

The Trouble with Beauty

OUR SECOND ARTICLE IN A NEW SERIES LOOKING AT ART IN RURAL CONTEXTS, DEIRDRE O'MAHONY CONSIDERS AESTHETICS, ECOLOGY AND THE LANDSCAPE OF THE WEST OF IRELAND



Dierdre O'Mahony *Wrap* installation. Galway Arts Centre 2000.



Dierdre O'Mahony *Erratics* installation. The Guinness Hopstore. 1996.



Dierdre O'Mahony *Erratics* process: marking shadowlines of boulders Mullochmore mountain 1996.



Dierdre O'Mahony *Viscaux Painting #14*. Oil/Pigmented Gesso/Fibreboard. 20x 20cm. 2005.

SINCE the formative years of the Irish State, landscape paintings of the west of Ireland have been used to represent a distinct and differentiated, uniquely Irish cultural identity and this has left a problematic legacy for artists who continue to use it as a mode of practice in the post-industrial, post agricultural, context of the 21st century. Landscape as a genre, continues to attract investors in the Irish art market and act as a locus for artists working in the west today. In this text I argue that it is only by taking into account the eschatological (a concept referring to doctrines of death, judgement, heaven and hell, and the working out of 'the last things') implications of a rapidly shrinking natural world, that landscape can become an active mode of cultural reflection, rather than a nostalgic reminder of a 'purer' past.

Sighe Bhreathnach-Lynch has written about the cultural constructs of independent Ireland and the way that Irish landscape painting in the early years of the state envisioned and represented an idealised view of the west of Ireland crucial to the construction of a distinctly separate, Irish, national identity⁽¹⁾. Central to the establishment of this western archetype was the painting of Paul Henry, Charles Lamb, Sean Keating and others who presented the western landscape as an unblemished ideal of purity, peopled with a poor, hard-working, Irish-speaking, Roman Catholic race. The popularity of the Paul Henry exhibition at the National Gallery in Dublin recently and rising prices for the work of early 20th century Irish landscape would suggest that such images of the west continue to hold this symbolic value as part of the iconography of the national psyche. In reconsidering this landscape one cannot therefore exclude the dynamics of post-colonial history, the symbolic values and subtexts inherited and embedded in the west of Ireland. My research is focussed on reframing landscape as a mode of cultural reflection in a way that addresses the proposition that in this post-modern world we are fast approaching the 'end of nature'.

WJT Mitchell has considered how the single term 'landscape', despite its many associated meanings, fails to address the complexity of the matter of speaking of space, place and site. Mitchell proposes that 'landscape' should be considered as a "dialectical trial, a conceptual structure that may be activated from several different angles". He explains that "If a place is a specific location, a space is a 'practised place' – a site activated by movements actions, narratives, and signs", and so "a landscape is that site encountered as image or 'sight'."⁽²⁾ A perfect illustration of this analysis in an Irish context, is the idea of 'the west' as a site that is made active through spatial practices such as tourism, farming and pilgrimages – which in turn become the object of imaginary renderings in artworks, souvenirs, interpretative centres.

I've found Mitchell's idea of the 'dialectical trial' particularly useful in considering a particular landscape which has become a contested site – the Burren, in County Clare. I moved back to Ireland 14 years ago having lived in London for many years and I settled in Kilnaboy, on the edge of the Burren, a limestone desert of immense geological and botanical importance. What I found in 1992 was that the area had become a hotly contested space. EU funding had been given for the construction of interpretative centres in national parks, including one in the Burren by a mountain called Mullochmore. A long environmental battle ensued, and the community was bitterly divided. This conflict has left a reluctance to discuss issues of sustainability and development that still reverberate today, mirrored in many rural parts of the west of Ireland, by opposing factions often, though not always, representing local versus national and global interests. Problematic negotiations around the area of economic development of the tourism and leisure industries, the survival of rural communities, planning and local authorities, housing development and the preservation and protection of heritage and ecology are taking place throughout the country – and are likely to continue into the future. The reversal of the pattern of emigration during the economic boom of the past 10 years has changed the social and demographic pattern of the west. Instead of generations of young Irish people going to Europe and the US to work on the building sites and service industries, migrant workers are moving to Ireland to work in the construction, agricultural and service sectors. The image of the west as a culturally 'pure' embodiment of the nationalist dream has come unstuck.

The first body of work I made on moving to the west was *Traces of Origin* in 1993 at the height of the Mullochmore dispute. This was a series of four, site-specific, 15ft x 9ft unstretched canvases which used source imagery derived from local geological and botanical references and placed them within the local environment. The social context was one of bitter division described by one of the protesters as "some boycotting, occasional threats, and anonymous poison pen letters". A fairly mild placard read: "UCG and D4 vandals will not be let destroy our parish"⁽³⁾. I could not get permission to place the work in a site accessible to the public because of disputes over public liability and I finally located it above the car park of Ailwee Caves, Ballyvaughan –

one of the most popular tourist attractions in the area. Significant numbers of visitors come to this attraction and putting the artworks in such a context, addressed issues of accessibility and the creation new audiences for contemporary art – issues that have been central to Arts Council policy. Yet what is more interesting for me now in re-viewing the project, is how detached it really was from the context in which it was placed. While it ticked all the right boxes terms of public policy, and received critical visibility – it did not have any real effect on the way the landscape was perceived, other than as an aesthetic spectacle.

An Arts Council residency in the local school introduced me to a section on the eastern side of Mullochmore Mountain covered with erratic boulders. The boulders became a metaphor for displacement being on, but not of, that place and paralleling my own experience as an Irish person in London and as a 'blow-in', in Clare. I made two series of works, *Erratics* and *Wrap* in this location. *Erratics* took the shadowlines of the boulders as a template for a series of paintings, which were made for the Guinness Hopstore in Dublin in 1997. Thus the passage of rural urban migration taken by so many was mirrored by the relocation of these awkward images of 'otherness' in a metropolitan gallery space. *Wrap*, used a process of wrapping the canvases around the rocks and scouring the surface with sandpaper or mud and grass to provide the original 'texts', for later work in the studio. These were brought into the studio and by using a series of different formats and art historical references, highlighted the complexity and contradictions within the relationship between culture and landscape. The work was shown in January 2000 as a site-specific work at Galway Arts Centre, the former home of Lady Gregory, a key-figure in the mythologising of the west.

The attempt to draw together my personal experience of displacement with elements in the landscape in my work in the 1990s was a way of dealing with issues of difference, exclusion and otherness. This crystallised around attitudes to land and land use. My strategy has been to shift my gaze from the physical natural structures and instead focus on the human traces of usage within the local environment. I began to extend my use of photography, initially as a mode of documentation, and latterly as a complementary mode of image making to my painting – allowing different forms of representation to undermine the hierarchical dominance and privilege of the painted landscape. I am now making small paintings; monochromatic transcriptions of photographs of waste and detritus found near my home. In the words of Gerhard Richter "the photograph provokes horror, and the painting, with the same motif – something more like grief."⁽⁴⁾

In the past images of landscape may have evoked a terror of the infinite, the sublime, however given the world's current environmental course, it now provides something akin to a terror of loss. To paint a landscape 'now' one cannot be innocent of the trouble with and in the landscape. As WJT Mitchell has written about another contested landscape, that of Israel: "...everyone 'owns' (or ought to own) this landscape in the sense that everyone must acknowledge or 'own up' to some responsibility for it, some complicity in it ... only an equivocal poetry of this sort will, I suspect, prove adequate to ... 'integrating the parts of the landscape' into a 'unity fit for habitation', much less contemplation... We have known since Ruskin that the appreciation of landscape as an aesthetic object cannot be an occasion for complacency or untroubled contemplation; rather it must be the focus of a historical, political, and (yes) aesthetic alertness to the violence and evil written on the land, projected there by the gazing eye... landscape itself is the medium by which this evil is veiled and neutralised. Whether this knowledge gives us any power is another question altogether."⁽⁴⁾

Deirdre O'Mahony

Deirdre O'Mahony was born in Limerick and studied at the RTC Galway, St Martin's School of Art, (BA) and the Crawford College (MA), Cork. She is currently doing an MPhil/PhD by research at the University of Brighton. Selected solo exhibitions include 'Viscaux', Galway Arts Festival 2006, Wall, Context Gallery Derry and LCGA, 2002 and WRAP Galway Arts Centre 2001. Awards include an international Pollock-Krasner Foundation fellowship; and bursaries from An Chomhairle Ealaíonn/The Arts Council 1997/2001. She is a Lecturer in Painting at the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology.

NOTES

1. Bhreathnach-Lynch, Sighe. *Landscape, space and gender: their role in the construction of female identity in newly independent Ireland. The Gendered Landscape* Routledge 1997 pp77. see also Bhreathnach-Lynch, Sighe. *Painting the West: The role of landscape in Irish identity. Eire/Land. Ed., Vera Kreilkamp. Mc Mullen Museum of Art/Boston College, Boston 2003. p99.*
2. Mitchell, W.J.T. Ed W.J.T. Mitchell, Preface to the Second Edition. *Landscape and Power*. 2nd edition, 2002. The University of Chicago Press p.xi
3. Doolin, Leila. *Ordinary People and the Mountain. The Book of the Burren*. 2nd Edition (Tir Eolas Press. Kinvarra.) 2002. pp240
4. Gerhard Richter *Conversation with Jan Thorn Prikker concerning the cycle '18 October 1977' 1989, The Daily Practice of Painting*. (Thames and Hudson, London, 1995.) pp189.
5. Mitchell. *Imperial Landscape, Landscape and Power*. (University of Chicago Press.) second ed. 2002p29