

Estranged Lands: *The art of the peatlands*

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Sean McSweeney *Dark Pool*

This year marks the final season for turf cutting for 32 raised bogs that have been designated Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) under the 1999 EU Habitats Directive.¹ The meeting out of this designation does signal a change in lifestyle and livelihood for those who, for generations, have relied on the peatlands for fuel and as an economic resource. It also represents, however, a much broader change in our ecological awareness in Ireland and the significance of our resources, which transcend local and national politics. These changes present us with an urgent question of what will be the future of such landscapes, and in this light, it is fortunate that this summer Ireland hosts the International Peat Congress.

The 2008 International Peat Congress theme is 'After Wise Use – The Future of the Peatlands'. Hosted in Tullamore, Co. Offaly, the Congress is giving participants from around the globe the chance to reflect on the history of the development of peatlands and offer pause to consider what will be the future of these landscapes. These are landscapes as rich with tradition and heritage as they are with ecological significance and bio-diversity. In the preface to their seminal history *The Bogs of Ireland*, John Feehan and Grace O'Donovan called us to remember:

1 Gilmore, T. 2008 'Turf cutters vent anger at ban as final season on protected bogs begins', *The Irish Times*, 24 March.

...the growing bog has kept a meticulous record of our doings down the centuries. Its successive layers are the leaves of a book in which hieroglyphic pollen and other fossils document the changing Irish landscape...²

The ecological memories of bogscapes are something precious to be celebrated. As much was appreciated by the ecological and political artwork of Joseph Beuys. As Beuys stated:

Bogs are the liveliest elements in the European landscape, not just from the point of view of flora, fauna, birds and animals, but as storing places of life, mystery and chemical change, preservers of ancient history. They are essential to the whole eco-system for water regulation, humidity, ground water and climate in general.³

In 1971, this sensibility led Beuys to his performance artwork *Eine Aktion im Moor* (Bog Action), where he directly physicalised the rich

2 Feehan, J. & G. O'Donovan 1996 *The Bogs of Ireland*, Walsh Printers, Tipperary. p. xi.

3 Joseph Beuys as quoted in Tisdale, C. 1979 *Joseph Beuys*, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, p.39.

diversity of the bogscape by enveloping himself in its fabrics.⁴ The legacy of Beuys' work presents us not so much with a history or past of art in bog landscapes but a call to engage with and embrace the possible futures of such spaces.

The future of the peatlands is a matter for some consideration, and in addressing the possibilities; this summer's International Peat Congress offers inspiration for through a programme of artwork from an international group of contemporary artists. Brought together by Kevin O'Dwyer and Ruairí Ó'Cuív, the artists have responded to the life, landscape and materials of the bogs in ways as diverse in content as they are in media. Sculptures and installations will be offered by Ann Mulrooney, Caroline Madden, Jørn Rønnau and Alan Counihan. There will also be paintings from Sean McSweeney and Jock Nichol, enamel panels by Joan MacKarrell, peat panels by Martina Galvin, photographs by James Fraher and a new video work by Grace Weir. Each in their different way, the artists through their stories and work offer possible paths and ways of engaging peatlands as places which are not dying or decaying but are steeped in opportunities for self discovery, creation and celebration of the traditional lifeways closer in time with the rhythms of our world.

Alan Counihan's photography and sculpture explore peat and bogland as the liminal stage between stone and wood – between the bone core and fleshy organic life which inhabits the surface. The bog for Alan is the pause between the decay of organic life and the resulting production of a solidified core of rock in the life cycle of the earth. '

If stone is like bone, peat is like flesh, soft, amorphous and semi-liquid. I am only learning its physical secrets, the way it draws in on itself drying and shriveling over time as though in shocked reaction to its modeling.

In its drying and shriveling over time, peat for Alan is a container both of decaying matter but also of waning memory. Within this container, startling evidence of the memories of bogs have been found. Excavations under Seamus Caulfield near Ballycastle, Co. Mayo, revealed one of the oldest field systems in the world, over five millennia old. Preserved by a blanket of peat, the Céide Fields of north Mayo are one of the many strange wonders revealed to us through engagement with peatlands.⁵

Counihan's first visual memory of the bogs was a photograph by John Hinde of a redheaded boy and his sister beside a creel-burdened donkey.

I would have been that boy's age when I had my first summer walks out on Wicklow's Calgary Bog and even then that landscape seemed otherworldly; alluring in the dry blaze of summer colour but dreadful and ominously barren in winter's depth.

Counihan deepened his connection with boglands when he undertook a residency at the Heinrich Böll cottage on Achill Island, Co. Mayo. Developing work from those intimate encounters he had on daily walks through the boglands, he began to produce work which testified to the rich social memories of such lands. Here, the dead provided nourishment for the living landscape. As organic life waned, the bogs waxed, and amidst this cycle, a residual memory made camp and occasionally is revealed to us today. At Lough Boora, Co. Offaly, for example, excavations in 1977 under Michael Ryan discovered the first early Mesolithic archaeological site in Ireland, preserved through the progressively rising levels of bog. Until the discovery of this site, the earliest evidence of human agency in Ireland dated to the Neolithic, and this one site gifted to us by the bog pushed back the story of humans in Ireland by nearly three millennia.

4 Adams, D. 1992 'Joseph Beuys: Pioneer of a Radical Ecology', *Art Journal*, vol. 51, No. 2, Art and Ecology (Summer), pp. 26-34.

5 Caulfield, S. 1986 'Environment Guide to the Bogs and Our Past beneath Them', *The Resource Source*, no. 5, 1-4, 1.



Alan Counihan *Broken Vessel*

The bogs do have strange powers over the materials of our imaginations. Journalist and archaeologist, Christine Finn noted this in a recent and powerful study of the impact of the photographs of Lennart Larsen and the research of Peter Globb on the Danish bog bodies found in the 1960s.⁶ Ireland has had its share of bog body finds, with events of discovery well recorded from over the last 150 years. Notably, in 2003, two Iron Age bodies were found in Oldcroghan, Co. Offaly and Clonycavan, Co. Meath, prompting a major study and exhibition of bog bodies in Ireland, which are currently on display at the National Museum, Kildare Street.

While the bogs are home to many stories, artefacts and social memories, they are also home to more intimate encounters. Raised in Leitrim, some of Maddens' earliest memories are of crossing the bog as a shortcut to do family errands.

Another early memory is helping my grandfather to load turf into big square creels constructed from sally rods and to then transfer the turf into the back of an ass cart that would later be stubbornly pulled up the hill home to the turf shed by Tommy the donkey who took off for a mille on his own with my granddad chasing after him to stop.

Her artwork testifies to such rich stories of the worked land, manifested through the intense working of materials in her art. Madden's work presents us with sympathetic juxtapositions of transient organic matter and more permanent materials such as glass. Her sculptural works capture the familiarity we have today of such permanent industrial materials but counters the estranged relationship between them and the material cycles of the organic world which surround them.

The visual landscape is always filled with elements of life and death, both indigenous and manmade. The natural growth cycles of woodbine or heather (often collected and neatly bundled together with string for sweeping around the hearth or top the of the range); the turf season of carefully stacked footings for drying out the peat before being reconfigured into a pike or transported to a shed for domestic use; rusted-out abandoned old cars, tin cans and the skulls and remains from a cow, dog or cat; water holes and drains teeming with tadpoles and later frogs; pheasants and foxes.

In the works programmed here, she brings together the archaeological resonances of bogwood with the more contemporary senses of glass. Embedded in her sculptures are engaging contradictions. Where we may feel glass is a more permanent substance, it is an extremely viscous liquid that itself flows and degrades over time. So, like the bog lands, the glass components of Madden's works are nearly imperceptibly durational in their viewing. Situating her

6 Finn, C. 2006 'Bog Bodies and Bog Lands: Trophies of art, science and the imagination' in I. Russell (ed.) *Images, Representations and Heritage: Moving beyond modern approaches to archaeology*. Springer, New York, pp. 315-32.



James Fraher *Thomas and the Turf Sod*

work within the peatlands, the durational qualities are emphasised by the flux, change and cycles of the earth which is evident in the vast horizons of bogscapes.

These temporal sensitivities form the point of departure of the paintings of Sean McSweeney. His dark canvases at first viewing present a barren and timeless landscape, but as you are drawn into the vigorous strokes of his brush, you find flashes of colour and life - sprigs of brown, sprouts of green and dashes of red which declare the temporal specificity of his works. They declare intimate moments in his life amongst bogs, punctuated by his sightings of traces of growth from amongst the brown and black peatland. For the last 25 years, the cutaway bogs of North Sligo near Ballyconnell have been McSweeney's most immediate inspiration. Thinking of his homes environs, he recalls encounters with traces of the workings of the cutaway bogs:

I remember seeing the local men dig out the turf from Kelly's bog. These bog holes 6-8 foot deep are now a mass of vegetation. During the growing season you see the marsh marigold, the bog bean, bog iris, bog cotton, the ragged robin, lots of orchids. The pools are home for wild life, the swans, wild duck, water hens, the crane. The pools are home for eels and a playground for the otter.

In McSweeney's works, the absences and negative spaces rendered through peat extraction are subtly inhabited. These static spaces become the home of a cacophony of burgeoning development in the ecology of the bogland. Yet despite the promise of such vibrancy and activity in his paintings, the images convey a sense of stillness or perhaps of balance or harmony. McSweeney's art invites a sensitivity to this harmony of life, action, growth, death and decay - a gentle call for a more subtle appreciation of the ecological nuances of peatlands.

From peatlands to peat in itself, Ann Mulrooney's work speaks of possibilities in the rich metaphoric engagement with peat as

material. Living in London away from her home in rural Ireland, Mulrooney was brought to peat through the poetry of Paddy Kavanagh and Seamus Heaney. Her draw towards peat was something of a Yeatsian call from the rigid forms of urbanism to the organic possibilities of peat as her own Innisfree. The skill in manipulating and conjuring forms from peat for Mulrooney is its own reward, perhaps capturing something of the satisfaction of the traditional hand moulding of mud turf common to Ulster. Her shaping of peat into the Baroque metalwork designs common to streetscapes in London call forth the life history of peat as a resource which fueled the city, while the ornate quality of the metalwork reminds one of the presence of metal barriers and structures which designate the ownership of urban spaces. Indeed, such politicized ownership of common space is something equally potent in the history of the peatlands themselves.

While Mulrooney's work speaks to us of a distance from and a reconnection to intimate landscapes through the touch of peat, James Fraher's photographs approach us from another place. Growing up in Illinois, Fraher's first encounters with bogscapes were from the Northern parts of his state. The Volo Bog and a bog south-east of the town of Wauconda instilled in him a fascination with the energies of such places of decay, which produced such diverse life.

In 1977, Fraher visited his ancestral homeland in Ireland. 'Nothing prepared me for the sight of the vast peat bogs of Ireland, nor ... the scent of a peat fire burning in every home in the West of Ireland...', Fraher recalls.

Learning to cut turf by hand from my wife's uncle Anthony and his sons Thomas and Michael was an unforgettable experience. As was visiting the local blacksmith Jimmy Dowd who I watched forge the blade of my turf spade. ... It was backbreaking but satisfying work. My cutting turf was an anchoring and grounding connection to the bog and landscape of the country.

Fraher's photographs speak of this connectedness of work to earth and the permeable boundaries between conceptions of hands, tools and land known well to workers on the peatlands. His photos, which are at once both specific and anonymous, celebrate a modest heroism of daily manual labour. Fraher's work can remind us of the lives of manual turf cutters and the skill and talent of traditional turf cutting techniques. For example, heroic lore grew up around Christopher Daly from Kerry who was reported in July 1945 in *An Slán*, the Turf Development Board's journal, as setting the national record for manual turf cutting; he cut 598.5 cubic metres in 48 hours.⁷ The heroic tale of Daly highlights the significance of the life of a turf cutter in Ireland as something understood and experienced by many living in Ireland. The life of the turf cutter was no less iconic or ubiquitous than that of the farmer, for they both worked and harvested the land. Instead of fixating on the green fields of Éire, the life of the turf cutter was, however, defined by the colours of the white turf, brown turf and black fen peat.

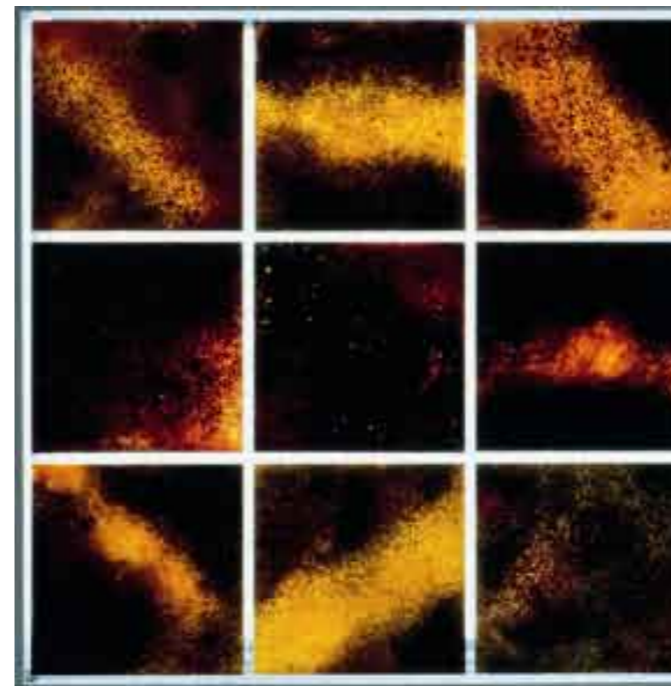
Connectedness to peatland does not only resonate through the black earth. Some, like the artist Joe Hogan, are drawn to the fruits of the land, such as willow and bogwood. Hogan's baskets

⁷ Trodd, V. 1996 'The Greatest Turf-cutter was a Kerryman', *Kerry's Eye*.



Joe Hogan *Deirks willow and bog pine*

are not so much a result of his interest in basketweaving but of his attraction to willow as a material. For Hogan, willow as a material which is worked from its growth through to its harvesting and weaving is deeply satisfying. Living in northwest Connemara and south Mayo, he draws an inspiration from the land around him and the rich and deep shades of colour in the moorland grasses. Hogan's more recent work stems from a desire to forge a deeper connection with the natural world around him. His baskets draw on found objects of bogwood from the bog lands near his home. For him, they are an on-going process of learning where no single work is finished or completed but merely an intimate moment in the growth of weaved tangles of a life amongst reeds and willow and peat and water which he encounters daily.



Martina Galvin *Bog Landscape- Skin of Earth*

The mediation of traces and residues of such intimate entanglements within the bogs resonates through the work of Martina Galvin. Since her first experience of bogland at Clara Bog in Co. Offaly in 1996, Galvin has returned again and again to the rich, fruitful peatlands collecting discrete finds of seeds and dried flowers, which she works into the texture of her paintings. Galvin's paintings are palimpsests in themselves, manifesting a new palimpsest. Working and reworking her mixtures of turf and oil paint, she creates her own layers of agency and memory, sometimes 10 layers deep. For Galvin, the bogs are a place which speaks to both the macro and micro qualities of life. She remembers intimate views of delicate flowers and petals at her

feet, which merge seamlessly into a wide horizon and sky - an ecology which we all share. When installed, her bog panels offer us a constellation of her intimate viewings of boglands. Each individual panel evoking an almost sublime placement within the greater whole of the work.

As a counterpoint to the manifestation of layers in Galvin's works, Joan MacKarell's wall panels offer an interrogation of the surface of palimpsest. Her wall panels are a testament to the rugged surface of the peatlands - a surface, cracked pierced and ruptured by the many layers of history and heritage which the artist senses in these places. For MacKarell, 'the bogland can be read like pages of a book, with the surface portraying the final page', and she actively responds the many finds and memory-caches enveloped by the rising peatlands over hundreds and thousands of years. It is apt that only two years ago, work in the bogs produced a book whose many pages were as saturated with historical significance as with bog water. In July 2006, an early Medieval Psalter was found during peat excavation in the townland of Fadden near Birr, Co. Offaly.⁸ Dating to roughly 800 AD, the Psalter's vellum pages not only offered significant opportunities to understand early Christianity in Ireland but also a rich metaphor for our engagement with peatlands.⁹ Just as the pages of the palimpsest were worked and reworked creating new stories as well as leaving traces of earlier narratives, so too our lived entanglements with boglands render the land a palimpsest of human agency. This palimpsest is the surface which MacKarell's work celebrates. Not only a landscape resonant with social histories, the MacKarell's work speaks from places where her personal histories reside. Stories of a North Donegal blanket bog traversed by 'a donkey and cart stuffed with old coats, wellingtons, a blackened kettle, sandwiches, a milk bottle and of course several slanes to use for turf cutting' enliven the ecological sympathies which her work call for in negotiating peatlands.

The themes of Jock Nichol's paintings echo residual traces within the ecologies of the peatlands. Drawn to the enmeshment of intimate human, as well as industrial, agency in such landscapes, Nichol's paintings respond to the oblique and sublime qualities of a vast bogscape.

Visually it is stunning - rich in colour and texture, the man made geometry of drains and plantations, all set against a vast horizon and the ever changing sky worthy of the grand landscape tradition.

Raised beneath the Cheviot Hills of the Scottish borders, Nichol has always found purpose to life through the rich contrast of bogs as a locus of death in which there is such a colourful texture of life. Heather, mosses and grasses as well as stagnant pools of water form a diverse fabric of interwoven threads of life thriving off the gifts of decaying forms.

Being on the bog is a sensual feast of colour, sounds, shape, texture, smells - from the wide horizon, to the minutiae at our feet. Untouched ancient bog sits beside a healing post-industrial landscape, sharing marsh grasses and solitude under a big sky. A place both timeless and vulnerable.

Nichol's paintings present a view of timeless horizon, a view which in itself is vulnerable beneath the weight of progress and industrial development. His intimate paintings offer a personal moment of reflection upon memories of peatlands amidst the rush of time.

Embracing this flow of time, Jørn Rønnau's contribution to the Peatlands programme is a poetic working of Durrow Abbey

⁸ Mac Cormaic, R. 2006 'Discovery in midlands bog "of staggering importance"', *The Irish Times*, 26 July.

⁹ Bergin, D. 2006 'Scholars did not expect to find calibre of Offaly bog psalter', *The Irish Times*, 6 September.



Jock Nicol *Colour before Dawn*

beechwood. The sculpture 'Traveller' carries multiple meanings, manifested in its single form. At a glance it may seem to be a tree trunk, with its weight of wood perhaps declaring the possibility of roots below. With closer examination, however, the handle at its top suggests portability, allowing its notional roots to be packed and brought with the piece as it travels itself. As a complete form, the work is reminiscent of a bell shrine. Instead of housing a sacred bell though, this piece houses the sound of meditation in the 'OM' carved into its bottom side. The piece presents a series of carved texts on its surface which, following the mantra of 'OM', offer meditations on the mediation of forms. One side carries, however, a list of the towns the work has visited, leaving a space for the addition of new names. This unfinished list renders visible the unfinished process of becoming of the artwork and reminds us of the continual flow of possibilities of such materials as unending moments of process. 'Traveller' offers a proposition of the unfinished manifestation of the peatlands and the unending process of discovery the represent.

Where many of the artists programmed offer pauses and moments, Grace Weir's responses to peatlands offer durational movements. An accomplished video artist, Weir's video productions document movements through spaces and scapes while simultaneously conjuring new possibilities for movements through the videos' installations. Weir has been recently interested in the scientific process of transecting landscapes in order to document life (e.g. butterfly populations). As a rigorous mode of producing scientific data, Weir's walks through bog landscapes transect both the land itself as well as our collective expectations of viewing and understanding such landscapes. Perhaps it is the durational qualities of video which afford Weir's responses to land and space such resonance with the temporal significance of bog space. Though her video work is often site specific, her engagements with the peatlands conjure something of a grander intimacy with the palimpsestic qualities of the narrative of bogscape.

The oft-quoted poem Bogland by Seamus Heaney concludes with this very sentiment:

Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
The wet centre is bottomless.¹⁰

Working boglands here can be an unending process of discovery of self and community and the creation of shared pasts and futures from the materials these excavations. The harvesting of bogs not only would harvest fuel for fires but also fuel for imaginations. The palimpsestic surfaces of bogland offered evidence of diverse human creative acts throughout time. With the ending of harvesting on 32 raised bogs this year, it does pose the question of what will be the future of such pregnant landscapes.

The selected artists present us with propositions for the future of our peatlands. They propose possibilities of new ways of being with landscapes founded on the long developed traditions of living and working with the land. Though peatlands grow through the decomposition of matter, in the midst of this decay there is a rich opportunity for discovering new and old, different and traditional

creative possibilities. Preserving and conserving our peat resources is not only about protecting the landscape, but it is also about preserving the tradition of human participation in the landscape through informed and responsible creative acts. By preserving the peatlands, we preserve a diversity in our ways of life on earth. This is a legacy worth passing on – our peatlands as a place for shared discovery of our pasts and futures.

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¹⁰ Heaney, S. 1969 *North*, Faber, London, 56.



Sculpture in the Parklands

Lough Boora, Co. Offaly

The magnificent wetlands and wildlife wilderness of Lough Boora now host some of the most innovative land and environmental sculptures in Ireland. The artists, inspired by the rich natural and industrial legacy of the boglands, have created a series of large-scale sculptures that are now part of the Parklands permanent collection. Sculpture in the Parklands began as an international sculpture symposium in 2002 when seven Irish and international artist created works of art over a three week residency. Eight site-specific sculptures were created during the symposium and they form the nucleus of the project. The intervention of the symposium artists has added another layer of engagement for visitors to the area, by combining visual and conceptual interpretations of the geography, landscape, and industrial history of peat harvesting and the people who had lived and worked there.

The success of the symposium led to the formation of Sculpture in the Parklands, a 50-acre sculpture park, which continues to invite artists to create significant site-specific works of art during the artist-in-residency programme each year. The mission of Sculpture in the Parklands is to inspire artists to create artworks in response to the unique landscape and industrial heritage of the cut away bogland and to build awareness of the arts within the community through public participation and interaction. In addition to permanent sculpture and time-based

work, the project has a commitment to commissioning video artists, composers, choreographers, and performance artists to interpret and document this unique landscape, folklore and industrial history.

Sculpture in the Parklands is open to the public 365 days of the year as a source of inspiration, study, recreation and education. The long-term goal of Access for All (a national disability access programme) was implemented in 2004 and provides access to sections of the walkways throughout the park. A visitors pavilion provides information on Lough Boora's extraordinary past including Ireland's oldest traces of human activity during the Mesolithic period (9,000 years ago), the unique flora and fauna of this encumbered landscape, industrial peat harvesting and the artwork created in the parklands since 2002.

The Parklands permanent collection includes works of art by Michael Bulfin, Jorn Ronnau (Denmark), Patrick Dougherty (USA), Eileen MacDonagh, Naomi Seki (Japan), Johan Seitzema (Holland), Maurice MacDonagh, Marianne Jorgensen (Denmark), Marian O'Donnell, Caelan Bristow, Caroline Madden, David Kinane, Martina Galvin and Kevin O'Dwyer. The sculpture park received the prestigious Business2Arts award in 2003 and the Best Art/Sculpture Award at the Local Government, City and Council Awards (LAMA) ceremony in 2007.

Sculpture in the Parklands has worked in partnership with Bord na Mona, Lough Boora Parklands Group, Offaly County Council, West Offaly Partnership and the Arts Council in the development of this unique sculpture park.



For further information please visit www.sculptureintheparklands.com or contact Kevin O'Dwyer info@sculptureintheparklands.com

