

Where are the Workers?

Human / Nature
Farmleigh Gallery

To take the relationship between the human and nature, or more specifically 'the land', or even more specifically, the landscape, as the point of departure for an exhibition is, despite all the apparent specificity, to risk the non-specific. Even the concept of landscape, implying a way of seeing, an aesthetically and historically inflected perception of place as there in order to be seen, is pliable enough to fade in to inexactitude. Nevertheless, *Human/Nature*, curated by Davey Moor, makes the most of its resources and offers a loose survey both of current ways of seeing place in photography and of some of the more interesting trajectories in recent photography in Ireland.

The work in *Human/Nature* is largely selected from the collection of the Office of Public Works and other government departments in the Republic of Ireland. Most of the pieces here were purchased under the Per Cent for Art Scheme, begun in 1988 and widely used in government capital spending projects from 1997, and so the majority of the photography in *Human/Nature* is from the last fifteen years, and all of it by artists working in Ireland. The earliest pieces on display are *Soil* and *Property* (both 1987) by Mick O'Kelly, and they represent a curious junction in Irish art and photography, and a useful place from which to map the later works in the exhibition. O'Kelly's monochrome landscapes, one a worked peat bog, the other less obviously marked by human activity, have a single, significant, capitalized word of text below the image in the middle of white band which runs under the photograph and two groups of three words aligned with the bottom left- and right-hand margins. The resonance of the words ('FIELD/TERRITORY/DISPLACEMENT', for example) carries a political directness that looks very much of its time, especially

in contrast to the methodologies of the later works which surround O'Kelly's here. O'Kelly's image and text combination, meanwhile, sits somewhere between Willy Doherty's early work (with which it is exactly contemporaneous) and the perambulatory cartographies of Richard Long.

O'Kelly's work is very much about intervention in the history of the landscape as image and in the politics of landscape itself. Its explicit and forceful questioning of the meaning of ideas of place (and of the artist's role in creating the ideology of landscape) is echoed much more quietly in the later work which makes up the bulk of the exhibition. Gary Coyle is well represented here, with two landscapes and two of his *Lovely Water* series of images in which the immersion of the artist in nature is rendered very literal, since the photographs are taken during his daily swims in the Irish Sea. The self-consciousness of the photographer 'in' the landscape, which gives Coyle's work a large measure of its impact, is one way to cope with the uneasiness around the possibility of cliché in making work which involves the landscape. Such visual self-awareness is replicated in, for example, Michael Boran's images of shadows of himself cast on to walls and grass, and Emelie Lindstrom's self portraits in which the cable release is made part of the image. A more textured approach to the sense of the self in a place is found in Dragana Jurisic's *Dreaming of...*, in which a portrait is layered over a landscape. The effect is clearly described in the title, and could thus be a bit too obvious, but the effective patterning of the two images, the branches of the tree and the fronds of the dreamer's hair, is syncopated to create an image which is curiously Victorian, as if it were modelled on a nineteenth-century attempt to capture a photograph of a dream, or a psyche at work.

Sitting somewhat over against this 'autobiographical' tendency within *Human/Nature* there is work which concentrates more on the cultural and political history and definition of landscape. The distinction

is a blurred one, of course. Seán Hillen's photomontages from *Irelantis* are well known, creating surreal and mythopoeic landscapes from a mixture of original photographs and postcards. They comment on the surging political ideologies of place which underlie assertions of Ireland's uniqueness. And their jokey obsessions with impending apocalypse undoubtedly have renewed relevance in post-Boom Ireland. Ursula Burke's work in *State of Grace*, represented by two images in *Human/Nature*, similarly explores the afterlife of touristic imagery and nationalist visual cliché (often the same thing), with an added interest in the femininity of the Irish sublime.

A final discernible thread to *Human/Nature* is a tendency to turn the banality of the landscape, often the suburban landscape, into a form of visual abstraction, a process of defamiliarisation which momentarily unhinges the everyday. Daniel de Chenu's photograph of cellular paving in a car park in County Antrim, in which grass and concrete intersect in regular squares, almost stands as an allegory for the exhibition's intentions, while Paul Lynam's *Wrapped Cloud, Kilcolgan* sees silage in white wrappers visually transformed against the sky. The effect is amusing, but not particularly enlightening or provoking, either about agricultural manipulation of the land or human reliance on the ability to control nature. In contrast, Martin Cregg's apparently slight image of a length of blue rope tied on to a twisted wire, with a blurred grassy background, has a literal tension which alludes to work, contingency and practicality, and above all to labour, something which is, in the end, the ultimate point of contact between the human and the natural. Indeed, much as there are many fruitful directions visible in *Human/Nature*, it is a curiosity (perhaps of Irish photography, perhaps of the government's collection of photographic art) that signs and traces of work on/in the landscape are almost invisible amongst the revised sublime, ironic sublime and anti-sublime work gathered here.

Colin Graham



DIVIDE
FRONTIER
BOUNDARY

PROPERTY

WATERSHED
LANDSCAPE
MAP



Above Left: **Property**, 1987 Mick O'Kelly

Above Right: **Inch Pier, Donegal** (from the series **State of Grace**, 2009) Ursula Burke

Below Left: **Dreaming of...**, 2009 Jurisic Dragana

Below Right: from **Urban Terrain Series**, 2004 Cregg Martin