

INTERIORS

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Susan Giles
The Burren Annual

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Interiors

By Susan Giles

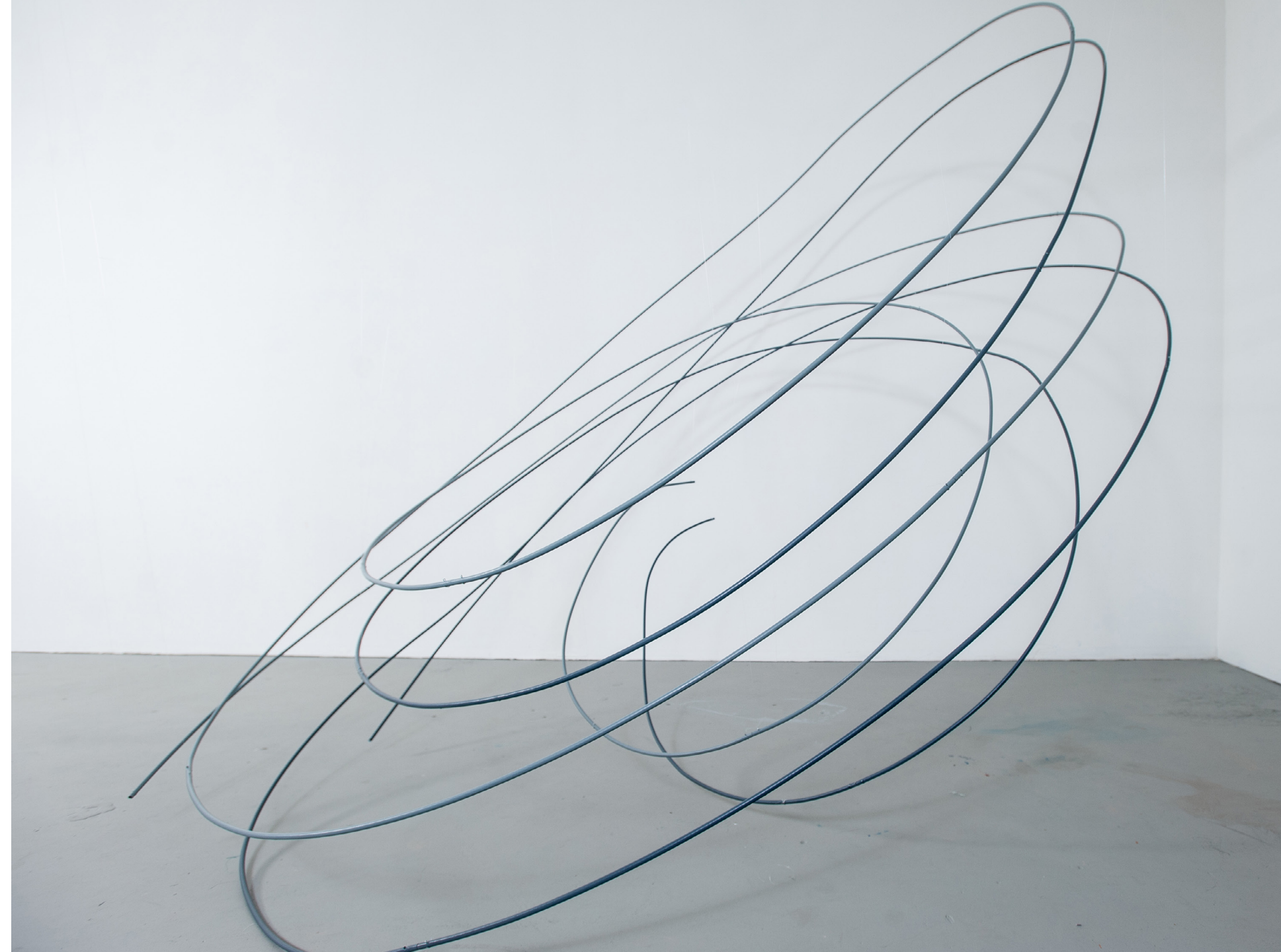
Focusing on how individuals perceive architecture through speech and gesture, Interiors is a solo exhibition of sculpture and video in The Gallery at Burren College of Art. The show features work about Newtown Castle in the main gallery and historic Chicago libraries in the project room. This exhibition is part of a multi-year touring project in which works in the series were presented at the University of Paris, Sorbonne Nouvelle at the International Society of Gesture Studies in 2016, with further iterations opening at THE MISSION in Chicago fall 2017. The series will culminate in a solo exhibition at the Chicago Cultural Center in 2018. Challenging the notion of a monument as a static form, this work brings individuals' internal experience of place to the immediate context of the physical structure through performed acts of gesture. While photos, videos, or souvenirs communicate specific aspects of experience to others, gestures convey information that often operates on the periphery of our awareness. Language becomes sculptural through gestures. By physically constructing the moment of recalled experience through material interpretations of gesture, I propose that multiple individuals' memories are part of the collective experience of public monuments.

Newtown Castle is a 16th century Tower House located on what is now the campus of Burren College of Art in County Clare, Ireland. Newtown Castle is open to tourists, and the College hosts international students and artists-in-residence. For this exhibition, I asked three international visitors to the tower to describe their experience of the historic landmark. Their resulting videotaped

narratives reveal very different conceptualizations of space through the improvised gestures that accompany their speech. Each speaker describes how her body moves through the tower, yet there are distinct differences in the way that they each use gesture to answer the same question. These gestures show their varied embodied perceptions of the same space, even when they are not accompanied by words that directly articulate that understanding. Linguist and prominent gesture researcher Irene Mittelberg writes that gestures, "as any other medium, do not simply imitate or reproduce the speaker's inner or outer world, they participate in the encoding and structuring of experience."¹ Often acting in the periphery of our awareness in rapidly unfolding discourse, spontaneous gestures convey our internal experience in an external manner.



The three individuals were asked the following question: How does your body move through the tower? In one gestural portrayal, the speaker says "It goes in a spiral like this." She begins the gesture accompanying her speech at hip level and with one index finger, she draws a tall, vertical double loop that ends above her head. By contrast, another speaker says, "It's going up stairs and stairs." While the first speaker uses one finger to trace the movement in space, the second individual uses the thumb and index finger of both hands. Unlike the first speaker,



the scale of her gestures is tiny. Her two hands simultaneously trace a double spiral that stays at waist level with only a couple inches of movement up and down. This gesture seems to indicate that she does not consider this particular architectural form to be very tall, although she has not yet specifically said so. Later, as she elaborates on her description she says, "...it's not like a stair that continues... a lot of towers you go up and up and up but here you go from room to room." Only after making her gesture does this speaker find the words that give insight into the scale of her movement, demonstrating University of Chicago psychologist David McNeill's assertion that gesture is "the very fuel of language and thought".² The third individual uses her full hand in large, sweeping ovals as she says, "...a circle-y movement...inside..." Her gesture begins at waist level and continues in several complete round motions climbing up in front of her face and back down with her arm fully extending to trace the arc of the movement. This gesture continues for several seconds after she finishes speaking, resulting in a gestural form large enough to envelop her body. Prior to this description, she talks about needing to hold the rope railing so that she would not fall. The large, encompassing nature of her gestures indicates that her body feels smaller in relation to its movement in the tower than the prior individual, and may reflect anxiety about moving through the space.

The works in the project room focus on three of Chicago's architectural landmarks, all of which are, or have been, public libraries. These library/monuments include the Chicago Cultural Center, T.B. Blackstone Memorial Library, and the Harold Washington Library. In 1892, architects Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge built The Central Library of Chicago and Grand Army of the Republic Memorial Hall under the Library Board's instruction to "convey to the beholder the idea that the building would be an enduring monument worthy of a great and public spirited city."³ Now known as the Chicago Cultural Center, the building houses cultural events including concerts and exhibitions. T.B. Blackstone Memorial Library was completed in 1904 as the first branch library and continues to play an active

role in the Hyde Park community. Harold Washington Library, completed in 1991, is a monumental postmodern building with an assortment of historical signifiers. Each of these libraries have at times been overshadowed, literally and metaphorically, by Chicago's famous skyscrapers, but each of these grand civic buildings contributes to the city's cultural history and attempts to convey to the visitor a sense of its place in history. The works in the project room stem from videos in which individuals describe these buildings from memory as a personal response to a structure meant to convey a sense of collective identity.

Gestures carry information about space, time, and form that is not easily conveyed in speech and is often imagistic in nature. These gestural portrayals simultaneously reflect the observers' viewpoints and connect the human body to material space. I have chosen to create video animations and sculptural interpretations of those gestures in order to make these forms linger in space and allow the viewer to focus on the ephemeral and nonverbal aspect of their experiences. By translating those shapes and forms into sculpture and enlarging the gestures to an architectural scale in the sculptures, I hope to give the viewer an opportunity to experience something of the individual's cognitive experience of these public landmarks.

¹ Mittelberg, Irene, *Gesture and Iconicity* (2014), *Handbücher zur Sprach- und Kommunikationswissenschaft /Handbooks of Linguistics and Communication Science (HSK) 38/2*, Publisher: De Gruyter, pp.1712-1732

² McNeill, David, *Why We Gesture* (2016), Publisher: Cambridge University Press

³ Seeger, Nancy, *The People's Palace: spontaneous gestures convey our internal experience in an external manner.*

For a Monumentality of Desire

Susan Giles' Interiors

By Michaële Cutaya

For the Burren Annual, Susan Giles presents Interiors, an exhibition that brings together two bodies of work engaging with buildings and gestures. This work has developed over the past couple of years through a residency at the Burren College of Art, a participation in the International Society of Gesture Studies at the Sorbonne Nouvelle and an evolving project on the historic libraries of Chicago. Buildings and gestures have long been part of Giles' practice – it was actually the title of a show in 2010 – but they are being brought closer together in this exhibition. The initial focus on gestures in her video works emerged from an interest in non-verbal moments of communication as well as what she sees as the sculptural aspect of language. For the videos of the Chicago project, Giles asked her participants to describe from memory the architecture of the grand public libraries. The gestures of the participants inscribe themselves on the screen through a digital animation technique used in gesture studies conjuring up fleeting architectural elements. The videos are accompanied by photographic prints showing the same participants viewed from above with their gestures trailing through a multiple exposure composite image suggesting three-dimensional shapes.

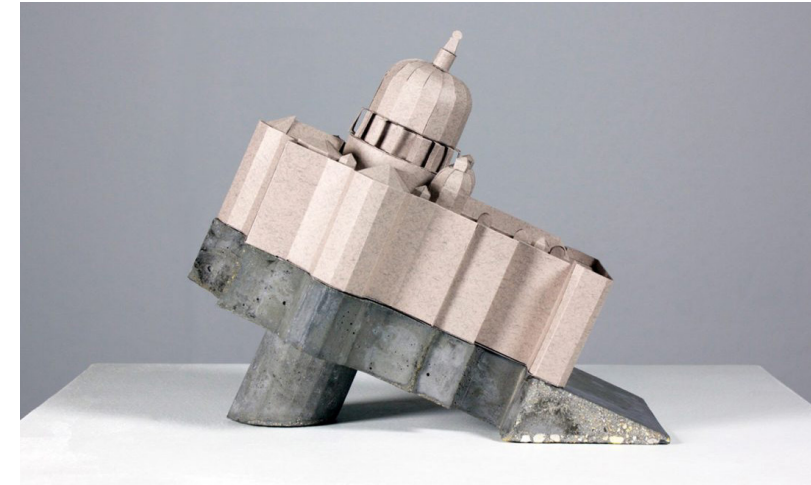
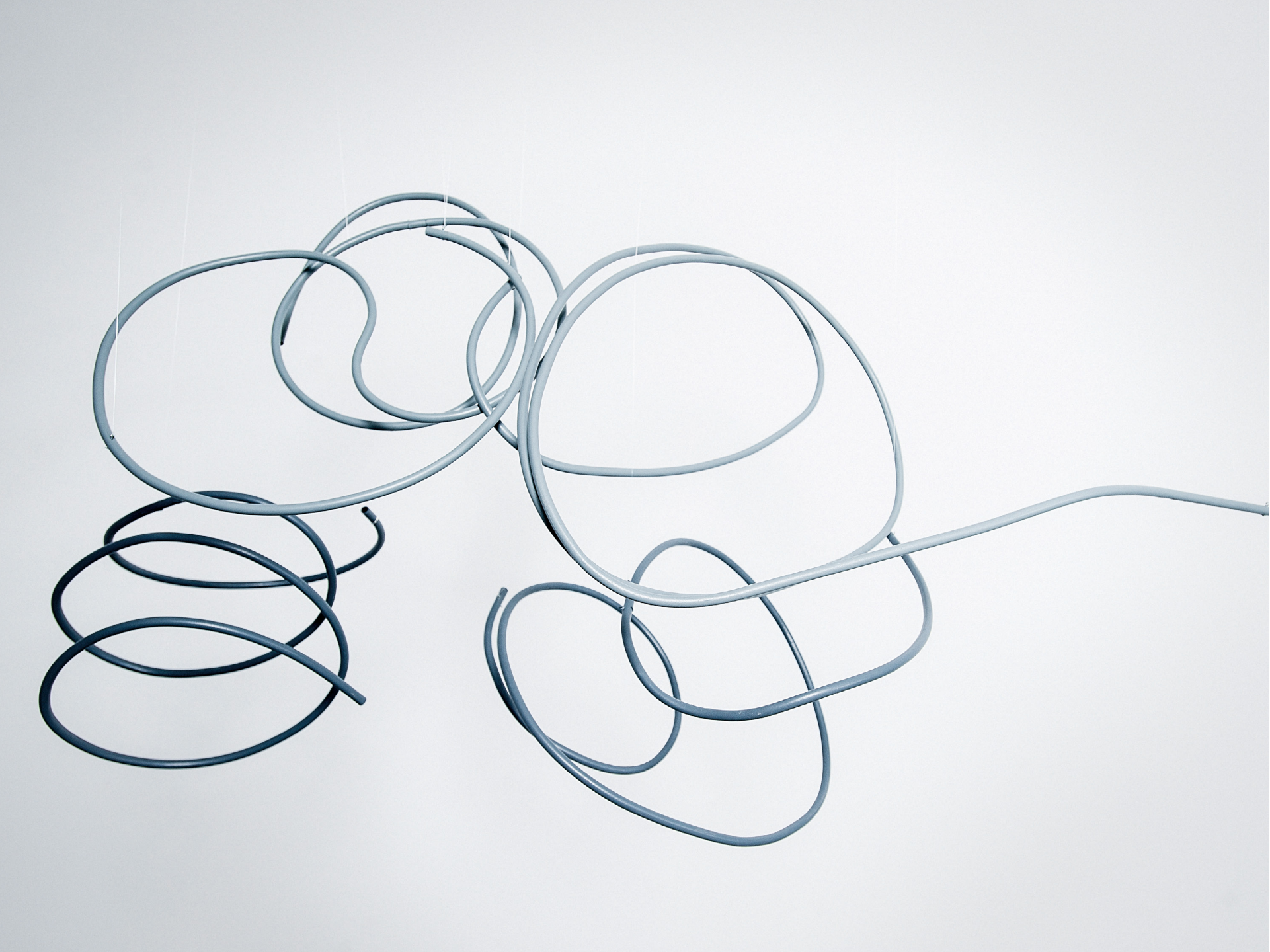
The series of videos and sculptures (three of each) Giles developed during her residency takes Newtown Castle, the 16th century tower house on the college's ground, as its monumental site. The artist asked three international visitors to answer the question: "How does your body move through the tower?" The single



gesture they made in answer was traced onto the screen, revealing how different each individual experience was. The trajectories of these gestures were then modeled into three-dimensional forms and scaled up as autonomous sculptures exhibited alongside the videos. The sculptures are made of aluminum

tubes and dispersed in the main gallery space so that visitors can walk around and even into them in one instance.

These artworks represent both a convergence and a further shift in Giles' practice: a convergence as it integrates gestures, architecture, bodies and sculpture closer than in previous work. A shift as for the first time her participants are moving inside the building. Giles discussed before her interest for the 'outside' and the symbolism of the monuments for the visitors, to 'what they signified at a distance'. Here she decisively focuses on the way visitors move into and experience the interior of the architectural structure. They are not asked to describe the inside of the monument either but the way they move through it. This shift is then compounded by the further translation of these gestures into 'monumental' sculptures: transforming a bodily perception of the interior into an external structure that can be experienced in turn. Something might be said about the choice of material here, throughout her work and as a sculptor, Giles shows a particular attention to what materials convey and how to contrast their innate properties. Here she chooses to use aluminum tubes, which may partly reflect practical issues, but also imposes a distance between the organic body moving through the tower and the non organic metallic material, thus further disembodying the gesture.



With this project, Giles also pursues her interest in touristic monuments or 'cliché buildings'. She talks about her wish 'to make them interesting again' and 'to challenge the monument as a static form'. In previous work she created models of iconic buildings juxtaposing unexpected materials such as paper and concrete, thus undermining their claim to durability, or placing her models in situation where the monument lost its dominance such as this paper model of St Peter's basilica whose platform is raised at a 25 degree angle, placing it on a slippery slope. This concern also resonates in the work she did editing tourists' video of famous sites using only their zoom-in function for instance to quite destabilizing effects. Here it is the individual's cognitive experience of architectural space that is drawn upon, teasing the question of how these touristic experiences can contribute to a collective identity beyond clichés.

It is tempting to follow a more subversive thread through Giles' work: after all as Georges Bataille reminds us architecture and monuments are always an expression of power. It is an unlikely coincidence, for instance, that the participants in these works are either female, foreign or from an ethnic minority, all groups who would have conflicting relationships with established authorities be they

Church, State or what Leslie Sklair calls the Transnational Capitalist Class. In challenging the staticity, the position and scale of monuments in her work, the artist also necessarily subverts the authority of these sites.

The desire to bring back some life into the way we experience monumentality is not incompatible with the desire to subvert its authority either. In *Towards An Architecture of Enjoyment*, Henri Lefebvre distinguishes between buildings and monuments, buildings have traded meaning for signification, 'the signification of the building is its functionality. Period. Shapes become fixed: boxes that are stacked and assembled.' By contrast, in *The Production of Space* he described monumentality as taking in 'the perceived, the conceived, and the lived; representations of space and representational spaces; the spaces proper to each faculty, from the sense of smell to speech; the gestural and the symbolic. Monumental space offered each member of a society an image of that membership, an image of his or her social visage.'

He suggests that this loss of meaning in our relationship with the monuments of modernity may be why we have such a desire to experience those of the past: 'space, monuments, homes (peasant or aristocratic) reveal the sense of something lost. The dream, utopia, the imaginary, the consumption of symbols and works, and finally tourism reinforce one another.'

In the process, beyond nostalgia, we may reinvent our relationship to both the past and authority through our participation and experience of monumentality. The playful and thoughtful approach that Giles brings to the exploration of this relationship gives the multitude a voice and perhaps may show the way towards the architecture of enjoyment sought for by Lefebvre.

Reference: Henri Lefebvre, Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment, University of Minnesota Press, 2014, and The Production of Space, Blackwell, 1991.



BURREN COLLEGE OF ART

Burren College of Art is an internationally recognised not-for-profit independent college specialising in undergraduate and graduate fine art education. The College offers artists and art students from around the world time, space and inspiration within the unique environment of the Burren. The PhD in Studio Art, MFA in Studio Art and MFA in Art and Ecology programmes are accredited by the National University of Ireland, Galway and operated in association with the Royal College of Art, London and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The College's Undergraduate Study Abroad programme, Summer School and Artist Residency programmes also recruit internationally. The Residency, Alumni Residency and Emerging Irish Artist Residency programmes bring Irish and international artists to the Burren year round.

THE BURREN ANNUAL

The Burren Annual exhibition brings Irish and international artists working with diverse modes of practice to the Burren to engage local and visiting audiences. Inaugurated in 2004 it foregrounds Burren College of Art as a site for discourse and artistic engagement and prioritises the rural as a hub for building local and



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This project is partially supported by an Individual Artist Program Grant from the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs & Special Events, as well as a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency, a state agency through federal funds provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Image credits: Kip Wilkinson

All sculpture photos