



They may put you off sweets for a while, but Abigail O'Brien's photographs of an Irish confectionery factory are brilliantly brave and seriously insightful public art, says Cristín Leach

At first glance, it looks as though Abigail O'Brien has been taking photographs of plastic or tar. Glossy material oozes through tubes, relaxes in blobs on cold metal tables, and falls in sticky droplets into reluctantly yielding pools. It is black, red or yellow; sometimes brown. In one of the photographs currently hanging in the foyer of the Royal Hibernian Academy in Dublin, an unwinding sheet of this tacky stuff collapses onto itself like a lazy waterfall and its glistening folds mimic the shiny bends and turns of exposed intestines.

None of which would lead anyone to believe that O'Brien has been taking photographs in a sweet factory. The project, entitled *Temperance*, started with a three-month stint as photographer-in-residence at the Oatfield Sweet Factory in Letterkenny in 2007. Funded under the Per Cent for Art Scheme, *Temperance* marks the second stage in O'Brien's artistic exploration of the cardinal virtues: Prudence, Justice, Temperance and Fortitude. She completed *Fortitude*, the virtue of courage, in 2005.

*Temperance* is the virtue of self restraint in the face of temptation or desire. That O'Brien should take herself to a sweet factory to explore it is unremarkable. That the work she has produced should be so much more than the sum of its parts, is. Not least because O'Brien has done what so few artists awarded a Per Cent for Art commission manage to do: answered the project's community remit without compromising her artistic vision, and extended it as a significant part of her continuing practice.

Donegal has commissioned more than 60 public-art projects since 1990. The Per Cent scheme allows part of a capital development budget to be spent on public art. In Donegal, projects have been linked to sewerage schemes, water-treatment plants, new libraries and housing developments. They have featured poetry, theatre, music, landscape architecture and pyrotechnics. Donegal has its share of uninspiring art-by-committee-type projects, which in their attempt to please everyone end up challenging and inspiring nobody. As with the rest of the country, many are attached to road projects.

O'Brien's task was to produce a behind-the-scenes insight into a factory that has near-iconic status in the community, marking Oatfield's 80th anniversary and its recent acquisition by Zed Candy. Her photographs, exhibited in Letterkenny in 2009, are almost certainly not what the 51 factory employees might have expected when O'Brien arrived on the factory floor with her camera. They are better.

*Temperance* is all about Oatfield, but it is also bigger. That is just one reason why it is a shining example of good spending on public art. It is unlikely any other photographer would have made the specific connections O'Brien did during her time at the factory. This is partly due to her personal circumstances, having suffered a serious illness during the project, but in truth, her success lies in the unerring integrity of her work.

It is tempting to say there are two projects here: one about and for the people associated with the factory, the other about and for

O'Brien. But that would be to oversimplify matters, because the two are inextricably linked. The RHA selection focuses on the latter, with images driven by O'Brien's fascination with the duplicitous nature of the hard-boiled material with which the factory staff work every day.

Separated by the camera from our other senses, most importantly smell, this fatty, soapy-looking, unwieldy substance does not look like something anyone would want to eat. It is distinctly unnatural. O'Brien's sweet factory is no Willy Wonka fantasy.

Even without their titles — *Corpus Flay*, *Saponaceous 2*, *Slip*, *Synovia*, *Syrup*, *Incision* — the seven photographs in the RHA foyer immediately trigger associations with medical procedures and body parts. Gloved hands use a knife to slice into a shiny red blob in *Incision*. A man feeds weighty yellow stuff into a machine in *Flay*. Elsewhere in the series, *Undertaking* likens the action to lifting a body into a mincer, and *Adipose* shows wrinkling folds of toffee that resemble the too-stretched skin of a once-obese stomach.

And yet O'Brien appears to have been more fascinated than repulsed, more curious than decided about the nature of temptation in an Irish sweet factory.

When *Temperance* was shown — to considerable acclaim — in Düsseldorf last year, it was accompanied by life-sized sculptures of human organs made from this hard-boiled candy material. *Orange Stomach*, *Purple Brain* and *Liver Duodenum* reveal how O'Brien moved without skipping a beat beyond the specific

remit of the scheme, once her work with the camera was done.

Back at the RHA, a gloved hand plunges into a vat of yellow sticky stuff in *Synovia*, which is a lubricating fluid secreted by membranes in the body. Other images in the series bear similar biological titles: *Epithelium*, *Mesentery* and *Amnion*, a medical term for the foetal sac.

Seen in this light, O'Brien's work is not particularly flattering of the factory or the process. And yet she served her commissioners well: her images have immortalised both the factory and its workers in an important and unique way.

Less staged, more honest and personal than her previous work, *Temperance* is challenging and respectful, a tricky combination

O'Brien is good at exposing the ritual in aspects of everyday working life and attaching weightier meaning to it all. *Temperance* includes images of the factory workers, with titles such as *Heft*, *Sunder*, *Commitment*, *Meditate*. Through her lens, their actions take on quietly heroic roles. The titles of the photographs elevate their actions beyond the mundane: *The Alchemist*, *Surgeons*, *Mentor*.

The best public art makes us look again, at our environment and at ourselves. It enhances our experience of something we might otherwise have passed by, triggers memories and associations, challenges us to live a richer inner life. Often it is work that finds the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Donegal has made some good choices: Walker & Walker's *Double Daisy* (2000), a super-sized tribute to childhood play; Grace Weir's elegant 1000 *Silver Limpets* (2000); and Locky Morris's *Dry* (2000), six bronze towels that await a non-existent swimmer on the seafloor at Bundoran. It also has its share of well-made but safe traditional bronze statues, stone sculptures and the kind of hybrid projects that mine local history and traditions, ticking boxes in an attempt to please the deciding committee, and secure the funding.

O'Brien was a brave choice for the Oatfield project. The last time she showed at the RHA, it was to mark the completion of her *Seven Sacraments* series (1995-2005). That decade-long project featured photographs that were unsettling because of their deliberate artificiality. For *Seven Sacraments*, she composed visual allegories, staged and

**Pick'n'mix:** from left, Abigail O'Brien's works *Incision*, *Purple Brain* and *Orange Stomach*, all derived from Letterkenny's Oatfield Sweet Factory and on show now at Dublin's Royal Hibernian Academy

captured them on camera. With *Temperance*, she entered a sweet factory where she found and captured them in real life.

This recent work feels less staged, more honest, more personal. In the context of her commission, it manages to be both challenging and respectful, a tricky combination.

The boom left Ireland with faster, safer roads. It also left us with some iconic, interesting and just plain silly roadside sculptures. Local communities often develop affection for these objects as they become part of the landscape. Occasionally, they cause lasting controversy, but more often than not we cease to see them.

The projects that have challenged us, particularly those that have sought to introduce the public to contemporary-art practices they may not have been exposed to before, carry a different kind of legacy, and a more important one. These are the projects that move us forward as a nation in terms of visual literacy, and tell us that good contemporary art is as much about us as for us. O'Brien's *Temperance* project is proof of that. [G](#)

*Temperance*, a selection of work from the series, is at the Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin, until April 25