

Landscape Fossilised

We all respond in a different way to the land we find ourselves in. That land is for the native a different place to what it is for the stranger. If we scientifically study this land, we experience a different result to that seen through the eye of the artist.

This exhibition explores the layers of understanding we can hope to reach where previously fossilised boundaries between artist and scientist, stranger and native, logic and emotion are blurred and hopefully the vision becomes all the clearer as a result.

A short time after the archaeological excavations of the pre-bogs fields of North Mayo had begun in the early 1970s, a young Seamus Heaney visited our excavations in Belderrig (sometimes written "Belderg"). A few days later my father and I received a brief thank you letter and included with it the poem "Belderg" which was subsequently published in Heaney's volume of poems entitled North. In four short lines, the poet captured what he had experienced of the landscape of Belderrig when he wrote:

A landscape fossilised
Its stonewalled patternings
Repeated before our eyes
In the stone walls of Mayo.

The land of North Mayo is the stage on which each individual person can experience one's own uniquely personal landscape. The native and stranger crossing that stage together can have the same sensual experience of their surroundings, may have identical images on the retinas of their eyes, hear the same sounds, smell the same scents and feel the same breezes but they do not experience the same landscape. To the stranger, it is a landscape of new discovery; to the native it is the landscape of old memory. The older the native, the deeper the memory, not just personal memory but indirectly accumulated memory. That accumulated memory will include the living memory of older neighbours, the folk memory of past generations and the remnant memory which survives in placenames.

A lifelong experience of one place can also have a negative effect where an indifference bred out of familiarity sets in. Look from your own front door at your own place but through a mirror and you will see a strange place. You see new lines, new patternings, new beauty you don't see every day simply because the pattern is reversed. This is the freshness of view which the stranger can bring to a place and if that stranger happens to be an artist, the rest of us are all the richer for that. Thus Heaney in a literary form fossilised for ever his Belderrig landscape in his beautiful poem.

A quite different route to a deeper understanding of place comes from scientific research be it from formal archaeological excavations, the analysis of plant material in the bog or the advanced science of radiocarbon dating. The detailed drawings of the archaeological excavations of Gretta Byrne, archaeologist at Ceide Fields and Rathlacken, are part and parcel of normal archaeological research. The drawings themselves have become a scientific fossil landscape of "stonewalled patternings repeated".

Varvara Shavrova has come to experience as a stranger the lands both ancient and modern of Ceide Fields and North Mayo. Now, the artist has chosen to express her response to these landscapes through the medium of the fossilised record of the archaeological drawings. By using the patterns as the basis for the altered images of this exhibition, the artist is providing the artist's mirror by which we can look anew at our familiar world. Except now we are the stranger and the artist is the native. The artist has again captured the transient experience of her landscape and has fossilised it artistically in these images. Varvara's "stonewalled patternings repeated" have given us a new mirror through which to view that which may have been dulled by familiarity for us. We may now be the strangers in the landscape were the artist is native but as we enjoy the new insights, we can hopefully return later to our familiar landscapes with a clearer eye to appreciate their inherent beauty and strength all the more.

Seamas Caulfield