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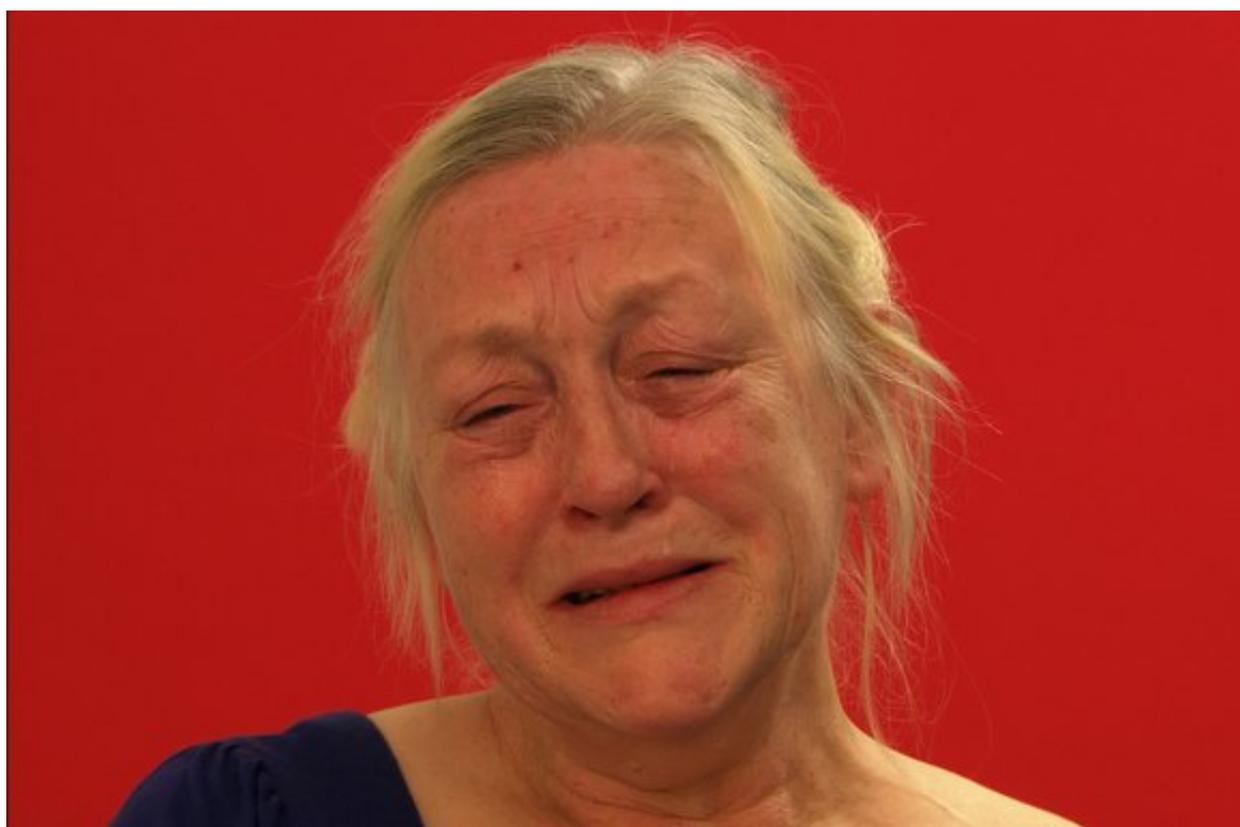
**THE SUNDAY TIMES**

# Traumatic viewing

Black tears fall in Cecily Brennan's latest work. As an artist who explores trauma, she is hard to like, but in video she has found her true medium

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Great sobs: the video work *Black Tears*

When asked in 1999 if her work was informed by personal experience, the artist Cecily Brennan dodged the question. "Everybody has experience of damage and injury," she told Peter Murray of the Crawford Art Gallery in Cork. Brennan had just

completed a series of polished stainless steel-sculptures that were uncomfortable to look at. They included *Knee Replacement (Middle Age)*, with its long stitched scar running over the knee-cap, and *Hinge-Ons for Bad Days*, a pair of calf-and-shin-guards with more surgically stitched flesh and an ugly-looking skin graft.

Even then, Brennan was cautious about attaching narratives to the images and objects she produced,

circumspect about telling stories that might pigeon hole her work as “self-help” or anything else. Twelve years on, she has returned to the Crawford with her latest project, an eight-minute, high-definition video that plays on a loop in a darkened room. And it is likely, if Murray put it to her again, that she would answer the same question in the same way.

*Black Tears* (2010) is showing as part of the Crawford’s Screening Room programme. It is a short film in which a woman cries. In the beginning, she is tight-lipped, tears falling. Then she closes her eyes and emits a sound from the base of her throat. No words, just “Oh.”

“Oh... ph-p-p-p-ph.” She lifts one shoulder and tilts her head, as if to comfort herself, then shakes her head, lowers the shoulder and cries. She closes her eyes and sobs.

Then all hell breaks loose: the woman goes from sobbing to roaring. When she looks, briefly, toward the camera she doesn’t register it. Soon, a second wave of grief will overwhelm her and she will roar again, wringing her hands in despair. Afterwards, her eyes will flicker as she stares into the camera, acknowledging that she has been observed, turns her head away and is still. Somewhere along the way the tears she is crying have turned black.

The woman is the Irish actress Britta Smith and she is crying because Brennan has asked her to. Smith carried out the task in private. The artist did not know what kind of footage she had until the actress emerged from her studio. In a tragic coda, Smith, who was in her seventies, passed away in October 2008, before Brennan edited the film.



Unstrung by Cecily Brennan

What they produced together, along with the cinematographer Seamus Deasy, is a powerful and unflinching study of deeply felt loss, which is essentially the trigger for all grief.

Brennan started out as a landscape painter, but in retrospect her journey from topographical-style views of the Wicklow countryside in the 1980s to short, visceral video pieces at the start of the new millennium makes perfect sense. As a painter she was interested in how the landscape might reflect emotion, or be used as a metaphor for such. When she began to make sculptures in the 1990s, she was exploring the body and physical pain. But, arguably, it wasn’t until she started making videos that she found her true medium. Not least because, rather than turning her back on what went before, she used her painting and sculpture as a

foundation for video work that keeps on getting better.

Brennan is interested in trauma. She likes to put that which is damaged and hidden inside on the outside, to make pain visible. This makes it difficult to “like” her work in the strict sense of enjoying, or finding it pleasing; but it is also what makes it good.

Asked to make a print inspired by the Old Testament for the Graphic Studio’s Holy Show at The Chester Beatty Library in 2002, she took a line from the Book of Job and produced an image of two red-skinned, boil-afflicted hands. When the Irish Museum of Modern Art showed *In the Time of Shaking*, an exhibition of Irish artists for Amnesty International in 2004, Brennan was represented by a painting entitled *Mother with Baby with Psoriasis* (2002). Neither image was pleasant, but both are strong artworks.

Painting and drawing are still part of her practice. *Black Tears* was accompanied by large charcoal drawings (18ft long) and small watercolour portraits of Smith when it showed at Dublin’s Taylor Galleries last April. And yet, her paintings have often felt as though they were compulsively poking at the sore. By comparison, her video work yanks the scab right off. And if that analogy is too much for you, then it is likely her art will be, too.

Smith's explosion of raw emotion contains anger, frustration and sadness. It is a roar of pain indulged and expressed that is so personal, so private and so loud it threatens to send viewers scurrying from the darkened gallery room. Some will find it powerful; others will see it as uncomfortably over-indulgent. Either way, Brennan wants us to look at the kind of emotion usually kept behind closed doors.

Black Tears references the lost Irish tradition of keening, at the same time asking questions of our modern-day reluctance to display extremes of sadness in public. Although Smith is an actress following instructions, she appears to be genuinely crying. If this is acting, it's method acting. Smith's emotions are drawn from somewhere very real and very painful.

She represents a kind of everywoman, with her bleached blonde hair tied roughly back, her greying blonde roots, her fillings, the gentle bags under her eyes and her freckled face lined with experience.

And she is wearing no make-up, certainly no mascara, which is why, when she begins to cry black tears, the artifice of the whole endeavour is suddenly brought to the fore. They fall almost cartoon-like down her face, and their appearance is so unexpected and so out-of-place, it threatens to distract from the whole.

It is important to watch the film more than once to get beyond the "how did she do that?" moment, because the black tears are vital. Not just because they remind us that this is a work of art, a construct, but because they are the "painted" element of Brennan's latest video work.

She has used the idea of black bile emanating from or afflicting the body elsewhere in her video work. In *Melancholia* (2005), black liquid seeps onto a white sheet beneath the body of a naked woman, and in *Unstrung* (2007), which was shown to great effect alongside Nigel Rolf's *Dust Breeding* (2008) in *Crawford's Terror and the Sublime — Art in an Age of Anxiety* show last year, a woman is knocked off her feet by repeated waves of black liquid.

In her watercolour painting, Brennan allows pigment to seep. This seeping is evocative of a slow build of emotion, or the unstoppable advance of pain once it begins to invade the mind or body. Here, the tears are like drops of black paint in water, they range from grey to black, depending on the amount of pigment.

When Smith finally acknowledges the camera, she looks momentarily embarrassed by the realisation of what she has shared. As she turns her head away, one black tear falls onto her cheek. Its colour isolates it, transforming it into a "painted" symbol of her pain.

"Don't bottle it up," they say. And you might think that Brennan doesn't, but in many ways her investigations into pain, in all its forms, are a way of controlling it. Whether she is painting, sculpting, or editing footage, she puts her finger on the pain and finds a way to contain it by turning it into a carefully constructed work of art.

We will never know exactly what Smith is mourning, but *Black Tears* requires no context to give you all it contains. It's a work of art that is not easily forgotten. Once witnessed, that roar of pain, those unexpected black tears, will stay with you, whether you like it or not.

*Black Tears is at the Crawford Art Gallery Screening Room until February 26*