

# Preserving Fragments

Joanne Laws



A text in response to Naomi Draper's exhibition  
FLORILEGIUM: A Gathering of Flowers



# Preserving Fragments

Joanne Laws

Roscommon Visual Arts Writer in Residence 2017

Naomi Draper  
FLORILEGIUM:  
A Gathering of Flowers

ROSCOMMON ARTS CENTRE  
September 8th - October 27th, 2017.

ARTBOX, DUBLIN  
November 2nd - 25th, 2017.

*“I confess that, in order to envisage the Ireland of my best years, I throw my mind back for half a century. There were many “disadvantages” – few bicycles, no motor-cars on the roads, no domestic electricity, no tarmac, no jazz (or worse), but there was less rush, time to think about things, and time to hold communion with nature, which is much the same as communion with God.”*

Robert Lloyd Praeger, *Irish Landscape: Cnéithe na hEireann*, (1953)<sup>1</sup>

The title of Naomi Draper’s solo exhibition, ‘FLORILEGIUM: A Gathering of Flowers’, hints at a sense of duality that is central to the artist’s wider practice, which utilises natural materials harvested from the landscape. Functioning both as a noun and as a verb, the term ‘gathering’ can denote a collection of things, as well as the process by which it is amassed, thus conveying the energy of the endeavour. In literal terms, ‘florilegium’ was originally derived from medieval Latin to denote a collection of fine examples from a larger body of work, as may be found within a literary anthology. This sixteenth century terminology holds resonance for botanical research, when we consider the clustering of indigenous species within certain regions, and their perceived dominance over non-native plants or weeds.

From here, we can begin to grapple with some of the inquiries that underpin Draper’s work to consider: an individual plant against a backdrop of wider botanical history; a craft product understood within shifting socio-cultural implications of the handmade; a single moment preserved and valued against the eternal index of deep time. In this way, the artist fundamentally explores the relationship between ‘fragments’ and ‘wholeness’; between that which is present, and that which is absent, ungraspable or not completely defined – something curator John Hutchinson previously described as “giving form to the invisible”<sup>2</sup>. This ontological shift in perspective (away from an isolated element, towards its broader context and provenance) ushers the unfolding of rich interrelationships.



For her recent solo exhibition at Roscommon Arts Centre (8 September – 27 October 2017), Draper developed a new, large-scale, pressed flower installation that dramatically occupied the dimly-lit gallery space. Described in the press release as a ‘preserved landscape’ of pressed Cow Parsley flowers, the six-metre-long *Veil 2017* descended from a table onto the gallery floor, creating a lush, botanical carpet. Illuminated by spot-lighting, the moss-green foliage took on the sheen of antique gold, resembling an ornate textile piece, fashioned in the finest silk threads. The proportions of this delicate meshwork called to mind the ceremonial saris worn by women on the Indian sub-continent, while connections with Ireland’s lace-making heritage also seemed potent. Given that the artist often refers to these pieces as ‘veil-work’, it would be all too easy to make definitive associations with feminine craft and ritual. However, summoning more poetic reflections, we can consider the delicate threshold between life and death, or the way early-morning mist can ‘veil’ a landscape, settling above it like an autonomous yet ephemeral shroud.

A desire to preserve fleeting moments in nature was evident in other works presented in the exhibition. Drawing influence from an historical form of botanical archiving known as ‘nature printing’, *Foliatus* (2017) is a ‘pounded leaf-print’, achieved by hammering a plant onto paper, causing it to stain the surface with chlorophyll, thus recording the leaf’s original colour and form. This leaf-print was also meticulously reproduced in gold ink stamps across the gallery wall, and in *Interval* (2017) – a series of 11 lithographic prints on archival paper. By capturing the shadows cast onto photosensitive metal plates, the lithograph technique preserves through the act of reproduction. Like flower-pressing and glasswork (the artists’ primary discipline), printmaking encases an impression in negative space, through a process akin to fossilisation.

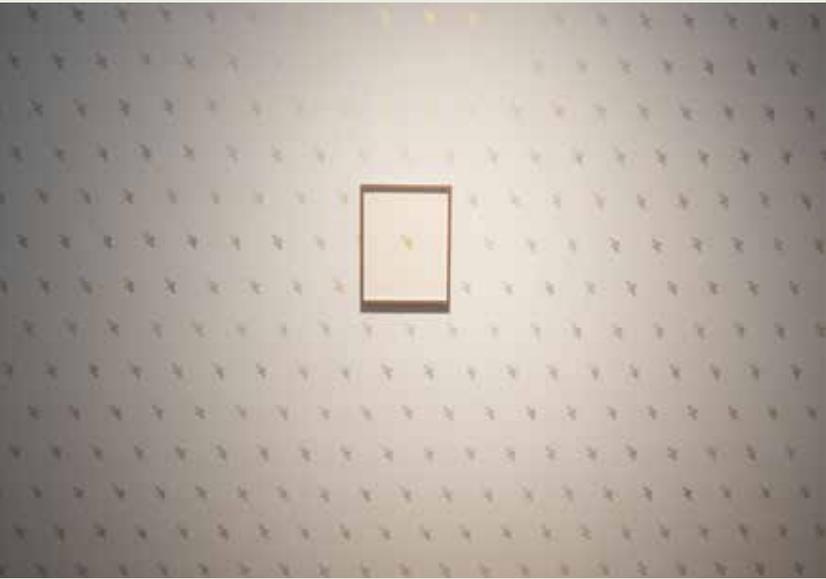


Preserving organic material in its optimum state, thus prolonging it beyond its natural lifespan, fends off the inevitable processes of atrophy, death and decay. Inescapably, we think about human mortality and our relationship with time – the irredeemable index against which we plot our personal and collective histories. During the Victorian era, a drive towards ‘taming’ and classifying nature sought to instill order in an otherwise chaotic world, defined by poverty and disease, as well as the otherworldly, mythological and superstitious cultural practices of pre-industrial societies. The mass influx to cities from rural areas at this time, ushered new perspectives on the natural landscape as a romantic place of leisure, wonder and discovery<sup>3</sup>. Modern post-humanist philosophers, including Georges Bataille, suggested that humanity’s “nostalgia for lost continuity” emerged during this period as a way of grappling with that fact that we, as individuals, “perish in isolation” in the midst of our “ephemeral” and “incomprehensible adventure”<sup>4</sup>. According to Bataille, “along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity, linking us with everything that is”<sup>5</sup>.



There is something very patient about Draper's work, which functions as a 'gathering site' for many of these narratives. It exudes a durational commitment, not least because the materials are seasonal. The artist invests a lot of time waiting for the Cow Parsley plant to come into blossom each May, along the meadows and hedgerows. With such an inbuilt cyclical rhythm, in many ways, the work almost dictates its own structure. Patient, even obsessive, observation is required; watching plants grow, spotting changes and deciding on the optimum moment for picking, gathering and pressing. Across ethnographic history, there is widespread sentiment surrounding the pressing of flowers, which aims to prolong fleeting moments and to preserve treasured memories. It could be argued that now, perhaps more than ever, we yearn for the solace found in patient and contemplative art. Underpinned by beauty as an enduring spiritual value, such practices seek to cherish fragments, long after wholeness has dissolved.

**Joanne Laws**



Inside cover image of Naomi Draper gathering by Mark Garry.  
All other images are installation views of *Florelegium: A Gathering of Flowers* at Roscommon Arts Centre, 2017.

### Endnotes:

1. Robert Lloyd Praeger (1953) *Irish Landscape: Cnéithe na hEireann Chomhar Cultúra Éireann* [Cultural Relations Comm], Dublin: Colm Ó Lochlainn/Three Candles Press, p.25
2. John Hutchinson (2015) *Wooden Ships*, Dublin: Douglas Hyde Gallery
3. With increased opportunities for travel during the Victorian age, intrepid 'plant hunters' would bring back exotic collections of botanical specimens (such as Lupins, California poppies, Geraniums and Rhododendrons) from far-flung places, which they subsequently preserved and catalogued. The establishment of museums, botanical gardens and natural history exhibitions satisfied a growing demand for natural knowledge among the general public at this time, underpinned by the alignment of learning with entertainment and leisure. The circulation of printed material – from popular literature and newspaper columns, to encyclopedias and illustrated botanical journals – further harnessed public curiosity about the natural sciences.
4. Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, [originally published as *L'Érotisme*; Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1957]; trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986), p.15.
5. Ibid.

### About Roscommon Arts Centre's Visual Art Writer In Residence

Arts Writer Joanne Laws is the Roscommon Arts Centre's Visual Art Writer in Residence for 2017. During this time, Joanne will write critical texts on selected exhibitions and projects happening across the county. The intention of this residency is to allow Joanne to experiment with her writing style and the dissemination of her work. Her writings will be available at Roscommon Arts Centre and online as they are published.

Joanne Laws is an arts writer, editor and researcher based in county Roscommon. She has recently been appointed Features Editor of the *Visual Artists' News Sheet*, where she will commission and develop new writing for an Irish arts readership. Joanne is a member of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) and a regular contributor to international arts publications including *Art Monthly* and *Frieze*. She was assistant editor for the online resource [publicart.ie](http://publicart.ie) and has previously developed research reports and policy documents for organisations such as 126 Artist-Run Gallery, Kilkenny Arts Office and Youth Work Ireland.

Naomi Draper graduated from NCAD with a Bachelor of Design specialising in glass in 2007. Following an Erasmus programme at the Academy of Art, Architecture and Design, Prague, she received a scholarship to attend Pilehuck Glass School, Seattle. In 2011, she completed a Postgraduate Diploma in Community Arts Education at NCAD. Naomi has participated on a number of residency programmes within contemporary art institutions, community and educational contexts; including the LOCIS Residency at Residence Botkyrka, Sweden, The Model, Sligo, and The Harrington Studios, Boyle, Co Roscommon. In 2017 Naomi will deliver two solo exhibitions of work in Roscommon Arts Centre and ArtBox, Dublin. Previous exhibitions include *A seed's a star*, the Hamilton Gallery, Sligo, *On Beauty*, Roscommon Arts Centre, *One Million to One*, Botkyrka Konstall, Sweden, *Paper for the Sky*, Interstate, Brooklyn, NY and Practice national tour; West Cork Arts Centre, Axis Ballymun, Dublin, The Model, Sligo.

### About the RVAF Award

The Roscommon Visual Artists Forum Award supported by Roscommon Arts Centre & Roscommon County Council Arts Office was established by curator in residence Linda Shevlin to provide visual artists based in or from the county with a platform to develop their practice. In response to the needs and requirements of the artists in the county, the RVAF award was set up in 2015. Naomi Draper was selected from an open call and was supported with a production budget, a residency at ArtBox, Dublin and an exhibition at both Roscommon Arts Centre & ArtBox.

ROSCOMMON  
ARTS CENTRE

ROS  
COM  
MON  
County Council  
Roscommon  
County Council

arts  
council  
ealaíon  
funding  
visual arts  
arts council.ie

AB

