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Critique

# Critique | Kevin Mooney ‘Revenants’

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‘Revenants’ at IMMA continues Kevin Mooney’s enquiry into the absence of a distinct Irish history of visual art within the dominant Anglo/European paradigm from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. Despite earlier attempts by the Roman Church, the Vikings, and the Anglo-Normans, it was the English who eventually dismantled the complex and nuanced Gaelic order by the sixteenth century, along with its rich cultural output. What followed was a period in which Gaelic culture was legally suppressed, buried within folklore, denigrated by the church, infantilised by the Anglo-Irish power base, and exported through emigration. Mooney’s project is to go back and compile a new visual lexicon of what might have been, if the English had been resisted. He mediates his research through a dazzling hybrid painting language borrowing from pre-Christian and insular art, *Síle na Gigs*, medieval architecture, the sagas, superstitions, and folk traditions.

‘Revenants’ brings together a tight selection of work, spanning from 2016 to 2022, in the cosy square rooms of the Courtyard Galleries at IMMA. The spaces are made homely with low lighting and feature walls of mustard, green, and pale ochres, complimenting the earthy tones in Mooney’s paintings. The six-year production period is reflected by dramatic differences in execution between works as Mooney mines his way through research and experimentation. With skill he runs the gamut of visceral expressionism, surrealism, and *trompe l’eoil* realism, with good measures of cartoon humour, horror, and despair. The exhibition narrative is anchored by a small number of mythical creatures caught in a grotesque cycle of metamorphosis. Nothing of quality is lost in this amalgam of styles, due to the compelling skill and authenticity that Mooney brings to his craft.

*Ilcruthach* (2021) and *Carrier* (2021) are two giant supernatural characters – or perhaps one shapeshifting individual, as it negotiates its circumstances in varying states of vulnerability. *Ilcruthach* is a half-beast hermaphrodite who sticks out its enormous torso of billowing pink flesh and exposes its genitalia. Mooney applies a sickly pink matt paint with sweeping brushwork that accentuates the naked ugly outgrowths, while the low angle view increases its monstrous deformity and floundering loss of control.

*Carrier* is akin to a wandering rag and bone man, his six-toed bare feet burdened with carrying a multitude of disembodied souls that cling to his torso. All that is left of them are eyes and skulls jostling to hang on until the journey ends. Both *Ilcruthach* and the *Carrier* have shrunk their heads backwards, protecting their conscious selves from this embarrassing spectacle. In *Beast* (2020) a donkey trots head down across the canvas carrying skulls instead of turf. There is something ineffable or even sweet about *Beast*; Mooney has captured the loyal donkey in a jaunty, loosely painted silhouette, carrying its burden with positive determination. The brushwork is naïvely spirited and luscious, rendering the earthy tones of the Irish landscape.

A recurring feature of Mooney's imagined histories are gleaming wide green eyeballs, rendered in uncanny depth and form. Despite being consistent in appearance, each eye brings an emotional tone of widely varying impact from painting to painting. Two of these, *Blighters* (2018-21) and *Storyteller* (2016), sit across from each other on walls of grey-cream and dark mustard respectively. *Storyteller* is a portrait of the *seanchaí* Peig Sayers, presented in glowing light, like a sacred heart; it is visible at the furthest point of the passage that connects the four exhibition rooms. Her likeness is minimal, represented by a shawl, hair, tobacco pipes and a pair of eyeballs embedded in a background of layered patterns, shapes and spirals. Its design structure, clarity and three-dimensional depth is tactile and mesmerising. It is a votive and playful tribute to Peig that challenges the clichéd misery and self-pity that characterised her in the past.

*Blighters* depicts a group of figures eating potatoes while sitting in a field and, just like the itinerant shapeshifters, is clearly a reference to the famine. The figures are probably already dead, as indicated by the white chalk-outlined silhouettes, and a single eyeball each. Any other features are obscured by hacked paint marks and bleached by multiple swirling suns. It is a powerful work that marks out a low point of Ireland's colonial history.

*Mutator (Head)* (2022) is the first work to come into view in the exhibition. Part of it comprises a curious rostrum of steps (that could have come from an old dance hall) supporting a portrait of another shapeshifting *créatúr bocht*. Again, it is only identifiable by its profile outline as its features warp and distort in a vortex of swirling brushstrokes. In the context of the overall selection of work chosen for 'Revenants', this painting points not just to absence as a key theme in Mooney's search for indigenous Irish art, but also to a continuous struggle for presence as it glitched in and out of the historical record. The exhibition is intense and beautiful but represents a tiny portion of the vast quantity of material Mooney has accumulated. At this point Mooney (and the viewing public) deserves a larger venue with a long lead-in time and adequate financial investment to fully realise the potential of this project. I look forward to it.

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