revenants

Kevin Mooney's paintings are ghost stories. Sometimes they are parafictions, fabulations that present as artefacts from a lost culture, and sometimes they are speculative imaginings which propose parallel histories of Irish art, or what might have been, if whole generations had not been dispersed by famine and emigration.(i) Sometimes these ghost stories are black comedies, sometimes body horrors, sometimes they channel schlocky B movie monster flicks.

Often they are stories of contagion and weird transformations. Mooney's project is to consider the lacunae which mark Irish visual culture, to borrow Mark Fisher's words, like 'so many eerie ellipses'.(ii) He reminds us that stories of ghosts and monsters are as revealing as they are disturbing, that they can point to the complexities of our culture, past and present.(iii)

Blighters for example, is a pale canvas populated by mossy, inchoate lumps partially obscured by scrims of scumbled white. Each greenish silhouette is studded with randomly placed teeth and a single lidless eyeball which fixes the viewer with an implacable gaze. Floating in the undefined space beneath the figures are two grey egg shapes, radiating pink tentacles. Despite the queasy strangeness of the image, there is something naggingly familiar about the composition. A loose grouping of figures gathered under weak light, Blighters is Mooney's mirror world corruption of Van Gogh's Potato Eaters, a depiction of a peasant family eating a meal of potatoes in the half light of an oil lamp. At once darkly funny and unsettling, Blighters exploits a series of verbal and visual puns — blight, potatoes and a hoary cliché of Irishness — to speculate on the ways in which a missing generation of Irish artists might have absorbed and reworked currents of artistic influence.

Blighters' dialogue with Van Gogh imagines trajectories of cultural transmission that stem from links, both documented and speculative, between a tradition of European painting and a history of Irish art. Van Gogh's work famously influenced Paul Henry's painting, and therefore fed into some of the most iconic images of Irish landscape, which in turn became central to the project of nation building post-Independence. Other scholars have pointed to the temporal links between the distinctive whorls in Van Gogh's Starry Night and the drawings of the Whirlpool Galaxy, which were first observed and recorded by in Birr Co. Offaly by William Parsons, Third Earl of Ross and which circulated widely in Europe in the 1900s.(iv)

But what Blighters spectral re-imaging points to more obliquely, are the gaps in our knowledge, the absences in the record of our visual culture caused by poverty, famine and mass immigration. What would Irish peasant painters of the 17th or 18th century have painted? What would their subjects have been? What influences would they have drawn from?

What palette would they have used? What kinds of motifs would have come from their vernacular? The fact that Mooney's work thinks through class as well as history, is crucial. His fictional painters are drawn from the rural working poor rather than the (largely non-existent) bourgeoisie.

This positioning has shaped his distinctive palette of swampy greens and dank greys and browns, interspersed with pinks, blood red and pale, fatty yellows.

Mooney describes it as his 'bog man' palette — the kinds of colours that his imagined Irish peasant painter might have used to represent the landscape around them. The result is unsettlingly fleshy, overlaid with tones of silt and mildew and algae. However, this particular vantage point also allows him to draw on the remnants of folklore and folk art and to blend vernacular visual culture with influences from Europe and beyond. In the process, he opens up thorny questions about cultural influence and transformation.

Blighters marks an acceleration of Mooney's explorations into Diaspora and hybridity. Earlier work imagines the kind of visual culture that might have been produced by those same 'bog men' painters as they emigrated to the West Indies. Irish Catholics were brought to the West Indies as indentured servants and labourers to work in the colonies' sugar plantations alongside enslaved Africans, eating the same food and living and sleeping alongside their enslaved counterparts. Other Irish (such as those in Donald Harman Akenson's study of Montserrat) arrived in the Caribbean with sufficient capital to purchase sugar estates. In the process they laid their own claims to a place among the planter elite, demonstrating that they were as likely to enslave Africans and behave in a capricious fashion as their English counterparts.(v) The works that made up Mooney's 2019 exhibition Fragments of San Borondon reverse engineered this lost visual tradition, fabulating the kinds of artefacts that might resulted from the integration of both politics and poetics in the peoples who shared a common but divergent transatlantic history.(vi) These works splice recognisable Irish motifs: snake, donkey and tricolour, with devices more readily associated with ritual imagery or tribal fetishes to concoct a mutant, absurdist folklore. Emigré is a rude abstraction of a skull gripping a clay pipe between absurdly buck teeth, while Madonna, draped in a white shroud, like the cartoon shorthand for a ghost, bristles with nails where eyes should be. Here Mooney's black humour is a disarming strategy — one that opens up a space for critical reflection on an overlooked and uncomfortable episode of Irish history when the Irish were as much colonisers as colonised.

This latest body of work, of which Blighters forms part, thinks through cultural diaspora through the lens of Samhain, the shape shifting pagan festival, borne to the US like a virus by Irish immigration during the famine, where it was gradually defanged, commercialised and returned to us as Halloween. Works like Bonefire make reference to ancient Celtic rituals associated with Samhain, where the carcasses of slaughtered

livestock would be cast into a communal fire, the flames used to restart household fires. In other works Mooney's ghosts take a more literal form, with imagery drawn from Irish mythology and a tradition of folklore and storytelling. Nera refers to the legend of the warrior of Connaught in the Ulster Cycle of Irish mythology who dared to put a wicker ring on the ankle of the corpse of a hanged prisoner on Samhain night and was forced to carry the reanimated cadaver on his back. The two entwined figures form a kind of monstrous lump, their limbs and fleshy folds seized by a kind of 'recombinatorial delirium'.(vii) Fèth Fiadh references the mysterious fog, or veil which the Tuadh de Dannan use to hide themselves from human sight. The fog is reimagined here as an ominously solid floating mass, dotted with staring eyes and pointed heads. In other works, mist or fog is more than just a reference to the spectral but also a painterly device, the scrims and veils of white paint dragged with a wide, dry brush, obscuring figurative details, so that the image seems to appear and retreat. Mists, fogs and storms are recurrent features in Irish mythology, they function as the barrier between mortal reality and the supernatural, barriers which become more porous at Samhain, the hinge point between the end of the Celtic year and beginning of the new. Fogs and shrouds of paint therefore signify disjunctures in time as well as space, acting as the viscous connective tissue which weds 1980s horror film references to ancient mythology.

Mooney's references to Irish myth and half forgotten ritual are far more sophisticated than an exercise in nostalgia, and activate a complex aesthetic and critical response. These images of pullulating fleshy bodies, twisting horse-figures and floating heads trigger a shudder of the uncanny, that distinct psychic unease where the familiar — Van Gogh's Potato Eaters for instance — is made strange and discomforting. Recent scholarship has argued that the uncanny is a distinctly modern experience, 'a symptom of the anxiety caused by a loss of continuity with the past'. (viii) In telling these ghost stories of Irish art; of what might have been had the 'bogmen' painters existed, had they stayed; Mooney's work marks this gap in our visual culture as reverberant event in the Irish psyche, a traumatic break caused by famine and forced migration. Mooney's paintings are revenants then, ghosts of lost futures, where we are haunted not by the spectres of an Irish visual tradition, but by its absence.

Sarah Kelleher

i. Carrie Lambert-Beatty, 'Make Believe: Parafiction and Plausability', October, 129, (2009), pp. 54-84

ii. Mark Fisher, The Weird and the Eerie, (Repeater Books: London, 2016), p. 106

iii. Sorcha Ni Fhlainn, 'Introduction', in Sorcha Ni Fhlainn (ed) Dark Reflections, Monstrous Reflections: Essays on the Monster in Culture, (Oxford: Interdisciplinary Press, 2008), xi

iv. See for example, Omar Nasim, Observing By Hand: Sketching the Nebulae in the Nineteenth Century, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013)

v. Shaw, Jenny. Everyday Life in the Early English Caribbean: Irish, Africans, and the Construction of Difference, University of Georgia Press, 2013, p. 3

vi. Ibid.

vii. Mark Fisher, 'Lost Futures', Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures, (Zero Books; Winchester, UK and Washington, USA, 2014), P. 8

viii. Jo Collins & John Jervis (eds), Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties (Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), p. 4