



Ruairiadh O’Connell

“I am interested in how the handmade can be distinguished to show identity”

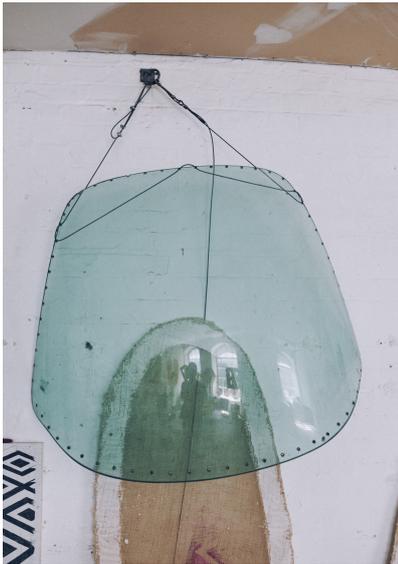
Ruairiadh O’Connell explores the dark twists of design and psychology in his seductively colour- and pattern-laden works, taking inspiration from Gothic architecture, casino carpets and murder-scene forensics. Emily Steer meets the self-described printmaker in his London studio.

Words: Emily Steer

Can you tell about the body of work that you created for your summer show, “Profiles in Custody”? It’s based on the Aaron Hernandez case in the US. He was found guilty of murdering twenty-seven-year-old Odin Lloyd in 2013 in Massachusetts. The exhibition took root in the forensic investigation of the shoe impression that was found at the murder scene. At the time of his arrest, Aaron Hernandez was a tight end for the New England Patriots of the National Football League. The show looked at our inherent ability to manifest evil, and man’s ultimate downfall.

My interest in the case extended into the history of the chevron. The chevron impression found at the scene comes from the “elephant’s foot” architecture of the Nike Air Jordan XI—the tread of the heel and toes—which gives maximum support to the basketball player. From the Middle Ages, the chevron was a crucial form in Gothic architecture to represent the peaks and valleys of life—our rise and our fall. It is seen broadly over Western Europe alongside Flamboyant representations of gargoyles, for instance, both serving as visual cues to pilgrims to abide by the laws of the land.

How do you tend to arrive at your ideas? I arrived initially at this project from looking at how burglars evade detection in crime scenes. Burglars tend to wear the same shoe style—the police describe it as a “uniform”. Over time, fashion dictates the shoe most commonly found and it changes based on regional trends from city to city. Our shoeprint is



just as distinguishing as our fingerprint. Through the wear and tear of a shoe, the wearer's individual walk and pacing, and, of course, measurements, we can learn a lot about identity. I was working with the Metropolitan Police to learn their techniques and their language and the ways they identify certain shoes from the mechanical process they employ to identify a suspect. The impressions left by a shoe can even give clues to the suspect's psychology during the crime. I am interested in how the handmade can be distinguished to show identity.

*Much of your work looks at the psychology of patterns and designs. How important is it that this element or effect then feeds through to the final viewer? That's crucial. With casino carpets [which inspired the works in *Invisible Green* at Jessica Silverman Gallery in 2014], there are seven strategies the casino can use to keep you engaged on your primary focus, to encourage you to gamble more. I was interested in the colour theory of hypnotism and the way that art can also be overwhelming. The one strategy that stood out was the way to encourage hallucinations, how design can overwhelm and direct the subconscious. The works that I made were using similar principles by messing with the perspective of the original visuals.*

Would you say that you're drawn to the darker side of design psychology? I think in terms of the dark side, I am interested in the fragility of being a human. One dominant theme of Romanesque sculpture is the battle: a battle to survive. The imagery used was a reminder of our inherent vulnerability to ignore social order and to do wrong. A reminder of our ability to be evil.

A few years ago, I did an investigation into spatial disorientation and the reason why Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, J.P. Richardson and their pilot, Roger Peterson, died; the graveyard spiral. When you're a young pilot you are trained immediately to fly using your instruments, but if you don't focus on them and can't see due to severe weather and turn a sharp left, the water in the vestibular system in your brain cancels out what you think is true and what your sense of level is. I was interested in the way the brain can also be inherently tricked, manipulated subconsciously.

How do you decide how certain bodies of research will be realized? Do you make a choice between sculpture and painting early on or do you experiment with them quite loosely? It's all one work. I feel like I'm always trying to get my wall works so they're more like sculpture—even the way the plaster can stretch the canvas. To get to these concluded works takes months of failed and broken experiments. The path is so convoluted as each step relies on the previous one. Each decision is never really planned, it's just a consequence that has worked with the materials.

Ruairadh O'Connell opens a solo show at Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco, in November 2017.

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Previous pages, opposite page
and this page
Portrait and studio photographs by
Benjamin McMahon

This page, top left
MGM Grand, 2014
Silkscreen on wax in welded steel tray
119 x 99 cm

Top right
Orleans, 2014
Silkscreen and wax in welded steel
58.5 x 48 cm