



Ruth Clinton and Niamh Moriarty, *In a Contrary Place*, 2022, film still; image courtesy of the artists.

## In a Contrary Place

RUTH CLINTON AND NIAMH MORIARTY DISCUSS THEIR NEW FILM PROJECT.

*“As the sunset burns over the hills in almost unbearable beauty, as the sea turns silver, and the first stars hang above the dark slopes of Croaghnaun, you sigh... then you sigh again.” — H.V. Morton, In Search of Ireland (Methuen, 1931)*

**IN A CONTRARY** *Place* (2022) is our new short film and accompanying storytelling performance that explores the impact of colonisation and American culture on Irish national identity. Through this work, we are pursuing an ongoing interest in the construction of official and folk records, and how these can contribute to a collective sense of possibility or paralysis. Following the old folk stories that warn against trespassing on fairy paths, often occurring in ‘contrary’ places in the Irish landscape, this 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. This work was presented as part of the Askeaton Contemporary Arts Welcome to the Neighbourhood residency programme in June, and at Cairde Sligo Arts Festival in July.

A specific focus of our research is the ways 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”,<sup>1</sup> 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.

*“People cling with pathetic heroism to their holdings with a dumb ferocity of affection. Existence [for many of them] would simply be impossible were it not for the money coming in from [relatives in] America” – Paul Henry*

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 eighteenth and nineteenth-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 whitewash colonial projects and to advertise foreign settlements to prospective emigrants, as well as to promote tourist campaigns. In the US, these aesthetics (as adopted by the western genre) broadly acknowledge the struggle for the hard-won freedoms of the ‘new world’, but often depict none of 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 Achill women who arrived to model for him wearing modern stockings and high heels instead of barefoot and dressed in their grandmothers’ shawls.<sup>2</sup> 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 (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 its people were co-opted into the Romantic vision of unspoiled landscapes and equally unspoiled inhabitants...”<sup>3</sup>

*“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” – Liam Weldon, *Dark Horse on the Wind*, 1976*

There is a troubling inconsistency between the promotion of our landscape, culture, and heritage by official tourism campaigns while the government simultaneously acts against those interests. Examples of this include granting prospecting licenses in environmentally sensitive areas, constructing roads through national monument sites, or giving the Disney corporation unfettered access to the incredibly delicate Skellig Islands, to name a few instances. Contradictions in our State abound: we uphold our neutrality yet permit US warplanes to refuel at Shannon Airport; we proclaim ourselves ‘Ireland of the Welcomes’, yet hold asylum seekers in draconian, for-profit Direct Provision centres; all while our state forestry corporation, Coillte, sells 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 magical, unspoiled lands of wild beauty and creating, on the other, a corporate tax haven whose ecosystems have suffered a profound “transformation of identity [and] a loss of defining features”?<sup>4</sup>

There has long been a cognitive dissonance in the way Ireland conceives of its own identity, which, Joep Leerssen 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).”<sup>5</sup> One interesting instance of this dissonance was the Round Towers debate of the nineteenth century, in which erroneous versions of

Round Tower history were used to bolster myths of a ‘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.<sup>6</sup>

*“Hey, is that real? She couldn’t be.” – Sean Thornton, *The Quiet Man*, 1952*

It is impossible to separate Ireland’s current narrative identity from that of the United States, given our complete immersion in Western mass media. Indeed, Ireland’s construction of ‘global Irishness’ – namely the figure of the plucky, roguish underdog – is appropriated from Irish American culture, rather than the other way round.<sup>7</sup> 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 the 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup>

*“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 lost potential in our history that could evolve Ireland’s narrative identity today. One such moment came during the Land War in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth 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.<sup>10</sup> This lies in stark contrast to today’s ‘Brand Ireland’ – a land of a thousand welcomes to tax-avoidant tech giants and their energy-hungry data centres. Mark Fisher argued 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.”<sup>11</sup> Perhaps it’s time for a new mythology.

**Ruth Clinton and Niamh Moriarty are collaborative artists based in the Northwest of Ireland who use performance, video, sound installation and storytelling, informed by site-responsive research, in order to open up spaces of renewed reflection.**

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Svetlana Boym, ‘The Future of Nostalgia’, 2001, in *The Svetlana Boym Reader* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018) p225

<sup>2</sup> Mary Cosgrove, ‘Paul Henry and Achill Island’, 1995 [achill247.com]

<sup>3</sup> Stephanie Rains, *The Irish American in Popular Culture 1945–2000*, (Irish Academic Press, 2007) p111

<sup>4</sup> Padraic Fogarty, ‘The Slow Death of Irish Nature’, 2018 [cassandravoices.com]

<sup>5</sup> Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cork University Press 1996) p140

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p143

<sup>7</sup> Stephanie Rains, *ibid*, p140

<sup>8</sup> Noel Ignatiev, ‘How the Irish became White’, 1995, p3

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p212

<sup>10</sup> Tomás Mac Sheoin, ‘What happened to the peasants? Material for a history of an alternative tradition of resistance in Ireland’, 2017 [interfacejournal.net]

<sup>11</sup> Mark Fisher, ‘Abandon Hope, summer is coming’, 2015 [k-punk.org]



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