

*Tilting at Windmills*, Kara Hearn and Mocksim a response by Ali O'Shea

What follows is my response to an exhibition between Micheál O'Connell/Mocksim and Kara Hearn, *Tilting at Windmills* showing in Gallery DODO, Brighton, UK until March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022. I have not seen the exhibition in real life, so much of this exchange happened via email, a Google Doc, a Dropbox folder and one Zoom call.

My experience of the work has been this shared Dropbox folder containing JPEGs and Mov. Files documenting the installation which comprises of an inflating and deflating windmill work by Mocksim, which is much too large for the space and a 32" monitor with a tiny Kara Hearn dancing for a duration.

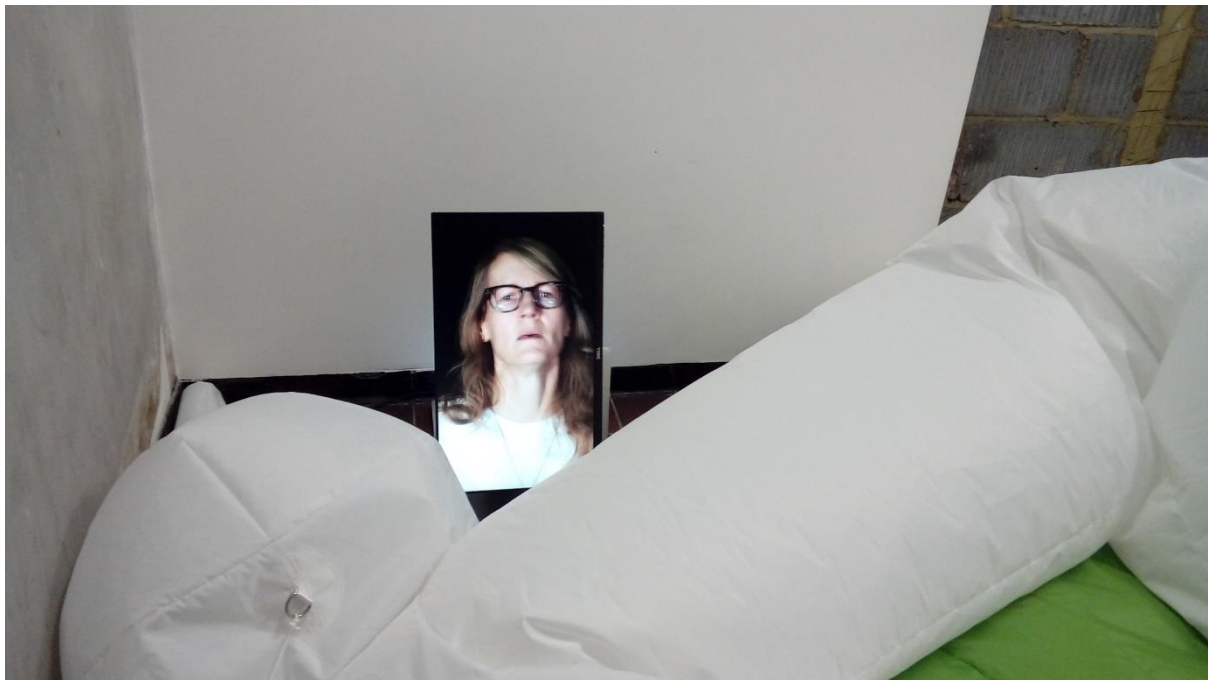
The title is a phrase from Don Quixote which roughly translates to fighting invisible enemies. Kara poignantly identifies the ridiculousness and earnestness imbued in the Quixote character, much of which she feels is reflected in her own work. Kara's video work is a re-enactment of a dance from Billy Elliott (the film), which she describes as "a too-difficult dance for my middle-aged non-dancing self." She reflects on earnestness being a requirement within her practice, having to "believe that the act of making work is productive, that it might do something, shift something. It is the hope imbued in all rituals" she supposes. Kara describes the comfort in the stuff we do working on one level and being a total failure on another, "that Don Quixote is both a hero and a fool. (She) senses a similar willingness to fail and keep trying in Micheál's turbine piece."

Micheál is currently conducting a series of artist residencies in Uilleann, West Cork Arts Centre in Skibbereen, Ireland which has involved looking to the landscape and the technologies within it. The monumental wind turbines scattered throughout this landscape have been a reoccurring motif. Micheál describes the windmill as a "clichéd component of old landscape tradition." The inflating and deflating windmill contained within the space at gallery DODO is never seen in its totality, the space is almost hiding it. The willingness to fail Kara touches on above seems to be evident here, the windmill not only has lost its functional purpose as a windmill but has also lost its purpose as an inflatable windmill. Micheál further describes the actively inflating windmill as having the effect of "shooing" the viewer from the space, whether this is taken as a success, or a failure is unclear.

An overarching response to the exhibition was laughter. Humour is something we had discussed a lot and its use in both artist's practice. Micheál pointed out the dangers within humour "in that some might be inclined to dismiss, or not take work seriously, but maybe they are the foolish ones in these situations." He also touches on the uses of humour as a means to belittle or other but is drawn to its potential uses. Kara describes humour as being "everything" to her. It underlies all of what she does. The contrast between a too big inflating windmill and a tiny compulsively dancing figure is absurd and very dry. The context of a work possibly allows it not to be trivialised into becoming just a joke, Micheál discusses embedding something within a "respectable art context" as a possible means to avoid this type of trivialisation. This brought up a discussion around what constitutes a "respectable art context," the project space at gallery DODO in fact had previously been a toilet. What respectability had it garnered since then to become respectable? I think as artists we should challenge what is considered respectable, especially where a lot of large institutions only require a little surface scratching to reveal something different.

Kara discusses the need to feel productive despite the failure in her rituals. This has brought me back to the title of the exhibition *Tilting at Windmills* or fighting invisible enemies. I often think of this cult of productivity and the guilt that surrounds it as reflecting a shadowy fight such as this. She goes on however to describe her video work as a cathartic mode of expression, this “particular video was intended to create a bit of agency and perhaps failing in both realms.” Kara’s struggle with productivity now lies “in the realm of allowing (her)self to *not* be productive, to *not* strive, to allow (her)self to rest.” For me the reference to Billy Elliot and this use of popular culture, being a fan of a movie is a means to subvert this need to be productive, that consuming a movie and re-enacting your favourite scene is creating agency over one’s time and what you consider to be a productive output.

This exhibition and conversation has encouraged me to question my own perception of humour in work. In Kara Hearn’s work what seems incessant rhythm and movement of her body can be seen on one level to inspire laughter, especially in contrast to this large windmill work, however on another level this ritual is cathartic, an output the artist has felt is hopeful. There may be a similar hope in Mocksim’s windmill, that ultimately may be a failure as it is never fully formed. The object may also incite hopelessness or question these monumental structures within our landscape.



Kara Hearn, *Dance of Defiance Three Ways (after Billy Elliott)*, 2022



Mocksim, Inflated Inflatable Windmill, 2022, photo by Rupert Harley

*Tilting at Windmills* runs at Phoenix Art Space, 10-14 Waterloo Pl, Brighton BN2 9NB, United Kingdom until March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022.

[Ali O'Shea](#) is a producer and writer based in Cork, Ireland, her primary research concerns include alternative methodologies of productivity, and creating sustainable practice models through speculative fiction.