KEVIN MOONEY'S MYTHIC SYMBOLS AND MONSTROUS AESTHETICS

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Two piercing green eyes gaze out at you, emerging from billowing rainclouds shaped like an upper torso. Kevin Mooney's painting *Smuggler* (2024), on display at Luan Gallery, depicts a Blemmye: a mythic humanoid species whose facial features are located in their chests, without either a neck or a separate head. In *Smuggler*, the monstrous figure's lower torso is a dense concentration of skulls: a series of eye and nose sockets emerge from the mass, rows of teeth bared in the composite form. Mooney emphasises the surreal or otherworldly character of the creature with loose, gestural brushstrokes that drip with gelatinous liquidity against an abstract background. Across the exhibition, the artist reimagines symbols from Irish history and folk cultures – from medieval Sheela na gig carvings to the pre-Christian goddess Brigid, later associated with Saint Brigid of Kildare (c.451–525). Restaging these characters in the present, Mooney probes constructions of the island's identity in the aftermath of the 2007–08 global financial crisis: a time of renewed left-wing movements and right-wing activism in response to austerity policies put in place after the collapse of rapid economic growth during the Celtic Tiger. The artist reanimates ancient or medieval magical beings to critically reflect on, rather than reify, narratives of Irish nationhood: examining ideas of gender, sexuality, race, ecology, empire, and time itself.
Blemmyes can be traced from ancient writing to medieval maps: a species supposedly living along the North African coastline, imagined to both delimit and trouble conventional social or territorial borders, demonstrating ways in which Europeans pictured ideas of foreignness or concepts of outsiders.1 The motif also appears in other paintings by Mooney: *Bolg* (2024) portrays a misshapen pink form with eyes and an ear protruding from its chest, skulls perched on its shoulder or hanging around its abdomen, and an erect phallus protruding. What is the significance of these creatures to the contemporary moment? To answer such a question, I want to consider mythic or monstrous imagery more broadly in Ireland over the last decade. At protests against the introduction of Irish water charges in 2014, for example, activists dressed up as zombies.2 Tracing the history of such symbols back to Haitian folklore and the fear of being enslaved after death, sociologists Carmen Kuhling and Kieran Keohane have argued that Ireland's bailout from the International Monetary Fund in 2010 hailed 'a recurrence of a social form resembling feudalism' in which 'Ireland becomes a neo-feudal fiefdom, a neo-colony of bonded tax-serfs paying tribute to a global elite of senior bondholders, a new absentee aristocracy of bankers and multinational corporations'.3
Mooney began noticing and responding to a renewed interest in Irish culture around this time.4 Art historian Sarah Kelleher has described his art's ability to evoke weird and eerie feelings – theoretical concepts also used by literature studies scholar Aran Ward Sell to describe catastrophic narratives of climate change and economic ruin in Irish fiction after 2008, including texts set in medieval worlds.5 Other academics, like art historian Tracy Fahey,

have observed a gothic turn in contemporary Irish art during the same period.6 I want to suggest that these characterisations of certain aspects of Irish culture or political discourse after 2008 – weird, eerie, monstrous, gothic, feudal, medieval – represent both a critique of the prevailing economic order, but also embody uneasy tensions that underpin divergent public responses to the financial crash and subsequent austerity policies. The 2010s and early 2020s saw renewed left-wing movements and right-wing activism, with elements of both engaging with a resurgence of magical and occult symbolism.7 Over the last century, interest in the supernatural has taken on particular meaning during moments of social and economic crisis: acting as a challenge to a supposedly scientifically-oriented status quo.8

Theorist Silvia Federici has argued that capitalism began in Europe with the prohibition of non-normative sexualities, enclosure of common land, enslavement of African people, and persecution of paganism.9 In places like Ireland, folk beliefs persisted alongside or merged with Christianity in figures like Brigid – the subject of Mooney's *Goddess* (2024). The painting depicts the shoulders and head of a humanoid creature with green skin. Thickly congealed impasto textures contour a face with exposed teeth and squinting eyes. Adorning a flowing cascade of curly auburn hair is a crown composed of abstract geometric patterns that evoke Brigid's cross, typically woven from straw or rushes on the saint's feast day and the pre-Christian festival of Imbolc, which traditionally marked the beginning of spring. Antiquarians have observed stylistic similarities with similar cross symbols across Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia.10 In Ireland, the crosses were and still are deposited in houses or holy wells as part of agricultural rituals performed with the aim of producing a year of plenty.11 Some legends tell of Brigid as a protector of cows and patron of dairymaids, with milk being used in certain Brídeóg ceremonies with the hope of ensuring an abundance of butter in future.12

Referencing such rites, Mooney's painting *Brídeóg* (2024) portrays a Sheela na Gig: a squatting female nude exposing her vulva to the viewer with both hands, legs splayed wide. Gestural marks outline or infill her slime green torso and reddish pink flesh from the waist down. The sockets in her skull-like black head stare blankly, an enlarged oval mouth screams open to reveal rows of teeth like splintered shards. Two enormous eyes float in a pus-coloured fog that mushrooms from her shoulders. Sheela na Gigs were carved in stone and placed in churches or castles, either in prominent positions or alternatively out-of-sight, between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries across Ireland and Britain.13 Researchers report longstanding folk beliefs in their protective qualities, including a custom of rubbing their genitals, but otherwise little is known today about the intentions of their makers.14 Academic arguments as to their meaning, from symbols of Christian misogyny with roots in Romanesque architectural motifs to proto-feminist Celtic goddesses with profound magic power, may reveal more about the social contexts such scholars project from.15 Although noticed by archaeologists beforehand, Sheela na Gigs entered wider public consciousnesses as a result of a British colonial Ordnance Survey mapping exercise across Ireland in 1840.16

Victorians were horrified when Sheela na Gigs came to the attention of those beyond the communities who carved them: decrying such figures as

wanton, disgusting, immoral, licentious, hideous, grotesque, weird, and repulsive.17 Some commentators speculated that such artefacts might have had ancient connections to East and North Africa, the Middle East, or South Asia.18 Often negative reactions perpetuated offensive stereotypes of supposedly backwards cultures.19 More positive readings sought to reclaim the sculptures as signifying heterosexual procreation or queer desire. 'It is very evident that the appeal of … the Sheila-na-gig was to the sexual side of woman's nature', wrote archaeologist Margaret Murray of Scottish and English examples in 1934, ' as to suggest that some form of homo-sexuality was practised by women as a religious rite'.20 Similar interpretations have persisted for decades: cultural studies scholar Barbara Freitag has noted lesbian Sheela na Gig websites and literature in 2000.21 More recently, queer-feminist artist group Array Collective made and then exhibited Sheela na Gig placards they took to abortion rights protests in the 2010s.22

Mooney's use of the motif follows a significant period of social change in Ireland: activist campaigns and referenda in 2015 and 2018 legalised same-sex marriage and decriminalised abortion, with similar legislation covering the north passed by the UK Government in 2019. *Brídeóg* and *Goddess* also offer ways on thinking about ecological politics during a time in which widespread public concern about climate breakdown became increasingly prominent. Sheela na Gigs have been found by holy wells, such as Saint Brigid's at Castlemagner in County Cork, and are often associated with ideas of environmental abundance or earthly divinity.23 Advocating for degrowth economics, anthropologist Jason Hickel has argued that capitalist-colonialism destroyed pagan conceptions of the land as animate and enchanted, 'to strip the earth of its spirit and render it instead a mere stock of 'natural resources' … to exploit'.24 On a global scale, through European empires, this process caused planetary climate change.

Such imperial projects narrated their violence as supposedly bringing modernity to those they believed to be backward, their understanding shaped by a conception of time as progressive – conflicting with alternative knowledge systems that imagined it to be cyclical or non-linear.25 Experiences of trauma can also splinter conventional perceptions of temporality and cause the past to recur in the present.26 In terms of Mooney's mythic or monstrous beings – as with a larger turn to medieval, feudal, gothic, eerie symbolism in Irish culture – ancient or old aesthetic forms connected to folk knowledge have been reanimated during a decade of social crisis and change. In the case of *Goddess* and *Brídeóg*, Mooney gestures towards pre- or anti-capitalist ways of relating to the environment organised around concepts of abundance. Writing in the context of Hawai'i, theorist Candace Fujikane has argued that capitalism manufactures scarcity, whereas 'abundance raises the possibilities of a just redistribution of resources'.27 While some commentators used the rhetoric of resource scarcity under austerity in Ireland to argue for hardened borders and anti-migrant policies, the monstrous forms that circulated in Irish culture after 2010 were symbolically symptomatic of a deeper public anger at the economic or political status quo.28

Art historian Asa Simon Mittman insists that monsters do essential collective work: they often challenge, question, trouble, worry, and haunt – both breaking or tearing and constructing or propping up social mores, which

they ingest and regurgitate back to us.29 Take Mooney's *Other Emerald Celebration* (2024), for example. A furious figure with four legs hurls their hands and bares their teeth, eyes furrowed with a look of menacing terror. The creature wears a kind of green smock, daubed with patches of dark colour, with a mass of octopus-like tendrils extending out from the garment. An elongated hat raises from its head, striped with bands of pink, red, white, and green. The background is a riot of colour, as the vibrant energy of static abstract formations crystalise into a thunderstorm. What appears to be bristling lightning, ominous clouds, and heavy rain give the scene an impression of climatic upheaval of apocalyptic proportions. The composition is closely cropped, with a shallow depth of field, creating a tight space to heighten its visual intensity. The central portrait, frozen in a moment of frenzied motion, is in the process of releasing a tremendously violent energy. While most of the figure's flesh is a reddish pink,

two legs have Black skin. The painting references Saint Patrick's Day in Montserrat, a British Overseas Territory island in the Caribbean, which remains under sovereign rule of the UK.

Following his research into a rebellion against Irish slave masters on Saint Patrick's Day in 1768, Montserratian historian Howard Fergus led a campaign to establish the date as a 'Heroes Day' national holiday – the event has been officially observed by the Montserratian Government from 1985, but styled instead as Saint Patrick's Day to market it to tourists.30 The uprising by enslaved people was one of many across the Caribbean, with the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) ending French rule, which eventually pressured the US and European empires to abolish chattel slavery in the nineteenth century. Commemorations in Montserrat have nevertheless often carried a certain kind of ambivalence or contradiction, as the politics of anti-colonial liberation are mixed uneasily with commercialised Irish stereotypes, following decades of anti-Black racist travel writing or anthropological accounts of 'The Other Emerald Isle' since the late 1960s.31 These tensions are alluded to in Mooney's painting *Other Emerald Celebration* – which could be read as amalgamating opposing forces in its composite creature: the revolutionary energies of the 1768 revolt, the punitive reaction and oppressive system of Montserrat's Irish slave masters, and the unresolved relationship between the two as manifested in the national festival from 1985.

Other Emerald Celebration interrogates the ways in which Ireland's own experience of colonisation has occluded wider public recognition of those Irish people who were complicit in the British Empire and chattel slavery. From the seventeenth century, Irish elites and indentured labourers participated in the colonisation of the Caribbean, many purchasing or inheriting enslaved African people, accruing wealth that flowed back to Ireland.32 The myth that Irish people themselves were enslaved gained traction in the 2010s as a way of dismissing the legacies of slavery, a conceptual slippage not helped by historical figures or contemporary scholars who have used slavery as a metaphor to describe Irish experiences of the Caribbean or British colonialism.33 Although in the nineteenth century, the British press used anti-Black racism against the Irish, while Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass drew parallels between Irish subjection

under British rule and the enslavement of people with African heritage, distinctions between two different positions should not be collapsed.34 It is precisely the uneasy juxtaposition of limbs in Mooney's *Other Emerald Celebration* – one leg fades from pink to brown with a few gestural brushstrokes – that critically stages and reflects on white Irish involvement in and often failure to acknowledge such histories of oppression.

As literature scholar Sandrine Uwase Ndahiro notes, the resurgence of Black Lives Matter as a global movement in 2020 provoked considerable self-reflection in Ireland about racism.35 The wave of protests provoked renewed scrutiny of European imperialism around the world, leading to a greater acknowledgment among scholars and the public that chattel slavery was instrumental in the development of capitalism.36 Mooney's use of jute for his paintings also implicates them in histories of resource extraction and commodity flows that marked British colonialism and its legacies. A fibre used for packaging, jute has been produced on the Indian subcontinent since antiquity and was exploited by British merchants and manufacturers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.37 Such industries were largely based in Dundee, drawing on a workforce that included Irish migrants.38 Mooney mines jute as a metaphor of the material infrastructures that enabled imperial wealth accumulation.

In *Other Emerald Celebration*, for example, jute underscores the uneasy position of Ireland being both subject to British colonisation and once a part of its empire – a dynamic that either impoverished or enriched different aspects of Irish society. Monsters can represent conflicted or contradictory signs.

Blemmyes may reveal ways in which Europe envisioned its outsiders, but *Other Emerald Celebration* insists those living beyond its shores played a constitutive role in Ireland's formation. Mooney's paintings stage symbols of Irishness, from Saint Brigid to Saint Patrick, to think about how they have been circulated or challenged in popular discourse for centuries. In particular, the artist considers how these icons have been reimagined in the twenty-first century. After the Celtic Tiger and subsequent introduction of austerity, the early 2010s–2020s represented a decade in which Irish national identity was re-evaluated: with activist campaigns organised around gender, sexuality, race, and climate. Occult or supernatural iconography was appropriated across the political spectrum and registered more widely in Irish culture to articulate a sense of unease or anxiety about the status quo. Zombie or feudal metaphors were used to critique neoliberal economics, while Sheela na Gigs symbolised imaginative forms of resistance to enduring structures of power. Mooney's paintings capture and critically reflect on the resurgence of otherworldly tropes in contemporary Ireland, reanimating ancient or profoundly old aesthetic concepts. Mooney's mythic or monstrous figures contest ways in which the world is ordered and speculate on possible alternative futures to come.

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12 Mason, p.165.
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