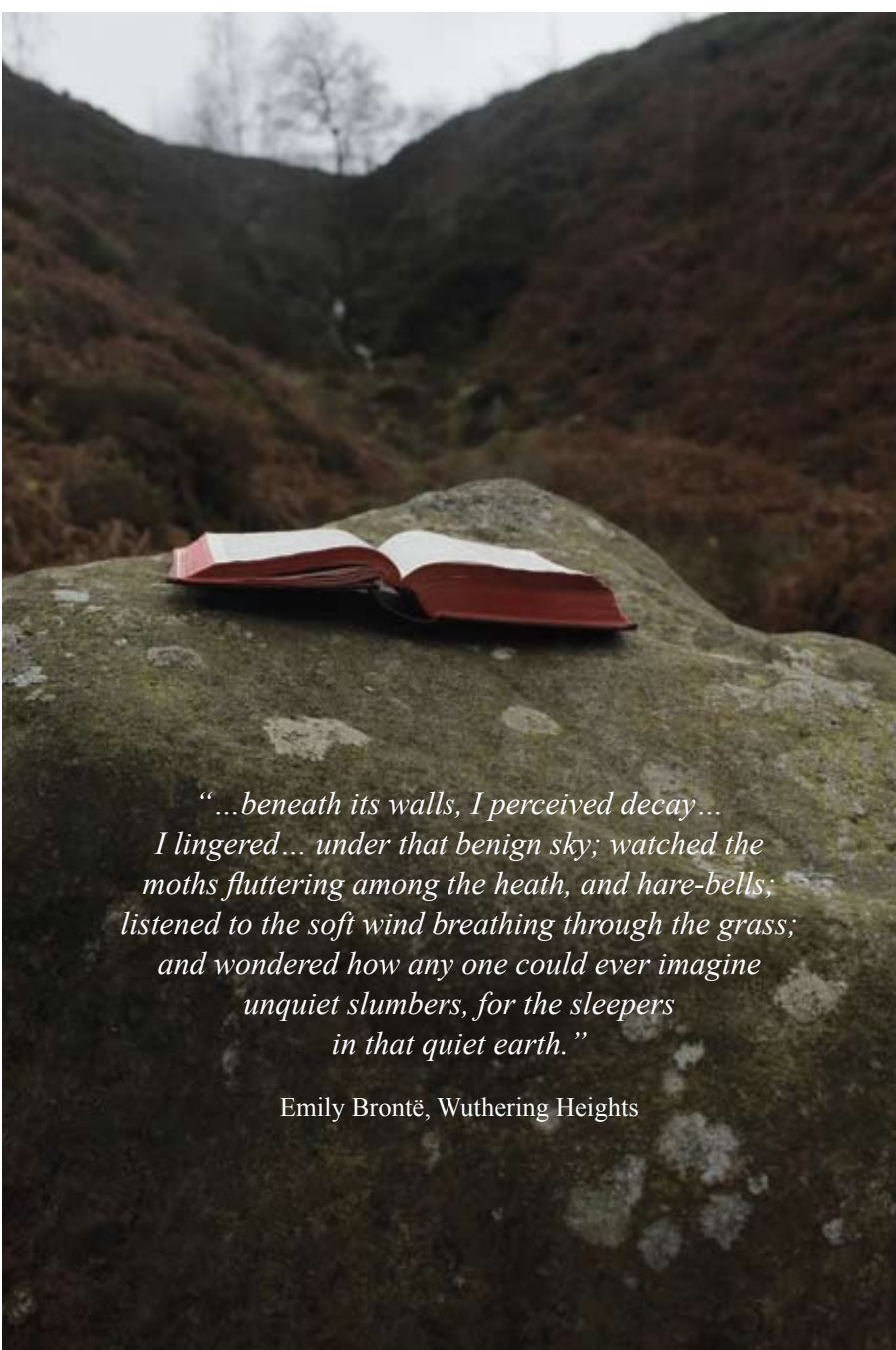
ur that I shall be troubled with

country! In all England, I do not

find on a situation as completely rem

fect: a therapist's heaven: a

Mia MacDermott

An open book with red covers is resting on a large, mossy rock in the foreground. The background shows a deep valley with steep, dark, forested hills under a grey, overcast sky. The overall mood is quiet and contemplative.

*“...beneath its walls, I perceived decay...  
I lingered... under that benign sky; watched the  
moths fluttering among the heath, and hare-bells;  
listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass;  
and wondered how any one could ever imagine  
unquiet slumbers, for the sleepers  
in that quiet earth.”*

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*

*The Moors have a memory recorded in the paths, ruins, walls, soil and bracken. They have a powerful illusory memory, which attracts pilgrims to derelict houses, cliff-sides and vistas, following footprints that the fictional heroes never actually made. Yet the myths have energy, shadows linger, absence is tangible...<sup>1</sup>*

Narrative is central to my creative process, and is usually formulated by an emotional impulse; a connection with a memory, music or poetry. This emotional inspiration arises by experiencing and appreciating a variety of narrative forms, whether it be through music in the form of a Claude Debussy 'landscape', through literature in the form of Scott-Fitzgerald synesthetic 'journey' or through the powerful stimulation of an Anselm Kiefer 'canvas'. My narrative ideas do not develop through experiencing and analysing a single medium, but rather through frequent exposure to different art forms and the sensations they incite. I have discovered that when formulating creative ideas, researching records of events and experiences or creating a new experience, is as powerful in motivating in evolving a piece of art as looking to art precedent and analysing secondary art sources.

Looking for a synergy between my 'A' level subjects I began contemplating Emily Brontë's 'Wuthering Heights' which has inspired musicians, poets and artists. I was intrigued by the themes of transcendence, elemental force, confinement, and escape; it seems that every human emotion was captured in the narrative, the characters and the descriptions of landscape. In the development of my current collection, Brontë's book is a constant companion, as my art explores how the book's themes can be captured through a variety of media. Like Brontë, I am trying to embody them metaphorically through evoking the 'genius loci'<sup>2</sup> of the moors.

<sup>1</sup> 'Thoughts from Top Withens', Mia MacDermott - October 2014

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Pope's *Epistle IV, to Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington*: laid down the principle that the spirit of the context or landscape should always inform the creative response.



Natural pigment cave painting, Lascaux, France, dated between 12,000 and 17,000 BC.

Narrative art is ancient; the cave paintings at Lascaux created by Palaeolithic people give us a powerful emotional insight into the minds and lives of humans of prehistory.

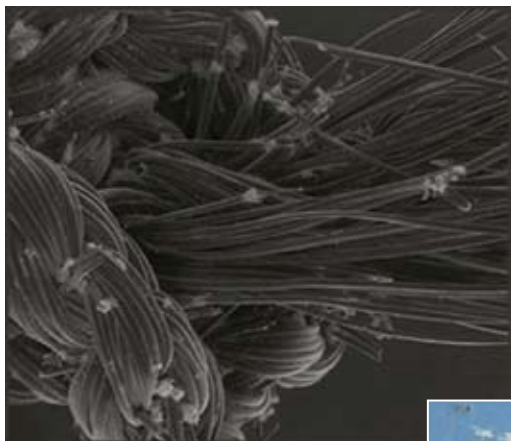
Friezes on Greek vases record battles and myths, not found in written records.

The use of art to record and symbolise stories, and celebrate and present memories, is profoundly human and continues through medieval religious art, the etchings of ordinary life by Durer and the work contemporary artists like Whiteread, Parker and Kiefer.



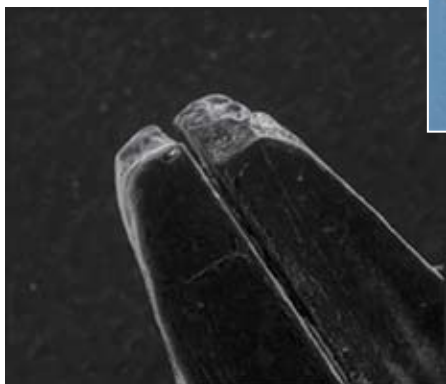
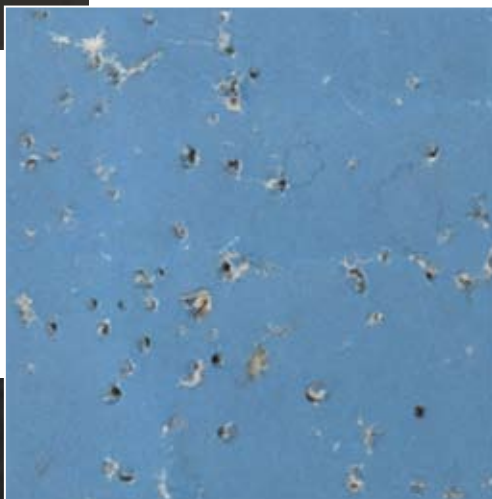
Late 5th century Greek vase, depicting Myths of the Gods.

When I visited the Brontë Museum I was fascinated by the way Cornelia Parker's manipulations of the Brontë collections seem to abstract and cement memory through artefacts.



Cornelia Parker *Brontëan Abstract*  
(Emily Brontë's hair) 2006

Cornelia Parker *Brontëan Abstract*  
(Charlotte Brontë's pin cushion), 2006



Cornelia Parker *Brontëan Abstract*  
(Emily Brontë's quill pen nib), 2006

Post rationalising my day as a “Brontëan pilgrim”, it appears Parker’s “forensic” approach to the Brontë collection crept into my sub-conscious, influencing my modus operandi. Working with forensic photographers she created detailed photographic pieces of personal effects; a pincushion, handkerchief and locks of hair. The images are oversized yet delicately beautiful, uncomfortably voyeuristic exposes of very personal relics. When looking at Parker’s work, I felt I was prying into a private narrative and the personality of the writer whose fiction inspired me; my inspiration now taking form as an “embedded narrative”. When exploring the context of the moors I collected degenerating evidence and material from site in order to develop a collection of context specific expressions and experiments.



Mia MacDermott

Then go on to toil resigned

If you still despair control  
Push its wipers in your face  
You shall reach the final goal  
You shall win the card or not

April 28<sup>th</sup> 1939

The soft unclouded blue of air  
The earth as golden green and green  
And bright: no clouds need to be  
That air and earth have <sup>met</sup> met

These aim to suggest memories and the spirit of the space, and create a personal sensory immersion, allowing my creative concepts to materialise. When exploring the moors through drawing and creating, my senses became increasingly conscious of the ‘shades... claustrophobic-expanse... dimly lit... soldier grey skies’<sup>3</sup>.



Mia MacDermott

<sup>3</sup> Sylvia Plath ‘*Top Withens*’



Parker architectural scale installation at the Royal Institute for British Architects is a piece of contemplative beauty, created using desiccated soil and clay excavated from beneath The Leaning Tower of Pisa. The installation exposes precariousness and fragility of the soil which jeopardised the stability of the “monument”, however, to me this piece also harnesses the power of the insignificant, as an abstracted reference one of the world’s most visited architectural failure. The installation also seems to fragment the memory of the space and architecture, usurping ‘touristic’ significance.



To me, narrative is powerfully evoked in the expressively provocative work of Anselm Kiefer. His recent retrospective at the Royal Academy, and the TV documentary ‘Imagine’ brought to my attention his creative interconnection of art and writing.

*‘Subconscious of a Monument’*,  
Cornelia Parker



*‘Edge of England’*,  
Cornelia Parker

Kiefer describes how he is creatively enthused by the emotions conveyed through poetry, expressing that to him “ [poems] are like buoys in the sea. I swim from one to the next, in between them; without them, I am lost.”<sup>4</sup> Kiefer grew up in post-war Germany, a time when remorse and defeat shrouded the recent past with menacing secrets. All around he witnessed the physical devastation of the German landscape, the moral guilt, and the psychological devastation of the German people. When observing Kiefer’s work, childhood experiences amongst the ruins can be clearly identified in the narrative of his creative process and output.

Much of his work deals with reluctance to look back and creates a powerful medium for ‘unforgetting’. According to Kiefer: “*those who don’t deal with the past cannot proceed to the future*”<sup>5</sup>, his work deals with memory and subliminally forces us to deal with themes of dark and light, death and rebirth. Though compelling for its architectural scale, inventive and masterly manipulation of unconventional and traditional media, and subjugation of found objects, it is the unexpected, haunting beauty of Kiefer’s work that is the profound and enduring impression.

Although I knew Kiefer’s work before visiting the RA I did not expect to encounter so many references to books or the use of the found materials; fern, flowers, thorns, rocks as I had collected myself on the moors. Before observing Kiefer’s works, I found myself manipulating the products of the environment, experimenting with dip casting the ferns, sculpting with rocks, and using the curve of the Wharfe River line as the focal point of my ‘canvas’, as Kiefer does with the architectural contours.

<sup>4</sup> Anselm Kiefer, ‘*Next Year in Jerusalem*’

<sup>5</sup> Anselm Kiefer, ‘*Next Year in Jerusalem*’

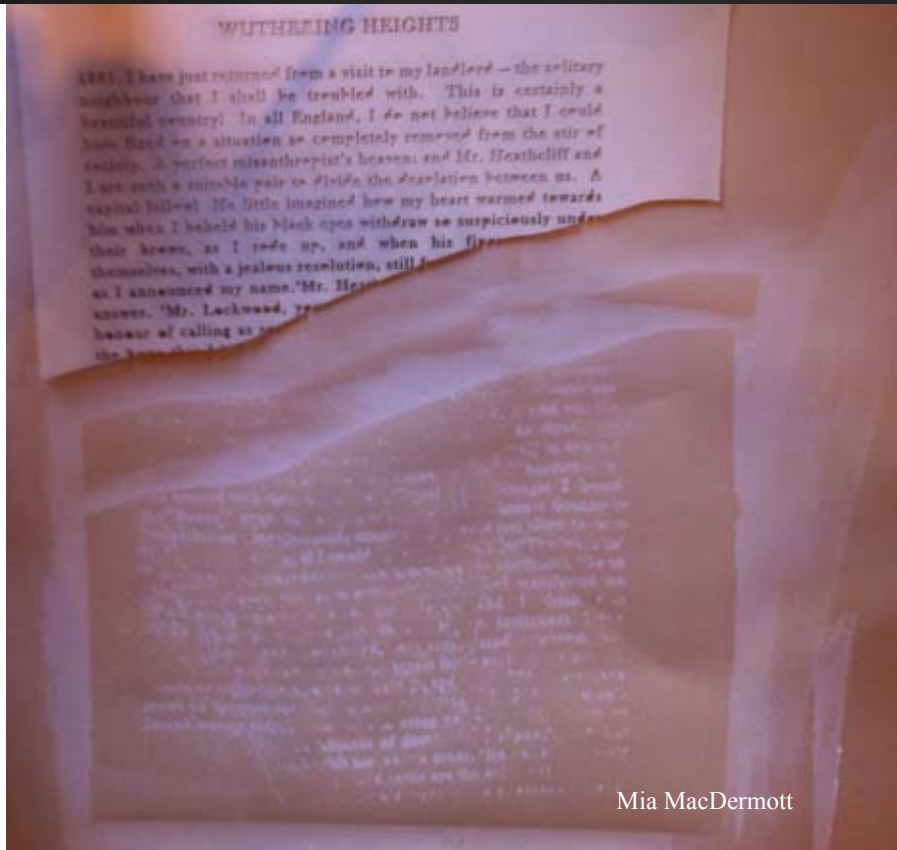


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Kiefer's works overtly, recycle the excess of the 'ruin'. However, to Kiefer his use of found materials is much more than an embodiment of decay, and is profoundly significant to the narrative he engenders. For example, he pronounces that he predominately uses lead, as it is "the only material heavy enough to carry the weight of human history"<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Anselm Kiefer, *'Next Year in Jerusalem'*

When experimenting with laser etching in my project, I was intrigued by the concept of etching alternative media to MDF. This led me to trial etching materials such as mirror-glass, representing with the reflections of the landscape I observed in the river, and paper which achieved a more delicate effect than wood, and also holds literal reference to my original inspiration; a book.



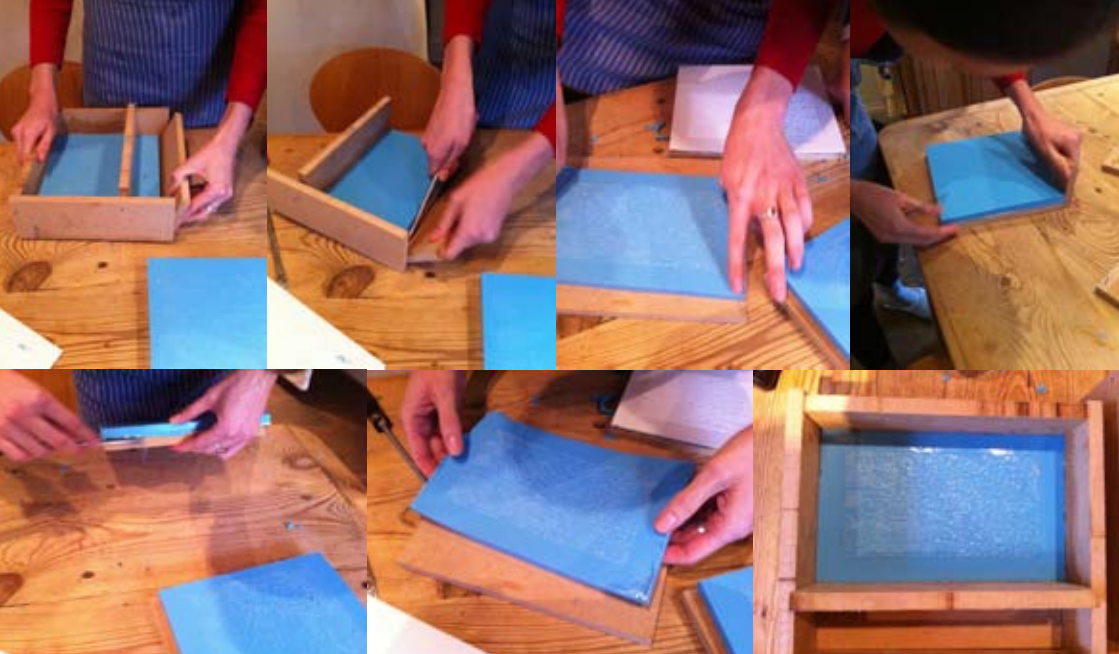


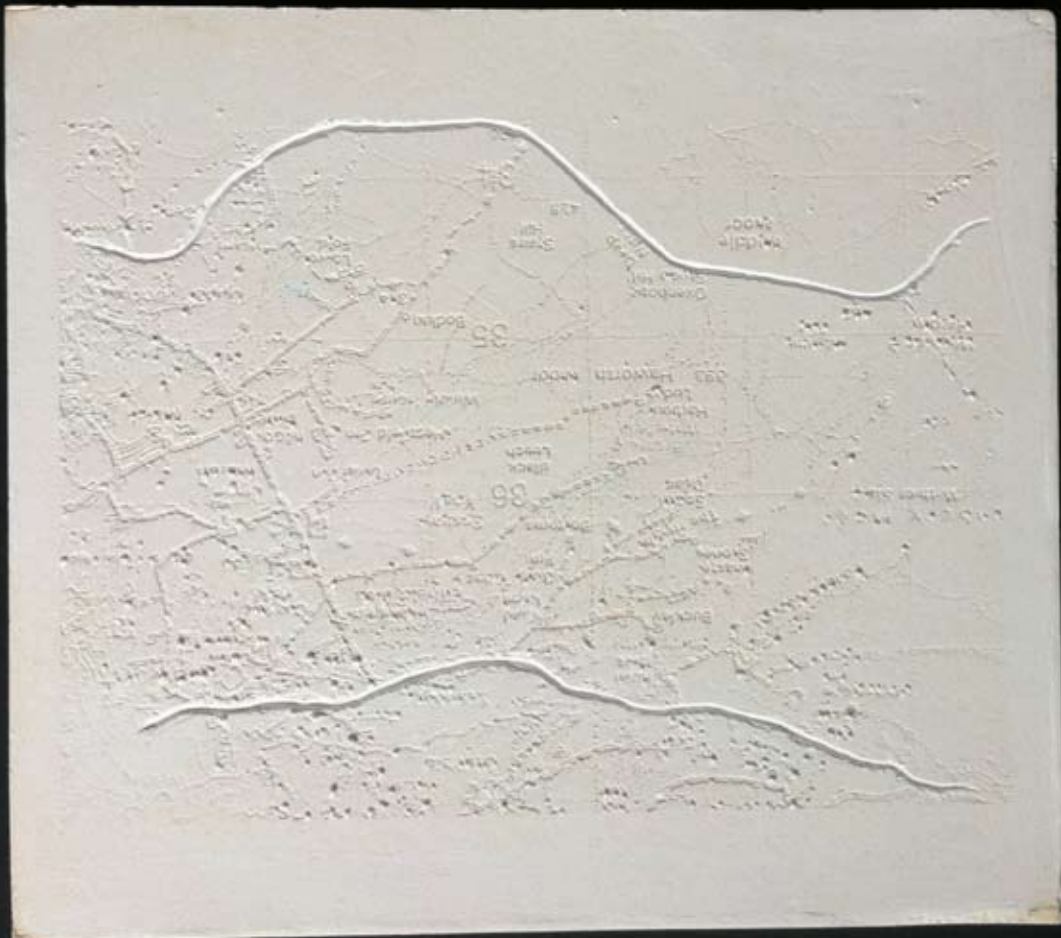
Janet Casey; Set of six plaster casts of seaweed woodcuts, which correspond to the black and white prints, each cast - 41x41 cm (2011-2012)

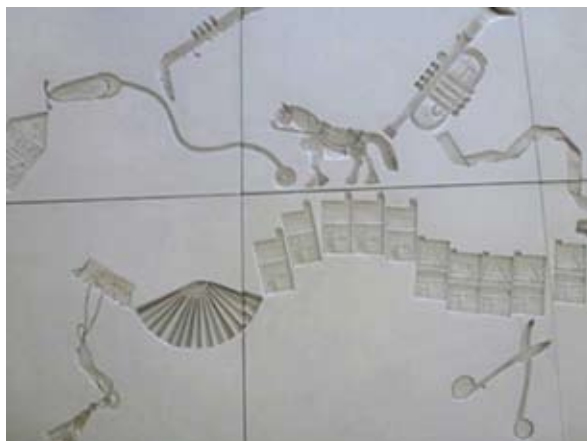


When researching the concept of plaster casting, I came across the works Janet Casey and Kathy Dalwood. Casey and Dalwood extract elements of their surroundings and incorporate them into their artwork through plaster imprints and the “direct [plaster] casting from real life objects and materials”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Kathy Dalwood, studio blog, [kathydalwood.blogspot.co.uk](http://kathydalwood.blogspot.co.uk), 4th May 2012







Kathy Dalwood; Cynon Valley Hospital Sculpture Commission (2012)

This idea of embedding elements from a ‘loci’ into artwork fascinates me. Aberrantly, the trace or imprint creates a sense of permanence, encapsulating the essences of a memory. Cementing the echo of a spatial experience, has from the beginning of my project, been my objective.



The idea of manipulating the form of the book, opening and closing, allowed me to hide or reveal the story, to begin the story or to end it, and

through dip casting I explored and disguised its meanings and identity. Whiteread’s installation, ‘Black Books’ to me, communicates a similar expression and presents a memorial to books and narrative; the books are alluring and provocative, but black, cemented and inaccessible. They are a compelling ‘*memento mori*’ that predict the death of the book in the digital age; “books are going to become a minority technology, but the *beau livre* will survive.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Will Self, ‘*The Novel is Dead (This Time it’s for Real)*’, The Guardian, 2nd May 2014





Mia MacDermott



Rachel Whiteread 'Black Books' 1997 Black pigmented plastic and steel

As part of my body of work, I created a series of site installations on the moors, to be encountered by walkers and Brontëan Pilgrims. My books, cast in plaster, became ghostly inserts in homage to Brontë; memorials at one with the landscape that *would* degrade with, and become lost in the elements, over time.









I have developed a fascination with conceptually narrative art that to me, embraces the entirety of human emotion. I am most compelled by art works that exceed the expression of pencil on paper, paint on canvas. Art that effects me the most, incorporate many components that relate to human existence- elements of a landscape, nostalgic items, universal treasures- to elicit the greatest physical and psychological responses. For example the works of Parker, Kiefer and Whiteread expose art's narrative form, and create works that resonate with cultural experience and response to a specific space. The manipulation of the 'familiar' sometimes allows the suggested narrative to become a personal chronicle, as it encourages individual viewers to impose their own experiences upon the artwork. As well as resonating with the audiences pre-existing experiences, I believe narrative art has the power to 'change' its audience; it initiates new poignant, emotional responses that have the ability to shape interpretations of the subject matter. This creative and emotional 'metamorphosis' compels me to widen my experience of different art forms and to discover innovative, progressive approaches like those of the artists who inspire me. Analysing the emotional stimulation of the art works that I find the most captivating has encouraged me to expand the boundaries my own creativity, to explore the variety of psychological responses that I can initiate through my narrative art forms, and to appreciate the transcendental nature of the creative process.



Mia MacDermott