

**Julie Merriman & Marcel Broodthaers**

**'GENERAL ARRANGEMENT'**

**Mermaid County Wicklow Arts Centre, Bray**

**8 September—1 November 2011**

Exhibitions emphasising the technical qualities of artworks tend to be rare within the realm of contemporary art production. Investigations into art materials and processes, and elucidations of an object's physical condition and history typically contribute to the preservation of the artefact or serve an educational function. Such information now frequently supplements surveys of a major artist's oeuvre. But 'General Arrangement' offers a completely different take on the subject. Bringing together work by Julie Merriman and Marcel Broodthaers that invokes nautical themes, the exhibition provides a conjunction teaming with references, that draws the eye into perusing an abundance of detail and sets up points of consonance that not only reverberate between these two artists' work, but also between their work and the space that houses them.

The bulk of the exhibition comprises 12 of Merriman's technically oriented drawings produced by using typewriter ribbon or transferring carbon onto supports that include canvas, carbon paper and masking tape on paper. The images consist of accumulations of linear detail delineating aspects related to sea vessels, the architectural intervention 'Unbuilding,' which inhabits the gallery until the last exhibition scheduled for 2011 closes, and a pair of grid structures. Some of the accumulations form dense clouds of superimposed information through which it is possible to enumerate plan, elevation and cross-sectional views, particular structural features and examples of hardware. Other drawings evoke motion. In *Ship IX* (2010) we see marks that intimate a ship's pivotal movement, whereas *Ship X* (2010) exhibits a hull snapped in half and sinking. It is a boat in the throes of its demise. Executed on creased black or very dark blue carbon paper, the choice of supports for these two works not only references the near constant undulations of the water's surface, but also conveys auras of mystery and peril. Though they predate the rest of Merriman's contributions, the drawings based on grids share a sensibility with the rest of the group. Involving the overlap and stacked arrangement of rectilinear modules, they represent the accumulation process in a manner that is both more literal and architectural.

Broodthaers *Bateau Tableau* (1973) focuses on a 19<sup>th</sup>-century genre painting he purchased in a curiosity shop. This slide projection reveals the

painting in and out of its frame, through detail and overall views, from different angles, in various kinds of light, even upside down. Through this process, we become familiar with the texture of the paint and the cracks and paint losses that interrupt its surface. The images record the presence of grime and a yellowed varnish. They offer views of the tacking margin and, with the help of raking light, distortions in the canvas can also be seen. In some respects the work recalls the analytical approach of a museum conservator documenting the artist's technique and painting's condition. But the path the camera follows doesn't always seem logical. While it does reveal the object's complex nature, it also—like Merriman's work—employs a surplus of detail, which proposes an alternate form of engagement.

This alternative engagement derives from the process of doing and looking that come together in the two bodies of work. It suggests that knowledge gradually builds up through a succession of actions and repeated viewings. Merriman's drawings, for example, condense time and space. The images she produces have been worked and reworked to the point that they neatly contradict the purpose of technical drawings. Instead, each work focuses attention on a compendium of recurrent actions and qualities inherent to the transfer methods employed. Similarly, Broodthaers' photo essay directs us away from the image and its conventional purpose and meanings. This intimate encounter with an artistically inconsequential canvas not only throws light onto its physical structure, but also completely changes the relationship viewers would have expected to have with such a picture.

While the title 'General Arrangement' may suggest otherwise, there's nothing ordinary about this exhibition. It is at once refreshingly instructive and intellectually captivating. The works invite the viewer to look and keep looking, and also compare our way of looking to one supplied by Broodthaers. Though the methods through which they have been conceived are now outmoded, the works themselves retain a sense of verity. They speak to the present as well as of the past, and engender new ways of seeing both. Moreover, the works effectively play off the structure that contains them. The ribbed framework that forms part of the 'Unbuilding' structure reminds one of a ship's hull and the creak of its floor recalls the sounds heard on a ship deck. This form of interaction only added depth to a thoroughly engrossing experience.





Marcel Broodthaers, *'Bateau Tableau, General Arrangement'* install view 2