

PHILLINA SUN DISCUSSES MADE X NW

'Made X NW' at The Dock (2 July — 27 August) is a group exhibition featuring emerging and well-established artists, who currently reside and work in the Northwest of Ireland. The curator, Ruth Carroll, has thoughtfully selected an eclectic array of works in various media, which together suggest the region's status as a dynamic environment for the visual arts.

Blending poetic sensibility with an interest in visuality, Alice Lyons's installation *Want/Plenty* (2005/2022) draws on local historical archives to consider the past and its resonance in the present. Vinyl lettering has been placed on the risers of the building's Georgian staircase, consisting of two words: 'want' and 'plenty'. The text refers to a census taken during the famine in the townlands surrounding Mohill, in which each individual's name was marked with either W (for Want) or P (for Plenty), thus ascribing their socioeconomic status. The work cleverly uses architecture to refer to the structural inequities under the Protestant Ascendancy rule, which contributed to the iniquities of the region under colonialism. Originally created for the same venue in 2005, at the height of the Celtic Tiger, *Want/Plenty* continues to resonate in a post-lockdown present in which many families struggle to find affordable housing and pay bills.

Text art continues with Walker and Walker's untitled work in which scrolling LED text discloses the statement: "Take cognisance of the fact that something is lost at the very moment in which it is found." The digital is an apt medium, in how it subjects knowledge to an erasable state.

Photographers Dee Barragry and Tommy Weir respond to the rural nature of the Northwest. Barragry depicts cattle at a mart or in close confinement, while Weir's photographs, from a series called *John's Field*, depict the prickly, sparse landscape of a working farm in tight closeups. Both artists address agricultural environments fraught with calculations made in relation to soil and livestock.

Sharply contrasting the high detail of Barragry and Weir's respective works, Mark Garry's photograph *Landscape Again and Again* is replete with obscure shapes that suggest landscape elements, compelling the viewer to decipher the beguilingly ambiguous shapes: is this a field, is that a wood, are those clouds?

Many of the paintings on show use abstraction to convey distinctive experiences of space. Coloured dots pinball Ronnie Hughes's canvases, either arranged with rectangular shapes into a grid, or laid over other dots, so that the canvas appears covered in crescents or eclipses. Paul Hallahan's ethereal canvases, *Beautiful Liar* and *Bamboo Puncturing*, consist of washes of paint in transparent layers, which build up to create eerie, almost oneiric compositions, like residues of dream – objectless paintings that nevertheless summon shadowy figures out of mist. Patrick Hall's *In the Vicinity of the Yellow Mountain* presents a striated field in which isolated figures move near a yellow triangle, denoting the eponymous mountain; this is a landscape suggestive of an interior state, and one of solitude

Nick Miller's bold, urgently expressive painting, *Flowering and Seeding*, depicts thistle and meadowsweet in a riotous tangle above the vases that barely contain them. Texture suggests the extravagant fecundity of nature, which seems to overflow the surface. If a still life implies human control over nature, then this is a kind of anti-still life. Meanwhile, painting does come to life in Orla McHardy's short, animated film, *Goodnight* (2020). Against a white background, blue shapes quiver, merge and separate. There's a frantic, barely contained energy, reflective of the time of lockdown during which it was made.

Jo Conway's collages combine paint and magazine images from the early twentieth century on large square sheets, hung with binder clips. In *A Classroom*, a seal-headed woman looks up at a sky in which children hang precariously and fish fall like bombs. In *A Circus*, the central image is of a bound woman, offered up for the delectation of viewers. These are tense surreal scenes, which seem to portray helplessness.

Irish painter Mainie Jellett is the subject of Grace Weir's film, *A reflection on light* (2015), which is taken in a single shot that roves in and out of photographs and domestic spaces. Jellett's *Decoration* (1923) was among the first abstract paintings shown in Ireland, while *Let there be Light* (1939) hangs in the School of Physics in Trinity College Dublin – one of three buildings depicted in the film, alongside a gallery space at IMMA, and the interior of an apartment once owned by Jellett. Not only is this film an engrossing foray into art history; it demonstrates art theory as well, by playing on translation and rotation – the principles Jellett used to create her works. Movingly, the film visualises the idea that there is no separation between history and the present, as enfolded by the artwork itself.

As stressed in the exhibition title, what links these works is the location of their makers. Often when art is discussed in relation to the Northwest, it is to consider how its famed romantic landscape has invited much writing and visual art in the past, functioning as both source and symbol of Irish national identity. Often a writer or artist will come to the Northwest with the explicit idea of rendering the landscape into an object or setting in their work. However, the works in this exhibition are not linked to the landscape in this manner; rather they have developed as responses to the opportunities of time and space that aren't immediately at hand in cities.

Urban centres have historically been seen as hubs for creativity and modern innovation, but as the housing crisis continues, artists are fleeing towards cheaper European cities, or to the rural environs of Ireland. The Northwest has a lively and vigorously nurturing visual art scene, as evident in its large community of professional artists at all career stages, and its vibrant institutions, galleries, and other infrastructure. Despite Ireland's relative isolation from Paris, Mainie Jellett produced, with her Cubist interpretation of religious iconography, a uniquely Irish expression of art. This exhibition offers similarly engaging approaches.

Phillina Sun is an American writer based in the Northwest of Ireland. Her most recent publication is *A Woman Walks Alone at Night, With a Camera* (2022), with Ruby Wallis and EimearJean McCormack.

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