

Director's Notes

If these walls could talk is my first attempt at a short documentary, and it was made after my debut feature. As such we hope that it is admissible under your First Steps programme. If these walls could talk is a short documentary film, which moves through the empty wards of anonymous closed psychiatric hospitals around Ireland, which were built around the turn of the century. In it, the long stay patients are invisible but their stories, sighs and songs are heard emanating from the walls themselves. This is in part a statement about how people with mental illness are an invisible group in society - faceless and forgotten - but also, allows the suggestion that places and buildings retain the memories of what went on there. The film is entirely non-narrative and all voices are fragmentary. They are singing, telling stories of the past, or simply recounting random memories. The snatches of voices are built into an abstract soundscape and they come at us as if from the walls, or from down the corridor. I feel the film has a unique style - we tried to do something different and experimental with it whilst still being respectful of the stories.

During 2004 and 2005 I spent a year working in St. Ita's Psychiatric Hospital in Portrane, as researcher on a landmark RTÉ series called "The Asylum". "The Asylum" was a 4 x 1 hour series for RTE on mental illness and the lives of the patients in the hospital, many of whom had been there most of their lives. The motivation for this film comes from my experiences there with the long-stay patients. In fact, the use of the song "One day at a time sweet Jesus" is a little nod to a woman called Caroline Smith, who we featured singing that song in "The Asylum" and who has since died... although here it is sung by another patient with quite a similar story.

I visited these empty wards numerous times, alone and with crew, and sensed so many voices of the past, and wondered, if these walls could talk what would they say? ...I always thought about a house, or a home as having some sort of character and also, a sense of memory of things, which happened there. A witness. Most of the patients I met in the hospital had songs; songs that they sang over and over, which might have reminded them of some time in their past, or songs made up long ago by patients and handed down over the years. They also all had a story, and experiences they wanted to communicate to me and others. Often they would tell the same story over and over, as if on a loop, to anyone who would listen. Their voices are not preserved in any way, and once the last patient dies, are forgotten. Part of why I want to make this film is to give a voice to these people, and to the uncomfortable stories of psychiatric patients both here in Ireland and abroad. Ireland is now closing the old hospitals like the UK and America before. The buildings slowly unwind ward by ward and lie empty, with only the imagined whisperings of difficult memories.

During research for this film I was also influenced by the story of the Williard Hospital suitcases, in New York, which is the subject of a book called "The Lives they left behind" about hundreds of suitcases discovered in the attic of the abandoned hospital. Many of these suitcases appeared untouched since their owners packed them decades earlier before entering the institution, and their contents bear witness to the rich, complex lives their owners lived prior to being committed. They speak about aspirations, accomplishments, community connections, but also about loss and isolation. We actually discovered a little suitcase on our shoot which belonged to a patient now deceased. Inside were blue canvas runners, knitting needles and wool, and a postcard from San Francisco. I placed in it the patients favourite cigarettes, Sweet Afton, as a little nod to her.