

## LANDSCAPE MACHINE

Marielle MacLeman

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*Discussed: Renaissance Pleasure Gardens, Museums, Tulca, Bauhaus, The Combined Works of Man and Nature, process and dying, wool, sheep and terrazzo.*

For visuals see [www.thedock.ie](http://www.thedock.ie) and <https://youtu.be/R9q7UCXc2w4>

On Friday May 6<sup>th</sup> Maeve Mulrennan (MM), curator at The Galway Arts Centre and writer was invited by The Dock to take part in a public interview with artist Marielle MacLeman (MMacL). The discussion that unfolded was about Marielle's work, her research interests and how the exhibition came about. The following is an edited documentation of the interview.

MM: I would like to talk a little about the work that you showed with us in the Galway Arts Centre about six years ago, and how that work is reimagined as part of this exhibition. Could you talk about how it is shown in the context of the new work in this exhibition at The Dock and how it has been re-hung. I believe that work took over a year and a half to make?

MMacL: *Poggio Reale* is a work made from 3mm text, it is a recreated image of a lost Renaissance pleasure garden, which was made by me over a period of about a year and a half. There are no images of how this garden would have originally looked; there are some 17<sup>th</sup> century etchings. I am really drawn to places that are missing or that have a shifting narrative. So I was interested in recreating it and the only thing that really exists is a 14<sup>th</sup> century poem from when the French invaded titled *Le Vergier d' Honneur*. A lot of that text informed the work, as it gave details of what kind of flora and fauna were in the garden which is why I have included the deer, vegetation and plants, and the make-up of the grounds. The structure was imagined by me, fusing influences from a couple of historians that had disagreed with each other about what the layout might have been. So I guess I was using the words to create the composition and then the words with the rubber stamp to create this imagined *Poggio Reale*. There is not a single trace of the original left. It is now the site of a prison and a

cemetery in the Bay of Naples. By using the text to stamp it I was using the principals of weight of line in drawing, just repeatedly stamping over the year and a half period. So I needed breaks from it. There was a concentrated period of six months in the studio, when it was completed. In fact the final push for the completion of the work was when it was to be shown in the Galway Arts Centre which was great because you really need to have an end point with something like that work.

MM: It was very interesting for me to see that work with brand new work which hadn't been shown before. You were asked by Sarah Searson Director at The Dock to take as a starting point for the work on exhibition elements of that you had done in Tulca two years ago in Galway. And from that point develop this new body of work for the galleries at The Dock. Would that have naturally been your inclination any way? Was it interesting to get that type of direction?

MMacL: I think the work for Tulca, which would have been the naturally dyed wool pieces, was very much a starting point. It was lovely to have the motivation to pick up where I had left off and to scale up, not just in terms of getting plinths and making carpets, but scaling up in terms of the ideas that were part of Tulca. The work in Tulca had been very much based around the notions of souvenir so I had been picking up bits of wool from fence posts and hand spinning them, using the drop spindle and hand dyeing them with plants collected on route so this time I was able to scale up a little bit more. So there is a piece in the exhibition called *Dangan for Gropius* which is made from a hundred colours just using gorse, blackberry and bracken and using mordants, being slightly more scientific, not a word you would usually use for my processes, but slightly more scientific in recording the process, so I could use the recipes. So it would be a record from which I could replicate the colours. Although I had tried to do this before to some extent.

*The Combined Works of Man and Nature* in the centre of Gallery Two would have been started using the wool as I was dying it, as I was walking to places and collecting, which meant that I was kind of limited in choice for colour and it was that record of where I had been, and a document of what I would happen upon. A certain amount of natural dyeing is out of your control anyway – even when I tried to replicate colours it wouldn't be quite on. Because I guess I am not as scientific as a really good natural dyer would be. So I was scaling up the work and playing with different mordants so it was nice to work with a bigger palette I guess. But it's also been good for me because it's really made me think about colour a lot more in my

work. If you go into my studio and you see hanks of wool it can just look like a million shades of brown or quite drab – but I just began really thinking about the placement of colours with each other and what pops with what – and then I’d have been unpicking whole sections of tufted carpet because it didn’t look quite right – so this is not as immediate as working with a brush and paint. This process has made me think a lot about colour.

*Dangan for Gropius* is the cube with a hundred colours and that was made by systematically taking a plant stuff – dying wool and doing four dye baths with it until I had exhausted it and then after that they were dried, and over-dyed with mordants of tin and chrome, iron and copper – a technique which I had used previously in the work for Tulca. And then over-dyeing with plants – so even with the smaller works there is an exhaustive process that goes into the work and for *Dangan for Gropius* – as a record in itself – it was nice to exhibit that recorded process. The wall mounted piece suggests that. I had also been looking at a lot of work from the textile workshop artists of the Bauhaus. And I really love the watercolour studies for their designs so that work is also a reference to that, and then the isometric drawing of the cube, and the section of rug in a way came from a picture of Walter Gropius’s study featuring a rug by Gertrude Arndt. But the work is also a reference the grid lines of a map. A lot of the work looks at how we map and manage the landscape.

MM: Can we talk about that mapping idea a little bit more? When you are walk around the show it does feel like you are in a four dimensional map of what it is to be you as an artist and I think it’s a combination of this venue and the quite Victorian look images of looms. It looks like you are in a Victorian time traveller’s ethnographic study so it does have that exploring and inventive element to it, making something new. There is a huge amount of process in your work that’s an under estimation. How important is it for the audience to know all or some of that? Or to be with you on that journey so that when they see the installation they feel like they are in a map or a recording?

MMacL: I think it nice for there to be a suggestion there and they can also take the time to explore that for themselves – but I suppose, selfishly, I make work for me. The processes are intuitive and central and I have started now to display a lot more of the process and the inner workings as part of installations – but in the end my main aim is to make nice looking things and if all someone sees is something they like that’s fine, or if they don’t like it, then I would like them to appreciate some level of

craftsmanship or skill. I don't want to spell it out because then there is an element of *look she has done so much work she's great* – I don't want to be the smart arse in the room. I would like to be suggestive of the process but if you put too much in it just gets boring and samey. I was given a lot of freedom with this show so I was able to be quite playful and the new work is still very new to me so I might reconfigure it again.

MM: Can you talk about the balance between the conceptual side of the work and then the making? As the making takes so long, is it tough to make sure that doesn't take over?

MMacL: I really like doing things that are boring and repetitive so it's kind of a nice balance – I been a lot freer in recent years in terms of not tying myself in to a concept and letting the materials take me to the end.

MM: You mentioned in your artist's statement that you have done quite a few residencies and that you have done one in the zoology and geology museums in NUIG. It has lots of little museums hidden, little gems.

MMacL: I was quite ambitious initially 'cause it was a six month funded residency, and I hadn't been offered a physical space to go in and work. That was quite a lot of work to take on two different museums. I could have continued going between the two but I don't think the work would have been very strong. The geology museum was the one that fascinated me most at the beginning because it had all the original fittings from the Victorian era, the wooden cabinets and I love all that jazz, it was lovely, like stepping back in time and walls are kind of falling down round about it. But it in the end it was in the zoology museum that I did most of the work in, and yes I was drawn to the hamster that looks like it is chewing on something really big and the specimens that didn't look as tidy but you have to be very careful when you are working with technicians who take great care and pride and don't want to draw attention to the things that are missing or that have been neglected over the years. And yet that is what I was quite interested in, that there had been stuff not taken care of by their predecessors and that's been a long-standing thing. There are some horror stories. For example there were keepers in the London museums, there were no pensions back in the day, so they would work until they were senile and there are records of entire snake collections being burned because they didn't like the scientist that collected them or of vaulting over zebras, and of collectors gilding things to make beetles look prettier.

I am really interested in our disposition to collect stuff and learn from it – so that's where the museum residency really interested me and then a later residency at Annaghmakerrig, that's where the weaving works started.

MM: We were talking about how we look to nature as something that is valuable and how we need to contribute to looking after it. But then nature is also an raw material for us on a massive scale and there is a nice contrast in what you are doing – as in that you have a camp fire and then with the charcoal you make drawings of the plants that are in the place so it's quite circular and there are also these references to weaving factories and dyes it makes you think about what we do now and how far industry has moved from when those original looms were designed to say textile fabrication and dyeing today. There is this thing in your work of looking at nature as a living breathing thing and also how it's being completely mined.

MMacL: I feel quite uneasy about some of the artworks that I have made because the idea is to highlight the mark that we make on the landscape. Moving to Ireland, it's not as easy to rough camp as it would be in Scotland, it made me think of the different kind of rights. And I would consider myself to be quite sensitive to the environment so I would be careful but making a campfire and using the pieces for making an artwork to highlight something - someone could say that I am potentially causing harm no matter how responsible I am being. The big *Dwell Time* drawing could be the same – of where the Corrib meets Galway Bay at the sea. It's where I walk every night. Just a little on from that is the beach where I collected and sorted loads of beach glass from the Claddagh and had it made into terrazzo – it's in the bench.

I am interested in exploring the limits of material and, here, turning waste into something that would normally be used in a more precious way for floors, but in the last few years with all the storms, seeing how much the beaches have changed and how much waste is continually brought up by tides, I couldn't believe the glass that I collected there.

The waste with the natural dyeing it's not on the same scale as commercial dying but I really had to ask myself if I was ok with using chrome. I have bottles of chrome waiting to be picked up by the right people and maybe I wouldn't use it again. But in scaling up and taking more of a plant stuff this time, I only took from dense areas, and there is plenty of gorse here. I am quite shy about my collecting of stuff – I look very shifty to dog walkers.

It's the same with the Merlin Park grass excavation piece. So for that I excavated the site of a picnic rug and then processed the grass. To me it was waste grass, it's a rough and ready area where there were kids hanging out throwing stuff, so I took material from there, processed it and made paper out of it but I didn't feel wrong about that, it's just grass. But with this kind of collecting, it still feels illicit. I am not bold about this kind of collecting. I still feel quite uneasy trying to articulate something that's trying to make us think about how we use the landscape, but then I am shy about doing. And at the same time I don't think twice when I go in and buy a couple of tubes of oil paints because all that stuff is removed from you.

All the work really looks at industry and it draws from traditional skills and these dyes that I am using are all recipes that people would have used to dye their clothes in the past. That whole body of work would have been influenced by a visit to Leenane's Sheep and Wool Heritage Centre and being told that most of Irish wool is exported because there is no scouring facility here, and that is a hangover from English legislation. But that whole cottage industry has just disappeared. My Father worked in the Scottish woollen industry, the diagrams and a lot of work in one of the galleries is from one of his books and I could see the devastation on his face when I told him that I had started to do stuff with dyeing. Because of the decline of the textile industry in Scotland, I remember as a teenager seeing him, heavy hearted, coming back home from a visit to another factory where someone he knew had closed down and I guess as a result of that decline he had not held on to all his dyeing notes and technical notes.

**MM:** On the idea of dyeing its obvious you have had to learn a lot and there are things that you would be very happy to leave to the professionals to do so your practice is a mix of you learning and you being this automaton's artist trying to move through this process, and you do also invite other people in to support this work.

**MMacL:** That is a new thing and I don't know how happy I am with it, I also really respect the true artisans and people how have done their ten thousand hours of labour. I know that I can't just take my hand to anything; I mean my work will always be involved in my journey in processing materials and taking them as far as I can. I also know that there are limits to what I can do and in terms of making a show like this, I would love to make beach glass terrazzo myself but it would have been very costly affair if had done it.

MM: One thing we didn't mention is The Sheep and *Wool Museum* in Mayo I think it's a great one there.

MMacL: So in Gallery Two, in each rug, 5 % of its area is stitched or replaced and, using 100% Irish wool dyed with 100% Irish plants, I worked back into the rugs as a comment on the export of Irish wool to China. And the design in each case is based on a Chinese lattice pattern, abstracted, so to me it looks like maps and roads, blocks of buildings, and even parterre design. Which brings the work back to the *Poggio Reale* stuff when I was looking at Renaissance garden design; it also looks like more contemporary carpet bedding. I was really interested in that woollen museum – in these sites of former industry that have become repurposed. And actually the title of the show comes from Carbonia, a town in Italy that won a European Landscape Award, and the title of the project was Carbonia Landscape Machine. The town has been completely rejuvenated, it was a mining town and the mine is now a place for education and research. There is a whole heap of work that could have been in this show that I just didn't get to follow.

I was really interested in the linen industry and in how that faded. I was interested in how we had burnt all our trees for the iron ore industry and that is also no longer there, and in how I could represent something like that with the charcoal, and then there is the drive into tourism. People from these areas are being encouraged to branch out into argi-tourism. I find all that really interesting, when we were talking earlier about the *Dwell Time* piece with the terrazzo bench and sea view – the idea of 'dwell time' comes from the Wild Atlantic Way's merchandising and branding. I came across a consultation brochure, it was just full of this horrible jargon like "device to entice", phrases like "experience hubs" and "dwell time". This whole idea that your time to escape and just be in a place is commoditised, packaged and sold as wild – but it's genius as well – the notion that someone could sell me a rock to sit on, and that there I can have my "solitude", or a more "exhilarating" experience. I find it fascinating the ways that we are constantly trying to package and market stuff.