The Ireland that we dreamed of

Niamh Moriarty & Ruth Clinton

Following the old folk stories that warn against trespassing on fairy paths, often occurring in 'contrary' places in the Irish landscape, this body of work comprises a series of cautionary tales set against the dominant myths that we are led to believe about ourselves and our homeland. Storytelling—oral, written and visual—has throughout history provided a means to create a common identity, and it is in this context that we are testing the possibility of creating a new narrative identity for Ireland.

The theory of narrative identity in psychology describes the process by which a person integrates the 'reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose,'[1]. Through the work presented in this exhibition, we are attempting, at least partially, to answer some difficult questions about ourselves.

What historical experiences and agendas have contributed to the construction of Ireland's narrative identity thus far?

How does this identity inform our understanding of progress?

How can we, and why should we, challenge and change this narrative identity?

A specific focus of our research is the way in which ideas of the rural west occupy the popular imagination, and how this construction can be used to interrogate the intersecting subjects of colonialism, tourism, art history, capitalist expansion, environmental destruction and protest.

Following these lines of enquiry, as well as Svetlana Boym's assertion that progress is not just temporal but also spatial[2], we move through centuries of Irish history, and across the Atlantic to the United States and back again. We are hoping to tell and retell a story of Ireland that will acknowledge our struggles, admit our complicities and build our capacity for solidarity.

Telling powerful stories nonverbally, images have long been used as propaganda for the building and expansion of nation states. Landscape painting was a key component in 18th and 19th century British imperial ideology. During this time, unsettled nature (and nations) would be enclosed, not only by the administration of the Empire, but also inside the

confines of a picture. These often innocuous images were used to white-wash colonial projects and to advertise foreign settlements to prospective emigrants as well as to promote tourist campaigns. In the US, these aesthetics, as seen in the Western genre, broadly acknowledge the struggle for the hard-won freedoms of the 'new world', but rarely depict the associated terror inflicted on indigenous communities.

Closer to home, Paul Henry's romantic painting, 'In Connemara' (1925) was used by the London, Midland and Scottish Railway Company to promote rail holidays in Ireland and to the present day remains fixed in the collective consciousness as an iconic and authentic vision of the west of Ireland. Henry intentionally constructed these premodern idylls, chastising the Achill women who arrived to model for him wearing modern stockings and high heels instead of barefoot and dressed in their grandmothers' shawls[3]. This kind of romanticised, depopulated and primitive

representation of Ireland was subsequently adopted by the modern state's own tourist industry, sitting uneasily alongside our colonial past. As Stephanie Rains writes, "The depiction of Ireland as a pre-modern idyll for visitors

its people were co-opted into the Romantic vision of unspoilt landscapes and equally unspoilt inhabitants, whose culture had not been fractured by the 'civilisation' of modernity. Thus Ireland, for the imperial visitor

'Now charlatans wear dead men's shoes, aye and rattle dead men's bones

'Ere the dust has settled on their tombs, they've sold the very stones

Oh then rise, rise, rise, dark horse on the wind

For in no nation on the earth more Pharisees you'll find'

Liam Weldon

(and, by implication, for the Irish too) is one of the most consistently recurring themes of the nation's tourist imagery. This process has its roots within colonial imaginings of Ireland in which the land and

represented the possibility of cultural renewal, even while this positioning of the Irish and their land also provided justification for the continuation of the imperial project."[4]

There is a troubling inconsistency between the promotion of our landscape, culture and heritage by official tourism campaigns while simultaneously the government acts against those interests.

Examples of this include granting mining licenses in environmentally sensitive areas, constructing roads through national monument sites, or giving the Disney corporation state sponsored access to the incredibly delicate Skellig Islands, to name a few. Contradictions in our State abound: we claim neutrality yet permit US warplanes to refuel at Shannon Airport; we call ourselves 'Ireland of the Welcomes', yet hold asylum seekers in draconian, for-profit Direct Provision centres; all while our state forestry corporation, Coillte, is selling large swathes of public woodlands at a time when the State has pledged to increase forest coverage to meet its climate targets.

Why is this hypocrisy so deeply embedded in our national consciousness, imagining on the one hand a magical, unspoilt land of wild beauty and creating, on the other, a corporate tax haven whose 'ecosystems have suffered a "transformation of identity [and] a loss of defining features"'?[5]

There has long been a cognitive dissonance in the way Ireland conceives of its own identity, which, Joep Leersen suggests, can be seen as a 'measure of the discontinuity and fragmentation of Irish historical development (itself caused by its oppression at the hands of the neighbouring isle)'.[6]

One interesting instance of this dissonance was the Round Towers debate of the 19th century, in which erroneous versions of Round Tower history were used to bolster myths of 'primordial Gaeldom', with the towers becoming part of nationalist iconography alongside shamrocks, wolfhounds, red-haired women and harps.

This kind of cultural nationalism was specifically 'fed to the American-Irish market' of the day, with facsimile Round Towers even being used in initiation ceremonies of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, an Irish Catholic para-masonic organisation[7] active in the US since 1836.

**'Hey, is that real?
She couldn't be.'**

Sean Thornton

It is impossible to separate Ireland's current narrative identity from that of the United States, given our complete immersion in Western mass media. Mark Fisher writes, 'the scenarios that we imagine, the stories and narratives that we consume, inform our understanding of reality, not in the sense that we confuse fiction with reality, but that the basic relations that underlie our fictions shape our understanding of reality'[8]. Indeed, Ireland's construction of 'global Irishness' (e.g. the figure of the plucky, roguish underdog) is appropriated from Irish American culture, rather than the other way round[9]. In promoting this kind of essential Gaelic character we run the risk of propagating dangerously ethnonationalist and exclusionary narratives that nostalgically long for 'simpler times', with all their patriarchal familiarity.

Meanwhile, American pop-cultural narratives often simplify the struggles faced by Irish people at the turn of the century in order to create their own foundational myth. Epic land-rush capers such as 1992 flop Far and Away show displaced—but spirited—emigrants braving the Atlantic to gain prosperity with nothing but hard work and perseverance. This fantasy of the 'American Dream' has endured as the country's origin story, relying on a European emigrant perspective that would become the basis for white nationalism in America, an ideology enthusiastically embraced by many Irish immigrants[10]. In the late 1800s, Irish-American workers moved westwards across the United States, laying the Transcontinental Railway line. They organised into regional gangs, following a shared history of agrarian struggle back home, and fought each other for jobs, purposely displacing many African-Americans and minority workers. Noel Ignatiev writes that, 'there

have been (and continue to be) moments when an anticapitalist course is a real possibility and that the adherence of some workers to an alliance with capital on the basis of shared "whiteness" has been and is the greatest obstacle to the realization of these possibilities'[11]. The railroad, itself an enduring symbol of power and progress in the Western genre, brought with it the ranch industry, destroying indigenous civilisations, annihilating the buffalo and razing many great plains ecosystems in its wake. The iron horse also brought Irish settlers out to the 'frontier' and exported resources back to the east. Colonial extractivism such as this continues: a new liquefied natural gas terminal has been proposed this year

for the Shannon Estuary by U.S. company, New Fortress Energy. In this context, President Joe Biden has promised to increase shipments of liquid gas to Europe, in response to fuel shortages. Over two thirds of natural gas in the United States is produced through hydraulic fracturing (banned in the Republic of Ireland since 2017), with the destruction and pollution caused by drilling rigs disproportionately affecting indigenous lands and communities.
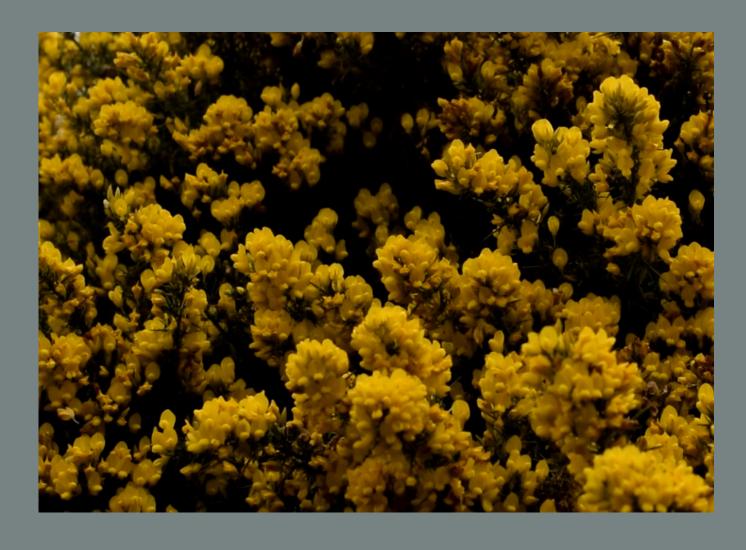
We are at a crucial juncture, where acknowledging our own complicity in facilitating these global processes could be the first step towards disrupting them, and not just for our own good.

'We don't need hope; what we need is confidence and the capacity to act'

Mark Fisher

Throughout this research process, we have looked backwards—contrary to the arrow of progress—in search of moments of potential in our history that could evolve Ireland's narrative identity today. One such moment came during the Land War in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when the cause of tenant farmers was identified as being central to the Irish national interest. Through public speeches, songs and grassroots activism, an Irish national identity was constructed in opposition to landlords and British imperialists[12]. This lies in stark contrast to today's 'Brand Ireland': indeed a land of a thousand welcomes to tax-avoiding tech giants. Mark Fisher argues that direct action alone will not be sufficient to halt capitalist expansion, 'we need to act indirectly, by generating new narratives, figures and conceptual frames.'[13] Perhaps it's time for a new mythology.

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