

The background is a dramatic landscape painting. The sky is a deep, dark blue, suggesting a storm or twilight. Below the horizon, the land is depicted in various shades of green, from dark forest greens to bright, almost neon greens, with visible brushstrokes. The foreground is dominated by a turbulent sea, rendered in dark blues and greens, with white foam and highlights indicating rough waves. The overall mood is somber and powerful.

# SHAPING IRELAND

**LANDSCAPES IN IRISH ART**

## CROWDED LANDSCAPE

Five minutes into a solitary walk in the lonely landscape of the West of Ireland and you realise that you're no longer as alone as you might have imagined. The empty landscape is crowded with memories and associations, random impressions gathered from years of reading and seeing, patchy learning accumulated from writers' descriptions and artists' observations. And neither is that landscape entirely empty of structure, even if the underlying structure is less than visible. The prospect we take to be 'natural' is the result of labour, policy and design. The line defining the difference between what has been formed by nature and what has been shaped by human endeavour is often at its most interesting where we can register how the one has been modified by the other: when the open sea hits the wall of a pier, when a cairn caps the top of a mountain, when a pathway bridges a stream, when a stone tower house rises out of a stone-walled field pattern. We can't remove the collaged architecture of the Rock of Cashel (castle, cathedral, Cormac's chapel and the round tower) from the hundred-metre eruption of geology on which it stands. The composite prospect forms a mental picture. Architecture reinforces the conditions of the place. Structure measures space.

When I was young, my parents kept the *Shell Guide to Ireland* shoved in the back seat of the family car. It was my introduction to the archaeology of the man-made natural environment. Kate O'Brien's description of the road into Roundstone echoes in the interior reaches of my inherited landscape. When we were students, we learnt to discriminate between elements discovered out in the field of the constructed landscape from Maurice Craig's *Ireland Observed* (1970). We couldn't have begun to think about how to see the shape of things from first principles without Frank

Mitchell's wide-ranging and scholarly *Reading the Irish Landscape* (1986). We wouldn't have been able to feel ourselves invited to interpret the complex overlay of history and geography to be found in the lay of the land without following the closely mapped footsteps set down in Tim Robinson's *Folding Landscapes* (1984-). Useful insights borrowed from generous intellects.

Now I can't step my way across any bit of flower-speckled bogland without remembering the close attentive gaze of Seán McSweeney's paintings. I can't look up on a cloudy day with unfiltered vision; what I see recalls the sweeping scale of Paul Henry's skyscapes. I can't admire the lines of geometry drawn in those same skies by the rural electrification schemes of the 1950s without being reminded of the poles and telegraph wires that cross Nick Miller's paintings. I can't look down at roadside ditches without the interference of Dorothy Cross's bronze *Foxglove*, where the wild flowers combine with her own fingertips. Singular images, imprinted one at a time, multiply in the mind.

The human eye is never naked, there is no innocence in our experience, we are always busy translating, reconstructing the view, recasting what is glimpsed in a moment within the wider dimensions of what has been gathered in a lifetime. The instant impact of what we see makes a lasting impression on our mind's eye. We retrieve these half-forgotten moments from our past to relive them in our present experience and this inward reliving equips us to look out at the world again with fresh eyes.

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Kathy Prendergast, b.1958

*Atlas*, 2019

AA Road Atlas of Europe, ink, 30 × 47 × 1 cm

Courtesy of the Artist and Kerlin Gallery

