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Blighted culture

Seán Kissane explores the work of Kevin Mooney, in which complex webs of history and cultural references abound



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Circularity, transformation and shapeshifting lie at the heart of Kevin Mooney's painting practice. He mines Irish cultures in search of a new art history that might address the gaps in our shared material culture, impoverished as it was through colonial hegemony. He takes well-known and sometimes clichéd tropes of Irishness and looks at them askew. What is revealed is far less familiar and more uncanny than may initially have seemed the case.

An example is Ilcruthach (Fig 3). Ilcruthach or Éimhne fhial ilcruthach is a shapeshifting fairy from Celtic mythology.[1] She is beautiful, but also malign, and moves through boundaries of human and animal, mortal and immortal, man and woman. Mooney's painting captures this spirit in this process. Mooney piles a patchwork of mythological and contemporary references on top of each other to arrive at this image. At the centre of the picture is a vagina, derived from a Sheela na gig carved in stone and framed by fingers. Like Cú Chulainn, the figure has seven toes at the end of

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each of its legs. The stormclouds in the background could be giant wings, or a spiralling energy that evokes the special effects of 1980s horror movies. The different painting processes produce an expressionistic mood and this suggests the violence of the metamorphosis, giving the surface a haptic quality.

A thread that connects these works is Mooney's research into the history of Hallowe'en. Samhain and its traditions were exported to North America by the Irish forced to emigrate by the Great Famine and other pressures. There, the festival assumed a different shape, adapting local traditions (carving pumpkins instead of turnips, for example), children and adults alike donning costumes to occupy a different identity for a night. Celtic Tiger Ireland reimported this newly commercialised festival. Out went monkey nuts and ducking for apples; in came mass-produced costumes, ghoulish consumption and toxic capitalism. In this Mooney sees a metaphor for wider Irish culture and how it assumes different forms as it moves through other geographies. Hallowe'en shows that, rather than remaking our own traditions, we prefer to buy into a commodified version of them, in line with late-capitalist cycles of consumption.

Such a complex web of histories and references is also found in Blighters (Fig 1). This painting is notable for its large size and its composition, which is more formal and symmetrically ordered than other works in the exhibition. It shows five highly abstracted figures, each with a single, prominent eyeball and a row of incisor teeth jutting from an uncomfortable place. Each figure is surrounded by a shimmering halo and in the foreground are two grotesque rotting flowers. The background is rendered in a Divisionist style, while the painted surface of the centre is disrupted in a disorder of mucky daubs and stains.

The title hints at the subject matter, which alludes to potato blight and the calamity of the famine of the mid-19th century. Mooney often returns to this subject, as he is preoccupied with mass emigration and how the Irish diaspora became part of a transatlantic cultural melting pot. In this work, Mooney is paraphrasing The Potato Eaters (1885, Van Gogh Museum). He describes seeing that work for the first time while an art student and being struck by a moment of false recognition, as if this were a painting that should be Irish – a missing link in Irish visual culture. With the potato so ingrained in the Irish psyche, why do we only have images of trauma, like Daniel Macdonald's An Irish Peasant Family Discovering the Blight of Their Store (1887, National Folklore Collection). Why are there no paintings like this, at least within the canon, that show the enjoyment of the food, honestly earned?

Looking again, it seems that Mooney has taken liberties in his homage by also integrating The Starry Night (1889, MoMA) into his picture. Van Gogh's iconic image, with its distinctive swirls of light in the sky, by coincidence references scientific discoveries made by an Irishman. When the Great Famine was at its height, in 1845, William Parsons, the third Earl of Rosse, constructed the world's largest telescope and observed the whirlpool structure of the M51 Galaxy for the first time. Parsons' sketch was published in Astronomie Populaire in 1880, where Van Gogh saw it. The Dutch artist then inspired Irish landscape painters like Paul Henry, who looked to him and other avant-garde painters for their colour, vitality and energy.[2] This idiosyncratic loop of references undermines notions of Irish cultural isolation, weaving a mesh of interconnected practitioners, who never met, yet deeply impacted one another.



MOONEY SEES A METAPHOR FOR WIDER IRISH CULTURE AND HOW IT ASSUMES DIFFERENT FORMS AS IT MOVES THROUGH OTHER GEOGRAPHIES

Mooney's work insists on thinking anew about the Irish vernacular and how a more expansive vision of its richness is revealed when it is placed alongside other cultures, hierarchies and registers. ■

Kevin Mooney, Courtyard Galleries, Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2 December–5 March.

Seán Kissane is Curator of Exhibitions at IMMA.

1 TP Cross, The Celtic Elements in the Lays of 'Lanval' and 'Graelent', *Modern Philology*, vol. 12, no. 10, 1915 pp585–644

2 SB Kennedy, *Paul Henry: with a Catalogue of the Paintings, Drawings, Illustrations*, New Haven, Yale University Press 2007 p24

1 KEVIN MOONEY ***BLIGHTERS*** 2018-2021 oil on canvas 160 x 220cm

2 Kevin Mooney in his studio

3 ***ILCRUTHACH*** 2021 oil and distemper on jute 130 x 160cm

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