

# The Visual Artists' News Sheet

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Ffrench/Harte, 'The Sovereigns', 2012, image courtesy of the Welland Arts Centre

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## VAN May/June 2013: Critique Supplement | Ffrench/Harte 'The Sovereigns'

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Ffrench / Harte, 'The Sovereigns', 2012. Image courtesy of the Mermaid Arts Centre

### **Ffrench/Harte**

#### **'The Sovereigns'**

**Mermaid County Wicklow Arts Centre, Bray**

**7 March – 11 April 2013**

Rope bridges incite all sorts of responses. Linked to recollections of playground fun, tree house adventures or daring action movie escapes, they trigger feelings of excitement and fear. Encountering Ffrench / Harte's rope bridge in the Mermaid Arts Centre's bright and spacious gallery not only conjured up such impressions, it also helped relinquish them because this bridge could not be experienced in the expected way. Lumped on the floor and only partially extended, it came across as a weighty and cumbersome object; more an obstacle to movement than a conveyance. The only intimation of suspension occurs at one end. Here the terminus has been draped over a wooden partition and dangles freely on the far side of that wall. In this configuration the bridge seems to lie in temporary visual storage: a functional object temporarily, if not permanently, devoid of purpose. Housed in this climate controlled environment, it can readily be accessed for perusal and consideration. The bridge was originally constructed for the provisional joining of The Sovereigns, two small and barren islands along the West Cork coastline – where it was installed and removed in the course of one day. In the Mermaid gallery the bridge is accompanied by a video and a selection of photographs that show the rope bridge in situ between the islands and document the people that contributed to the project's realisation. The islands, which are isolated, enshrouded in light mist and provide a habitat for sea birds, exude a mysterious aura and have a lurking presence. Their proximity to one another actually proposes some kind of connection, but for whom and for what purpose? It quickly becomes obvious that the bridge really goes nowhere. Though it is accessible from the smaller of the two islands, the opposite end meets a wall of rock. The images also effectively relay a sense of the project's scale and the challenges that confronted the artists. Evidence of the difficulties also derives from the photo of five team members. It is written across each of their wet and weary faces as they huddle together in a small inflated craft.



Ffrench / Harte, 'The Sovereigns', 2012. Image courtesy of the Mermaid Arts Centre

Visitors respond to the exhibition in many ways. One individual walks into the space, sees the picture of the suspended rope bridge and questions if it's the Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge in County Antrim. The image also reveals a host of materialistic differences. The span's open mesh structure, elegant curve, inherent flexibility and strength, contrast sharply with the density, rigidity and jagged contours of the stone. Some are drawn to the level craftsmanship – the artists tied each and every knot, and resorted to cutting up wooden pallets to make the deck – or make historical associations. Not only did the artists pursue a labour intensive process, they also immersed themselves in a centuries-old technology. Still, others became transfixed by the wooden deck and its unusual array of colours. The multi-coloured bars actually reminded me of an oversized children's xylophone, but the predominantly sombre tones, which range from discoloured whites, muted yellows, ochre and a touch of violet to a multitude of dark green-greys and browns, advocate an altogether different relationship. It turns out that each tone replicates one of the hues produced by a computer translation of Edouard Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, a work chosen for its strange depiction of modern life.

Much like Christo's *Valley Curtain*, the rope bridge hovers between being a functional entity and an art object, but with its placement in the gallery its complexity is compounded. Seeing it in this 'uninstalled' state poses a dilemma for the viewer. One expects to see it suspended or inventively displayed, not collapsed on the floor. The lack of access and sense of purposelessness are unsettling and initially distance viewers from the structure. And yet there is something very powerful about the bridge's presence, in the way that it grabs and holds attention. That power derives, in part, from the degree of workmanship, the physicality of the materials and the congruence of its constituent colours and textures. The fact that it cannot be traversed changes our relationship to the structure. We can, for example, imagine seeing the bridge as the artists saw it when they completed its assembly. We can also, with the help of the accompanying images and video, envision its transport across the water and hanging. The realisation that it connects to vertical walls in both contexts confirms that alternative explanations must be sought. The passage offered by this richly evocative object takes us out of the literal realm.

**John Gayer is a writer and artist based in Dublin.**

<http://visualartists.ie/van-ebulletin/critique/van-mayjune-2013-critique-supplement-ffrenchharte-the-sovereigns/>

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