

MOMENTA BIENNALE

Balado / Podcast

Episode 4 - Verbatim

Séamus Gallagher

Ce verbatim a été généré automatiquement par l'outil de transcription Sonix et peut contenir certaines coquilles.

This transcript was generated automatically by the transcription tool Sonix, and may contain some typos.

Séamus Gallagher x Jamie Ross

Episode 4 (29 min)

Jamie meets Séamus in the Biosphere dome, an iconic Montréal site located in the former United States pavilion for the 1967 World's Fair. The pair discuss the desire to innovate that inspires such major events and look back at the invention of the nylon stocking in 1939, made possible by that era's scientific advances. Through the figure of Miss Chemistry and borrowing the codes of drag culture, Séamus's work highlights the colourful aspects of an advertising campaign undertaken by the Du Pont Company during the New York World's Fair.

"I've seen this miraculous substance take infinite shape, Oil transmuted to stockings to parachutes to rope."

Jamie rencontre Séamus dans le dôme de la Biosphère, lieu iconique de Montréal situé dans l'ancien pavillon états-unien de l'Exposition universelle de 1967. Le duo discute des volontés innovantes qui motivent ces grands événements et porte son regard sur l'invention du bas de nylon en 1939, rendue possible par les avancées scientifiques de l'époque. L'œuvre de Séamus révèle, par le biais de la figure de Miss Chemistry et en empruntant les codes de la culture drag, les éléments d'une campagne publicitaire haute en couleur déployée par la compagnie DuPont lors de l'Exposition universelle de New York.

« J'ai vu cette substance miraculeuse prendre des formes infinies. L'huile transformée en bas collants, en parachutes, en corde. »

Jamie: You're listening to a podcast about images and the artists who make them brought to you by the 2023 edition of Momenta Biennale de L'image, curated by Ji-Yoon Han.

Entitled Masquerades Drawn to Metamorphosis, the 18th edition of MOMENTA Biennale de l'image presents 23 artists whose projects activate processes of transformation, mimicry and mutation. Its goal is to shed light on the dynamics of visibility and invisibility, defining the relationships between self and other, between humans and our environment.

I'm your host. Montreal artist and filmmaker, Jamie Ross and I'm meeting up with the artists showing work at this edition of MOMENTA for generous moments of conversation. Je suis votre animateur, artiste et vidéaste Jamie Ross. Je rencontre des artistes faisant partie de cette édition de MOMENTA pour des conversations enrichissantes. Les entretiens seront en français ainsi qu'en anglais.

I love artists. I love having the opportunity to sit with other artists about the work we make and to look at it with rigor, with curiosity and with delight. I'm interested in the messiness and the irregularity of communication, and I believe in the singular energy that is engendered by the places that inspire artwork. Not just our studios, galleries or the museums where they're shown. I'm interested in the resonance of a site and the objects that accompany each artist in their practice. For this series, I joined MOMENTA artists for an encounter at a site of their choice to hear about their process and to think about the questions their work asks. And I'm also fascinated by the paradox that is artists working with images, sharing their work in a decidedly non visual medium, that of a conversation, a podcast.

Jamie: So I've lived all of my adult life in Montreal, and there's one place I have never gotten around to visiting the Biosphere. So when Séamus Gallagher proposed the iconic Buckminster Fuller designed geodesic dome from Expo 67 as a site of inspiration related to the project presented by MOMENTA, you know, I leapt at the chance. For this episode. We explored the dome under a bright summer sun as we conversed about Séamus's practices.

Enjoy.

At the sound of the bell. We begin the spell.

Jamie: Welcome, Séamus Gallagher.

Séamus: Hello.

Jamie: Hi. Welcome to the MOMENTA podcast.

Séamus: Thank you so much for having me. Very flattered.

Jamie: Yeah. Well, thanks so much for bringing us to this really special place.

Séamus: First time here. It's beautiful. We're at the Biosphere currently, and, yeah, I'm so happy. I'm here for two days, so I'm happy to have, like, a location that's a bit of, like a tourist checkbox for me, but also still kind of related to my own work.

Jamie: Absolutely. Let's, let's take a moment to describe for our listeners a little bit about the setting. Let's describe it a little bit visually, because the paradox of this medium, of course, is that we can't show very well where we are. Yeah. Would you describe what you can see from where you're sitting?

Séamus: I see many, many triangles that create a fraction of a dome and many, many trees, many greenery and just all around a very calming atmosphere. To my left, we do see a funny little boardroom glass doors into a board meeting room. And yeah, feeling very at peace here.

Jamie: I love it. We're on this deck next to a boardroom within the Buckminster Fuller Dome for our listeners. So the entire the Biosphere, which will be familiar to most through its connection to Expo 67, Buckminster Fuller's dome that famously caught on fire. We're inside it on this porch next to a water feature on the island, and there are some summer cicadas. I see also a plane that's flying. I think I can also slightly hear, oh yeah, there are some bernaches, some Canada geese, and I can sense the slight sound of the ripening of the crabapples just to our north.

Séamus: But now that you mention it.

Jamie: Maybe, maybe our listeners might have a little more trouble with that. Well, I think that the most elegant and exciting part of being here is that connection between the work you're showing around world fairs and international universal expositions. Would you tell our listeners a little bit about the project you're presenting

at MOMENTA, a little bit about the concept and what it feels like to be inside the show?

Séamus: Yeah, absolutely. So this is a show I've been working on for the past two or so years, mostly just through research. The sort of jumping off point conceptually was my research into the 1939 New York World's Fair. At the time, I was thinking a lot about sort of ontology and this idea of present being sort of haunted by lost futures of the past. And so the 1939 New York World's Fair, the theme that year was World of Tomorrow. So I was really interested in revisiting this sort of nostalgic projection of a future. And so during my research, I was looking at particularly DuPont's Pavilion, because that's something that's funny maybe with All World's Fairs, but this sort of, sort of positioning of companies having the same placement as entire countries is very, very bizarre to me. And DuPont was premiering their newest invention, which was nylon stockings. And so they had this very campy pavilion where in order to advertise nylon stockings, they had this woman whose only identification publicly was as Miss Chemistry, perched on top of this three tiered pedestal, leg outstretched, showing off these nylon stockings. And I was really interested in that, just both visually, but also researching the sort of history of nylon and the many sort of associations that it's come to develop since its sort of production. And so my exhibition is called Mother Memory Cellophane, and I created a series of lenticular photos and a video work sort of performing as this ghost of Ms.Chemistry and sort of using this figure to sort of think through these ideas of lost futures, particularly lost futures caused by companies like DuPont thinking about the sort of environmental destruction these corporations have caused. And yeah, just thinking about sort of plastic as a whole and the sort of nylon

production as its own form of haunting, the way that sort of we sort of use these materials and then discard them and think that they're sort of no longer with us, but they are kind of haunting our environment. One other pavilion that I was really interested in in the 1939 New York World's Fair was, it was either Futurama or Democracy, both funny little names, but it was this sort of imagined future city. And, really what it was was just highways and suburbs. It was like this quote unquote utopic vision of the futuristic city where, like, everyone has their own car, everyone has their own house, and they drive into the city and they work, and then they come home into their own little bubbles. This was presented as like the dream. But the kicker was that the entire pavilion was funded by General Motors. So it's like this sort of future given to us by these companies, presented as this utopic idea. It's like, yeah, biting my tongue while laughing, just sort of researching it.

Jamie: Like, I mean, this is deeply your practice. I mean, also, the erotic dimensions are so wild to me, too, like the fact that there's at least in the Montreal one that I'm a little more familiar with. There was there was a lot of women who were brought in from all around the country to work the pavilions, and so if you had the pavilion from X country, you'd hire Canadian women from small towns all across the country, and they had fairs to hire people to play bartenders, because a lot of these pavilions were serving drinks.

Séamus: Oh, interesting.

Jamie: So La terre des hommes, um, Man In His World was quite oriented towards

men to be able to have a drink and learn about how progress was working in Czechoslovakia, or how progress was working in country Y, country Z.

Séamus: Very little social progress, but progress in like innovation, quote unquote.

Jamie: Exactly, exactly, exactly. I mean, there's also just these the islands that we're on right now have such an interesting history. Like we were also just speaking about, um, right now we're on Île Sainte-Hélène, which is a natural island. This is an island that was existing before Expo 67. But Jean-Drapeau is big project of the metro. The excavation from the metro was installed right across this little rapid and formed this island and also the island where people were interned after World War two in concentration camps.

Séamus: Yeah.

Jamie: Mostly Germans, Italians, but also people who had been rescued from Jewish people who had been rescued from camps only to become interned in this park again that would later become Expo. It's such a wild place. Yeah. It's such a wild history. Yeah, yeah, it's such a wild series of threads that that weave through it. Just like in your work.

Jamie: Would you describe that? The mise en scene of the video. There's this incredible set that's built and the character Ms.Chemistry is like, is really she's crowning this really complicated, beautiful, sort of nocturnal mise en scene. Would you describe that visually for our audience?

Séamus: Yeah. So a lot of my practice is sort of developing these, these sets out of two dimensional imagery creates a sort of uncanny image. So my background as a photographer and sort of media artist, so I usually either photograph or render these objects and then create large format prints out of them to create this sort of stage for whatever the video or photo ends up being. And so for the video in Mother Memory, Cellophane, I took a lot of inspiration from two separate parts of the DuPont Pavilion. One was this image I found of Ms.Chemistry on this sort of three tiered pedestal, with a sort of red curtains surrounding her. But then another one was a mural that was part of DuPont's pavilion, and the mural has DuPont sort of slogan at the time, which was Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry. And then in that mural as well, there was this it's again pretty campy to look at now, but this sort of God like figure with a crown that said "chemistry" on it, I think holding a torch, and it sort of shows the sort of billow of smoke surrounding this chemistry figure, and it shows a sort of past time prior to all the innovations that have come through these sort of companies like DuPont, and then the sort of utopic future to the right. So I took a lot of imagery from the mural and created this setting for Ms.Chemistry to take center stage.

Jamie: I love it, I love it, I love it, it almost looks like also arms that raise on either side of her, the banners of the text that you just that ... that slogan that is, is written in banners underneath her throne like structure. They rise on either side, almost with trees or arm-like figures. There's sort of like a figurative element almost to the set.

Séamus: Yeah, there's like a very natural and unnatural aspect of it where there were like sort of 3D renderings of these sort of natural environments, like trees and

flowers that sort of encompass the set. I wanted something kind of romantic looking, but also a bit more nightmarish, but in like a nice way.

Jamie: It's uncanny, for sure.

Séamus: Yeah.

Jamie: Would you describe also how the face is created? The character that you play in the in the piece has a very interesting there's like a décalage. There's a certain there's a bit of a slippage, both in the spoken dialogue and in the river, but also in the way that the face is represented and the movement of the mouth that also really feeds that perfect, uncanny vibe. Would you describe like that sort of texture and the technique behind the face?

Séamus: Yeah, absolutely. So for previous projects, I have sort of developed this process of creating these 3D models of often drag inspired characters. And then I use this program that turns 3D models into paper templates so that I can then print them out, cut them, score them, hot glue them together, and wear them for various photos and videos. For this one, I changed it a little bit where I modeled this face, but I didn't add any image texture of it. So I left this face completely blank. And then I created a 3D rendering of this figure who ends up being Ms. Chemistry in the video and projection mapped this rendering of Ms. Chemistry onto this blank sculpture face mask. Part of that was to sort of add this spectral element of the sort of projection, sort of illuminating this face, and again, even more uncanny as I sort of move slightly throughout the video, the the face itself sort of shifts from where it's

intended to be mapped and yeah, I just wanted to sort of continue the sort of ghostly, haunting aspect that sort of conceptually and visually flows through the exhibition.

Jamie: Yeah, it's like the theme of the biennial, of course, this year is Masquerades, and it's like it's a perfect sort of mise en abyme of like projection of a mask, of a face on the face itself. It is it does feel like there's something.

Séamus: I like trying to, like incorporate sort of images of sort of glamor and desire, but then sort of like twice removed to the point where it becomes a bit more upsetting, potentially for people to look at. So like the original sort of 3D model I think looks very stunning, but then it's sort of this facial motion capture where I'm talking to the camera, and then the model is receiving the sort of facial movement data. And so then there's already this layer of like disconnect and then having that projected on. To this mask as well. It's sort of. Yeah, becomes something else entirely through this copy of a copy.

Jamie: And it's not necessarily a photorealistic copy either. It is ghostly. It's sort of a whitened, desaturated image. It's Lynchian in my eye. It brings like a mulholland drive sort of night projection. It makes me also think about that work of yours. Thinking of you, thinking of me, where the sort of fractalized printed 3D images of two figures are kissing the character in the center and being worn as a mask is that three faces and two faces, like two quite masculine looking faces, are kissing the the queen in the center. And it's, it's that that same sort of cyclical, repetitive thinking of

you, thinking of me, but then seeing two figures interacting with the center who has ostensibly created and animated and printed and formed and incarnated all of the scene themselves.

Séamus: Right.

Jamie: It's it's a really complex gesture that I also see being recreated in this piece.

Séamus: Yeah. It's both like conceptually and visually, something that I don't think was done with with that video and always just seems to sort of lurk throughout my work.

"I contain myself for so long. But it's all slipped down now. The vessel's broken down and joined the spillage. In trying to keep myself together, I feel it all slip into a shimmering horizon."

Jamie: So the simulacra of the video is is one of the parts that most appeals to me. But there's also, like the deep love of text that comes through the exhibition and comes through the piece itself. Would you explain the relationship of the lenticulars, which also have this really strong textural element to it, to them? Are they are they from the video or do they relate to the video? Do they stand adjacent to the video?

Séamus: Yes. So accompanying the video, there's a series of five lenticular prints. A lot of them are sort of portraits of Miss Chemistry, inspired by sort of archived advertisements or posting of old nylon stocking adverts. And so the lenticular prints,

for anyone listening that isn't familiar, they're the sort of printing technique where the image changes depending on the viewpoint it's looked at. So the images of Miss Chemistry sort of shift from these photos to text that appears in the work itself. And I wanted to work with lenticular printing just to drive home the sort of idea of haunting these images, while present, aren't always fully seen at once. So it does create more of like a ghostly effect to the exhibition. And yeah, the the shifting images. It shifts from the photo to the text, and the text is sort of alternated between three images that sort of make up the text. There was a renderings of coal, air and water images moving through the photo, and those were taken from how DuPont had sort of advertised nylon. They described it as sort of being made from coal, air and water.

Jamie: So coal, air and water ?

Séamus: Yeah. Originally they had more of a scientific description of it saying that it was sort of produced using this chemical, I think, called cadaverine, but.

Jamie: Cadaverine?

Séamus: In their original text, they talked about how theoretically it could be sort of taken from a chemical that people sort of expose after dying. But people misinterpreted this and thought that DuPont was harvesting. Yeah, corpses. And so they had like one sort of PR disaster where this woman was like, I know people that work in the DuPont department that like, harvest these corpses. So DuPont obsessed with image. We're like, okay, cut it. It's just cool air, water. That's how we

make. That's how we make this nylon product.

Jamie: Oh my God, nylon is people.

Séamus: There you go. Yeah. I think like the writing about Miss Chemistry that was used in advertisements. She was kind of talked about in like, inseparable from the fabric, as though like she was nylon itself. She was sort of seen as described as the synthetic woman of the future. And so I was just interested in sort of resurrecting this idea of a synthetic woman of the future.

Jamie: It's like that, that classic reflection on misogyny where women in public space cannot occupy like monumental positions as themselves. They have to be these, these allegories, like they have to be peace or war. Justice is blind and holding her implements. She can't be like Madame a person, right? Exactly. She can't be herself.

Séamus: Yeah. Separate to Ms. Chemistry. There's other writings about her where she's labeled as the test tube lady. Because in the 1940 rendition of the New York World's Fair, DuPont repeated their pavilion, but made it even a bit more bizarre, where Miss Chemistry steps out of an enlarged test tube. So it's just like, yeah, not a person, but just a vehicle to advertise this new material.

Jamie: A recipient of our ideas.

Séamus: Exactly. Yeah.

Jamie: That's so wild. Would you tell us the story behind the title of the exhibition?

Séamus: Yeah. Mother. Memory. Cellophane. So that was taken from a poll I found conducted in 1940 on the most beautiful words in the English language. And those were the top three, top three spots, respectively. And I was really interested in I think any sort of people's perception of a beautiful word is very much linked to its connotation. So it had this sort of like nostalgic sort of home for the top two words of Mother and Memory, and then cellophane, which was just created a few years prior, sort of, I think, took up the space of like people's sort of hope for the future. I'm sort of projecting that meaning onto it, but it's interesting just seeing. Those three words paired together. And so I thought it was a nice way of tying in a lot of the ideas of the exhibition itself, of just sort of nostalgia and sort of promises of a future. Yeah, especially thinking now our relationship to cellophane. It's one our relationship to sort of plastic. There's much different connotation when people sort of regard these materials, but it's also just like a cheap material. It's nothing that I think any of us think too highly of, and it certainly wouldn't make a top three position in the most beautiful words today.

Jamie: It's so absurd. Do you identify yourself like, I mean, my my, as a queer video artist myself, my my love of lineage is like such a place of like of desire for me to like, locate and situate the work that I make. And I feel like there's so much interesting both critique of utopia, but also a touch of pessimism, but also a pleasure and a delight, I think, in the utopia and the deliciousness of drag. Of course, in both this work and your practice at large, do you like situate yourself in a particular lineage

with relationship to queer pessimism, or to the utopic, either thinkers or writers or or or particular artists that you really feel an affinity to?

Séamus: I don't, I don't know, it's sort of partly like it depends on what project I'm working on. And there's this sort of I think I am a pessimist, but I would love to not be. There's this sort of like reach towards maybe another position, just because it seems like a more productive way of like moving through the world. So yeah, I don't know. I'm not sure.

Jamie: Apologies, I am, I think the performance is such an interesting way of dealing with feelings around pessimism, I think. And I think that like the image of Miss Chemistry in this, in this piece is it just reminds me that, like, you can still you can still host a cabaret as the world burns or as the like. I have prepared a little game for you around words.

Séamus: Oh, amazing !

Jamie: When I was watching your work, um, a quote from David Wojnarowicz's close to the knives came to mind. Okay. And so because there's such an interest in this really strange, most beautiful words in the English language sort of quirk in the piece, I have a game for you.

Séamus: I can't wait.

Jamie: So I will say two words and you tell me which of your you prefer.

Séamus: Oh, amazing.

Jamie: And then that word will win and go to the next round, and then I'll give you the next word, and that word will win and go to the next round.

Séamus: I cannot wait.

Jamie: And then maybe we'll read the quote because it. There's something I think really interesting about how that sort of like the view, the elevated sort of sentimental, I don't want to say nostalgic because it doesn't feel super nostalgic, but that that sort of. Yeah, acid, elevated vantage point on the world, sort of, I think dovetails with the character in your film. Amazing. Okay. So between cigarette and backward.

Séamus: Cigarettes. Ooh, that might win.

Jamie: They love cigarettes between cigarette and sputtering.

Séamus: Oh, that's a really good one. Oh, I felt like I created emotional bond with cigarette. But I have to go with sputtering.

Jamie: Between sputtering and excavations.

Séamus: Sputtering.

Jamie: Between sputtering and slide.

Séamus: Sputtering.

Jamie: Oh, between sputtering and stirring.

Séamus: Sputtering and stirring. I love the two together, I think sputtering.

Jamie: We could have a tie too.

Séamus: I like more of like a combination. I like sputtering and stirring as a phrase, but sputtering.

Jamie: Let's go with it. Okay, great.

Jamie: Sputtering and sputtering and stirring, sputtering and stirring and knives.

Séamus: Oh! Sputtering and stirring.

Jamie: Sputtering and stirring and dragging.

Séamus: Oh again I love all these together. But sputtering and stirring.

Jamie: All right, we have a winner.

Séamus: Oh, delightful.

Jamie: I love it, I love it.

Séamus: Sputtering and stirring and dragging. I like that, but sputtering and stirring. Maybe the three sputtering and stirring. I'm happy with that. So decisive.

Jamie: Sputtering and stirring. I love it. So the text is in loving him, I saw a cigarette between the fingers of a hand, smoke blowing backwards into the room and sputtering planes diving low through the clouds. In loving him, I saw men encouraging each other to lay down their arms. In loving him, I saw small town laborers creating excavations that other men spend their lives trying to fill in loving him, I saw men. Moving films of stone buildings. I saw a hand in prison, dragging snow in from the sill. In loving him I saw great houses being erected that would soon slide into the waiting and stirring sea. I saw him freeing me from the silences of the interior life.

Séamus: Oh, wow.

Jamie: It was just like there was just such an interesting. I felt like Ms.Chemistry was just like incarnating such a similar sort of energy of, like, poetic, repetitive. Yeah, poetic, poetic repetition and look onto the world that was somehow agnostic around the destruction of the past, the death that she also implies as well. She's gone. She's past.

Séamus: I mean. That's beautiful.

Jamie: Thanks. Well, thank you so much, Séamus.

Séamus: Thank you so much. This was so delightful. And I'm so happy we ended on a delightful little game as well.

Jamie: Thanks for listening to this podcast presented by MOMENTA Biennale de l'image. The present edition guest curated by Ji-Yoon Han, is entitled Masquerades Drawn to Metamorphosis. Join me Montreal artist and filmmaker Jamie Ross for more episodes released weekly throughout the run of the Biennale. We have some really cool artists this year. This podcast was produced by Virage Sonore and the biennale runs in galleries and museums in Tiotià: ke, Mooniyang Montreal. From the 7th of September to October 22nd, 2023, on Kanyen'kehà: ka Unceded territory. Thanks for listening.