

D I A N E F E N S T E R

Photographic Arts

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Secrets of the Magdalen Laundries Explanation

OVERVIEW

Secrets of the Magdalen Laundries is a room size installation that creates a symbolic laundry environment by combining large scale photographic images printed on full size cotton bedsheets hung from clothes line with a digital sound composition based on the recording of women speaking Irish Gaelic. Viewers are able to journey through a labyrinth of swaying translucent sheets set in motion by the breezes generated from the person's movements. Emanating from the sheets and washtubs are the evocative sounds of women whispering and speaking.



Secrets of the Magdalen Laundries Installation View Gallery Henschel, New York, NY October 2000

INSTALLATION

The environment consists of fifteen bedsheets ranging from full size to king size sheets along with a series of antique washtubs and pails as well as a hidden speaker system. Reconfiguring the placement of the sheets to harmonize with each installation location allows for enough room for physical movement around each sheet and through the environment. The translucency of the fabric allows for a layered mutable view of the images depending upon where the person is standing within the physical space.

ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHIC SHEETS

Secrets of the Magdalen Laundries is not intended to be a documentary about the Irish Catholic Church run prison laundry systems (The Magdalen Laundries) that were in operation from the 1800s to the 1970s but is instead an imaginative inquiry into the question of what enabled the women incarcerated in the laundry prisons to survive in such a punitive environment. The imagery on the sheets supports the premise that it was the women's retreat into their inner fantasy lives that offered them a survival mechanism and escape from the confinement of Church imposed morality. The double Polaroid Image Transfer portraits of the women can be likened to the double mug shots encountered in prison systems. The openfaced pages from the copybook representing the confines of the Church are taken from a series of writings in my collection by Isabella Morgan, an Irish woman writing in 1875 to her family and friends about her having found Jesus in her heart and hoping those who she is writing to will do the same. The objects rising through the copybook pages are meant to symbolize the women's personal fantasies that provide the means for their mental freedom.