

**Beyond the Pale Australia: The  
studio as Site where notions of  
Irish National Identity are  
translated into Contemporary  
Works of Art**

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An exegesis submitted to the School of Drama,  
Fine Art and Music, Faculty of Education and  
Arts, The University of Newcastle in fulfilment of  
the requirements for a Masters of Philosophy in  
Visual Arts.

October 2012.

### **Statement of originality**

This exegesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

**Kiera O'Toole**

**To my son, Cionn.**

**“We are all in the gutter but some of us  
are looking at the stars”.**

**Oscar Wilde.**

I would like to thank Dr Annemarie Murland and Dr Christian Messham-Muir for their supervision and incredible support throughout my candidature. I would also like to thank my parents, Iseult and Gerard, and my brothers, Christopher, Eoin and Fiach for their love and support. Mostly, I would like to thank my husband, Craig, for his unwavering love and support but mainly for never questioning why I needed hundreds of seaweed roots in our house.

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## Abstract:

This exegesis and studio praxis convenes within an Irish contemporary art framework to translate an embodied experience of being an Irish woman living in Australia. As a constituent of the Irish diaspora, my research evokes the sentiments of Irish artist Katy Deepwell, whose remarks about Irishness are echoed in the exegesis that accompanies the works of art: 'our displacement, our living all over the world, our history of emigration, our psyche'.<sup>1</sup> The impulse of the research is not to fashion sentimentality of a homeland but to examine the physical and psychological distances between the two countries through a personal and critical response to Irish national identity.

The conceptual premise of this research analyses the West of Ireland's position as the enduring site for Irish national identity. The research proposes that this model of identity, constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, lingers in the Irish psyche as the sacred home of Irish national identity. Given the premise of where 'Irishness' is seen to be located in the heartland of the West of Ireland, then my position of 'coming' from the East presents as a form of otherness or as an alternative way of 'being' Irish. In a landscape of 'Saints and Scholars' this dichotomy causes tension in relation to belonging and raises questions on the formation of a national identity. To this end, the West of Ireland plays a fundamental role as a place for a self-reflective journey, where the experience of diaspora as it relates to Irish national identity is explored and recorded. The studio-based art practice as research manifests through a series of material conversations to present a discourse that reflects and draws upon Irish and Irish Australian nationalist histories and nationalist ideologies.

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<sup>1</sup> Katy Deepwell, *Dialogues: Women Artists from Ireland* (IB Tauris & Co Ltd, 2005), 140.

## Prologue

The imagined umbilical cord, which ties me to 'Ould Ireland', activates underlining questions of Irishness from afar. Irish art critic, Fintan O'Toole, observes that as the Irish diaspora travels 'through the labyrinths of the wide world they are bringing with them a ball of Irish thread with which to find their way back home'.<sup>2</sup> The disjunctive experience of living outside my psychological and cultural living space has informed my fascination with my national identity. Therefore, to understand oneself as an Irish woman in Australia, it is necessary to reflect on my place of origin and probe what it means to be a product of the diaspora.

Living in Australia, a multicultural and multi-religious nation, provides the space to reflect on my sense of identity and belonging. Raised in a Catholic-bound nation, Catholicism shaped my understanding of personal and national identity. However, beyond the parish, a legacy of sexual and emotional abuse at the hands of clergy created discord within the family unit. In turn, the research project negotiates the church's impact on national and personal identity through a critical and personal perspective that merge in scholarship.

Catholicism is entrenched in Irish life from birth to death: 'Baptism', 'Holy Communion', 'Confirmation', marriage, funerals and education. A myriad of signs and symbols which form my memory of place also serves to reinforce the role of the church in Irish culture. Adorning Irish homes, reflecting the doctrine and attachment to the church that testify to the culture and politics of place, are the following examples of cultural clutter: the Irish version of the Holy Trinity: 3D images of Pope John Paul II, Jesus Christ and the unofficial member, Elvis Presley, all of which decorate Irish homes past and present. This décor resides only in memory and not in present reality.

Informing my perceptions of Irishness is my father's family stories of brothers fighting brothers in the Irish Civil War (1922) yet sharing evening meals. A similar story exists on my mother's side of the family, where my great grandmother concealed ammunition under her baby's pram for the *cause* of Ireland's freedom from British

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<sup>2</sup> Declan McGonagle, Fintan O'Toole, and Kim Levin, *Irish Art Now, from the Poetic to the Political* (Merrell Holberton Publishers, London, 1999).26.

rule. The outcome of the war resulted in a lasting and devastating division between north and south of Ireland.

At age ten, my family moved to the idyllic countryside of County Wicklow in Ireland, remote from the contested borders with Northern Ireland. However, sectarian violence formed a distant yet familiar backdrop to my life through mediated cultural imagery of bombed streets, kerbstones painted in the colours of the Republican or British flags. Murals of red hands or masked men with guns, monotonous voices spewed from evening news reports: another person shot dead, a car blown up or another bomb scare. All of this formed aspects of my identity and relationship to Ireland.

While working as a waitress in a Dublin café in 1998, I served Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, the principal figures of the political party Sinn Féin, considered to be the political arm of the Irish Republican Army (IRA). As men of political influence, their presence created a sense of tension and embedded a sense of fear such that I was unable to direct my gaze at them. They personified the brutality and bloodshed of 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland from the late 1960s until the late 1990s.<sup>3</sup> The significance of this encounter revealed itself later when I realised that their meeting took place in the week leading to the 'The Belfast Peace Agreement', signalling the end of 'The Troubles' and the start of new interpretations of Irishness.<sup>4</sup>

My generation is the last generation to witness 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland. My perception shifted from silent resentment to acceptance after the English Monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, made an historic visit to Ireland in May 2011.<sup>5</sup> Queen Elizabeth II bowed her head and laid a wreath in Dublin's Garden of Remembrance of Irish freedom fighters. This simple yet poignant gesture acknowledged past atrocities and injustices caused by *her* nation's actions.

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<sup>3</sup> 'The Troubles' refers to the ethno-political conflict between Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland between the late 1960s and late 1990s. However, military campaigning by dissident paramilitary organisations such as the Real Irish Republican Army continues.

<sup>4</sup> The British and Irish Governments sanctioned 'The Belfast Peace Agreement', otherwise known as 'The Good Friday Agreement' (1998) in a new British-Irish Agreement on Northern Ireland.

<sup>5</sup> King George was the last monarch to visit Ireland in 1911. However, Ireland was still part of the United Kingdom before becoming a Republic in 1948.



## Introduction

### Is the West of Ireland still the site for an Irish national identity?

We are our past and our past's past: they entwine our lives. We build on that past constructively, carefully, or its ruins collapse and crush us.<sup>6</sup>

My practice-led research examines the question of Irish national identity as it relates to the West of Ireland through a personal lens rooted in my contemporary art practice. Drawings and sculptural installations reveal the history and embodied experiences attached to the notion of 'Irishness' from a migrant's perspective. I will illustrate through practice-based methodologies supported by historical and theoretical discourses that reference cultural nationalism which is a division of nationalist ideology. To this end, the research is underpinned by examining Irish nationalism through the role of the Roman Catholic Church and the West of Ireland.

This research project, titled *Beyond the Pale: Australia*, comprises an exegesis and an exhibition that consist of a sculptural and drawing installation.<sup>7</sup> The works of art that form the nucleus of the thesis act as a form of visual exchange between Ireland and Australia. Thus, conceptually, the works of art shift from one era to another and from one place to another as reinterpretations of Irish national identity that extends to include the Irish diaspora in Australia.

The romantic and contested notions of the West of Ireland embody old and new lines of understanding Irish national identity and provide the premise for this discussion and act as subject matter for the exhibition, *Beyond the Pale: Australia*. The construction of the West of Ireland as Ireland's spiritual homeland manifested in the emergence of an Irish Free State in the early twentieth century. The West embodied 'Ould Ireland'; a place connected to a complex history that posited the region as the home for the whole of Ireland. This research project weaves the legacy of the ideology, politics and history of the West into an evolved thesis. The exegesis and exhibition create an interstice between total negations of this legacy through the

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<sup>6</sup> Patrick O'Farrell, *The Catholic Church and Community: An Australian History* (Kensington, N.S.W. : New South Wales University Press, c1985). 450.

<sup>7</sup> Before the mid fifteenth century, the untamed territory outside the area of Dublin, Counties Louth, Meath and Kildare, was known as 'the Pale'. While the Gaelic Irish occupied outside or 'Beyond the Pale', the Anglo-Irish occupied within. Paradoxically, the Anglo-Irish leaders of revivalist movements, sought to define Ireland outside of the pale to inside the West of Ireland. David George Boyce, *Nationalism in Ireland* (London : Croom Helm ; Dublin : Gill and Macmillan, 1982).38.

visual literacies of contemporary Irish artists, such as Caroline McCarthy, whose art practice supports this analogy which is venerated and perpetrated by the Irish tourist industry through cultural 'branding'.

The intention of this research is to expand the contours of Irish national identity to include *her* diaspora through visual and textual responses. The evidence uncovered through the research project proposes that this legacy of the mythologised landscape, that was once an integral part of the Irish national narrative, still lingers in the collective memory. This notion acts as the foundation of contemporary Irish national cultural identity.

My art praxis explores the inherent narratives common to the subjectivity of 'Irishness' and diaspora through a comparative analysis with contemporary Irish artists: Dorothy Cross, Sean Hillen and Caroline McCarthy, who rework national identity issues through dialogue and discourse, sculpture, painting, video and installation art. There are no prescribed categories for these artists; rather, they share a commonality in their art practice through engaging with the notion of the West of Ireland as locus of identity. Through the visual process of reconstructing Irishness into works of art, a new narrative will emerge that is informed by personal experience and histories past and present. I will explore what it means to be an Irish woman living beyond the physical borders of Ireland through exhibitions as research that have formed part of the process of this project.

I negotiated the boundaries of identity within an Irish/Australian context in the exhibition titled *Romantic Ireland's Dead and Gone*, 2007 that formed part of the research process.<sup>8</sup> An emotive response to the reality of migration, the loss of a sense of place and displacement of language and community, found form through the materiality and process of drawing. Gestural graphic images of Blue Bottle jellyfish found on my local beach on the Central Coast, acted as a metaphor for the migrant experience through their 'un-rootedness' and dislocation from their habitat, created uncertainty and tension in the drawing through the spatial relationships between subject and object.

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<sup>8</sup> The title of the exhibition derives from a William Butler Yeats poem titled *September 1913*.

In my visual art practice, I am primarily concerned with exploring personal identity through historical, political and cultural narratives that manifest through a process of mark making and object making. A narrative style deliberates between drawing and sculptural works of art whose form has developed from ruptures, repetitions and gradual exposure of layers which determine a strong sense of meaning. Form and content fuse in the three large-scale drawings that are installed to form as drawing as a suspended sculpture. The two sculptural works of art that take shape in the form of a currach, reference national identity in their materiality that filters real and apocryphal memories of the West of Ireland. The fragility and scope of national identity embeds a visual and literal dichotomy in the currach as a motif, which appears solid but is in fact fragile delivering a sense of instability that references the evolving and dissolving nature of the diaspora. To this end, this exegesis and exhibition, solicit questions about current Irish national identity from a diasporic position. In an attempt to retain my indigenous language and to remind the viewer of my cultural and national uniqueness, the titles of the artworks in the accompanying exhibition are in Gaelic.<sup>9</sup>

The works of art oscillate between strategic applications of history, memory and experience that are resolved through the employment of the motif of the currach, a traditional Irish seafaring boat constructed from a wood frame and canvas.<sup>10</sup> The currach is re-appropriated through subverting its materiality and physical dimensions which act as a mediator of exchange between subject and object. The dematerialisation of an historical and cultural artefact is reshaped into an art object that significantly describes a personal enactment of what it means to be Irish from a position of dislocation. The imagined movement of the boats in situ is forecast through penetrating deep shadows cast on the wall of the gallery setting. These hovering motifs create a reception where memory and migration appear as sfumato while the architecture of the boats and their location serves as a sign of the diaspora and the West as a symbol of national identity. Simultaneously, the currach motif bears witness to dualities of time and of place between Ireland and Australia and the continuing lines of connection through a personal experience of migration.

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<sup>9</sup> Ireland was a British colony for over eight hundred years and, as a result, the English language has taken too strong a hold over the Irish language. I can neither speak nor understand my native tongue despite Gaelic being compulsory at school or my attending the *Gaeltacht*, (Irish speaking districts in the West of Ireland) during school holidays. Reeling from the impact of the forces of colonisation, Ireland witnessed the rise of Irish nationalism, the quest for a national identity and the return of the native tongue during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

<sup>10</sup> The currach has been in use for over two thousand years.

Underpinning this exegesis is the concept of national identity and the wider notion of nation.<sup>11</sup> Discourse on the concept of nation is problematic in terms of diverse opinions within nationalist ideology.<sup>12</sup> This thesis does not seek to address current debates within nationalist studies to a significant degree; rather, the intent of this research project is to reflect on Irish national identity as it relates to the auto-ethnography of my personal migratory experience explored through my artistic practice. Discussing the thematic of nationalist ideology, this research utilizes supporting texts from seminal theorists, John Hutchinson's (1949 -), *the Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism*, and *Nations and Culture*, and Anthony D. Smith's (1933 -) texts: *National Identity* and *Nationalism*. Both theorists concede that a nation as a concept is not ancient, but a premodern set of components were present within nations.<sup>13</sup> Within this theoretical structure, the exegesis examines Ireland's cultural uniqueness through the media of sculpture and drawing in the form of an installation.

This research draws from aspects of cultural nationalist ideologies to support my position on the idea of nation as an organic community where individuals share in a complex site of identities, gender and religious rather than a constructed state based on legal uniformity.<sup>14</sup> Hutchinson compares the idea of a nation to that of family: as a quasi-natural institution that comprises individuals connected through creative systems articulated by origins of myths, culture, history and landscape, rather than the construction of 'rational self-interest'.<sup>15</sup>

Supporting this treatise is Smith's working definition of national identity as:

The continuous reproduction and reinterpretation of the pattern of values, symbols, memories, myths and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of nations, and the identifications of individuals with their pattern and heritage and with its cultural elements.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> A nation cannot be simply equated to a state: the notion of state involves self-directed institutions that have legitimate authority over a territory; whereas a nation is a community that shares a homeland and culture. In addition, ethnic communities do not constitute a nation as they lack political structure, historic or current territory or public culture. A nation must occupy a homeland of its own, or continued existence, evolve public culture; require self-determination but not necessarily exist as a sovereign state. Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism* (Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2001).12.

<sup>12</sup> For example, prevailing modernist theorists such as John Breuilly state that the nation is a political structure and that nationalism is only a means to a political end, resulting in a sovereign state, rather than cultural entity. John Hutchinson, "Re-Interpreting Cultural Nationalism," *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 45, No 3, no. Sep 01 (2011).392.

<sup>13</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London ; Penguin, 1991).70.

<sup>14</sup> Hutchinson, "Re-Interpreting Cultural Nationalism."397.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 398.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, *Nationalism*.18.

Hutchinson states that artists are the primary leaders of cultural nationalism, yet both Smith and Hutchinson acknowledge the absence of examination of cultural nationalism by artists within the wider nationalist paradigm. To this end, the research project expands the nationalist paradigm towards a recontextualisation into contemporary works of art.

Chapter One, titled *Currach as Identity: The Gaelicisation of Irish National Identity and its Foundation in Irish Cultural Nationalism through Studio Praxis*, demonstrates that the cultural movements, and in particular the impact of the third revivalist period, Gaelic Revival, from 1890 to 1921, facilitated Irish nationalism in the high phase of nationalism.<sup>17</sup> The Gaelic Revival positioned the West of Ireland as the homeland for an emerging national self, and in turn, accelerated the unity between political nationalism and cultural nationalism against a British hegemony. By using these cultural blueprints, the research establishes the cultural framework to discuss identity.

Chapter Two, titled *Currach as Identity: Framing the West of Ireland as Irish National Identity in the Formative Years, 1922 – 1949 that examines the role of Irish tourism in the creation of a national self*, examines the envisioning of the West of Ireland as the sacred home for a national identity. This notion is analysed through a comparative analysis, which considers how Irish visual artists Sean Keating (1889-1977), Jack Butler Yeats (1851-1957) and Paul Henry (1877-1958), elevated the Western region as the heart of the nation through their respective art practices. This chapter considers the pivotal political role of politician and president of Ireland, Eamon de Valera and the legacy of his cultural direction of the national self as a conservative, rural and Catholic, during the years 1922-1937 in the Irish Free State.

This chapter also reflects on aspects of Irish tourism as the vehicle for the production of the enduring projections of the West as the nucleus of Irish national identity. It is beyond the scope of this exegesis to examine Irish tourism in depth due to its long and multifaceted history.<sup>18</sup> The Irish Tourist Board's images of Ireland provided an

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<sup>17</sup> John Hutchinson's seminal text, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism* articulates in depth the three-revival periods in Ireland from the eighteenth to the twentieth century.

<sup>18</sup> The First issue of The Irish Tourist was in 1894. Barbara O'Connor, "Myths and Mirrors: Tourist Images and National Identity," in *Tourism in Ireland. A Critical Analysis*, ed. Barbara O'Connor and Michael Cronin (Cork University Press, 1993).69.

indigenous self-image that referenced Ireland's golden eras.<sup>19</sup> Signs, symbols and mythologies from the Celtic era were used as codes of cultural uniqueness during the Gaelic movement but these were not realised in Irish visual art history.<sup>20</sup> To this end, Celtic signs are excluded in the exhibition. In addition, the overuse of the Celtic signs by the tourist industry emasculates the deep-rooted, rich and ancient history of Ireland.

Chapter Three, titled *Reflections in Australia: the Irish Roman Catholic Church and Irish Nationalism through studio praxis*, illustrates how the correlation between the Roman Catholic Church and Irish nationalism, as forces for national identity, reflect the Irish diaspora in Australia. The late principal historian on the Irish in Australia, Patrick O'Farrell, observed that the Irish in Australia is an impossible subject, 'too vast, too various, too complex'.<sup>21</sup> As a means of grounding oneself in an exotic land, my research considers elements of Irish national and religious allegories that emulated in Australian historical narratives through a series of works on paper.<sup>22</sup>

Chapter Three divides into two sections. The first, titled *Drawing as Identity: Irish Nationalist Roots and Reverberations in Australia* examines statues of Irish nationalist figures and Irish memorials that are germane to Australia, which are recontextualised into works of art. Irish material cultural history in Australia provides the contextual framework to examine Irish identity through a studio lens.<sup>23</sup> A direct experience of material culture, near and far, imposes a formal set of parameters for the discourse to merge with my visual literacies to establish a sense of cultural belonging.

The second section of Chapter Three, titled *Sculpture as Identity: When Irish Giants Walked Australian Earth: Irish Roman Catholics in Australia*, examines the Irish element in the Australian Roman Catholic Church through sculpture and drawing. While the West of Ireland was the site for a national identity, the Roman Catholic Church was Ireland's spiritual leader at home and abroad. I reference Catholicism as a means of grounding oneself as an ethnic Irish woman whose identity flirts with the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.77.

<sup>20</sup> Brian Fallon, *Irish Art, 1830-1990* (Belfast : Appletree Press, 1994).154.

<sup>21</sup> Patrick O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia* (University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana).1.

<sup>22</sup> Foundational moments in Australia's history, such as the Battle of Vinegar Hill in 1804 and the Eureka Stockade in 1854, attest to the Irish as a distinguishable and considerable force in the development of Australian identity.

<sup>23</sup> The Eureka Stockade Memorial in Ballarat, Victoria, is currently under construction and therefore not included in the project research.

capacity to understand the role of the Irish in Australia. The work titled, *Our Lady of Currach*, embodies this notion in its physical structure and to the impression of the currachs as nuns in their habits. As a physical reminder of the history and legacy of Irish nationalism within Australian culture, the works of art in the exhibition, *Beyond the Pale, Australia* offers in its entirety, form, shape and content an alternative reading in this repositioning of Irish identity.

The exhibition titled, *Not Just Ned: a true history of the Irish in Australia*, the National Museum of Australia, [MNA] Canberra, 2011, in which I participated, contributed to the historic impact of the significant Irish contribution to Australian culture. The sculptural work titled *Inimirceach (Immigrant)*, [Figure 1], formed part of the curatorial aesthetic and presented as a motif of Irish cultural identity. Constructed from wood, acrylic paint and gold leaf, the currach materializes to form as a metaphoric reference to the Free State. The impact of the multiple is realized in the installation of thirty-two currachs that confront the viewer en masse. Placed in this context, the currachs embody through their materiality and scale a neo narrative of trans-nationalism and the ongoing story of *Irishness* in Australia. The work was the subject of a talk by NMA social history curator, Cinnamon Van Reyk, on Irish artists in Australia at the *Shamrock in the Bush*, 2010, symposium and was further discussed at a public program curator's talk, 2011 on Irish stories.<sup>24</sup> As a continuum, I presented an extract of this research at the 18<sup>th</sup> Australasian Irish Studies Conference at the NMA, July 2011.

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<sup>24</sup> The other selected artist is renowned Australian Aboriginal artist, Lorraine Connelly Northie.

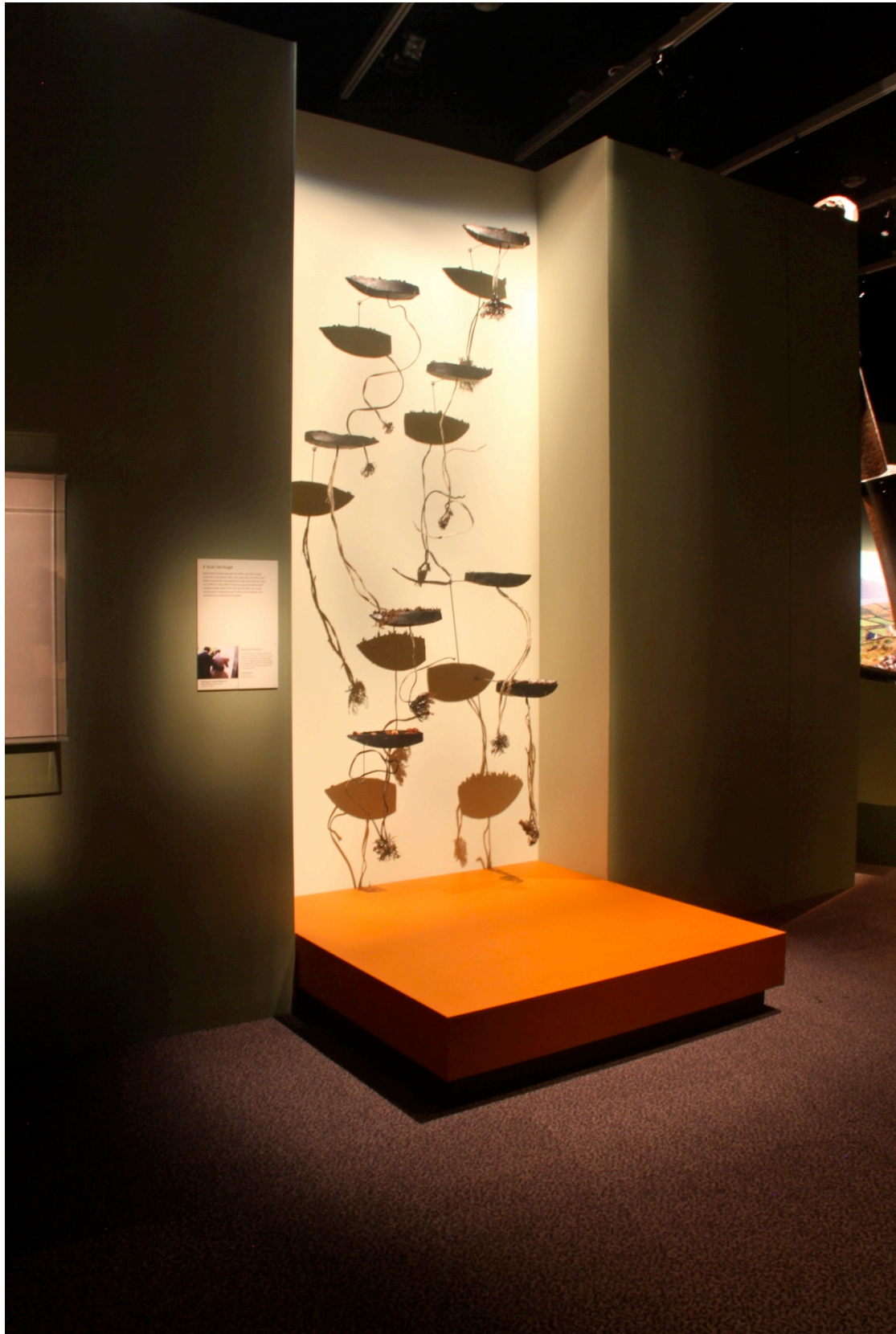


Figure 1. Kiera O'Toole. *Inimirceach (Immigrant)*. 2011. Balsawood, acrylic paint and Australian bushnuts. National Museum of Australia, Canberra.



Chapter Four, titled *Currach as identity: Responding to the West: Contemporary Irish artists*, examines the re-imagining of the West. Dorothy Cross, Caroline McCarthy and Sean Hillen visually and conceptually explore versions of 'Irishness' through the locus of the West of Ireland. As a site of investigation, their work navigates the topography of the West through a variety of media and medium, which explores contemporary Irish identity. To this end, the research shows a spectrum of responses to the issues of identity and the role of the West that are accepted, confronted and rejected in terms of the works materiality and concepts. There is no formal grouping for these artists: rather, they share a commonality through the collective psyche of a national identity that is divided by 'invisible rifts and faultlines'.<sup>25</sup> Irish art critic, Fintan O'Toole, suggests that the Irish have discarded the West of Ireland as a legitimate truth and are pursuing an alternative, by 'trying to find a stable place from which they can glance back and take it all in'.<sup>26</sup>

Chapter Five forms a conclusion to my opening argument that examines the premise of the West of Ireland as a locus of Irish cultural and national identity within a context of practice-led research. My research process follows an historical and theoretical pathway that provides a firm underpinning for the exhibition *Beyond the Pale, Australia*.

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<sup>25</sup> Kim Levin, "Poetics, Politics, and Irish Art: Thirteen Questions," in *Irish Art Now, From the Poetic to the Political*, ed. Irish Museum of Modern Art (Merrell Holberton Publishers Ltd: London, 1999).34.

<sup>26</sup> Fintan O'Toole, "Ireland," in *Irish Art Now, From the Poetic to the Political*, ed. Irish Museum of Modern Art (Merrell Holberton Publishers, London, 1999).24.