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THE NATURAL LANDSCAPE OF NORTHEASTERN MAYO—SEA, LIGHT, HEDGEROWS, ROCKY GREEN FIELDS, STONE COTTAGES, AND DRAMATIC GEOLOGICAL FORMATIONS OF CHASMS AND STACKS IN THE SEA—DRAWS POWERFUL RESPONSES FROM THE ARTISTS WHOSE IMAGES APPEAR IN THE FINAL SECTION OF *ÉIRE/LAND.* THESE paintings were, for the most part, produced by Fellows at the Ballinglen Arts Foundation, an organization that brings American and Irish artists to live and work in Ballycastle, a small rural coastal village in Mayo. Painters at the foundation fall into two broad groups: some work outdoors, responding directly to the natural world; others paint in studios, conceiving their imagery from a variety of other sources and experiences. Artists working outdoors explore the local landscape by car, bicycle, and foot; they use portable canvases that can be transported easily as they search out sites from which to capture coastal Ireland's mercurial shifts of the weather and light. Others, who paint on large-scale canvases or build complex surfaces, choose to work in the studio, often after making preliminary studies or excursions in the landscape. By describing these different practices, both conceptual and technical, this essay seeks to convey the variety of private exchanges between contemporary Ballinglen artists and the vast landscapes of North Mayo.

Despite painting directly from observation in the natural world, which in earlier generations might have resulted in an exacting realism, artists working in the landscape combine topographical description with a degree of personal expression. Stuart Shils observes that "on the coast of North Mayo, form and mass dissolve, eroded and battered by the assault of light, weather and the rush of time—all of which act as powerful solvents, essentially destroying the presumed stability of the visible world as we usually know it" (2). Shils paints oils on paper with a brush, but more often with a palette knife, a tool that precludes delicate representations and detailed drawing. His choice of paper, a more fragile surface than canvas, limits reworking or overpainting. These methodological choices support Shils's emphasis on form and structure in his paintings, exemplified by the unadorned underlying geometry of road, fields, and buildings in *Ballyglass Fields From the Turf Road* (no. 75). The simplified forms of the image allow him to focus on the expressive qualities of paint—on its application and surface textures—as he seeks to capture Mayo's rapidly changing light. Like Eric Aho and Wendy Prellwitz, Shils uses variations of the demanding *a la prima* oil technique, in which fresh paint is delivered 'wet-into-wet' onto a prepared dry ground—the canvas, board, or paper. In the quest for a seamless whole, failed areas in the painting must be scraped off and repainted. Aho's broad, paint-loaded brushstrokes or Shils's palette-knife geometry can look effortless and masterful—or awkward and incompetent. The risk of failure raises the

stakes; each successive stroke is a decisive, intuitive assault. The painterly depiction of atmosphere dominates Eric Aho's images, in which the forms of buildings contrast with nature; light, or the lack of it, fills his skies and backgrounds. *Behind Balleycastle* (no. 84) depicts small village houses and *Enniscoe, Calm Evening* (no. 85), a grand Georgian house—architectural forms with resonant historical associations in Irish social history. But working in the landscape, Aho focuses not on sociological content, but rather on the expressive qualities of light captured by paint. He strives to capture the specific moment and place—that instant in which *a la prima* brushstrokes congeal into the image—before the light or colors shift.

Shils and Aho paint an inhabited land, but both of Prellwitz's canvases explore Downpatrick Head, a rugged peninsula rising from the mainland that is a striking geological phenomena dominating the Ballycastle coastline. She depicts a cave carved into the land by Atlantic waves, whose relentless erosion caused the ceiling of the cave to collapse—opening a "blow-hole" in a field a hundred feet inland. Using color-filled brushmarks, Prellwitz delineates the strata that expose the cliffs' sedimentary rock layers as markers of time. Her *a la prima* delivery incorporates scrapes and scratches to carve away paint and divulge color underneath, a process paralleling that of the sea carving the stone on Mayo's cliffs. *Downpatrick Cliffs #2* (no. 64) reveals the erosion-carved cave from the ocean's entry point into it, whereas *Blow Hole* (no. 65) depicts that same abyss from above, where ground gives way to air and sea. Working on-site, she paints the colors of warm sun-bleached stone and the cool shadows of the cave that both catch a specific moment in time and reveal the massive geology of this place.

Working outdoors like Prellwitz, Mary Armstrong searches out vistas having even greater depth. Her paintings delineating the edge of the land are studies in dramatic contrasts—morning's east opposing afternoon's west, the forms of the land against those of the sea. To describe such contrasts she employs the formal language of light and dark, as well as of horizontals and verticals. In *Ceide Cliffs, Looking East* (no. 67), the morning light reflecting off the sea isolates the dark cliffs of Downpatrick Head in a horizontal mass stretching from the land. In *Ceide Cliffs, Looking West* (no. 66), late daylight surrounds the dark, undulating cliffs and the edges of green fields. Armstrong's drawings in oil pastel on paper are not unlike oil paintings in effect, but the pigment comes bound in a waxy-oil stick rather than in a tube; thus it erodes as it is applied directly to paper. Since she works outdoors in the hot sun, the softened pastel more closely approximates paint, with colors mixing together as she adds each additional layer. However, the small mark of the pastel applied layer over layer creates a heavily worked surface. This hard-wrought impression—in which the effort of pulling an image out of gooey pigmented wax and of catching the moment before the surface turns to mud—is visibly different from the *a la prima* painter's graceful delivery.

Also working outdoors, Catherine Kernan shares Armstrong's interest in capturing different times of day—in studies of a particular light viewed from a specific place. In *Keerglen Ravine* and *Pollaphouca Ravine*, (nos. 77 and 78), Kernan discovered isolated and unvisited ravines reputed to be the dwelling places of spirits, sites offering glimpses of what lies beneath surfaces and suggesting that terrestrial openings may also be psychological ones. The ravines are vistas in shallow spaces that lack horizon lines. These geological cavities drain the surrounding Mayo hills, gathering the runoff rain and becoming lush areas of brush and scrub trees that border creeks. Kernan's watercolors capture the wet environs of these glens—light, form, water, and reflection. Working within the landscape, she makes a few watercolors everyday day, each different in point of view, or simply changed by her recording of the passage of time. Her small watercolor sketches may serve as source material for prints or paintings that she will create later in her studio.

Artists who work on a scale that limits their mobility choose to paint primarily in studios provided by the Ballinglen Arts Foundation. Developing practices only possible in the studio, they often distill their imagery indoors after a period of visual note taking in nature. Both Susan Shatter and Jane Goldman, for example, make visual studies—small paintings and photographs—to gather information they will later use as reference material as they work indoors. Layering transparent washes of watercolors, they paint on large sheets of paper laid flat on oversized tables in their studios. Their palettes move from light to dark as they repeat applications to achieve their darkest

effects. Both artists create recognizable images that are built from a formal language of brushstrokes, in which each mark of color describes part of a form. When viewed from a distance, these forms create the illusion of space, and a recognizable image comes into focus. Seen from a closer point, the brushstrokes—an extension of the hand and thus emblematic of human presence—appear individually distinct, each holding its place on the picture plane and rendering the image flatter and more abstract. Using a wide panoramic perspective, Shatter often focuses down into the water, but in *Irish Moss* and *Sea Ledge* (nos. 58 and 59), she includes the horizon, distant shore, cliff, and an atmospheric edge of sky. Goldman's *Tidal Pool #2* and *Tidal Pool #14* (nos. 60 and 61) look down into the shallows at sea's edge, recording the variety of life: seaweed, kelp, snails, and the surge of each wave.

The practice of some artists dictates repeated reworking, the building up of a surface or the pushing of formal issues to achieve balance or tension. These repeated painterly assaults or corrections are best accomplished in a studio, even when the process begins in the natural world. Overwhelmed by the presence of water in coastal Mayo—the sea, rain, springs, waterfalls—Cynthia Back, for example, begins by making studies of the sea outdoors. But she then creates large oils in the studio, layering repeated glazes (thin washes of dark paint over light) and scumbling (brushy semi-transparent marks of contrasting value) oils onto canvas. Her process builds the surface while honing the image through repeated revisions. The underlying triangular forms structuring *Seaweed & Rocks at Ballycastle Pier* (no. 70) develop through persistent alterations in the balancing of lights against darks and color contrast. Finally Back distills a tightly constructed and luscious picture of a richly colored underwater world.

Similarly, Cynthia Knott develops deliberate practices that draw imagery from the process of painting as well as from observation of nature. She seeks not a frozen moment in time, but a period of transition that is visible at dusk, at dawn, or during the approach or aftermath of a storm. Painting on a hill near the bogs of the Ciede Fields, she stored her easel and canvases in a peat shack. There she made small watercolor studies and started the larger paintings that she later completed in her Ballycastle or New York studios. Knott started both *Eminence* (no. 56) and *Casir* (no. 57) outdoors, using encaustic paint sticks and a malleable cold encaustic—a mixture of beeswax, linseed oil, damar varnish and pigments that are kept in a buttery consistency to be applied and scraped with palette knives (Knott). While building the encaustic surface layer upon layer, the palette knife occasionally gouges the surface revealing the earlier hidden colors. For months in her studio, Knott reworked her surfaces until she achieves the desired transparent light, atmosphere, and surface. The resulting effect, "a skin of memory" according to Knott (qtd. in Moore 1), changes with the light, revealing layers of hidden colors.

Donald Teskey and Gwen O'Dowd also derive imagery from a process combining observation in nature and the painting process itself. Teskey makes drawings or watercolor sketches that inform the work he later produces in his studio; there he builds up and reworks layers of thick paint applied with plasterers' trowels, in the process occasionally destroying and then reviving a work. Andrew Lambirth observes that Teskey's work involves memory and imagination; "he paints his response to shape and forms and the fall of light, but his art is less an emotional excursion than a reaction to visual information" (3). Another commentator notes that the artist is drawn to places at the margins "marked by both separation and confrontation—the tension between land and sea is not resolved in these paintings but internalized" (Horne 2). The unease of straddling these contrasting impulses infuse images such as *Benwee Head III* (no. 71) with a cryptic tension between exterior stimuli and interior responses.

Although the North Mayo coast inspired *Uaimh* (no. 62), and Gwen O'Dowd made initial studies for the whole *Uaimh* series there, her painting's life began in a Dublin studio. O'Dowd's demanding technique requires an indoor environment, for her mixed-media process includes the use of encaustic, a pigment in beeswax that is mixed on a hot-plate palette and applied to a surface before it cools. The painting's structure—its dark center, the placement of light and color as well as its surface—shifts as she works. O'Dowd distrusts initial attempts at resolution. "[I]t would have to be reworked and reworked before I'd allow it to survive" (qtd in Conley 127). Although

evoking the edges of the land, her images of blowholes intentionally border on the abstract; her paintings "become a vehicle to portray emotions, so that both mood and topographic elements are necessary and, perhaps, inseparable" (O'Dowd qtd. in Mulcahy 21). Disconnected from a specific place, these paintings encourage open metaphoric readings. According to Angela Bourke, O'Dowd's Irish-language title *Uaimh* implies both "what is seen and what is hidden"(69). The paintings express mystery, a dialogue of tension not only between land and sea, but also between the known and unknown.

Other artists prefer the studio because they work from various stimuli—for example, from memory, intuition, or texts. They synthesize a combination of experiences, not specific as to time and place, but drawn from multiple encounters. The structure of Cheryl Warrick's work—fragmented scraps of images held together in a quilt-like organization—hints at such a multiplicity of sources. Landscape imagery is juxtaposed with an archetypal tree, schematic house, or a floral pattern derived from textile. Warrick's interest in oral tradition leads her to use proverbs and folklore texts in her paintings. As if contained in the land itself, written passages from Irish proverbs emerge from graphic marks evoking the land. In *A Dry Spell* (no. 81), a proverb is translated into English; but in *Take your Bad Luck* (no. 80), it remains in Irish, introducing conversation-like murmurs into the painting.

Peter Brooke walks the Ballycastle landscape studying its details, but later paints from memory onto mylar in his studio. His larger pieces were created in Vermont, where he drew from his remembered experience in Ireland. The tall *Foidin Mearaidhe* (no. 74) reflects the vertigo of standing on the edge, with sky-land-sea as a netherworld, alternately swallowed and revealed by shifting clouds. Such dislocation creates a foreign space that disorients ordinary perception and order, yet the influence of a specific Mayo landscape is clear in the title: *Foidin Mearaidhe* is Mayo-ism for a type of bogfly, born in specific local weather patterns. *Suiffin* (no. 73), structured as a square within a square that fragments two disjointed views, evokes a stream opening into a highland bog. Both small mylars and larger panels use transparent oil glazes, opaquely layered for the darks that when scraped away and reworked reveal light.

Both Jane Proctor and Deirdre O'Mahony, eschewing topographical recording, share Warrick's and Brooke's refusal to depict a specific time and place. Proctor's method resembles the surrealists' "automatic drawing," a process of making unmediated marks and imagery drawn from the subconscious and unconnected to observation. Walking through the landscape to gather inspiration, she produces her art in the studio. Proctor works without preliminary study, intuitively responding to the rhythmic mark-making process of applying pen to paper and striving for immediate connections that come without self-conscious decision making; in an interview she notes that "when I'm thinking I'm not as good" (qtd. in Conley). In her drawing *Black Lines* (no. 63), India ink lines move across the page horizontally, each rising and falling as rolling waves, or stacked like cliff strata. Or perhaps, they are, as she suggests in a description of these elements, just lines.

By mapping microcosms of nature, Deirdre O'Mahony's unique conception of painting combines a rich engagement with the natural world with later studio enhancements. Her outdoor processes capture literal traces of a place that guide her in the studio where she develops these initial markings into completed works. In *Wrap #1* (fig. 1), made in the Burren region of County Clare, O'Mahony transferred a diagram of the land's surface to her canvas by wrapping the canvas around a boulder and rubbing it with mud or grass to press an image onto it. The unwrapped canvas records

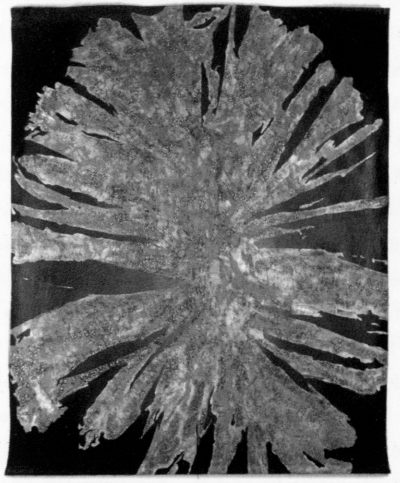

Fig. 1: Deirdre O'Mahoney, *Wrap #1*, 1998, acrylic and cotton duck on stretched canvas, 118" x 79". Courtesy of the Artist.

forms—like a topographer's flattened image of a globe—and becomes her guide in the studio. For the *Cut* and *Pool* series made at Ballinglen, O'Mahony used a related methodology, collecting "direct imprint or trace element from the landscape"(O'Mahoney) onto compressed-wood-fiber boards. She placed the boards into cuts in the bogs to collect traces of turf and insect life; such markings from nature later suggested the direction of her brushmarks. To make the *Pool* series, *Surface #2* and *Surface #3* (nos. 68 and 69), she gathered trace images by pressing the algae from ponds around Balleycastle between sheets of paper, subsequently enhancing the imagery with watercolors.

The above description of the methods, techniques, and practices of Ballinglen artists suggests a range of individual responses to the rural land, small villages, and rocky coast of north Mayo. Clearly painters respond to this extraordinary place in distinct ways, working both directly within the natural setting and in their studios: some record what they have observed with an eccentric topographical accuracy; others internalize the land's imagery, investing it with deeply emotional resonances; still others, drawing on a multiplicity of lived experiences, respond to the bewildering displacements of modernity even in this most rural of Irish landscapes. In a sense, the experience of viewing and decoding these paintings becomes a virtual walk, not just through the particular sites artists have encountered, but through the artistic languages developed to respond to such places. The Ballinglen Arts Foundation serves the local community, the artists for whom it provides fellowships, and those viewing the painting by facilitating this creative investigation of the rural Irish landscape. ❖

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