

REVIEW: LAST OF THE VISIONERS

— Ingrid Lyons, August 2023

With work by Kevin Jerome Everson, Grace Henry, Paul Henry, Sean Keating, Maurice MacGonigal, Emily McFarland, Kent Monkman, William Orpen, Nano Reid, George William Russell, Tuqa Al Sarraj, Steven Yazzie and Jack B. Yeats, *Last of the Visioners* merges temporally and geographically disparate artworks to examine the cultural construct of Irish identity.

The exhibition is curated by Niamh Moriarty and Ruth Clinton, whose dual artistic practice has often adopted the structuring of a guided tour to impart a sense of journeying through ideas. The design and layout encourages meandering, as the work is not emphasised as a sequence. As a result each viewer's set of associations might differ. A plurality of voices chime and jar with one another and paths are not linear. Instead, ideas and themes, tropes and motifs wind and jolt through digressions and epiphanies. Texts by Moriarty and Clinton act as a road map.

Given the number of artists and complexity of the subject matter, I've treated this review as a walkthrough, responding to some but not all of the works. I begin with Paul Henry and Grace Henry whose paintings *The Old Woman* (1920) and *Top of the Hill* (1920) are presented side by side, as though to poke fun at the contrast between Paul's (melodramatic, profound, visionary), and Grace's (casually attentive)

intentions in their depiction of Irish women. Such interludes create space for comic relief but also buttress one of the key concerns of the exhibition which seeks to disrupt ideas of Irish identity.

I pass Steven Yazzie's video piece *Draw me a picture* (2007). The artist drives across the desert in a go-kart, passing through arid mesas and canyons. Given that this is Yazzie's traditional territory and that he is from the Navajo nation, the work challenges romanticised fictions pertaining to this kind of landscape that appear in cowboy films and stories of the Wild West; fictions which form a significant part of the foundation of white American national identity.

Emily McFarland's conversationally paced documentary film follows the story of a group of activists seeking to protect the landscape and communities of west Tryone from dangerous and carcinogenic chemicals released as part of intrusive mining processes. Canadian owned company, Dalradian intends to extract copper, gold and silver to catastrophic effect on the local area through a series of neoliberal loop holes. The film listens and looks. It attests to a series of contradictions and ironies. It implies casual clichés that have served to down play such exploits. Tourist tatt of Leprechauns and their pots of gold in poor green Erin, for example. Or popular folk songs and jingles describing, from the side of the 'forty-niners' — the pursuit of 300,000 people who travelled into the comminates of Native Californians accelerating the Native American population's decline from disease and

starvation and playing a key role in the California genocide. McFarland's meticulously researched yet visually poetic piece encourages reflection on the consequences of complacency.

I move to the hallway of the exhibition space which is pasted with 20th century travel posters, reproductions of pastoral landscapes of the West of Ireland by Paul Henry which were 'first published by the London Midland and Scottish Railway Company in the 1930s', according to Clinton's essay. Trains feature throughout the exhibition as a visual footnote that represents progress as a myth.

A jarring switch occurs. In a room of their own, two bricks bear the imprint of the small hands that made them. Clay bricks with indentations c. 1825 from the Rogan Plantation House, Sumner County, Tennessee. An Irish family who, according to Moriarty's accompanying text, 'gained prosperity through the cultivation of cash crops on their farm', and 'whose wealth was owed to the work of enslaved people'. Kevin Jerome Everson's two video works titled *North Mulberry Street* (2021) remember and subtly refer to the 'Great Migration', a lesser-known chapter in North American Rail history where six million Black people travelled northwards by train between 1910 and 1970 to pursue education and employment and to escape oppression and murderous lynch mobs emboldened by the Jim Crow Laws. An atmospherically urgent film nearby announced itself with the steady beat of a drum. Kent Monkman's *Sisters and Brothers* (2015) comments on colonial legacy from the

perspective of his Cree heritage and identity. Footage of the stolen generation confined in religious missions conjures the history of Magdalene Laundries in Ireland.

However, this connection is not emphasised in the curatorial decision-making of the exhibition. Instead a momentum builds towards a reckoning. And while there are opportunities to make comparisons to the Irish experience of colonialism; to internalise and victimise in response to the work, we are discouraged from doing so. Instead we are brought into contact with an artwork which points towards the danger of victimhood as a national identity. A stance that could foster complacency and affect our solidarity with people who travel to this country to escape their immediate experience of violence and oppression.

I return to the two bricks that bear the imprint of the small hands that made them. ‘As we grapple with surges of national violence and nativism at home, each brick serves as a warning. Sharing and retelling these stories of the Irish in America can open up a space to acknowledge our past struggles, confront our complicities and, crucially, build our capacity for solidarity’, Moriarty asserts in conclusion to her essay.

Tuqa Al-Sarraj’s poetic video work, *My Neighbour Tommy*, is a meditation on the Irish folk tradition and its role in the creation of a national identity. As she joins her neighbour on a trip around the town we get a glimpse of that rare ability that

some people have for finding and recording moments in daily life that are both modest and monumental. It is a portrait that refers to displacement and loss in the national identities – Palestinian and Irish – of its subjects, but goes beyond this to offer a blueprint for the expression of accord and solidarity through stories, songs and conversation.

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