

**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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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'.¹ 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.

¹ 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'.² 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

² 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.³ 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.⁴

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 2011.⁵ 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.

³ '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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.⁶

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.⁷ 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

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

⁷ 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.⁸ 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.

⁸ 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.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.¹¹ Discourse on the concept of nation is problematic in terms of diverse opinions within nationalist ideology.¹² 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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'.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

¹¹ 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.

¹² 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.

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

¹⁴ Hutchinson, "Re-Interpreting Cultural Nationalism."397.

¹⁵ Ibid. 398.

¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ The Irish Tourist Board's images of Ireland provided an

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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'.²¹ 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.²²

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.²³ 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

¹⁹ Ibid.77.

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

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

²² 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.

²³ 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.²⁴ As a continuum, I presented an extract of this research at the 18th Australasian Irish Studies Conference at the NMA, July 2011.

²⁴ The other selected artist is renowned Australian Aboriginal artist, Lorraine Connelly Northie.

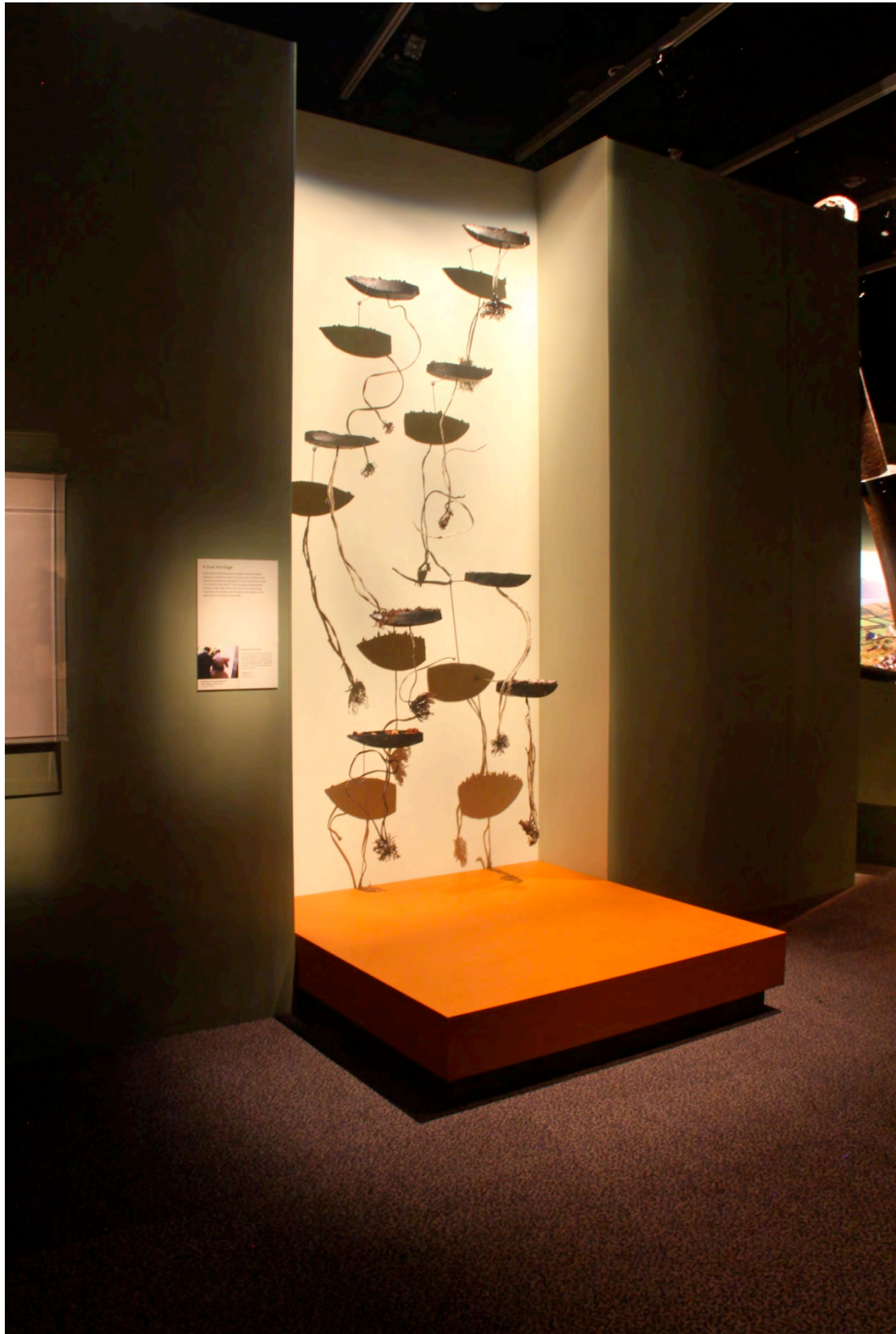


Figure 1. Kiera O'Toole. *Inimirceach (Immigrant)*. 2011. Balsawood, acrylic paint and Australian bushnuts. National Museum of Australia, Canberra.

Chapter Four, titled *Curraich 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'.²⁵ 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'.²⁶

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*.

²⁵ 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.

²⁶ 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.

Chapter One

Currach as Identity: The 'Gaelicisation' of Irish National Identity and its Foundation in Irish Cultural Nationalism through Studio Praxis

When I departed my place of origin, Ireland, I confronted my identity from a multifactorial perspective. I carried notions and images of a national identity that were real and imagined. My departure from Ireland signified leaving a trinity: 'Mother Ireland, Mother Church, and just plain mother'.²⁷ Being an Irish migrant and artist in Australia highlighted the complexities of colonization by default. I experienced Ireland's complex legacy of Irish and British relationships through my research whose trajectory developed twofold: the works of art and their counterpart, the discourse and analysis. Ireland's extensive history as a colony and subsequent realization as an independent nation through cultural and political nationalisms continues to act as an integral and contested force in my national identity. This research project examines and re-imagines my personal and national identity from the perspective of migrant, which has shaped a series of drawings and a sculptural installation.

The presupposition of this treatise cites Irish national identity within an ethno-culturalist nationalist paradigm through the reciprocal relationship between John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith. Both theorists acknowledge nationalism as a modern phenomenon, yet as cultural nationalists they focus on the profound impact of premodern ethnicities as the basis for the nations and nationalisms that ensue.²⁸ This ideology serves as the conceptual framework to discuss Irish national identity through art as cultural currency.

In contrast to modernist, perennial and primordial paradigms of nationalism, ethno-culturalism and, in particular, ethno-symbolism integrates the political, geopolitical and economic components that stresses the subjective components of myths,

²⁷ Brian O'Doherty changed his name to his alter ego, Patrick Ireland as a political protest against the 'Bloody Sunday' killings in Northern Ireland in 1972. Bloody Sunday was the shooting of thirteen unarmed civilians by British soldiers. O'Doherty vowed to keep this alter ego name until British military presence was gone from Northern Ireland. For more information, see *Bloody Sunday: scenes from the Saville Inquiry* / Richard Norton-Taylor, London: Oberon Books, c2005

On the 20th May 2008, Brian O' Doherty reclaimed his name when he 'buried' Patrick Ireland on the grounds of the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin.

²⁸ Nationalist ideology comprises of three common goals: national autonomy, national unity and national identity, which demarcate it from other movements. Smith, *Nationalism*. 9.

memories and symbols.²⁹ The studio-based research emphasises the ethno-culturalist perspective by extracting the currach from the West of Ireland as a cultural symbol for Irish uniqueness and by drawing on Irish statues and memorials in Australia as signs of Irish nationalism as identity.

The works of art in the exhibition, *Beyond the Pale: Australia*, translate the personal and collective myths and memories of the West of Ireland as site for contemporary national identity.³⁰ In doing so, drawing and sculptural works of art provide the platform for my visual literacy and mode of thinking to examine and explore the role of praxis in stirring a collective imagination that contributes to nation building.³¹ Hutchinson suggests that historians teach national destiny, however the authoritative figure of the nation is the artist who encapsulates the collective experience.³² To this end, the studio praxis process of reinterpreting the currach as a vernacular icon from the West ignites queries into the West as a shaper of identity and extends the parameters of Irish national identity to include the Irish diaspora in Australia.³³

My participation in the *Not Just Ned: A true history of the Irish in Australia*, exhibition at the National Museum of Australia, (NMA) Canberra, supports this research. An article in the magazine, *Inside History*, NMA curator, Cinnamon Van Reyk, contextualises my work and states, 'Kiera's life and inspiration for her art is a modern phenomenon – what I call the transnational Irish'.³⁴ The research undertaken in this project validates Van Reyk's claim as it ties national identities across nations but not as a hybrid of identities.

The currach motifs serve, in part, as a cultural and political allegory to discuss ongoing territorial issues in Ireland. The works of art embody through their materiality and context the early characteristics of Irish national identity, territory, religion and Ireland's proximity to Britain. The foundation of Irish emancipation from Britain that

²⁹ Ethno-symbolism as section of ethno-culturalist paradigm stresses the links between elites and the lower strata within cultural boundaries for cultural and political purpose Smith.D. Anthony, *Nationalism* (Blackwell Publishers Inc. USA, 2001). 57.

³⁰ Although historians and nationalist theorists acknowledge the significance of how artists constructed and developed national identities around 1900, art historians have largely neglected it. Michelle Facos and Sharon L. Hirsh, *Art, Culture, and National Identity in Fin-De-Siècle Europe* (Cambridge; New York, N.Y. : Cambridge University Press, 2003).2.

³¹ Smith.D. Anthony, *Nationalism*.162.

³² John Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State* (Allen & Unwin (Australia) Ltd, 1987).15.

³³ Ethno-symbolism compels the cultural engagement of the nation through the unearthing of its vernacular language and vernacular arts.

³⁴ Cassie Mercer, "From Outlaws to Tiaras," *Inside History* 2011. 26.

evolved as the Irish Free State in 1922 and the ensuing Republic of Ireland forms part of the currachs conceptual identity.³⁵

The sculptural work titled *Inimirceach (Immigrant)* responds to the political hangover that split Ireland into two: Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The legacy of this division forces this research to take a tentative approach of publicly considering personal thoughts on Irish national identity. As an artist from the south of Ireland, the number of currach motifs in the exhibition is significant and, after much consideration, the artwork consists of thirty-two currach motifs: twenty-six currachs signify the twenty-six counties in the Republic of Ireland and six currachs signify the six counties in Northern Ireland. Thus, the boat motifs operate as a platform for the continuous debate of the complex issues that surround Northern Ireland and act as cultural containers for personal and national narratives.

My objective is not to resurrect Ireland's golden eras to rejuvenate the edifice of national identity, rather, to discuss the legacy of these interpretations of Irishness that continue to operate as a cultural blueprint in a foreign land.³⁶ The research analysis examines Smith's assertion that nationalism is principally a cultural doctrine within a political ideology through Ireland's third cultural revivalist period from late nineteenth century until early twentieth century.³⁷ Earlier periods of cultural nationalism became the cultural blueprint for the Irish cultural intelligentsia through the Linguistic and Literary movements in the late nineteenth century.³⁸

Nationalist ideology's main goal, in spite of diverse definitions, concerns the welfare of the nation through national autonomy, national unity and national identity, thereby reinterpreting previous ethnic communities. The Gaelic Revival movement in the late nineteenth century epitomizes Smith's account of building upon cultural traditions of peasantry and Catholic lower classes. The inheritance of these reinterpretations of Ireland's cultural heritage, as witnessed through her three revival periods, in

³⁵ National identity is a multifaceted and abstract concept that draws upon a diversity of identifications such as gender, territory and religion. Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1999). 231.

³⁶ Ireland's 'Golden age' posits in the pre-Christian Pagan-Celtic era from 2000BC to 400AD or in the aftermath of St Patrick, when Ireland converted from paganism to Christianity in the fifth century.

³⁷ Hutchinson examines Irish cultural nationalism within a border comparative perspective. He notes that cultural nationalism is a distinctive form of nationalism articulated by secular intellectuals that formed the current political community. Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State*.3.

³⁸ Douglas Hyde (1860 -1949) and Eoin MacNeill (1867-1945) led the Linguistic movement that focused on the pursuit for a national identity rooted in the Gaelic language and posited the West of Ireland as the sacred homeland. The Literary movement known also as the Celtic Twilight movement, focused on creating an "Anglo-Irish nation by a literature in English infused with the legends and idioms" of Irish peasantry in the West of Ireland Ibid.119.

particular, the third period, persists in contemporary Ireland and her national identity. The West of Ireland became the homeland and the 'setting of the national drama' for the collective self and acted as the repository for the nation's historical and cultural memories.³⁹

Although, the West of Ireland was where this ideology was played out, it was in the east where the cultural nationalists elevated the West as Ireland's spiritual home through literature and the arts.⁴⁰ The artistic projections by the writers and playwrights of the Literary movement, William Butler Yeats (1865 – 1939), Lady Augusta Gregory (1852 – 1932) and John Millington Synge (1871 – 1909), enveloped my childhood.⁴¹ My mother and stepfather, as directors and actors in Irish plays, immersed our family in the writings of famous poets such as Yeats and writers such as Sean O'Casey's (1880-1964): *The Plough and the Stars*, 1926 and John Millington Synge's: *The Playboy of the Western World*, 1907. Exposure to these texts and plays, in tandem with formal education and persisting tourist projections of the West, established my perception and visioning of this territory as authentic 'Irishness'.

This research aligns with Smith's and Hutchinson's ethno-culturalist perspective of considering the nation as not just a political entity, but as comprising organic beings, living personalities that draw from the nation's cultural past through vernacular myths, memories, and symbols to restore the 'creative life-principal'.⁴² This 'creative life-principal' finds form through the works of art in the exhibition, *Beyond the Pale: Australia*. The artworks identify and re-imagine the currach as signifier for a national self that is attached to the West of Ireland. Therefore, the artworks provide a space for personal reflection on national identity, while simultaneously offering a platform for discussion on current Irish national identity, which includes the Irish diaspora.

The next chapter, Chapter Two, examines the role of the West of Ireland as a space

³⁹ The Western or 'civic' model of a nation is predominantly a territorial one. Smith, *National Identity*.65.

⁴⁰ In the late nineteenth century, cultural nationalists such as George Petrie (1790 – 1866) who was an artist, antiquarian and topographical surveyor, constructed an emerging Irish national identity via scientific cultural evidence based upon Ireland's pre-conquest era. The objectives of the cultural intelligentsia were to mobilise the nation through the rediscovery of vernacular historical culture. Their attempts were social and political rather than academic. Ibid.66.

⁴¹ Irish writers and playwrights found inspiration in Irish mythology and storytelling by means of written and spoken language located in the West of Ireland. Jeanne Sheehy, *The Rediscovery of Ireland's Past: The Celtic Revival, 1830 - 1930* (London : Thames and Hudson, 1980).95.

⁴² John Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultral Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State* (Allen & Unwin (Australia) Ltd, 1987). 13.

where political and cultural nationalists played out their agendas during the emerging years of the Irish Free State from 1922 – 1949. This chapter focuses on Irish artists, Paul Henry (1877-1958), Sean Keating (1889-1977) and Jack Butler Yeats (1851-1957) whose works epitomize how the West of Ireland was visually constructed, directly or indirectly, towards the national self.

Chapter Two

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.

Nationalism triumphed: independence came: the British went – and culture nearly went with them.⁴³

Irish art historian Sighle Bhreathnach-Lynch suggests that 'the imaginative possession and the characterization of the land are deeply implicated in the...formation of a national identity'.⁴⁴ This research project critically engages the (re)positioning of the pictorial tradition of the West of Ireland as the sacred home for a national self. I will analyse the works of Irish artists, Paul Henry (1877-1958), Sean Keating (1889-1977) and Jack Butler Yeats, who readily or reluctantly, constructed the West as a symbolic image of the national character. This distinctive and contested territory acts as a catalyst to explore my concerns that relate to national identity through a visual dialogue. The inherited images of the west signify the 'memory of an old world artificially constructed in the present'.⁴⁵ My art praxis and visual imagery recontextualise the legacy of the West through an aesthetic dialogue coded in natural materials, which act as a metaphor for cultural and national identity.

The works of art in the exhibition, *Beyond the Pale: Australia*, seek a self-reflexive response to nationalism and identity from a position of displacement where familiar Western landscapes act as a referent. Irish art historian Sighle Bhreathnach-Lynch observes that nationhood requires 'a distinctive imagining of a particular sort of community rooted in a particular location'.⁴⁶ Aesthetic representations of the Western Irish landscape are rendered through layers of meaning: a thatched cottage, ass and cart, a wild Atlantic Ocean and currachs, all of which became codes for Irishness.⁴⁷

In the sculptural work titled, *Inimirceach (Immigrant)*, [Figure 2], Australian native bushnuts embed the interior space of the currach. It is my intention to subvert the

⁴³ Timothy Patrick Coogan, *Ireland since the Rising* (London : Pall Mall Press, 1966). 177.

⁴⁴ Sighle Bhreathnach-Lynch, "Painting the West: The Role of Landscape in Irish Identity," in *Eíre/Land*, ed. Vera Kreilkamp (Boston, Mass. : McMullen Museum of Art, 2003).99.

⁴⁵ McGonagle, O'Toole, and Levin, *Irish Art Now, from the Poetic to the Political*. 25.

⁴⁶ Bhreathnach-Lynch, "Painting the West: The Role of Landscape in Irish Identity."100.

⁴⁷ Catherine Nash, "'Embodying the Nation' - the West of Ireland Landscape and Irish Identity," in *Tourism in Ireland. A Critical Analysis*, ed. Barbara O'Connor and Michael Cronin (Cork University Press, 1993).88.

initial readings of gumnuts, such as May Gibbs's *Gumnut Babies*, by adding layers of flat black acrylic paint over the surface of the native materials. In doing so, the artwork disrupts the reading of the meaning of the materiality and suggests a sense of dislocation to the viewer. The contextual placement of organic native Australian materials when placed in an Irish cultural context act as referents to the Irish landscape in their juxtaposition. The sculpture endorses Bhreathnach-Lynch's notion of nationhood by subverting the unique origins of bushnuts into a generic account of Australian topography. The employment of native natural materials suggests a familiarity with the local landscape; however, the materials were purchased from a garden centre and not through an accumulative process from an expansive and diverse landscape. Thus, the sculpture conceptually extends beyond the physical space of the gallery. In addition, the juxtaposition of the Australian landscape with an element from Irish western terrain activates notions of inherited colonial perspectives.



Figure 2. Kiera O'Toole. *Inimirceach (Immigrant)*. 2011. Balsawood, acrylic paint and Australian bushnuts. 12cm x 20cm.

This research maintains that Ireland's tourism continues to present Irish people with a national image that rests, accurately or erroneously, in the West of Ireland.⁴⁸ Synthetic envisioning of the West of Ireland was inadvertently created in the picturesque era of the 1700s and 1800s.⁴⁹ The construction of the national self in the early twentieth century relied on the demotion of the rest of Ireland, which was corrupted by British colonisation.⁵⁰ As a result, binaries between the East as educated, modern and industrialised and the West as premodern, naïve and passive, articulated the cultural difference from the refined English gardens and countryside.⁵¹ Irish artists facilitated this repositioning of the Western region as the internal primitive 'other'.⁵² Although these sentimental projections are now outmoded, the amount of images produced for tourism cannot be ignored.⁵³ My studio based research recalls imagery that is neither fact nor fiction, but surfaces as a collection of snapshots procured from personal experiences and tourist marketing.

Eamon de Valera's role as the leading politician in Ireland during the twentieth century warrants consideration in relation to his approach to the cultural direction of the national self and the arts.⁵⁴ As a rebuttal to the eight hundred years of cultural corrosion, de Valera created a sense of distinction through the promotion of the Irish language, the unearthing of Gaelic roots and the safeguarding of Irish culture. Ireland's cultural gaze turned inwards, absorbed by its golden eras and was encased in a conservative, rural and Catholic structure. This analysis of Irish identity inherits the bitter legacies of De Valera's *Irish Ireland*.⁵⁵ In the exhibition, *Beyond the Pale: Australia*, three small, enclosed spaces encase the drawing and sculptural installations, forcing the viewer to confront this suggested legacy that, in part, still shapes Irish national identity.

Authentic images of *Irish Ireland* promoted the Gaelicisation of Ireland, and the national characteristics were reassigned as 'ignorant become naïve, neglected

⁴⁸ Ibid.86.

⁴⁹ O'Connor, "Myths and Mirrors: Tourist Images and National Identity." 69.

⁵⁰ Nash, "Embodying the Nation - the West of Ireland Landscape and Irish Identity."87.

⁵¹ O'Connor, "Myths and Mirrors: Tourist Images and National Identity." 70.

⁵² Nash, "'Embodying the Nation' - the West of Ireland Landscape and Irish Identity." 87.

⁵³ Yvonne Scott, "The West as Metaphor," ed. Royal Hibernian Academy (Royal Hibernian Academy, 2005). 14.

⁵⁴ P. Brian Kennedy, *Dreams and Responsibilities : The State and Arts in Independent Ireland* (Dublin, Ireland:Arts Council, 1990). 29.

⁵⁵ *Irish Ireland* was a term for the cultural direction of Ireland in the early twentieth century. For example, in 1932, the publication, *Saorstát Éireann* was The Official Handbook of the Irish Free State that documented Irish cultural life and included illustrations from Irish artists Charles Lamb, Patrick Tuohy and Paul Henry. Official handbook for Irish free state employed Henry's renowned painting *Lakeside Cottages*, 1930, which encapsulated the nation as the authentic image of Ireland.

became unsullied, impoverished became unaffected, the naïve tribe acquired a pure pedigree'.⁵⁶ This account of Irishness illustrates an intensely familiar image of the people from the West but not from the East where I grew up. In the exhibition, the West of Ireland remains a place that is tied to complex narratives that are real and imagined, but the notion of Irish identity that is attached only to the West is recast through the sculpture *Inimirceach (Immigrant)* to include the contemporary Irish diaspora. The notion of diaspora is channeled through union of real Australian native materials that rub up against mnemonic fragments of the currach to represent the West of Ireland.

The beat of a national self-determination as depicted by de Valera's Ireland engendered notions of national identity towards a reconfigured male hierarchy located in the West of Ireland.⁵⁷ The studio-based research rejects the Gaelic masculinity of de Valera's Ireland and restores the feminine as a code for personal identity that manifests through the handmade sculptural work *Our Lady of Currach*. [Figure 3]. Femininity is implied through the sculpture's domestic scale and delicate materials, which seek to destabilize male conventions of boat building. The title of the work, *Our Lady of Currach*, refers to the most feminine entity in the Catholic Church, Our Lady, otherwise known as the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is the Mother of God. Our Lady is venerated through song, art, poetry, prayer and feasts, all of which were entrenched in my upbringing.

Personification of Ireland as female re-occurs throughout twentieth century Irish art and informs my attitude on Irishness.⁵⁸ For example, Maurice MacGonigal's (1900-1979) painting titled *Mother and Child*, 1942, portrays Ireland as a serene mother figure within the Aran Islands, West of Ireland. In Rita Duffy's (1959-) *Mother Ireland*,⁵⁹ 1989, national identity depicts the grotesque, exaggerated female figure of Mother Ireland with her four sons, referring to the four provinces of Ireland indicating a united Ireland. Patrick Graham's (1943-) painting, *My Dark Rosaleen (Ireland as a Young Whore)*, 1984, exemplifies the love/hate relationship Irish artists had with

⁵⁶ Scott, "The West as Metaphor." 12.

⁵⁷ James Christian Steward, *When Time Began to Rant and Rage : Figurative Painting from 20th Century Ireland* (London : Merrell Holberton, 1998). 19.

⁵⁸ Coogan suggests that Ireland's propensity to personify Ireland as female under names such as *Eire, Banba, Fodhla, Cathleen ni Houlihan, Dark Rosaleen*, also alludes to the reason why the Irish are devoted to Mary, in Catholicism. Coogan, *Ireland since the Rising*. 227.

⁵⁹ Yuval-Davies notes peasant societies depended on the earth. This contributed to the intimate connection between collective territory, collective identity and womanhood. Nira Yuval-Davis, "Nationalism, Feminism and Gender Relations," in *Understanding Nationalism*, ed. Montserrat Guibernau and John Hutchinson (Cambridge : Blackwell, 2001). 128.

Ireland. These artistic aesthetic projections inform my outlook on Irish national identity. The materiality and metaphors attached to both the construction and limited palette of black and grey that form the character of the works of art in the exhibition, reinforce this repositioning of the weight of Irish national identity issues of history, territory and religion.



Figure 3. Kiera O'Toole. 2012. Our lady of Currach. Detail. Mixed media. 213 cm x 100 cm.

Art historians, Sighle Bhreathnach-Lynch, Yvonne Scott, S. B. Kennedy and Vera Kreilkamp, amongst others, have extensively acknowledged the notion of the West as the consecrated homeland for national self. Conversely, arguments persist between art historians over the direct role of Irish artists in formulating a national identity. Bhreathnach-Lynch queries in her seminal text *Ireland's Art, Ireland's History*, whether Irish artists endeavored to capture the violent period between 1916 and 1923 and advocates that art historians disregard this political art as academic.⁶⁰ Kennedy claims that Irish art merely coincided with the development of the national consciousness.⁶¹ Whereas Sheehy suggests that the arts were weaker than the Literary movement.⁶² Irish art critic, Brian Fallon, observes that Irish art witnessed a golden age that paralleled the great Literary movement, which was tied to Ireland's independence'.⁶³ This research acknowledges there was not a conscious goal in determining a national self, in the visual arts, however, some artists, such as Sean Keating, (1889-1977), were politically motivated. Regardless of artists' motivations, representations of the West of Ireland became 'not only part of their national identity, but also central to it'.⁶⁴

Irish artist Jack B. Yeats and his brother, the literary genius William Butler Yeats, rendered in verse and in painted works of art this distinctive place, the West of Ireland, which was central in strengthening the idea of a national self that was attached to a specific landscape.⁶⁵ Jack B. Yeats paintings such as *Bachelor's Walk*, 1915, *The Funeral of Harry Boland*, 1922, and the *Man from Aranmore*, 1905, exemplify Yeats's sympathy with political stirrings. The proud and determined figure in Yeats's painting, *The Man from Aranmore*, 1905, illustrates how the natives were portrayed as a noble independent and reliable race that captured Irishness for the whole of the country thereby aiding in the country's sense of national self.

Irish realist painter Sean Keating's politically motivated paintings, such as *Men of South*, (1921) *Men of Aran*, (1925) and later *Economic Pressure*, (1936) particularly captured the dawn of an emerging identity through their structured drama and heroic

⁶⁰ Sighle Bhreathnach - Lynch, *Ireland's Art/Ireland's History, Presenting Ireland, 1845 to Present* (Creighton University Press, 2007).136.

⁶¹ S. B. Kennedy, *Irish Art & Modernism, 1880-1950* (Belfast : Published for the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin by the Institute of Irish Studies at the Queen's University of Belfast, 1991).205.

⁶² Sheehy, *The Rediscovery of Ireland's Past: The Celtic Revival, 1830 - 1930*. 95.

⁶³ Fallon, *Irish Art, 1830-1990*.15.

⁶⁴ Bhreathnach - Lynch, *Ireland's Art/Ireland's History, Presenting Ireland, 1845 to Present*. 83.

⁶⁵ Yeats illustrated John M. Synge's book, titled 'It's a Charmed Life' while touring Connemara in 1905.

narratives. Although Fallon criticizes Keating's freedom fighters as a 'mild costumed...folk realism', the romanticised heroes who are posited in the West provide a national portrayal in the development of the national consciousness.⁶⁶ From a twenty-first century perspective, Keating's protagonists collide with current 'freedom fighters' in Northern Ireland.

My studio-based research locates Irish artist Paul Henry (1877-1958), as the accidental leading figure in positing the West as the source for artistic and political expression. For Henry, this unique place stood as a cultural safeguard against the outside world.⁶⁷ Although Henry was not overtly nationalist, his portrayal suited the temperament of de Valera's sentimental gallicised Ireland. Generic renderings and bold oversimplifications of the Connemara Mountains shaped his pictorial language. Paintings such as *Launching the Currach*, (1910-1911), [Figure 4], *A Connemara Mountain*, (1933-34) [Figure 5] and *The Lobster Fisher*, (1911 – 1913), strengthened the ties between Irish national identity and the land, which formed a 'kind of God's Own Country'.⁶⁸ The artworks in his exhibition are shaped by Henry's 'homespun art' that formed the artistic setting on which archetypal images of the West of Ireland as Irishness lingered long after the fact.⁶⁹

Debates persist amongst art historians, Bhreathnach-Lynch, Scott, Kennedy and Kreilkamp, as to the role of Irish artists intentionally creating a national identity through their work. Whatever the artists' motivations, the outcome remains the same, Irish artists, generally, promoted the West of Ireland as the core of Irish identity. These projections of the West of Ireland are now dated; however, they form the visual backdrop to contemporary Ireland's tourist market that continually projects the West of Ireland as wild, rural and mythical. This chapter has argued that these versions of 'Irishness', both old and new, continue to inform national identity, at home and abroad.

The next chapter, Chapter Three, titled *Reflections in Australia: the Irish Roman Catholic Church and Irish Nationalism through studio praxis*, examines the cultural vestiges of Irish material culture in Australia to develop a sense of cultural belonging. The chapter divides into two parts. The first section, titled *Sculpture as identity: When*

⁶⁶Fallon, *Irish Art, 1830-1990*. 112

⁶⁷ Scott, "The West as Metaphor."13.

⁶⁸ Fallon, *Irish Art, 1830-1990*.98.

⁶⁹ Ibid.112.

Irish Giants Walked Australian Earth: Irish Roman Catholics in Australia, investigates Irish nationalist reverberations in Australia, through iconic Irish statues and memorials such as the Irish nationalist, Michael Dwyer's grave in Waverley Cemetery, Sydney, the statue of Irish politician, Daniel O'Connell and the Irish Famine Memorial in Sydney. The second section, titled *Drawing as Identity: Irish Nationalist Roots and Reverberations in Australia*, examines the Irish element of the Catholic Church's authority, particularly Cardinal Francis Moran and the republican, Archbishop Mannix, over the Irish Australian community. I will illustrate through my works of art how the temporal aspects of history and place are re-determined through a material and process driven praxis where mark making and non-archival materials deliver a sense of cultural-self in this place, Australia.



Figure 4. Paul Henry. *Launching the Currach*, 1910-1911. Oil on Canvas. 41 x 60 cm



Figure 5. *Paul Henry. A Connemara Mountain. 1933-34. Oil on Canvas.*

Chapter Three

Reflections in Australia: The Irish Roman Catholic Church and Irish Nationalism through studio practice.

Part One:

Sculpture as Identity: When Irish Giants Walked Australian Earth: Irish Roman Catholics in Australia.

the long shadow cast by their Irish style and outlook....young men, both critics and opponents, enthralled by these dramatic Irish patriarchs into the 1960s, and by the mythologies they left in their wake, still think and contend the mind-frame of that clerical past, when Irish giants walked Australian earth.⁷⁰

Beyond the broad subject matter of national identity, this research explores a cultural attachment in Australia. One vital element of this research articulated through studio practice, is the presence of the Irish Roman Catholic Church in my personal life and its role in an Australian cultural context.⁷¹ The geographic shift from Ireland to Australia prompted a gravitational pull towards the Catholic Church as an important cultural identifier. My research finds new meaning of being Catholic and Irish through investigating my lapsed Catholicism within this landscape. The process of making the sculptural work, *Our Lady of Currach* [Figure 6], created a moment for reflection on an Ireland that once had a Catholic heartbeat and this intensity of religious conviction is mirrored in Irish Australian narratives. The currach motifs in my work are concurrently re-imagined as an outward manifestation of Irishness in the Australian Catholic Church and as a reappraisal of an enduring cultural signifier of a nostalgic Ireland.

Informing my identity in Australia is the inherited religious histories attached to the Irish aspect of the church. The strong religious beliefs of the Irish Catholic migrants in the nineteenth century continue to function as a cultural umbrella for national identity in the present day. This research empathizes with the Catholic subdivision, as they were also 'unable to fully identify with significant parts of the host culture' which was

⁷⁰ O'Farrell, *The Catholic Church and Community: An Australian History*.452.

⁷¹ Smith notes that religion defined Ireland rather than by state. Smith, *Nationalism*.100.

predominantly Protestant.⁷² The role of church in Irish identity has diminished recently but the legacy of the church in Ireland lies in the underbelly of ongoing political debates such as the current abortion issue.

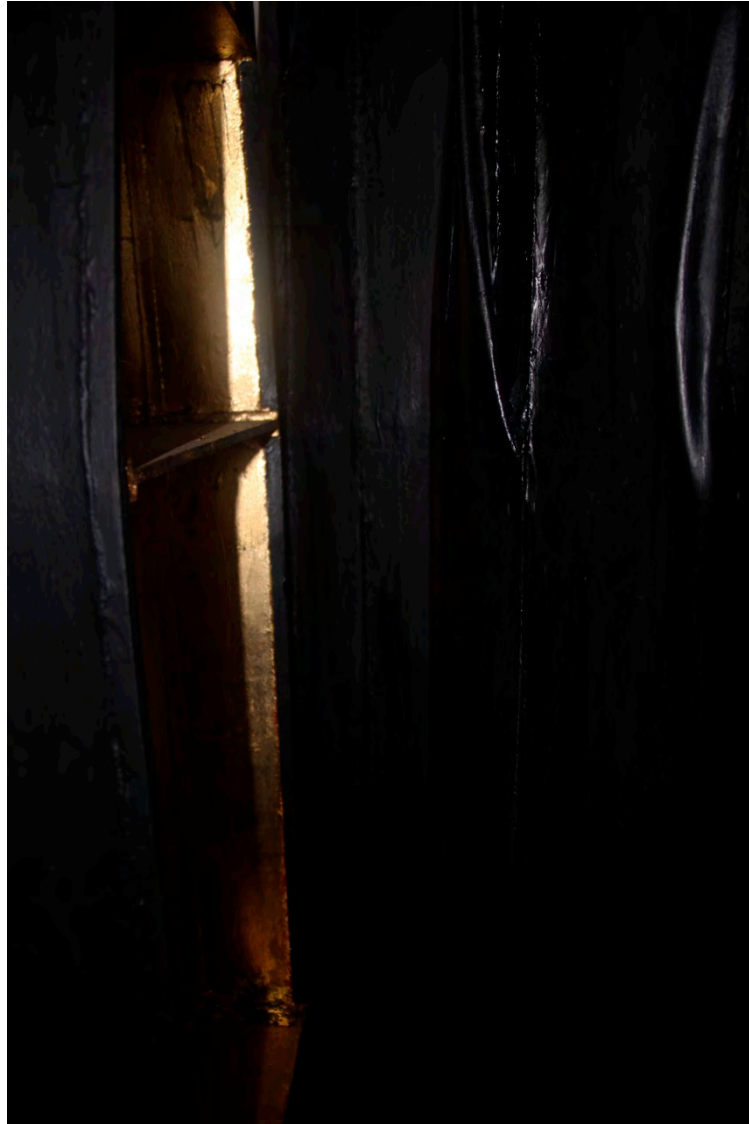


Figure 6. Kiera O'Toole. 2012. Our lady of Currach. Mixed media. 213 cm x 100 cm.

To create a sense of belonging, I visited religious statues and memorials that are intimately connected with Ireland. The research revealed two principal Irish Catholic protagonists in Australian history: Cardinal Francis Moran (1830 – 1911) [Figure 7], in Sydney and Archbishop Daniel Mannix (1964-1963), [Figure 8], in Melbourne.⁷³ While

⁷² Colm Kiernan, *Ireland and Australia, 1788-1988* (North Ryde, N.S.W Angus & Robertson, 1984).10

⁷³ Cardinal Moran was Australia's first Cardinal. He is renowned for establishing St Patrick's college in Manly, Sydney in 1885, which opened in 1889. Moran supported a national seminary for all Australians, however the majority was Irish. Daniel Mannix was Archbishop of Melbourne from 1917 to 1963. He was renowned for establishing state funding for Catholic schools that eventually became law in 1964.

standing in front of the statues of these powerful figures, I felt a surreal sense of cultural refuge. Although Mannix and Moran were unfamiliar names to me, their religious fervency and Irishness profoundly resonated when viewed within a space of cultural difference. As an Irish migrant in Australia, the inheritance of the church's monopoly over religious and national identity still lingers, albeit through a more sceptical perspective in the twenty-first century. The monumentality of the statues, their positioning on a plinth and their traditional sculptural material of stone and bronze is at odds with the fragility of materials and the accessibility of the sculpture, *Our Lady of Currach*. The work demotes the God-like statues to a human level, thus reduces the church's moral authority in personal and national identity.



Figure 7. Kiera O'Toole. 2011. Statute of Cardinal Francis Moran. St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, Australia.

The studio work employs architectural strategies to frame the 'special position' of the Catholic Church in personal and national identity.⁷⁴ The 'special position' mirrors the central positioning of *Our Lady of Currach* in one of three confined 'rooms' that forms the epicentre of the exhibition. Viewers are encouraged to enter the gallery space from the rear in the vein of entering a church. The three darkened rooms are

⁷⁴ Eamon deValera's 1937 Constitution held a 'special position' for the Catholic Church until it was removed in 1973. However, the current Irish constitution still retains Catholic references: 'Most Holy Trinity, from Whom is all authority..., our Divine Lord, Jesus Christ'.

evocative of the 'Sacrament of Penance', more commonly known as confessional boxes that acted as repositories for my childhood 'cardinal sins'.⁷⁵



Figure 8. Kiera O'Toole. 2010. Statue of Archbishop Daniel Mannix. St Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne, Australia.

Traditionally, the confessional box divides into two departments: one section for the priest and the other for the penitent. My work ruptures Catholic traditions by reconfiguring the confessional box by removing the interior partition and by repositioning the dividing lattice shifts to the facade of the box. Diffused lights penetrate the small mesh openings and slowly reveal the narratives within. A mediated glow of light activates the space, which emphasizes the authoritative position of the Catholic Church. The viewer must cross a fabric threshold to view the

⁷⁵ A 'cardinal sin' is another expression for the term 'Seven deadly Sins'. The cardinal sins refers to the moral teachings by the Catholic Church.

work and in doing so, they become part of the work. The size of the rooms creates a claustrophobic experience that evokes the spiritual repression of the Church. Simultaneously, the confined spaces contrast with the vastness of the Australian terrain on which the exhibition physically sits on.

Our Lady of Currach comprises three currach motifs that symbolise the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Fixed on a church altarpiece, the motionless presence of the triptych of currachs resonates a theatrical thread that directs *our* gaze towards the divine. Positioning the works on their sterns eliminates the boats' functionality, which generates an imagined movement. Inwardly facing each other, the small opening obstructs the viewer's vision both physically and psychologically, alluding to the inward, naive Ireland under de Valera's leadership that remained into my childhood years.

The lining of the interior of the currach motifs with gold leaf vibrates against the dimly lit room and denotes the church's material affluence. Yet upon closer investigation, the fissures and deep incising on the surface of the worn canvas of the body of the currach, symbolically discloses the church's loss of authority in Ireland in recent years. The silhouettes and the layout of the motifs suggest ceremonial and symbolic possibilities. Although no works in the exhibition depict the figure, the absence thereof, the size, proportion and position of the works imply a human presence through the spectator. The artwork declares its presence by virtue of its scale that explicitly relates to the human body and, in turn, levels the church's position to an earthly one. The large-scale black-hulled silhouettes of the currachs are engendered to be evocative of the role of the feminine in their advocacy of representing cloistered nuns.

Part Two:

Drawing as Identity: Irish Nationalist Roots and Reverberations in Australia.

Symbolic images of sanctified individuals and revered nationalists that stirred the Irish psyche in the nineteenth century, continues to incite moral authority in

Australia.⁷⁶ The Irish embraced a nation that was not entirely authentic but the images of a religious and nationalist 'Irishness' generated a sense of belonging.⁷⁷ From a distant time and place, familiar images of religious figures of *Our Lady* and the *Son of God* continue to resonate within my enveloped experience of Catholicism and nationalism.

Reconfiguration of principal figures intimately linked with Irish nationalism or the Irish component of the Roman Catholic Church in Australia manifests as drawing. A tableau of fragmented images of prominent individuals translates through monochromatic drawings, which evoke a sense of drama through their materiality. The three drawings in the exhibition are titled as single entities for analysis purposes, but the overall visual experience results in a visual blurring of histories, time and place to present drawing as a sculptural installation. The overlapping hanging drawings produce a push and pull effect through the surfaces translucent materiality that reveal the lines of expression that hint at the transcendence of time and history. The drawings discard a linear reading of history and religion, in favour of a multi-dimensional perspective of time and place. Employment of charcoal and graphite medium exemplifies my persistent exploration of a traditional drawing process while also rejecting any formal or projected imagery that might describe the work as 'Hallmark' Ireland.

Subjective qualities of mark making and an uncommon, transparent drawing surface establish new visual possibilities that are reinforced in their spatial relationships. Masking tape, a commonly discarded material, replaces conventional drawing surfaces. Masking tape's common function of packing, wrapping and fixing inverts into unpacking, uncovering and unmasking of Irish Australian identity narratives. The masking tape acts as a mnemonic repository for Irishness within Irish and Australian contexts through the residual charcoal that is left behind. Intensive drawing processes allow contemplation of the subject matter and the marks made. The large-scale format of the drawings envelope my being and personal space. The sheer physicality of the works' surfaces conceptually and physically interrogates the viewer. The haunting material presence of the masking tape's semi-transparent surface exposes the marks made. As a device for recall, the surface of the works prompt

⁷⁶ O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*.206.

⁷⁷ Patrick O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia* (Kensington, N.S.W.: New South Wales University Press, 1993).332.

collective memories of the *Holy Ghost* and function as historical parchments.⁷⁸ The drawings declare their divine presence through their scale and are elevated in space to infer the presence of God.

In 2009 I went home to Ireland to document the site of the notorious Battle of Vinegar Hill, [Figure 9]. Upon returning I recorded, through photography and drawing the Australian Battle of Vinegar Hill, [Figure 10]. This translates as charcoal drawings that are indecipherable in their non-representation and act as fragments of cultural memory that are intended to create a sense of refuge in a foreign place.



Figure 9. Kiera O'Toole. 2009. Vinegar Hill, Co Wexford, Ireland.



Figure 10. Kiera O'Toole. 2011. Battle of Vinegar Hill, Castlebrook Lawn Cemetery, Sydney, Australia.

The title of the first drawing, *Who Fears to Speak of '98*, takes on a double meaning by referring to the 1998 Belfast Peace Agreement and to the verse on Michael Dwyer's grave located in the 1798 Memorial in Waverley Cemetery, Sydney, [Figure 11].⁷⁹ The memorial denotes the ruptured passage to the modern Irish nationhood.⁸⁰ Etched into the rear wall of the gravesite are the names of the protagonists of the 1798 Vinegar Hill martyrs, the 1916 Easter Rebellion martyrs and the hunger strikers who died in Northern Ireland in 1981.

A sense of attachment and pride formed when I visited Dwyer's grave, from the familiar imagery of wolfhounds, harps, shamrocks, round towers and an Irish cottage

⁷⁸ The 'Holy Ghost' is the third person in the Holy Trinity within the Catholic Faith.

⁷⁹ Michael Dwyer was a leader of the 1798 Rebellion. Dwyer was also known as the 'Wicklow Chief'. Irish Australian communities from around Australia erected the 1798 Memorial in Waverley Cemetery in 1898.

⁸⁰ Richard Reid and Brendon Kelson, *Sinners, Saints and Settlers: A Journey through Irish Australia* (National Museum of Australia Press, 2010).114.

reminiscent of those found in the West of Ireland. Although these signifiers are attached to Irish nationalism, the sculpture through drawing is not overtly political or didactic; rather they are a space for understanding and exploring Irish histories, and identity. Reverberations of Irish nationalism in Australia were cemented in history when over one thousand United Irish protagonists from the 1798 Vinegar Hill Rebellion in Ireland were deported to New South Wales between 1799 and 1802.⁸¹ Leaders of the rebellion ignited the Australian Battle of Vinegar Hill in 1804 and instilled Australia with an Irish spirit. Australian historian, Lynette Ramsey Silver, concedes that Australia's Battle of Vinegar Hill is virtually forgotten yet the 'love of freedom that motivated the Irish convicts to rebel has lived on, forged into our national ethos.'⁸²

Strengthening a sense of identity in Australia, the second drawing titled *An Gorta Mor agus Anseo (The Great Hunger and Here)* [Figure 12] converges on the Irish Famine Memorial in Hyde Park Barracks, Sydney, [Figure 13], and the Irish statue of Queen Victoria (1819 – 1901) located outside the Queen Victoria Building, Sydney.⁸³ The large-scale drawing forms part of an installation that acts as a personal memorial to commemorate the Irish Famine.

⁸¹ At the closing stages of the eighteenth century, the United Irishmen, inspired by the French Revolution in 1789, fought for an Irish Republic.

⁸² A dispute ensues among historians over the exact location of Australia's Battle of Vinegar Hill. As a result, the memorial lies between the contested locations in Castlebrook Lawn Cemetery, Sydney. Lynette Ramsey Silver, *Australia's Irish Rebellion: The Battle of Vinegar Hill* (The Watermark Press, Sydney, 2002).8.

⁸³ An Iranian Australian artist, Hossein Valamanesh, and English artist, Angela Valamanesh, designed the Irish Famine Memorial. Irish artist, John Hughes, created the statue of Queen Victoria also known as the 'The Famine Queen', in 1907. The statue originally sat outside the Royal Dublin Society until 1947. However, when Leinster house became the Irish parliament of the Irish Free State, Australia received the statue as a cultural gift. The statue of Queen Victoria was re-erected in 1987 and remains outside the Victoria Building, Sydney.



Figure 11. Kiera O'Toole. 2010. The gravesite of Michael Dwyer, Waverley Cemetery, Sydney, Australia.

The drawing reinterprets Irish artist Paul Henry's picturesque renditions of Ireland's Connemara Mountains through layers of willow charcoal, which form an immense looming mass over the image of Queen Victoria who ruled at the time of the Famine.⁸⁴ A process of sfumato allows time and place to merge to create interplay between memory and political history. The imagery presents as ambiguous and suggests the formation of a conceptual landscape that is devoid of any prospect. Although the subject matter in the drawings is representative, the result is abstract, which offers a fractured and restructured reality in their reading. Catherine Nash observes that the Famine is fundamental when considering the Irish diaspora temperament as loss, dislocation and prejudice.⁸⁵ To this end, the artwork pays a personal homage to the Famine and to the mass emigration that fractured the island's history.

⁸⁴ Irish artist Paul Henry is renowned for his recording of the Western landscape of Ireland during the 1920s onwards. In Henry's paintings, the Connemara Mountains often formed the backdrop to whitewashed cottages and turf stacks.

⁸⁵ Nash, "'Embodying the Nation' - the West of Ireland Landscape and Irish Identity." 30.

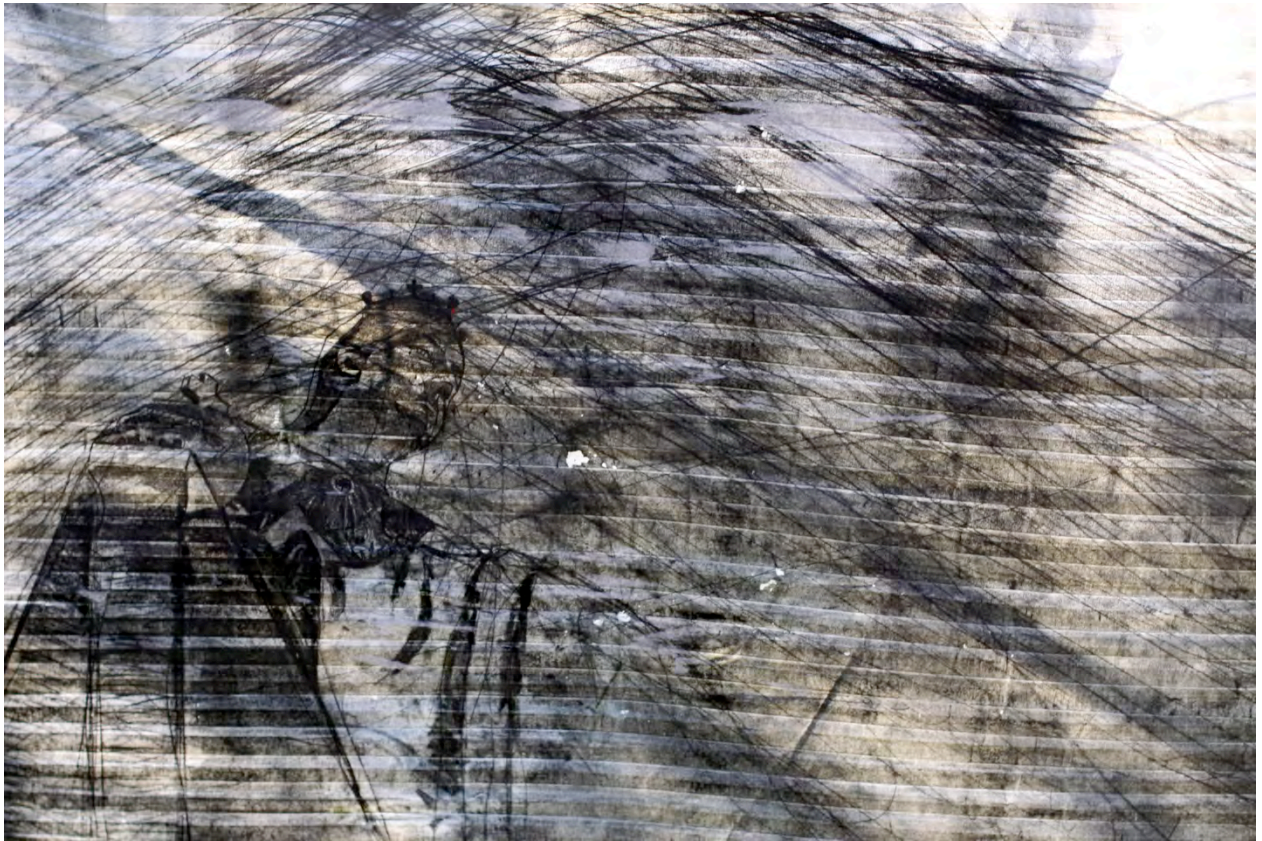


Figure 12. Kiera O'Toole. 2011. *An Gorta Mor agus Anseo* (*The Great Hunger and Here*).



Figure 13. Kiera O'Toole. 2010. Irish Famine Memorial, Hyde Park Barracks, Sydney, Australia.

The Irish Famine as subject matter materialized in contemporary Irish art in the late twentieth century with Irish artists such as Alanna O'Kelly and Kathy Herbert. In O'Kelly's video installation, titled *No Colouring Can Deepen the Darkness of Truth*, 1993, she recounts how the stories of the Famine era were undisclosed as it lived in the Irish psyche as a shameful and bleak era.⁸⁶ Herbert's installation titled, *Absent*, 1996, addresses migration and the resulting sense of loss of culture in the West of Ireland.⁸⁷ The works of art in the exhibition, *Beyond the Pale: Australia*, address similar issues regarding the impact of British colonization on language by rupturing any direct reading of the drawings in situ.

The third drawing, *Irish Sons of the Church*, [Figure 14], stresses the intimate relationship between politics, religion and land in the Irish story. The artwork converges on the trinity of historical protagonists: the Irish clergy (Mannix and Moran) in Australia and the Irish patriot, Daniel O'Connell, [Figure 15].⁸⁸ O'Connell, also known as 'the Liberator' of Catholics in Ireland, embodied the Irish political fight for land and religion.⁸⁹ To underpin the notion of attachment and the centrality of Catholicism in identity, the three religious protagonists form a crucifix within the pictorial frame.⁹⁰ The work of art creates spatial references to religion and politics that co-exist as a subjective synthesis of knowledge building through the work's embodied signifiers. The protagonists rise out of the darkened surface through mediated light from which they radiate and exude a sense of authority within their allocated space.

⁸⁶ Deepwell, *Dialogues: Women Artists from Ireland*.143.

⁸⁷ Kathy Herbert, "Absent," <http://www.kathyherbert.ie>

⁸⁸ The statue of Daniel O'Connell was erected in 1890 in St. Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne. Australia.

⁸⁹ O'Connell linked Irish cultural identity with Roman Catholicism into a single nationalist identity to ensure political success. O'Connell's repeal against the Act of Union of 1800 fought for religious freedom for Catholics in Ireland. Steward, *When Time Began to Rant and Rage : Figurative Painting from 20th Century Ireland*.102.

⁹⁰ National identity possesses four 'sacred properties' including attachment to homeland, with a chosen people and sanctified by saints, heroes, monuments and golden ages. Smith 144.



Figure 14. Kiera O'Toole. *Irish Sons of the Church*, 2011. Charcoal on masking tape. 182cm x 121cm.



Figure 15. Kiera O'Toole. 2010. Statue of Daniel O'Connell, St Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne, Australia.

This chapter discussed the ways in which my artistic syntax explores Irish religious and nationalist narratives in Australia. As a way of mapping oneself into an Irish diasporic homeland, personal encounters with Irish statues and memorials in Australia informed this research and subsequent works of art. In doing so, a sense of displacement was temporarily removed. Against the dominant Protestant religion in Australia, Moran in Sydney and Mannix in Melbourne epitomised Irish religious authority in Australia and underlined Irish nationalism's close relationship with the church. As an Irish immigrant, the works of art in the exhibition articulate the sense of religious displacement in a multi-religious nation and the realisation of the profound influence of the Roman Catholic Church as a source of national identity.

The three large-scale drawings are a nexus of religion and nationalism within an Irish Australian context. Protagonists of Irish nationalism, Daniel O'Connell and Michael Dwyer, in their different ways, demonstrate the intimate links between Irish religious and national narratives that are echoed in Australia. Exploration of the Famine through the Famine Memorial in Sydney and Irish artists, Alanna O'Kelly and Kathy Herbert, illustrate how the notions of the Famine are embedded in the Irish psyche.

The drawings permit an intimate and immediate commemoration of the Famine through gesture, trace, print, and shadow. The reading of the work remains hidden through their positioning within the space and abstract materials which offers the viewer a multiple and ambiguous reading so that multiple reinterpretations are possible.

The next chapter, *Currach as Identity: Responding to the West: Contemporary Irish artists and Irish National Identity*, investigates how contemporary Irish artists confront the 'ass and cart' representations of the West of Ireland. Studio based works of art and discourse strengthens the argument that the employment of the West of Ireland, positively or negatively, remains the site for current interpretations of Irish national identity, which is forever being updated.

Chapter Four

Currach as Identity: Responding to the West: Contemporary Irish artists and Irish National Identity

Every fisherman who carries a currach to sea has the weight of our nation's history on his shoulders - and also its collective grief.⁹¹

Informing my art practice are the strategies and concerns of two informal groups: the Irish Neo-Expressionists and Irish female Surrealists. My art praxis deliberates on the complex relationship with the Neo-Expressionist artists, in particular Brian Maguire (1951-) and Patrick (Paddy) Graham (1943-). The patriarchal attitudes attached to the Neo-Expressionists conflict with my art praxis. However, their expressive and subjective approach and their political and cultural outlook, profoundly inform my attitude to Irishness. My work retains a restricted tonality and non-figurative approach that discards the Neo-Expressionist strategies of expressive colour and figuration. 'Paddy' was my mentor and lecturer during my undergraduate years at Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland, and as such, his perception of Ireland, which he describes as a country that is 'worthy of love and hate in a mixture of affection, contempt and embarrassment', resonates with me.⁹²

During my undergraduate years and after, the art practice of Irish surrealist artists Alice Maher (1956-) and Dorothy Cross (1956-) offered an alternative to the aesthetic dominance of the Neo-Expressionists.⁹³ My work shares common aesthetic threads with their practice through surrealist, abstract strategies, such as symbolism and the creation of mythologies by employing familiar objects to activate unfamiliar realities. To this end, my studio-based research creates poetic experiences through diverse materials to explore interstices between personal and national identities.

The exegesis and exhibition address identity issues of gender, landscape, religion and nationalism that are attached to the West of Ireland.⁹⁴ In this context, my art

⁹¹ Paul Drury, "Every Fisherman Who Carries a Currach to Sea Has the Weight of Our Nation's History on His Shoulders - and Also Its Collective Grief.," *The Daily Mail* (London, England) http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/gi_0199-10464164/Every-fisherman-who-carries-a.html.

⁹² Steward, *When Time Began to Rant and Rage : Figurative Painting from 20th Century Ireland*.22

⁹³ Fintan Cullen, *Sources in Irish Art: A Reader* (Cork Univeristy Press, 2000).150.

⁹⁴ Scott, "The West as Metaphor."16.

praxis interrogates traditional and contemporary aesthetic representations of the Western region. From the late twentieth century onwards, contemporary Irish artists such as Dorothy Cross, Sean Hillen and Caroline McCarthy reappraise, re-imagine and rearticulate the clichéd images of the West as a source of national identity. The archetypal images of the region projected by Yeats, Keating and particularly Henry, hide the privation and trauma of the nation that contributed to a lasting projection of a naive Ireland that characterized the country's sense of self for many generations

Contemporary Irish artists seek to escape the projected images of national identity as being located in the conservative, parochial, rural Ireland that had a claim on the legitimate truth on Irishness.⁹⁵ The inherited homogeneous identity attached to the region became the mode of address, directly or indirectly, for contemporary Irish artists to deliberate their national identity. Irish artists' persistent use of imagery, objects and symbols procured from the West as proxy for identity, enables their arts practice to discuss Irish national identity.

The repetition of the currach motif strengthens my position that the West of Ireland continues to act as the centre of Irish cultural authority, whether real or imagined. My art praxis is comparable to Dorothy Cross's work in terms of employing natural materials with manmade industrial materials to deliberate gender, landscape and politics. Cross's exhibition *Sapiens*, (2007), [Figure 16], procures a rescued defunct and split currach from a familiar Connemara landscape, recalling the territory's fractured history. As a symbol for identity, the currach is persistent in Cross's arts practice as evidenced by her earlier sculptural work *Storm in a Teacup*, (1997), [Figure 17], in which a film is projected into an ornate teacup and saucer that depicts a familiar image of three fishermen in a currach on the wild Atlantic Ocean.⁹⁶ Cross interrogates conventional images and gender roles of the West by placing the currach, fishermen and Atlantic Ocean in a delicate feminine teacup. In my studio-based research, *Our Lady of Currach* also destabilizes traditional gender roles by replacing the male for female: from fishermen to nuns.

⁹⁵ McGonagle, O'Toole, and Levin, *Irish Art Now, from the Poetic to the Political*. 2.

⁹⁶ The film is an extract from Flaherty's film, *Man of Aran*, (1934).



Figure 16. Dorothy Cross. *Sapiens*. 2007 Boat with wood, tar and gannet, 500 x 130 x 70 cm



Figure 17. *Storm in a Teacup*, [Still] 1997, Video. 3 minutes.

The notion of negation of the West as identity is apparent in Cross's video work titled *Endarken*, (2000). In this instance Cross questions the negation of the West as site for cultural identity though a decayed cottage in Connemara, for which she cannot obtain planning permission.⁹⁷ Yvonne Scott observes that Cross's artwork *Endarken*,

⁹⁷ Scott, "The West as Metaphor."25.

conflicts with John Ford's renowned film *The Quiet Man*, (1952),⁹⁸ This corny and sentimental film presents Ford's depiction of Irishness, set in the 1930s in the 'damn fine Catholic place' in the island of *Innisfree*, off the West Coast of Ireland.⁹⁹ Irish artists seek to abandon the projection that propounded the stereotype of twee Irishness and escalated it on an international scale. Although this version of the West is outmoded, artists still deliberate, indirectly or directly, issues of identity that is sited in the West. In the sculpture *Our Lady of Currach*, the conceptual removal of the currach from its original environment and the repositioning of it within new territory, places the currach as an agent for Irishness that counteracts Ford's idyllic depiction of identity.

In Maher's installation, *Cell*, 1991, thorn brambles act as a metaphor for national identity within Irish society. The evolutionary nature of identity finds form through the artist's installation that provides a new context where contemporary artists turn outwards to include wider geographical, political and historical narratives in their work. An inherited aesthetic shapes my perspective on national identity and sense of Irishness but the catalyst for exploring national identity as an art form lies deep within my inherited DNA and my cultural memory. In O'Mahony's mixed media work titled, *Surface*, (2001), she subverts traditional artistic systems through directly engaging with materials directly from the land. In doing so, O'Mahony challenges her sense of estrangement with the Irish landscape.¹⁰⁰ The sculpture, *Inimirceach (Immigrant)* also engages with materials from the land, however the materials were procured from the Australian landscape, thus alluding to my sense of estrangement in Australia.

The artwork *Inimirceach (Immigrant)* is a measurement of the presence of self in the work that is troubled by a sense of loss and absence attached to the experience of migration. The deracinated seaweed roots that have been dried and painted in order that their identity is subverted, attached to the underside of each currach motif, render the object as defunct. This testifies to the measured cultural loss and experience of isolation and up-rootedness as a migrant. The labored construction process of making these works of art permitted time to reflect upon personal memories and experiences of Ireland and being Irish. The inaccurate measurements

⁹⁸ Ibid. 25.

⁹⁹ Scott Murray, "The Quiet Man " The Sydney Morning Herald, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/tv-reviews/the-quiet-man/2008/05/02/1209235130549.html>

¹⁰⁰ Vera Kreilkamp, *Eire/Land* (Boston, Mass. : McMullen Museum of Art. 2003).122.

and materials of the currach motifs are constructed from memory and are not made to scale. My physical dislocation and strained relationship to another territory materialize through the artwork and its place within the gallery as site for identity reinforces a sense of disruption.

Multiple readings of the West as signifier for identity attest to this research project's claim that the legacy of the West persists as a locus for a sense of national identity.¹⁰¹ Irish artist Caroline McCarthy relies on the significance of the West as Irish identity in her video installation *Greetings*, (1996). On two video monitors, McCarthy intermittently juts in and out of an emblematic Irish landscape of soft rolling hills and grey skies. However, the landscape is located in the East and not in the West as implied. McCarthy claims she has no ownership on this fabricated landscape, yet ironically she enacts upon the West as a point of reference to discuss Irish identity issues.¹⁰²

Irish artist Sean Hillen hijacks the tenet of the West as identity for tourism in his series *Irelantis*, (1994-2005). Hillen amalgamates John Hinde's nostalgic postcard imagery with images of a contemporary Ireland.¹⁰³ As a result, Hillen's postcards present a time-warped view of reality: a synthetic world that operates as a 'satire on tourism, nostalgia, and the official ideology of nationalist Ireland'.¹⁰⁴ To contest any attempt of loading sentimentality, the collective title of the drawings in the exhibition, *Greetings from the Irish in Australia*, mockingly refers to the archetypal holiday postcard and the fractured handmade currach motifs contradicts the polished projections of the West by the tourist industry.

Ireland's cultural and spiritual homeland is deeply rooted in the Irish psyche, which is reflected in major exhibitions in Ireland such as the *West as Metaphor* in the Royal Hibernian Academy, (2005), and *New Sites, New Fields*, (2008), in the Leitrim Sculpture Centre. In a wider diasporic context of America, major exhibitions such as *Eire/Land*, (2003), in the McMullen Museum of Art, Boston and Irish artist Brian Kennedy's *Passage*, (2008), in the Ice Box Gallery, Philadelphia, further stress the centrality of terrain in Irish national self. Kennedy also employs the currach as subject

¹⁰¹ Bhreathnach - Lynch, *Ireland's Art/Ireland's History, Presenting Ireland, 1845 to Present*.74

¹⁰² McGonagle, O'Toole, and Levin, *Irish Art Now, from the Poetic to the Political*. 11.

¹⁰³ Renowned photographer and postcard publisher John Hinde, captured a romanticised Ireland that encapsulated de Valera's vision for an *Irish – Ireland* in the 1950s and 1960s.

¹⁰⁴ Fintan O'Toole, "The Book," <http://www.irelantis.com/>.

matter and signifier throughout his work. Strengthening the notion of identity through the diaspora are two major exhibitions in Australia. The first is the bicentennial year exhibition *West of Ireland Artists*. Nine Irish artists, whose art practice is based in the West of Ireland, were invited to participate in the exhibition to visually discuss the significance of Irish national identity. Bill Doyle's photographic series *Currach Folk*, (2007), in the Australian National Maritime Museum, explores the fishermen from the West of Ireland.

This Chapter Four emphasises the continued centrality of the West of Ireland as national identity through the employment of the currach motif as cultural and national signifier. This is evident in the continual examination by contemporary artists through scholarship and major exhibitions within and outside Ireland. Contemporary Irish artists, Maher, Cross, Hillen and McCarthy, interrogate and reinterpret the prevailing sentimental version of the West of Ireland that Yeats, Keating and Henry portrayed and, in doing so, they debunk the notion of the total negation of the West of Ireland as identity.

The West of Ireland continues to act as a visual index that contemporary artists rub up against when considering Irish national identity issues of gender, religion, nationalism and territory. Smith states that a national identity must include an historic territory or homeland that shares common memories, myths and traditions. To this end, the West of Ireland perseveres, at least for now, as the hub for Irishness. National identities are forever being up-dated, forever in search of relevance, and these artists and my studio work, contribute to the ongoing debate on identity discourse within wider paradigms. From a diasporic, artistic and female perspective, the West of Ireland remains as a site for deliberation of Irish national identity, albeit a semi-fictitious one.

Conclusion

Through all the shenanigans – green beer, dyed hair and T-shirts bearing ‘Kiss me I’m Irish’ slogans – a question still lingers in the air: ‘What has it meant to be Irish in Australia?’¹⁰⁵

My research addresses the origins of my national identity, and considers what it means to be an Irish migrant in Australia. The geographical distance from Ireland to Australia permitted a physical and psychological space to explore and analyse this dichotomy through my practice-led research project. This challenge was translated and recontextualised as an embodied experience of being Irish in Australia through the materiality of the art object. Gazing back to ‘Ould Ireland’, I realised through both theoretical and studio discourse that the images and codes for Irishness sited in the West of Ireland still held a central position in visualising Irish national identity. The mythologised imagery of the West of Ireland that produced an entrenched projected sense of national self for many generations, acted as a catalyst for exploring identity through studio praxis. Thus, the research project was a critical reappraisal of ‘Irishness’ from position of migrant, which uncovered new meanings into the West of Ireland as legacy for identity.

In the exhibition *Beyond the Pale: Australia*, the West of Ireland remains active and current through the currach motif and links personal migration with Irish national identity. The white gallery walls, which camouflage the three white rooms, conceal the darkened spaces containing the three sculptural installations: *Our Lady of Currach* and *Inimirceach (Immigrant)*, and *Greetings from the Irish in Australia*. The configuration of the three spaces is cruciform to reiterate the notion of Catholic dominance over Irish identity over a long period.

Beyond the Pale: Australia, examines visually the cultural and political landscape of identity politics that continue to shape mother Ireland. An exploration of the underlying nationalist ideological forces that shaped the course of the national self, revealed a trinity of narratives: religion, territory and nationalism. These intertwining

¹⁰⁵ Richard Reid, *Not Just Ned: The True History of the Irish in Australia* (National Museum of Australia Press, 2011).22.

buttresses of Irishness, deliberate on Irish nationalism as the thrust for an emerging national identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.¹⁰⁶

The crux of considering the concept of nation lies within the ethnic histories where generations of Irish men and women are tied to particular places, where national identities continue to provide people with a measure of a sense of belonging. This notion of nation and national identity served as the theoretical context for understanding oneself as part of the Irish diaspora in Australia.¹⁰⁷ This treatise employed ethno-culturalism and ethno-symbolism ideologies by John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, to discuss Irish national identity through material conversations. This research analysed Smith's definition of national identity through reinterpreting and reimagining the imagery, myths and memories of the West of Ireland as identity. The exegesis and exhibition *Beyond the Pale: Australia*, expands the perimeters of the nationalist paradigm through deliberating on cultural nationalism through an aesthetic and material dialogue.

The inheritance of Eamon de Valera's Roman Catholic homogenous nation and the church's authority over the morality of the arts, established a religious tenet over national identity which still lies, at least in part, as the sounding board to deliberate Irish national identity.¹⁰⁸ To this end, this research considered the third cultural revival period in Ireland: the Gaelic Revival in which the cultural nationalists rejuvenated Ireland's golden eras for political autonomy. Through literature and the arts, the revival drew from Ireland's profound cultural history and located its homeland in the West of Ireland as it offered a lineal link to a pre-conquest Gaelic past.¹⁰⁹ The Irish Free State and subsequent Republic of Ireland constructed a distinctive national character whereby the fledgling nation became a virtuous Gaelic hegemonic race.¹¹⁰ This research interrogated the West of Ireland's dominance over the visualising of Irish national identity and examined the visual legacy as a romantic and sacred 'other,' physically and spiritually detached from the rest of Ireland.

¹⁰⁶ Kreilkamp, *Eire/Land*. 100.

¹⁰⁷ Smith, *Nationalism*. 129.

¹⁰⁸ Brian P Kennedy, *Dreams and Responsibilities: The State and the Arts in Independent Ireland* (Dublin, Ireland: The Arts Council (An Chomhairle Ealaíon) 1990). 32. For further information, Slighe Bhreathnach-Lynch explores the Catholic Church's central role in Irish art during the post independent years of 1922- 45, a period of political and cultural conservatism. Bhreathnach - Lynch, *Ireland's Art/Ireland's History, Presenting Ireland, 1845 to Present*. 103-133.

¹⁰⁹ Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State*. 13.

¹¹⁰ Kreilkamp, *Eire/Land*. 99.

Re-contextualising the mythologised images and iconography of the West of Ireland, the works of art signify Irish national identity through a visual process of art making. My artistic syntax employed ruptures and repetitions to obscure and reveal layers of meaning that serve to accentuate personal experiences of Irishness. The currach functions as a fixed and enduring symbol of a particular territory, which continues to aid the country's sense of self. In turn, the objects in the exhibition become biographical accounts of personal and national identity.

The West of Ireland became the de-centered home for the whole of Ireland, which stood as a cultural safeguard against British hegemony for many generations. Acting as a cultural vortex, the West provided access to Ireland's Gaelic past, where the traces of history and memory are found in the layers of soil.¹¹¹ Articulation of the Irish landscape through visual and literary systems constructed, readily or reluctantly, the Irish disposition in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Irish artists, Keating, Yeats and Henry initiated and imagined a visual code that tied this landscape to identity, which persists in one form or another, into the twenty-first century.

The exegesis considered Irish art historians' examination on whether Irish artists purposefully articulated the West as national self or whether the aesthetic expressions of a national art were the result of political appropriation of paintings by Yeats and Henry, or was it merely timing. However, the research project stressed that regardless of artists' motivations, the West of Ireland was activated as the home for national identity. The research considered the familiar tourist projection of the West as a stereotype that continues to generate a national self-image linked with a particular terrain that transcends across the globe as Irishness.

Underpinning the historical element of this research is the Irish Australian texts by historians such as Richard Reid, Patrick O'Farrell and Colm Kiernan and in part, my participation in the exhibition *Not just Ned: the true history of the Irish in Australia* at the National Museum of Australia.¹¹² Personal experiences of Irish cultural material in Australia, such as Irish sculptures and memorials, provided a scaffold on which to negotiate the Irish diaspora and identity that informed a sense of belonging.

¹¹¹ Scott, "The West as Metaphor." 51.

¹¹² The Irish contributed to Australian identity because it was culturally distinct from the English, Scottish or Welsh. Colm Kiernan, ed. *Ireland and Australia* (North Ryde, NSW,: Angus & Robertson, 1984).

The sculpture *Our Lady of Currach* embodies a personal perspective of what it means to be a Catholic within a contemporary Irish and Australian cultural context. When I arrived in Australia, a multicultural nation, I became conscious of how embedded Catholic ideology and doctrine is in my life, despite being a lapsed Catholic. The re-imaging of the currach acts as a physical reminder of the authority of the church and serves as an invitation to explore the shifting role of the Catholic Church in the Irish psyche near and far. Perceptions of the Catholic Church as interchangeable with being Irish, founded in pre-conquest period, continues to resonate through the sculpture *Our Lady of Currach*. Mediated light engenders the distinctive tonality of the church and operates as a metaphor for an oppressive religion. Integration of politics and religion in Irish national identity found form through drawing that created tension between abstraction and representation. Irish religious statues and memorials in Australia possess a mnemonic quality that attaches meaning to material culture in Australia, thus positioning oneself in a foreign territory. The Irish clergy, in particular Mannix and Moran, exemplified the stronghold of Irish control over the church in Australia and illustrated how the Irish were, and continue to be, culturally distinct from the dominant anglicized Australia.

This research examined contemporary artworks, which engaged and disengaged with Irish identity issues of gender, religion, nationalism and territory. Contemporary Irish artists such as Dorothy Cross, Sean Hillen and Caroline McCarthy examine the enduring iconic landscape to reveal alternative responses and relationships to the notion of Irish identity attached to the West of Ireland. Artists queried the conventional aesthetic systems and gallicised notion of identity that is sited in a landscape where the 'tranquil surface belies hidden scars'.¹¹³ Regardless of contemporary artists' attitudes, artists continue to employ the concept of the West of Ireland as Irishness in the Irish psyche by enacting the Western territory as a buttress for national identity. This attachment to the West of Ireland continues to operate as the centre for cultural identification and incites Irish people through spiritual attachment even from afar.¹¹⁴

Embarking on the studio-based research, the drawings of shamrock motifs were cast aside in repugnance at their sheer obviousness as code for Irishness. However, the

¹¹³ Kim Levin, "Poetics, Politics, and Irish Art: Thirteen Questions," in *Irish Art Now, from the Poetic to the Political*, ed. Declan McGonagle, Fintan O'Toole, and Kim Levin (Merrell Holberton Publishers, London, 1999).29.

¹¹⁴ Smith.D. Anthony, *Nationalism*.23.

emblematic symbol of Ireland repeatedly resurfaced. As part of my research, I trawled through the National Museum of Australia's archives and explored their visual documentation. I found the shamrock motif expanded beyond the tourist imagery to include the motif carved on the outside of St. Mary's Cathedral in Sydney, on the breast of the Queen Victoria statue and on the Bowman Flag, to name just a few. To this end, this research opens new possibilities to explore Irish Australian material culture through symbols of Irish national identity and their meaning within a new context in Irish diasporic homeland. The significance of the Irish influence in Australia in terms of founding a nation, political activism, religious authority and cultural richness ensures the 'evolutionary envisioning' of the Irish narrative in Australia as an enduring field of research.

Within this context, the exegesis and exhibition unveils that the mythologised imagery of the West of Ireland continues to capture the Irish imagination, in one form or another, as the homeland for the national self. Furthermore, the three buttresses of Irishness: religion, territory and nationalism, find new meanings through layers of Australian history, myths, symbols, and traditions. Being an Irish woman in Australia, my sense of belonging is strengthened. However, I shall keep the ball of Irish thread to find my way back home.

Appendix

Source of Figures.

1. Kiera O'Toole. *Inimirceach (Immigrant)*. 2011
2. Kiera O'Toole. *Inimirceach (Immigrant)*. 2011
3. Kiera O'Toole. *Our Lady of Currach*. 2011
4. Paul Henry. *Launching the Currach*. 1910-1911. Colour reproduction from http://www.nationalgallery.ie/en/Exhibitions/Past_Exhibitions/2003/Paul_Henry.aspx. [Accessed 3. 5.2009]
5. Paul Henry. *A Connemara Mountain*. 1933-34
www.nationalgallery.ie/Home/Collection/Irelands_Favourite_Painting/Final_Henry
[Accessed 17. 6. 2009]
6. Kiera O'Toole. *Our Lady of Currach*. 2011
7. Kiera O'Toole. Statue of Cardinal Moran. St. Mary's Cathedral. Sydney. 2011
8. Kiera O'Toole. Statue of Archbishop Mannix. St. Patrick's Cathedral. Melbourne. Australia 2010
9. Kiera O'Toole. Irish Battle of Vinegar Hill. 2009. County Wexford, Ireland
10. Kiera O'Toole. Australian Battle of Vinegar Hill. 2010. Castlebrook Lawn Cemetery, Rouse Hill, Sydney, Australia
11. Kiera O'Toole. Michael Dwyer's Memorial. 2010. Waverley Cemetery, Sydney, Australia
12. Kiera O'Toole. *An Gorta Mor agus Anseo (The Great Hunger and Here)*. 2011
13. Kiera O'Toole. Irish Famine Memorial. 2010. Hyde Park Barracks, Sydney
14. Kiera O'Toole. *Irish Sons of the Church*. 2011
15. Kiera O'Toole, Statue of Daniel O'Connell. St Patrick's Cathedral. Melbourne. Australia. 2010
16. Dorothy Cross. *Sapiens*. 2007 Colour reproduction from:
<http://www.kerlin.ie/exhibitions/Past-Exhibitions/Dorothy-Cross,-Sapiens.aspx>.
[Accessed 10.2.2010]
17. Dorothy Cross. *Storm in a Teacup*. [Still] 1997. Video. 3 minutes. Colour reproduction from http://www.frithstreetgallery.com/shows/view/video_projection_film/
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