

Vanessa Donoso Lopez: *Quotidian Tensions between the Domestic and the Unexpected*

Golden Thread Gallery- 11 January – 17 February 2018

By Jane Morrow

The Babel fish in Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is a universal translator renowned for its instantaneous language translation capabilities. Because of its extraordinary evolution, it is argued in the book that the Babel fish simultaneously proves and disproves the existence of God and that by removing language barriers between people it is responsible for the bloodiest wars mankind has ever known.

To lay the blame for humankind's propensity for war at the Babel fish's door negates a more tangible barrier to peace, love and understanding: land. In the Catalonian context, underpinned by research on the history of the ancient, contested near-eastern state Samaria; resident in one European state and exhibiting in its nearest neighbour (soon to be once further removed), Barcelona-born, Dublin-based artist Vanessa Donoso Lopez has a lot to navigate.

Metaphysical and subjective forms – objects, tools, space, time and effect – are those that most concern the artist: her place (as one of many) in this place (as one of many) at this time (as one of many). What is real or tangible amongst this: material/ substance, relationships, the lifespan of everything and everyone, the limits of time? Clay, as both the host and matter of the first expression of language, is a generous, sustaining and wonkily sophisticated material in Lopez's hands.

For her, clay fulfils a number of fundamental social functions as a metaphor for human experience: it is the land we walk upon, where we grow our produce (another cultural signifier), where we bury our dead. Clay traverses the borders between pre-language and develops narrative implicit in our individual stories.

As a person (electively) displaced from her native land, Lopez focuses on her material's potential for sharing and comforting: creating a table adorned with crockery created from clay which has been excavated from sites of personal significance – her parents' birthplaces and her own.

The table stretching the length of Golden Thread's Project Space affords Lopez an opportunity to gather more material through conversations: preparing and serving food for gallery staff and guests. She describes the acquisition of language and culture as addictive and complex. Alongside much current work based around food practices and production, the feeling is one of inclusivity, big-heartedness and exchange.

The long table is augmented by a parallel shelf, supporting a range of test pieces of plates, bowls and vessels displayed in museological rows, classified by their formal properties. Perhaps it is the inherent colour of the clay or the variances of glaze fired at different temperatures, but despite their anthropological descriptors ('descendants' of those that made it to the table), these pieces feel almost science-fictional and, intentionally,

slightly colder than those which fulfil their function as crockery – like somebody or something else is needed to activate them.

A key component of the installation is a series of succulents dotted atop the table. These have been propagated by the artist through her travels and her relationships. She refers to them as 'relatives' of earlier plants, maintaining a lexical borrowing – as with 'roots' – which is somewhere between botany and genealogy. The plants have travelled with Donoso Lopez throughout her life, experiencing the same climates, transitions and relationships that she has. Despite the perceived dangers of transporting organic materials, she tells me that they have less bother at customs than she does.