

IMMA  
MAIN GALLERIES, WEST WING

GHOSTS  
FROM  
THE  
RECENT  
PAST

## Introduction

*Ghosts from the Recent Past* explores how urgencies of the past continue to inhabit the present. Set within a 40-year timeframe, the exhibition draws on IMMA's Collection along with a number of key international loans. The works tell stories of colonisation and contested borders, of human relationships to the environment, of radical self-representation in the face of oppression and of love.

Throughout the galleries, lists of 'ghosts' appear on translucent panels, naming spectres from the last four decades. *Ghosts of Globalisation*, *Ghosts of Species*, *Ghosts of H-Block*, *The Holy Ghost* and others signal a myriad of invisible forces that actively structure our present. Likewise, the artworks themselves are presented as ghostly objects, carrying languages of resistance, waywardness or joy.

Since the 1980s, the fragmentation of societies into individualised consumers has accelerated at dizzying speeds with the dawn of the Internet, the abandonment of the Communist project in Europe and the widespread adoption of neoliberal politics in the West. The processes of fragmentation that followed have no doubt hindered our ability to think together (and to think radically) about the planetary dilemmas facing us. In this moment of uncertainty, a simple but burning question arises—"how can we care for a shared world?"\*

Yet within the current matrix of discontent, there is hope. The artworks confront us with paradox, resounding with themes of care, resistance, intimacy and play—the vital life signs that are now more important than ever. In anticipating what will be deemed essential in the wake of the pandemic, the American writer and civil rights activist Audre Lorde's famous affirmation "Poetry is not a luxury"\*\*\* has never felt more relevant.

\*A. Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (2019)

\*\*A. Lorde, *Poetry Is Not a Luxury* (1977)

## Room One

Legacies of colonialism loom large in our present. Given the context of the IMMA Collection, it follows that many artworks here engage the colonial histories of this country. However, the focus deliberately expands beyond the local. Along the carpet, colonialism and slavery are explored in Kara Walker's tellingly titled pop-up book *Freedom, a Fable* (1997). Set during the American Civil War, Walker's work tells the disenchanted story of an emancipated female slave. Works by Dorothy Cross, Bill Woodrow and Mónica Mayer indicate the wider repercussions of colonial mindsets of domination and extraction on the natural world.

A selection of sculptures by Siobhán Hapaska made in the 1990s and 2000s—populating the floor and walls—point to the impact of trauma upon the environment and the collective psyche. An unsettling audio track emits from *Heart* (1993). This is one of a series of works made by Hapaska in response to a moment of intense fear experienced when a peaceful morning was ruptured by the piercing roar of training fighter jets flying low overhead.

At that time, a climate of fear had been building around the rhetoric of terrorism, including in the artist's native Northern Ireland, marking a distinct atmosphere of invisible threat and the dangerously unknowable 'other'. Hapaska's interest is in the altruism, sense of interconnectedness and breaking of the social script that often follow moments of collective fear.

Dedicated to the idea of selflessness in the face of adversity, Garrett Phelan's *Phase 3 – (Actions)* (2010) flyers were inspired by the activism of a local group called The Rossport Five in Mayo against extractive work by the gas company Shell, known as the Corrib Gas controversy.

Hanging high on opposite walls, Willie Doherty's 1987 diptych *Protecting/Invading* sets up a duality that resonates throughout the exhibition. Created during The Troubles in Northern Ireland in the 1980s—a decade of hunger strikes, H-Block and escalating violence—Doherty's work explores ambiguities of perspective that depend on which side of the political divide one identifies with. This and other works in the show present the idea that opposing forces are not always easily disentangled: love from hate, protection from invasion, fear from hope.

1983, the date of Kathy Prendergast's *Body Map Series*—lining the wall beneath Doherty's photograph—adds another layer of meaning to the work and its cartographic dissection of the female body. This was the year that the 8th Amendment passed into Irish law—a legacy recently unravelled by the 2018 Referendum, on the back of decades-long grassroots resistance by women of Ireland.

Further along the corridor, the beauty and intimacy that is often obscured by political violence is captured in Phil Collins' *young serbs* (2001). The series presents close-up portraits of five young people living in Belgrade shortly after the democratic revolution of 5th October 2000, when mass demonstrations across Serbia overthrew the regime of Communist leader Slobodan Milošević. The work continues Collins' longstanding interests in the media's simplification and reductive categorisations of people in conflict zones. In defiance of this, his works revel in ambiguity and sensuousness.

Birdsong from Margaret Salmon's *Bird* (2016) cuts through darker themes at the heart of the corridor. Immersed within fleshy-pink walls, it sits alongside Isabel Nolan's *The view from nowhere* (2014). This floor-to-ceiling scene of donkeys grazing in Bully's Acre graveyard (on IMMA's grounds) was made for an exhibition inspired by Thomas Hardy's poem 'The Darkling Thrush' (1899). An unexpected moment of hope in the dark is signalled by the ecstatic soundings of a thrush—"Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew / And I was unaware."\*\*\* At the core of Nolan's work is an interest in the inexplicable and unsettling moments that leave us with a heightened awareness of what it means to be alive.

Towards the end of the corridor, a textile monument of soft, fluid and feminine forms commands the space in Sarah Pierce's installation *Meaning of Greatness* (2006). Within the work, a remake of artist Eva Hesse's *Rope Piece* (1960) writhes and twists in its bodily form. A set of shelves holds archives and 'test pieces' from Belgrade art students in the 1970s and the 2000s, along with letters relating to the 1970 shooting

of demonstrators at Kent State University, Ohio. Completing this monumental installation is a set of drawings by the artist's mother, Anne Guerry.

Pierce's work layers the political with the personal, collapsing periods of time onto one another. She considers the past a site of radical potential. Active, ongoing, haunting the present. "Instead of a canon", she offers, "imagine a more affectionate past".

\*\*\*T. Hardy, *The Darkling Thrush* (1899)

## Room Two

Janet Mullarney's *Alpha and Omega* (2003) abounds with religious and spiritual symbolism; two sacred bronze cows rest on illuminated horizon lines of land under foot. The opposing locations of each glowing sculpture create an enclosed and circular movement in the space and the crimson strings tied around each animal imply talismans, rites and rituals.

Isaac Julien's *Paradise Omeros* (2002) links the two island cultures of 1960s England and contemporary Saint Lucia as it follows the central character Achilles' journey through multiple cultures. Set against the backdrop of the mass immigration from Caribbean countries to Britain in the aftermath of the Second World War—encouraged by the British Government to fill labour shortages—Julien's film explores the paradox of black diasporic experience. The recent Windrush Scandal, which saw many of these same people detained and threatened with deportation, demonstrates the dangers of whitewashing the past.

*Paradise Omeros* immerses the viewer into an environment of clarity and confusion, portraying in tandem the intricate workings of race, class, culture, desire and memory that bring people together or set them apart. This work evokes the tragic effects of history and reinforces the continuous underlying battle between love and hate.

## Room Three

Room three brings together a cacophony of works addressing systems of order, communication and control in society.

Some works identify historic moments: the anti-Iraq War demonstration in Phil Collins' *untitled (pershing square)* (2000); the outbreak of Foot & Mouth in 1960s Britain in Joshua Compston's print; and the gaudy shabbiness of recession-fueled closures of the early 1990s in Michael Landy's *Cor! What a Bargain* (1992). Other works reflect anxieties, perceived threats and a loss of control through symbolism and repeated motifs; Patrick Hall's paintings show us nature lamenting, fires rage across several works and Stephen McKenna's *St. Sebastian* (1985) wards off plague.

Mark O'Kelly's *The Party* (2010) draws on 1970s Italian politics, evoking the familiar poster battle during elections when opposing parties vie for attention. Rather than romanticising the past, O'Kelly sets the female protagonist amid an election campaign,

reminding us that there have always been alternative paths to the future. A different type of war on the street resonates from Janet Stein's poster for Vivienne Dick's film *Visibility: Moderate* (1981), fly-posted floor-to-ceiling.

Les Levine's radical poster campaigns from the 1980s and 1990s deliver hard-hitting messages; 'Kill God' is emblazoned across billboards in London, Derry and Dublin; in New York, activists from an art-based AIDS awareness campaign sit in front of Levine's 'We Are Not Afraid' poster on the subway in 1981.

## Room Four

Comprised of fiction and documentary filmmaking, Vivienne Dick's *Visibility: Moderate* (1981) traces the journey of an American tourist around Ireland. Following a series of postcard perfect experiences—including the obligatory kissing of the Blarney Stone—her journey enters occasional dreamlike states as she meets with people who wouldn't normally have a presence in the advertising of Irish tourism.

Towards the end of the film, political prisoner Maureen Gibson talks about her humiliating experiences during the dirty protest in Armagh Women's Prison, prompted when the British Government brought an end to the Special Category Status of paramilitary prisoners in 1976. Censorship laws in the South of the country at the time prevented RTÉ from broadcasting interviews with spokespersons for Sinn Féin or the IRA, meaning Gibson's story and many others would go untold in the mainstream media. The visibility hinted by the film's title points to the lack thereof for certain people and conditions in 1980s Ireland.

Throughout the film's raw narrative, the backdrop of 1980s political oppression, poverty and inequality is spliced with vibrant undercurrents of protest and resistance. Dick's handheld Super-8 reveals an instinctive melting pot which captures a moment in time of Irish culture, delivered against a blistering soundtrack.

## Room Five

Migration, ancestral history, experiences of home, memory and loss are important for Veronica Ryan. Born on the Caribbean island of Montserrat, she moved to England with her family in the 1950s and settled in New York in the 1990s. Ryan's *Cavities* (1988), the title of which suggests a loss, hangs like an organic armor in this room. Its oxidized ghost-like presence implies a transition from one form to another. These objects, initially embedded in the earth, now hover and vibrate around Nina Canell's floor-based installation, *Expand, Expand Through Bush & Land* (2007). Canell's installations are testing grounds—imitating, misinterpreting or reinventing elements of the natural world—proposing intimate bonds in real and imagined environments.

Both artists' works evoke the feeling of aftermath. Created almost two decades apart, one could speculate which images of aftermath these works might speak to from their time of making.

## Room Six

The final artwork presented in *Ghosts from the Recent Past*, Suné Woods' *We was just talking* (2016), weaves together images of domestic, rural, urban and social spaces to explore ideas of intimacy, social systems, ecologies and healing. The joy and pain of black relation are key concerns within the work—more specifically the political and economic pressures that render such relation impossible and the miracle of persistence in the face of impossibility.

Woods is interested in the breadth of intimacy within both interpersonal relationships and political events. She considers our capacity for immense love and, at the same time, unrelenting violence. Her work circles back to ideas of entanglement first presented in Room One, pointing to the interconnections between intimate and ecological relationships. Exploring acupuncture and massage treatments as strategies to navigate systemic structures of repression, Woods draws attention to the process of healing as one of many potential answers to our question—how can we care for a shared world?

## Acknowledgements

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Featuring artworks from the IMMA Collection together with international collections, the exhibition also debuts works from the major donation of the Kerlin Gallery Collection to the museum in 2018.

## List of Artists

Janine Antoni, Boyd & Evans, Gerard Byrne, Nina Canell, Helen Chadwick, Phil Collins, Joshua Compston, Barrie Cooke, Dorothy Cross, Vivienne Dick, Willie Doherty, Patrick Hall, Siobhán Hapaska, Patrick Jolley, Isaac Julien, Michael Landy, Les Levine, Brian Maguire, Tim Mara, Mónica Mayer, Tom Molloy, Janet Mullarney, Stephen McKenna, William McKeown, Niamh McCann, Isabel Nolan, Asako Narahashi, Mairead O'hEocha, Brian O'Doherty/Patrick Ireland, Mark O'Kelly, Garrett Phelan, Sarah Pierce, Jack Pierson, Kathy Prendergast, Veronica Ryan, Margaret Salmon, Norbert Schwontkowski, Janet Stein, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Kara Walker, Robin Warren, Elinor Wiltshire, Bill Woodrow and Suné Woods.

*Ghosts from the Recent Past* is co-curated by Rachael Gilbourne, Janice Hough and Claire Walsh, Assistant Curators, IMMA. Steered by the vision of Annie Fletcher, Director, IMMA, this interdepartmental curatorial approach represents an ambitious project that works across the museum's programming of temporary Exhibitions, the permanent Collection and the activities of the Engagement & Learning team.

Exhibition design by Emma Conway.

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