



Gaolbreak



Gaolbreak

Angela Fulcher

27 January – 25 February 2017, Cork City Hall
Curated by Pluck Projects

Gaolbreak is Pluck Projects' second collaboration with Angela Fulcher, and marks an escalation in her recent practice of ambitious, large-scale, temporary fabric installations. *Gaolbreak* responds to the story of the November 1923 escape attempt made by prisoners at Cork City Women's Gaol. Taking the idea of the knotted sheets of bedding that aided their bid for freedom, Fulcher interrogates these forms, considering the twists and knots of textiles as ways to approach this history. Her response to this intriguing narrative develops its implications, bringing them into the modern architecture of City Hall, and exploiting the soaring space of the Atrium. With references beyond this single historical incident, *Gaolbreak* prompts us to consider how escape can manifest in materials, and perhaps to reflect further on the ways in which these inexpensive materials point to issues of gender, class, taste and labour.

This project has benefitted from the support of a number of people to whom thanks are due. Firstly, Jean Brennan and Maeve Dineen from Cork City Council Arts Office have been enormously helpful in organising and installing the work. Jessica Hemmings, Professor of Crafts at HDK, University of Gothenberg, Sweden, has generously contributed a rich reading of the work. Thanks are also due to Jędrzej Niezgodą for his peerless photography.



*Gaolbreak:
studio
developments,
documentation I,
2017.*

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The material of escape has often been modest: hair clips for picking locks; files smuggled in food packages; clothing worn in disguise. This may in part be explained because the practical function of the textile is often overlooked in the laundry list of items to confiscate during incarceration. Belts are removed to reduce the risk of suicide or harm to fellow inmates.¹ In cases of solitary confinement even papers, calendars and books have been banished.² Under regimes enforcing censorship, it has been the textile that has managed to travel under the radar and into the world.³ And while the material of fibre is used occasionally used to thwart escape,⁴ bedding, sheets and blankets tend to register as benign. Because they are seen to offer little threat, the textile often remains close at hand – close enough to be repurposed.⁵

Cork-based artist Angela Fulcher's response to the 1923 gaol break at Cork City Women's Gaol is inspired by forty-two inmates' bid for freedom in the aftermath of the civil war. The escape made use of the soft stuff of textiles: bedding fashioned into ladders to aid their descent. Fulcher's recent work regularly includes found fabrics such as curtains, blinds and carpets associated with the home, clothing and accessories, as well as tents, window display materials and vinyl that "span spaces".⁶ Her response to the 1923 gaol break spans not only space but also time. Anachronistic purple, maroon, light and cerise pink sheeting and duvet covers that

date from the 1970s through to the contemporary are here deployed as a reminder of the event. Much like the prisoners daring means of escape, this material too was found close to hand: harvested by the artist from charity shops and popular economy department stores such as Guineys and Penneys.

“The boldness of the colour in the space reflects a sense of the audacious and spirited nature of the escape,” explains Fulcher.⁷ The prominent presence of colour and pattern represents other changes as well: a return of the decorative to visual language that carries meaning beyond the superficial. The textile – and practices more generally that focus on materials – have experienced the decorative used in a pejorative sense for decades. But interest in the meaning of beauty is on the rise.⁸ The political, as diverse examples from hip-hop fashion to Chilean *arpilleras* can teach us, also resides in the decorative. Today this may be explained as an expanded interest in the everyday and recognition of value in aspects of culture previously ignored. But modest things have always been nearby; their variety of purposes includes the potential to be overlooked.

Jessica Hemmings
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- ¹ The low-waisted style of hip-hop culture is associated with “time inside”, suggesting a familiarity with wearing clothing without a belt eventually translating into global fashion. See, for example, Shaun Cole (2012) “Considerations on a Gentleman’s Posterior”, *Fashion Theory*, 16:2, 211-234.
- ² South African anti-apartheid activist, Ruth First recalls stitching a calendar of unravelled threads during solitary confinement in Pretoria in 1963 to keep track of her days and preserve her sanity while held under South Africa’s 90-day detention law. See R. First, *117 Days: An Account of Confinement and Interrogation Under the South African 90-Day Detention Law* (Virago Modern Classics, 2006).
- ³ During Pinochet’s ruthless dictatorship of Chile, arpilleras stitched by women’s groups documented the “disappeared”. These pieced and quilted textiles, often with short passages of stitched text, were smuggled out of the country for exhibition before conventional media reported these stories. See M. Agos and C. Franzen, *Scraps of Life: Chilean Arpilleras: Chilean Women and the Pinochet Dictatorship* (Red Sea Press, 1987).
- ⁴ In the Japanese novel by Kobo Abe *Woman in the Dunes* (1962) (made into a film of the same name directed by Hiroshi Teshigahara and released in 1964) a couple thrown together by cunning and chance exist in a pit in the sand dunes. Their daily task of clearing sand preserves their immediate existence, but deepens their prison. The local community command a rope ladder by which the protagonist first enters his prison, ensuring power remains only with those who choose to deploy the ladder from above.
- ⁵ Katie McGown’s unpublished PhD at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle, *Dropped Threads: Articulating a History of Textile Instability through 20th Century Sculpture* describes the textile’s covert role in the French film *A Man Escaped* (1956) directed by Robert Bresson: “This first object, a piece of string thrown up through the bars of Fontaine’s window into his still-cuffed hands by another sympathetic inmate, is tied to the corners of a handkerchief creating a makeshift basket. By raising and lowering it to the courtyard below, he can send letters to his family, and smuggle in a safety pin capable of springing his handcuffs. This initial liberation enables the prisoner to gradually breach successive boundaries, and simultaneously gain a better understanding of the prison’s architecture. He determines that he needs to create rope and hooks in order to drop down towering walls, and monkey climb between two high barriers. Unravelling the wire mesh of his bed frame, and ripping his blankets into long strips, he twists the materials together to make a strong and flexible length. His earlier letters to his family have brought a suitcase full of clothing, and these are cut up as well. In prison where even pencils are forbidden, the tools of escape have to be as innocuous as possible. If the guards had found his length of rope, there would have been trouble, but the raw materials of his escape could be stuffed into a mattress, becoming soft and amorphous again, flying under the radar. Through this small accretion of inconsequential fibres, an arsenal of tools were created.” (pp. 125)
- ⁶ Skype interview with the artist January 10, 2017.
- ⁷ Email correspondence with the artist December 29, 2016.
- ⁸ See Jorunn Veiteberg’s “The Problem of Beauty” in *Craft in Transition translated by Douglas Ferguson* (Bergen National Academy of the Arts, 2005).



*Gaolbreak: studio
developments,
documentation II,
2017.*

Fabric/Sculpture

Angela Fulcher sculpts with textiles. Sometimes she uses specialised technical fabrics such as tent canvas, public transport upholstery velvet or sail cloth. Most often though, she uses everyday materials; bed sheets, bath towels, cheap woven belts, old footballs, fun fur, or soft furnishing fabrics familiar from the semi-d's of the 70s and 80s; swirling carpet, scalloped window blinds, brown leatherette. These are deeply un-valorised materials, more readily associated with kitsch, the un-romantically outmoded, or cheap and cheerful tawdry glamor. However, Fulcher treats her fabrics with conceptual and formal exactitude, eschewing easy irony in order to draw our attention to the strangeness and intricacy of everyday surfaces. In doing so, her work touches on complex and fraught networks of power, taste, class, labour and gender.

Textile is a difficult medium for sculpture; neither loadbearing nor self-supporting, fabrics must be cut and pieced together, either stuffed or stretched around an armature to attain three dimensionality. Its properties are multivalent however; light, diffuse, permeable, flexible, cloth can be both fluid and tensile, allowing for a complex range of formal manipulations. It can be creased, folded, knotted, and ruched, or pulled taut in singing diagonals, as in *Traverse Frieze (Supple Lilac and Midnight Blue)* (2014). It can be draped so that it falls in fluted columns to gather in softly heaped pools as in *After Strawberry Switchblade* (2016). In *Sun Stopping*, (2016)

bright radial bands of sail cloth streak through a summer orchard, making (to paraphrase John Cage), bright airports for passing, dappled shadows. A vivid scatter of irregular shaped pebbles, *Blinkers* (2015) plays on the textural contrast between the scratchy garishness of transport upholstery seats, and the smooth perfection car headlights made opaque with high gloss spray paint. What makes her sculptures and installations so particularly compelling, is the way in which Fulcher performs critical operations on familiar surfaces, exploiting both the decorative properties of everyday fabrics as well as their structural capacity. Her works pit form and pattern against each other, or, more precisely, choreograph rich, surprising tensions between structure and pattern.

Take *Untitled (Crystal Cabinet No. 4, 2012)* a crisp, three metre triangle of carpet appears to float just above the ground, the fusty brown pattern disrupted by another inset triangle of a different, yet equally familiar design. As streamlined as a stealth bomber, a magic carpet hovering inches off the floor, the precision of the geometric shape recalls Robert Morris's *Slab* (1962) a simply painted plywood rectangle similarly raised just above the ground – the forms of echt-minimalist sculpture colliding with the suburban domestic interior. Equally *Untitled*, a commission for the 2014 Soundeye poetry festival; makes an elegantly stepped screen from scalloped and fringed window blinds arrayed three deep in a slim aluminium frame. These are shot through with a vertical band of perfect circles, which energise the inert nubbly cotton with a complex pattern of light and shadow. There is a surgical precision to Fulcher's process, which

derives from collage; the techniques of incision and alignment come to mind rather than cutting and stitching. The result is a satisfying tension between pure, irreducible geometric shapes and frowsy surface.

Fulcher's work often involves collecting, sorting and reconstituting, as in *Untitled* (2009) an oversized football pieced together from the footballs washed up on banks of the Lee, or *Out There 4 Man (Paloma Grey and Bluebell)* (2010) the geodesic form of the football reappearing as an elegant shard-like construction, partially covered with canvas taken from tents discarded at a 2009 music festival. The clean, vaguely futuristic structure is brilliantly undercut by the turquoise dream catcher hanging from one of its struts, in a stroke, colliding the utopian dream of alternative public gatherings with its bastardised, commercialised iteration. *Belt* (2015) comprises 170 woven belts collected from second hand shops, sorted so that each is paired end to end with its closest match, and carefully arrayed so that the whole arrangement is fringed with buckles. The subtle surface modulations of colour and texture offered by the neatly aligned belts is further complicated by three underlying cardboard cylinders, which are placed at an angle and protrude slightly from beneath the mat of belts, offering a complexly shifting surface variations; a pliant, latticed matrix which simultaneously evokes geologic or biologic patterns.

There is in each of Fulcher's works - whether large scale public installations, or smaller gallery pieces - a carefully reasoned strategy of formalist spatial intervention. As partition, shelter, veil, sheet, shade or drape, she manipulates fabric to create its own architecture or to open a

surprising dialogue within existing structures. *Traverse Frieze (Supple Lilac & Midnight Blue)* (2014) responded to the interior architecture of the Crawford Gallery of Art. Traditionally a long stretch of plaster ornamentation, this frieze drew attention to the richly sculptural properties of rucked blue fabric and plastic film, as pliant as bubble gum. *Vermiculated Render Quoins to Ground Floor* (2016) transposed the decorative detail animating the venerable façade of Bandon's Allin Institute into vast filigree banners of upholstery fabric and leatherette. *Gaolbreak* is the latest and most ambitious in this series of large-scale, temporary fabric installations. Occupying the height and breadth of Cork's City Hall's atrium with swathes of sheeting and jazzy duvet covers, this formal strategy reflects on a half remembered account of incarceration and daring escape, articulated in bright, inexpensive bedding fabric. This work continues her critical exploration of calcified notions of taste, class and gender while adroitly sidestepping the clichés that pertain to fabric art and craft, the decorative or the neglected labour associated with women. Fulcher's spare and rigorous formal language allows us to apprehend the familiar while appreciating its unexpected strangeness and beauty.

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*Vermiculated render
quoins to ground floor,
2016.*





*Sun Stopping,
2016.*



Belt, 2015.



Blinkers, 2015.

List of Illustrated Works

1: Jed Niezgoda, Cork City Gaol Exterior, 2016

2: *Gaolbreak: studio developments, documentation I*, 2017. Mixed media: cotton/polyester duvet covers. Photo credit: Angela Fulcher.

3: *Gaolbreak: studio developments, documentation II*, 2017. Mixed media: cotton/polyester duvet covers. Photo credit: Angela Fulcher.

4: *Vermiculated render quoins to ground floor*, 2016. Mixed media installation: leatherette, upholstery fabric, upholstery glue, rivets, thread, galvanized bar, straps. 3 x banners, dimensions: 500cm x 175cm. Installation view of the Allin Institute at ENGAGE Bandon Arts Festival, 2016. Photo credit: Brian Mac Domhnaill.

5: *Sun Stopping*, 2016. Mixed media installation: spinnaker cloth and tree stakes. Dimensions variable. Installation views of Carlow Arts Festival, 2016. Photo credit: Jed Niezgoda.

6: *Belt*, 2015, mixed media floor installation: approx. 170 belts hand-stitched, cardboard tubing, leatherette, 4m x 2.5m. Photo credit: Jed Niezgoda.

7: *Blinkers*, 2015, mixed media: car headlamp lens coverings, transport interior fabrics, leatherette, wadding, polystyrene, spray paint, thread. Dimensions variable. Photo credit: Jed Niezgoda.

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