

HUMAN / NATURE

catalogue essay by Adrian Reilly

Of all the questions that an exhibition focussing on landscape should raise, the most ironic yet fitting one of all would surely be: *where* indeed, to begin? As I wander through the locations that are represented in this exhibition (all of them scapes of some description) I realise that my response varies...in the first instances I gaze, drawn in by the finality of such a thing as a scene with definitive edges; I consider the specificity of each vista. On the third or fourth encounter I begin to glance: my visual experience of these scenes becomes more fleeting and my time in front of them, bound with them, shortens. Of course this is a subjective response, but one which is symptomatic of our western encounter with the natural. Such was the speed that western civilisation moved from the pastoral to the urban as a location for its existence, that the remnants of this great shift (caused in the main by the industrial revolution) are scattered far and wide across our cities and countrysides and lodged within our collective memories. Important also, is the juxtaposition which arose as a result of this shift in relation to vision, in cognizance of the natural and its translation into pictorial forms. This shift can be considered as the aesthetic logic of the gaze (traditional easel painting or tripod mounted cameras) versus the synthetic philosophy of the glance (snapshot, handheld or abstracted). An obvious example however of the violent clash between the pastoral and urban, is the city park: totemic keepsake of the natural, whose function is in part to preserve our encounter with nature. Gardens and allotments have similar functions for today's psycho-metabolism, allowing us to connect, like the archaeologist, with our collective past, or what Marx would call 'species being', by digging holes in the loose earth for home grown vegetables, and watering potted plants.

The natural is planted firmly in our collective unconscious and the roots of our separate individualities. This not least, upholds a lasting appetite for our engagement with and consumption of representations of the 'landscape'. Of all the major themes in art, the landscape is perhaps the most covertly sociologically and politically woven of all. Thus, I find the title of this exhibition to be particularly fitting. The landscape in all its forms, whether actual or political, geographic, economic, or deemed to be picturesque, has been impacted upon by the nature of humanity since pre-history to the present day. All of these relationships and more are present in the works on display in this exhibition, which itself testifies to the complexity of the unassuming naturescape. Our personal and social histories are inseparable from the natural world we inhabit.

Human / Nature is an exhibition spanning fifteen years of art production,¹ containing the representation of the Irish Landscape specifically. More generally, the exhibition testifies to a range of instances in art history which sought to appropriate nature either through direct manipulation (the Brownian landscape, Romanticism, picturesque) or through representation alone. Land, like the natural, is never neutral. Our territorial disposition, both political and ideological, is expressed through aesthetics. Despite our waning experience of the rural in favour of urban modernity, (via the industrialisation of experience) it does not take a sociological perspective on nature to realise that the natural is inherently prominent in contemporary culture. Nature itself is "a construction of culture"² and this exposes the tension which lies at the heart of our engagement with it. Asking, how culture 'constructs' nature, we may begin to consider the ways in which symmetry is imposed upon newly developed forestries, organic foodstuffs become fashionable and a set variety of plant species become widely available in place of others at local (yet global) outlets. As the conception of nature has shifted over time from an independent external reality to one which is determined by a global society, the natural has passed through a range of periods - mostly positivist - dictated by theories of vision: chiaroscuro, Cartesianism, Romanticism, Naturalism and the Picturesque. Again, these canonical pillars of art can be observed in many of the works on display. What this exhibition reveals most tellingly, is the ways in which the appropriation of nature has itself been appropriated by different artists, from different backgrounds over time.

At the height of the explosion of modernity, in the 1920s, a new form of scape began to emerge that was more democratic, not reserved for the societal elite.³ Predicated on vision, but relying heavily on intuition or 'base' senses, *Terrain Vague* emerged as a construct where the city and the countryside met. This form of 'new' nature was one of happenstance rather than circumstance. A very real yet unfamiliar landscape, containing the memory of the rural lives that the city dwellers had left behind and the most recent additions to the edges of the city itself, *Terrain Vague* marked a distinct turning point in our relationship to 'nature' which is still being processed today. At this point landscape ceased to be solely an external reality and began to occur more frequently as an internalised, personal geography. Photography had a defining role to play in this transition. In the nineteenth century, through mechanical reproduction, foreign vistas several thousand miles removed from European abodes, began to be observed outside of concrete temporality. The far off and exotic became immediate and localised, and locality coupled with the linguistic tradition, were the primary means through which the Irish Landscape was assimilated. That the 'planters house is known by the trees'

1 Mick O'Kelly's *Allegories of Geography*, (1987) work excerpted.

2 Adrian Franklin *Nature and Social Theory*, London: Sage, 2002, p.22.

3 As an example, the Picturesque (comprising of the beautiful and sublime) was a construct whose evolution and recognition was the preserve of the societal elite. A good example of this is the shore of Lough Tay, near Luggala in County Wicklow.

should come as no surprise considering the backdrop of ecological colonisation and the oral tradition in the Irish mythology of its landscape. The romanticisation of nature then, was deeply political and based on the congruence of power expressed through the natural and humanity. Again, this proves that what we consider (*and* perceive) as 'nature' is culturally constructed. The image of nature, and particularly those images where the body is present in the scene, serve as way markers to the enculturalisation of nature - a wholly social activity. Connecting the social to the natural, Marx and Engels observed that:

Nature is mans inorganic body...man lives on nature...nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man's physical *and* spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is part of nature.⁴

It is for this reason not least, that the image of nature has remained central to artistic production and consumption, past and present. It is why the works on display here are so varied in appearance, in motive, and in execution. Yet despite these obvious differences, there is something which binds them all together. That quality is the part of our nature. There is no longer a standard stratagem through which to begin to engage in the representation of nature, despite the fact that the natural has become increasingly and strategically standardised. As a direct result of this, the social, personal and political are exposed through the image of the natural and our identification with it. Similarly, nature itself provides humanity with a plethora of metaphorical and metonymic signifiers through which the linguistic and pictorial devices contained in the image, give rise to social thinking. In art production, the aestheticisation of nature in the latter part of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, has become the primary vehicle through which the themes outlined in this essay and explored in this collection of works have been upheld, deconstructed and re-examined. A key characteristic of 'Irishness' is our relationship to our land, our human history. Yet this dictum is also a universality, broad in scope. Like an atlas, *Human / Nature* represents a totality without ever being able to fully denote it. This is also one way through which the strength of this collection of works is asserted. The simultaneous absence of presence promotes a mystification of its own accord, and it is perhaps this with which we struggle in the face of nature from our human vessels, by simply 'looking out from within.'

⁴ Karl Marx, 'The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts' in L. Coletti (ed.) *The Early Writings*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1975, p. 276.