Pines Eye Text

Cork-based artist Kevin Mooney makes paintings that speculate about connections between the folk cultures of Irish émigrés and the cultures of the Caribbean, and their absence from Ireland's art historical record.

On taking control of Jamaica in 1655, England – at that time ruling Ireland – displaced large numbers of Irish people to Jamaica to raise the colony's population and increase its labour force. Some, considered undesirable, were forcibly displaced, some were kidnapped, and many migrated as indentured servants to work on the English sugar and tobacco plantations (signing an agreement to serve a master for a number of years, in return for passage). Many died on the crossing or later from the poor working conditions: they were nicknamed the 'red legs' on account of the effect of the climate on their fair skin, and in later years English political leader Oliver Cromwell preferred to send children, who he believed would have a better chance to adapt. Such was the impact of this process that today 25 percent of Jamaicans claim Irish ancestry. It is a story that extends across other Caribbean islands including Barbados and Montserrat, and one that speaks of the coercive uprooting of people from their traditions and lands.

During this period the Irish population dropped significantly (by around one third owing also to famine and conflict) and from an Irish perspective this history of emigration is one of great loss, as many people went away never to return. For Mooney, as a painter trying to connect with the visual history of Ireland, the seventeenth century is something of a void within the records. For him, English rule led not only to mass migration but also to a kind of exodus of cultural memories, identities and traditions. He states that, 'when a visual culture does re-emerge in the eighteenth century in Ireland it is only within the context of a complicated, contested and compromised history emerging under colonial rule. So, engaging with this earlier period of Irish history through art involves a leap of the imagination.'

Apparition, Orbs, Trickster and Peasant – appearing at intervals throughout the exhibition – invite us to take this leap of the imagination. Occasionally including motifs that appear like straw, they reflect traditions like the 'Straw Boys' from Ireland and comparable folk traditions and crafts carried by West African slaves to the Caribbean; threads tracing back to more pagan traditions rooted in nature. But these mischievous spectres also appear broken and torn. Mooney, in fact, considers them less as portraits – as representations of someone's status and individual personhood – than as gruesome trophies. Here he references, 'early Celtic traditions where the head is considered the site of knowledge, consciousness and spiritual power, to the point that the decapitated head of one's enemy was considered a prized possession. [Where] to possess it meant possessing everything they saw or knew as well as their spirit and energy.' This gives them another kind of charge. Out of the obscurity of darkness, the eyes appear hypnotic and compelling, seemingly beseeching us to find a way to look beyond the surface. As Mooney includes loose reference points to images by painters like Paul Henry (see Apparition) or photographer John Hinde (see Trickster), who in the early twentieth century produced romanticised images of Ireland's soft landscapes, gentle people and bucolic country settlements, we might consider this surface to be what remains when the

violence of history is expunged by those in control. In this way, Mooney sets up his works to haunt us; hybrid, partial, zombie figures that – unhinging the usual stability of the portrait – challenge us to see what they have seen, or at least be prepared to imagine.

James Clegg, Curator of Exhibitions, Talbot Rice Gallery 2020

https://www.trg.ed.ac.uk/exhibition/pines-eye