

**Trish Morrissey : Autofictions**  
**Twenty Years of photography & film**



**Exhibition Guide &  
Education Resource**



Still from *Eupnea*, 2022, HD video and 16mm film

Trish Morrissey's practice crosses the disciplines of performance, photography and film. Born in Dublin, she moved to London in the early 1990s and worked as a commercial photographer before completing formal studies. In 2001 she started to use herself as both "subject and narrator", and since then has always appeared in her work. A natural storyteller, Morrissey uses performance and humour to disrupt our expectations of the image, be it the family snap or the costume drama, creating a sense of things having gone awry – scenes that, she suggests, "lie on the border between psychologically disturbing and a little bit funny".

This exhibition brings together work from the past twenty years, starting with early projects that reflect on the artist's childhood in Ireland, and culminating with a new film installation inspired by the lives of Ruth and Sigrid ("Sissi") Serlachius.

Motherhood, family and the domestic are key themes. Morrissey has collaborated with her sister, mother and children throughout her career, often making work in her home. In recent years, she has also found inspiration in museum collections and archives, with a particular concern to resurrect stories of women from history.

A dual approach, whereby Morrissey reflects on her own experiences and uses her body to re-enact those of others, continues throughout the gallery, producing a cumulative narrative – or autofiction – about female experience, from youth to motherhood, middle age and beyond.

**Eighteen and Forty-Five**  
**2004**

MiniDV, colour with sound  
Duration 3:20

This short film is a study in nostalgia, ageing and inheritance; some of the themes that Morrissey has returned to throughout her career. An early work, it also introduces the artist's interest in the body, costume and gesture. It was made on the eighteenth anniversary of the artist's school prom and the forty-fifth anniversary of her parents' wedding, to which mother and daughter wore the same dress. Here, they dance to Glenn Miller's Moonlight Serenade, a favourite of Morrissey's parents, who courted in the 1950s during the heyday of the Irish Dance Hall. The women's bodies carry the conventions and aspirations of their separate generations — the hopes and dreams of both the dance hall and the 1980s New Romantic. However, shot in the family's back yard in Dublin, the film suggests the restrictions of domesticity and the fading hopes of youth.



Still from *Eighteen and Forty-Five*, 2004,  
MiniDV, colour with sound

**Seven Years**  
**2001-2004**

The title for this series refers to the age gap between Morrissey and her elder sister, with whom she staged these fictional mise-en-scènes that, as the artist has written, “aim to deconstruct the trope of family photography by meticulously mimicking it”. With careful attention to props and period clothing, the sisters assume different roles and characters within a fictional family album, their body language revealing subplots and psychological tension, suggesting that things are not quite as they seem. Morrissey is director, author and actor.

The photographs were taken in and around Morrissey’s family home in Dublin, where she grew up, and were inspired by discovering a box of family snaps in her mother’s possession. Printed at a large scale, they also relate to the development of “staged photography” in the 1990s and early 2000s, particularly among a generation of female photographers influenced by feminist theory, whose work re-examined both the language of photography and the representation of women. It is interesting to note that they were made using analogue processes around the time that digital photography started to replace the traditional photograph album.



*August 8th 1982 from Seven Years, 2001-2004*

**Front**  
**2005–2007**

A twist on the tradition of family portraiture, this series was made on beaches in the UK and around Melbourne, Australia. Morrissey approached families and groups of friends and asked if she could become part of their encampment by swapping roles and clothes with a woman from the group — usually a mother figure. This woman assumed the role of photographer, using the large format plate camera complete with a hood that Morrissey had already set up, while the artist took her place amongst her loved ones. Each piece bears the name of the woman Morrissey replaced, who ‘authored’ the image but is made visible only through this performance. Highly theatrical, the photographs are thus shaped by both careful planning and by chance encounters with strangers. They evoke ideas around the mythological figure of the ‘shape shifter’ and the cuckoo, which leaves its eggs in other birds’ nests, while also relying on identification and collaboration between women. In retrospect, the artist has commented that they might have been a subconscious ‘rehearsal’ for motherhood, as she became pregnant for the first time while making them. Set on the liminal space of the beach, the images also pose questions about what happens when physical and psychological boundaries are crossed, and bring to mind broader issues around borders and identity.



*Hayley Coles, June 17th, 2006, from Front,  
2005–2007*

## Psycho Beach 2008–2010

Morrissey started this series when she was pregnant with her second child, knowing that he would be born with significant health challenges.

Keem Bay and Dookinella are beaches on Achill Island off the Atlantic coast of Ireland, where Morrissey's family holidayed when she was a child. These same locations also featured in the melodramatic stories about the sea that Morrissey used to write at school. Here, the artist returns to these sites of memory, staging enigmatic, contemplative scenes suggestive of the works of Northern Romantic painters, in which a figure is absorbed in and possibly overwhelmed by the landscape; a kind of contemporary sublime.

As with all of Morrissey's work, each piece carries several layers of reference; pictorial and conceptual, personal and collective. These include mermaids in art and fairy tale who give themselves to the sea; Christian iconography of the mother and child; and memories of her own childhood.

In *Gower*, made in Wales, where Morrissey and her new family spend their holidays, a mother and a young child face a stormy sea, perhaps an allegory for an uncertain future or a more direct reference to the series title. *Psycho Beach* is a punning reference to a derogatory expression for post-partum psychosis overheard by the artist some years previously.



*Gower, Psycho Beach, 2008-2010*

## The Failed Realist 2011

Morrissey's son was born with health difficulties when her daughter was three years old. Confined to the house with two small children, Morrissey needed to find her materials and subject matter within the home.

*The Failed Realist* evolved from a rainy day face painting activity into a collaboration between mother and daughter — the daughter deciding to paint her mother's face, choosing subjects from her immediate experience and naming the pictures, and the mother submitting to these desires and photographing the results.

The series title comes from French philosopher and psychologist Georges-Henri Luquet (1876–1965), whose studies of the evolution of children's drawing based on stages of realism were published in 1927 (translated into English 2001). The "failed realism" stage comes between the ages of four and six, when the child wants to represent the world and yet their verbal and visual skills exceed their mark making abilities.

Modernist artists contemporary with Luquet saw children's drawings as pure expression, unaffected by representational conventions (Picasso famously said: "It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child"), but these mask-like paintings evoke nightmares, clowns and the grotesque rather than the usual motifs of butterflies and flowers.



*Bitzer, from The Failed Realist, 2011*

## The Successful Realist 2017

This series is a reprise of *The Failed Realist* project, and was made when Morrissey's daughter was eleven, and bordering on becoming a teenager. In some respects, it was an experiment to test the theories of drawing explored in the first series, and to see how the child's worldview — and relationship with her mother — had evolved during the intervening years.

As before, Morrissey gave her daughter completely free reign and submitted to her will. As she writes:

*Where previously it had been an endurance test —her clumsy brush skills poking and scratching my skin for up to an hour — this time she was an artist with a canvas, a successful realist. Some of the results from the second iteration of this process were obscure and witty (Cyclops Twins), and others ghoulish (Clown Face). Some were influenced by her time online (Emoji (Love Eyes), Miranda Sings), others express her generation's obsession with the world they are being left to fix (Life and Death).*



*Emoji (Love Eyes), from The Successful Realist, 2011*

## Self Portrait with Two Snails

2020

HD video, colour with sound

Duration 3:02

Made during the first Covid-19 lockdown of 2020, this film explores themes of stoicism and submission in relation to motherhood and domesticity. An exploration of Morrissey's personal experience during this period, when her perception of time became distorted and she found ways to cope with new dynamics within the home, it is also an oblique record of the increased demands on women and the heightened attentiveness to the natural world brought about by the global pandemic. Morrissey writes:

*Days dragged on while weeks flew by. A crippling combination of anxiety, claustrophobia and fear affected me for the first time. Home-schooling my children and keeping my family's physical and mental health on an even keel required all my energy.*

*I planted seeds and grew food. My brain started to quiet and I observed the little things that I normally have no time for. I watched snails in the garden and was inspired by them to live in the moment. I forced myself to breathe deeply. To slow down. To be still. 'Self Portrait with Two Snails' depicts my full submission, without resistance or friction, to this new dynamic.*



Still from *Self Portrait with Two Snails*, 2020

## Ten People in a Suitcase 2014–2015

In 2014, Morrissey was among a group of international artists invited to travel to Mänttä, Finland and make work that reflected their encounter with the town for the exhibition *Touching From a Distance* at Serlachius Museum Gösta.

Morrissey's project evolved from researching the photographic archives of G. A. Serlachius Ltd, now part of the Serlachius Museums, which contain many portraits of townspeople, often company employees and mostly unnamed. She restaged ten of these photographs, meticulously recreating the scenes and assuming the characters herself in a process that she describes as "acting both as protagonist and narrator".

As she writes: *Each character I chose to re-imagine had something about them that I recognised. I felt there was a part of me already within the photograph. It could have been the way the character stood, or the space they took up in the frame, a glint in the eye, or an authority in the angle of the hand. I felt a visceral connection to them. In order to create these new photographs, I had to imagine the events that led up to this moment in the character's lives, and in doing so, felt closer to the town itself.*



Fig. 04287KEL (TM) G. A. Serlachius Oy's workers at Loukkusuo peat bog. One Woman. 1943 / 2015. Mänttä, Finland, from *Ten People in a Suitcase*, 2015

## Rosa, Irma and the Sandman 2016

Morrissey describes her work as sitting “somewhere between performance and portraiture”. This series was made while on a residency at the Bohusläns Museum in Uddevalla, Sweden, where she came across a collection of dolls that belonged to identical twins Rosa Bohlin (1915–1989) and Irma Bohlin (1915–1990). Morrissey became fascinated by these women, who lived together and dressed identically for their whole lives. Seamstresses by profession, they made clothes only for themselves, their dolls and other women.

The museum also holds the archive of Ingeborg Enander (1880–1976), who ran a photography studio in the twins’ hometown of Stenungsund from 1904–1967 and photographed them on several occasions.

Morrissey also made contact with the twin’s nephew, who showed her photographs from his family’s collection. She worked in and around her own home to set scenes reminiscent of Stenungsund and recreate a selection of these images, posing as both women — Rosa, “confident, smiley and positive” and Irma “who was shy and a little sad”. This was the first time Morrissey used overlay techniques to perform as more than one character in a work. The series marks an important shift in her practice towards exploring and researching other lives and histories.



*In the Garden, from Rosa, Irma and the Sandman,  
2016*

## Eupnea

2023

Duration 11 mins. 40 secs.

The starting point for this film was Morrissey's research into Sigrid (Sissi) Serlachius (1877-1944) and Ruth Serlachius (1882-1963), the first and second wives of Gösta Serlachius, who was managing director of G. A. Serlachius Ltd and founder of the Serlachius Fine Arts Foundation. The family's portraits, personal correspondence and photographs are in the collections and archives of the Serlachius Museums, where this work was first shown.

Eupnea is the term for the effortless normal breathing pattern common to all mammals. The film draws on points of contact between the biographies of Sissi and Ruth Serlachius and Morrissey's own experiences of illness and motherhood. It reflects on, and perhaps processes, the artist's memories of her son's stays in hospital during treatment for a life-threatening illness and expresses a collective trauma brought on by the Covid-19 Pandemic, when it was made.

Centred around the connections between breathing and life force (linking to Ruth's interest in Spiritualism), and recalling the anguish of the parent who learns of the fragility of life (Sissi's young son died in her arms on the way to hospital), the film is collaged from various sources. These include the artist's journals and *The Science of Breath*, the yoga manual that Ruth translated into Finnish in 1935, footage of the landscape around the Morrissey's home and images of hospitals in London and Helsinki.

Morrissey performs a variety of physical exercises (feats of endurance rather than 'roles'), re-enacts Covid nightmares and the feverish breathlessness brought on by the disease, and stands in for a universal mother figure. Inspired by the account of Sissi's tragic loss, and following the instructions of Ruth's text, she learns to breathe through her flashbacks and share her own story in this epic tale from a baby's first gasp to the final breath at death.



Still from *Eupnea*, 2022, HD video and 16mm film

## **The Maiden and the Crone** **2017–**

Twice a year since her daughter's eleventh birthday, Morrissey has posed with her in the same room of their house for a joint photograph. As the title implies, this ongoing series, planned as a ten-year project, considers heredity (specifically, what is passed down through generations of women), and so far records the simultaneous occurrence of the daughter's adolescence and the mother's menopause.

Morrissey appropriates the term 'crone' (an equivalent to 'hag' or witch) for a frank examination of her ageing self, confronting society's identification of youth and fertility with beauty and usefulness, while also implicitly handing on the role of mother to the next generation.

Presented as a grid, the photographs can be read as a record of the evolving relationship of mother and daughter over time, while the act of making them marks both a parental desire to freeze the moment and the commitment mother and daughter have made to one another over this period.



*30th March 2019, from The Maiden and the Crone, 2017 –*

## Phenomena of Materialisation 2019–2020

Morrissey became interested in photographs of séances when researching the involvement of Ruth Serlachius (1882-1963) in Spiritualism in the 1930s. From its beginnings in 1850s America, modern Spiritualism grew in popularity during the latter half of the 19th century, based on the belief that departed souls could interact with the living, often through the assistance of a medium. Photography had an ambivalent status in debates about the veracity of spirit mediums, and was used by some as 'evidence' and also adopted as a means to expose these claims as fraud.

Ectoplasm photography, a form of spirit photography that depicted (usually female) mediums violently discharging substances from their bodies, emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, and reached its height of popularity after World War 1. Photographers exploited developments in technology (including shorter shutter speeds and the invention of magnesium flash lamps) to capture the 'materialisation' of spirit activity in the darkened spaces of the séance room. (However, in the light of day, 'ectoplasm' was often found to be cheesecloth and magazine cut-outs.)

Morrissey restaged a selection of these images, performing the roles of both the medium and the spirit photographer. Her ectoplasm photographs draw attention to the uncanny and sexualised nature of the séance and explore the boundaries of self and other, finding an association between artist and medium. On the borders of science, magic and melodrama, and with their baroque overtones, the images present a spectacle that is both bizarre and disturbing.



*Automatic Writing, from Phenomena of Materialisation,  
2019-2020*

**Worksheet**

Describe the photograph:

What are the images of? Can you describe what you see?

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Is the image taken inside or outside?  
How does this affect your reading of the image?

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Is there anything you think that is not shown? Why?

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Composition – where are things placed within the image?  
Can you describe what you see?

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Can you describe the light in the image? Is it natural or artificial?  
Describe the colour in the photograph. Is it light or dark? What kind of  
feeling, atmosphere or mood does it create?

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Think about the position of the photographer the framing of the  
photograph.

Are they formal or informal?

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.....

Describe the size of the work. How is the work presented? Is it framed,  
hung on the wall? Does this affect what you think of the work? What if it  
was bigger or smaller?

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What is the artist trying to say? Is the work titled? Does the title affect  
the meaning of the work? Are they addressing a subject or issue? Have  
they succeeded in communicating their idea?

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What do you think about the artists' idea for this work? What does it  
make you think about, how does it make you feel?

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Do you like the work? Why? Do you dislike the work? Why?

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## Photography & Art Terms

### **Conceptual photography**

Conceptual photography is photography that is focused on illustrating an idea.

### **Documentary Photography**

Documentary photography is a style of photography that provides a straightforward story or representation of people, places, objects and events.

### **Straight Photography**

Straight photography is concerned with the inherent qualities of photography and rejects any form of manipulation or distortion of the image for painterly effects as associated with pictorialism.

### **Social documentary**

Social documentary refers to photography by artists who use the camera as a tool for social change, using it to shed light on injustice, inequality and the sidelined aspects of society.

### **Subjective Documentary**

Subjective photography is a creative or artistic process that aims to make a personal interpretation of a particular subject. It often invokes or describes a mood or conveys a particular atmosphere or emotions.

### **Staged photography**

Staged photography is made using situations that are set-up or staged especially to be photographed, often using performance and costumes.

### **Feminist Art**

Feminist art is art by artists made following developments in feminist art theory in the early 1970s. It is about showing the experiences and struggles of women in contemporary society.

### **C-Print**

A c-print, also known as a c-type print or chromogenic print, is a photographic print made from a colour negative.

**The following reading list has been provided by Trish Morrissey to illustrate some of the research behind the works in the exhibition:**

*Garden People*, Ursula Buchan

*The Ongoing Moment*, Geoff Dyer

*The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard

*The Uncanny*, Nicholas Royle

*Séance*, Shannon Taggart

*The Spectacle of Illusion*, Mathew L Tompkins

*The Brown Sisters*, Nicholas Nixon

*Family Snaps*, Jo Spence and Patricia Holland

*The Beach, The History of Paradise on Earth*, Lena Lancek and Gideon Bosker

*Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Post Memory*, Marianne Hirsch

*Caliban and The Witch*, Silvia Fedrici

*Hags*, Victoria Smith

*Stabat Mater*, Julia Kristeva

*Every Day is Mother's Day*, Hilary Mantel

*Mothers, an essay on love and cruelty*, Jacqueline Rose

*Women and Power: A Manifesto*, Mary Beard

*On Love and Death*, Patrick Suskind

*Breath*, James Nestor

*Being You: A New Science of Consciousness*, Anil Seth

*The Wim Hof Method*, Wim Hof

*The Phenomena of Materialisation*, Baron Albert von Schrenck Notzing

*The Science of Breath*, Yogi Ramacharaka

**EXHIBITION OPEN:**

24 November 2023 – 10 February 2024

Tuesday – Saturday: 11 am to 5 pm

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**Credits:**

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