

WHAT LIES BENEATH Niall MacMonagle

Pipes by Kevin Mooney

Oil on canvas
courtesy of the artist and Talbot Gallery

THERE'S only one Irish character in all of Shakespeare. In *Henry V*, Captain Macmorris, a drunken, swearing soldier. Given only 20 lines, he asks the question: "What ish my nation?" It's a question everyone asks the world over.

Irish artist Kevin Mooney, in his recent work, questions, with a keen intelligence, his nation and he also explores cultural migration, especially between Ireland and the Caribbean in the 17th and 18th Centuries.

In *Pipes* there is much more going on than meets the eye. A red-headed, green-eyed woman in a red jumper is seen through an arrangement of green circular shapes. But look closely. She has eyes in the back of her head and then there are those five tobacco pipes.

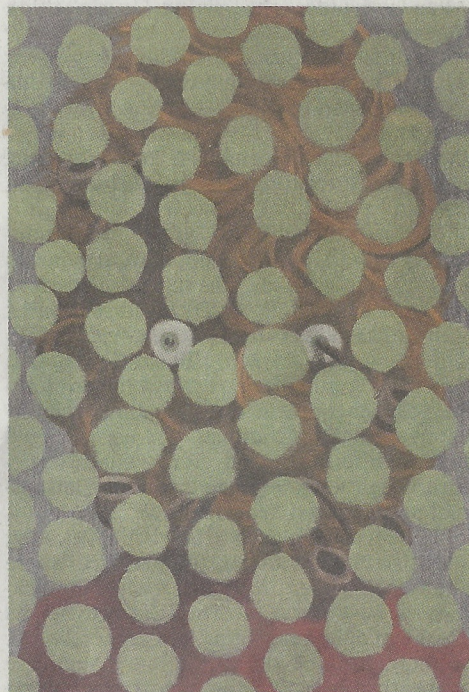
Mooney, here, is influenced by the John Hinde school of Irish images. You know the one: that wild red-haired Connemara boy and girl wearing lurid colours and gathering turf. And beside these happy,

hard-working children, an obedient creel-carrying donkey. And it all happens beneath a blue, blue sky. Yes, you could make it up — and touch it up. John Hinde did.

In Mooney's surreal, unsettling, liberating painting, the freckled Galway girl reappears but in what Mooney calls a "highly corrupted" version. This work quietly unsettles expectations regarding anything that might seem Irish. It's a humorous, satirical approach. He borrows a clichéd image and makes it new.

The pipe will always remind us of Magritte's "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" and his 1945 painting of the old soldier with his eight pipes, but Kerry woman Peig Sayers, gone and not forgotten and still haunting generations of grown-up Irish men and women, was also on Mooney's mind when he included them.

Peig smoked a clay pipe, as does Nanna in John B Keane's *Sive*, and the viewer is invited to view femininity, Irish-style, and masculinity in an original and different way. His work may be rooted in history and folklore but he has tried and



succeeded in finding "vocabularies of paint that were somehow at odds with the image so that the way the paint was used would disrupt a normal, easy reading of the image".

Now, put that in your pipe and smoke it.