



That piece is especially telling, and worth describing in detail. Helen will wade in, collect a bucket of water, then lug it to the beach where nine other buckets are lined up, “and then I faff about with the buckets, moving the water from one to the next... So it’s terribly serious, and at the same time pointless and ludicrous”. As with the pomegranates video – where she looks very sombre, ignoring the camera, and is dressed in a drab grey outfit – her demeanour is a big part of the work. She initially thought the audience might laugh at her beach stunt (viewers observed her ‘faffing about’ from behind a sea wall), yet in fact an assistant later reported that “some people were

literally in tears, they were so moved. People came up to me at the end, and they were really quite profoundly affected by it... I think it was because I was so focused on what I was doing, the intensity of what I was doing came across. And of course the futility of it, that sort of Sisyphean task.”

Futility is part of her project, especially as it relates to bereavement. Her performance pieces and various installations draw “on her own experience of sudden loss”, as it says on her website – which is surely why the work speaks to people, evoking the experience of futile, repetitive tasks (whether it’s working in an office or carrying buckets of seawater) enacted as a kind of distraction from a deep sense of emptiness. Helen’s husband Reg died in 2001, which is not especially recent – yet it took her a decade to start creating art in response to that, and her work continues to grapple with themes of yearning and incompleteness.

There’s a lot more to Helen than her marriage, of course – but the marriage makes a pretty good starting point, if only because it seems to have been so idyllic. “We were soulmates,” she affirms, briefly threatening to become emotional. “I mean, I’m so lucky, he was just one in a million.” Even now, 20 years after Reg died, I note that she still wears her wedding ring. “Yeah, I’m still married to him! I mean, I feel that I am,” she replies, laughing wryly. (She’s not at all sombre in person, chatting away even while protesting that she doesn’t like to talk about herself.) Yet the way she talks about her 25-year marriage also reflects something quite specific about her contrarianism – a subversive aspect, an aversion to the grand gesture and what she calls “the glib”, a commitment to a kind of termite art and a self-effacement when it comes to her own qualities.

Consider the marriage, for instance. Reg was 28 years older, and an academic – admittedly a top academic, professor of Civil Engineering at Trinity College Dublin, then again Helen was no slouch herself, working as a barrister in London in the lucrative field of chancery law (i.e. property disputes). One assumes she had the edge, financially; one might also add that the younger partner in a couple with a big age-gap tends to have the edge emotionally (it’s the power of youth). Yet, when I ask about their dynamic, she still sounds like the wide-eyed young girl she presumably was when they first met:

“He was very wise, very kind,” she begins, speaking of the ‘indefinable something’ between them. “He was very knowing, he was very, very wise... I mean, he knew me better than I knew myself... He knew my faults very well – but he loved me anyway. In a way he almost loved them, he’d tease me about them. I was very naïve when I met him, about human nature. It took me a while, but then I began – I mean, I learned from him how to love back.”