

*Straw sister* is a wearable sculptural work that aims to reconnect present day realities of farming with the historical artefacts held in the National Museum of Ireland – Country Life collections.

The ‘A.I. man’ is a common colloquial term in rural Ireland, referring to the person who visits farms on request to intervene on the reproductive lives of cattle. In this agricultural context the abbreviation A.I. refers to Artificial Insemination. Before a visit from the ‘A.I. man’ the process has already been initiated through the collection, assessment, packaging and freezing of a bull’s seminal fluid until it is required for use. Storage takes place in what are referred to as A.I. straws. Produced and handled in highly sterile environments these straw receptacles come in a variety of bright pop colours to help distinguish between different bull’s specimens while being stored in liquid nitrogen.

A bull may continue to sire well after he has expired, and emerge anywhere in the world the frozen straw is transported to. Benefits of A.I. are the possibilities for increased meat and dairy yield, as well as perhaps being the more economical and safer option – the cost of feeding and housing an animal weighing somewhere between 500 and 1000kg can be high, and whose testosterone hormone can threaten a possible outburst of aggression.

Development of A.I. in livestock began in the early twentieth century, born from a desire to further proliferate the progeny of what’s considered a superior animal. In 1940 a straw of oat from the field was repurposed as the first ever A.I. straw.

Today, many farmers (of both sexes) elect to undertake A.I. training themselves so they may perform this contemporary fertility practice.

In the National Museum of Ireland – Country Life a number of the objects on display were used as part of calendar customs. These annual observances marked the the coming and going of the seasons, and along with them important events for food production such as the sowing and reaping of the harvest. Through these customs was an acknowledgement of the importance of fertility - of both crop and animal in order to secure our own human existence.

The Museum’s collection of harvest knots communicate the skill possessed by their makers. With their hands they manipulated the natural material of straw into intricately woven knots. These objects were often given as a token of affection to a prospective spouse at the annual country fair. Strawboys would emerge at wedding functions – distinctly human rituals whose purpose was to formalise a union between two, and often the precursor to creating new human life. In order that no-one identify these invaders, their use of straw to create disguising costumes was likely a result of this material being readily available and amenable to the task.

Inseminating a cow requires intimate knowledge of this female animal’s reproductive anatomy – guiding the plunger (green) to the opening of the cervix (orange), where once correctly positioned, the seed is released into the womb and uterine horns (pink).

The performer of A.I. must use their hands to navigate these internal biological structures.

Emphasising the feminine though the title and reproductive structures depicted in the work, the aim is to reassess the perception and role of women in the agricultural sector.

Traditionally considered a male dominated occupation, the work of women in this context often went unnoticed. These gender roles are slowly shifting with women increasingly taking a leading role in farming in Ireland today.

*Straw Sister* is created from the same type of hand-craft used to create harvest knots, though with the contemporary material of A.I. straws. The intention of *Straw Sister* being worn on the body is a way to think about the ultimate purpose of A.I., farming, and fertility rituals – in order to produce food. This food then enters our bodies, fuels our actions and how we shape the world around us, as well as our dominance over all other living species.

- Maria McKinney