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Living Water: Irish Artists and Ecology

Abstract: It is thirty years since the seminal art exhibition, *Clean Irish Sea*, was displayed at Dublin City Gallery in 1988. This was arguably the first major Irish art show to specifically address ecological issues. This paper focuses on key works by two participating artists, Barrie Cooke (1931-2014) and Gwen O'Dowd (born 1957), placing their contribution to the show both in the context of their environmental interests, but also analysing their work in relation to a particular dilemma facing them as visual artists, but relevant also to cultural communicators in general addressing this vital subject, which is the problem of the aestheticisation of contentious situations. This essay is part of the author's research project exploring the response of Irish artists to issues of landscape and environment in modern, postmodern and contemporary art.

Keywords: contemporary art, landscape, environmental issues, Ireland.

Résumé: En 1988 la City Gallery de Dublin accueille *Clean Irish Sea*, la première exposition majeure d'art contemporain irlandais consacrée aux questions environnementales. Le présent article examine les travaux de deux artistes ayant participé à l'exposition, Barrie Cooke (1931-2014) et Gwen O'Dowd (1957-), pour déterminer le contexte dans lequel s'est développé leur intérêt pour l'écologie, et pour analyser leurs œuvres en regard du problème – commun aux artistes peintres et aux acteurs de la culture en général – de l'esthétisation des situations de crise. Cette étude s'inscrit dans un projet de recherche plus large sur la façon dont les artistes irlandais des périodes moderne, postmoderne et contemporaine envisagent les problèmes de paysages et d'environnement.

Mots clés: art contemporain, paysage, problèmes environnementaux, Irlande.

The fish that have disappeared from our lives
return as public art in the concourse¹.

As the history of Irish art over the last century or so demonstrates, there has been a consistent interest in representing the external physical environment, both in panorama and in detail. Interpretations range from topography to fantasy, from realism to idealism, from cartography to naturalism. As an island nation with a

1. Rem Koolhaas, in Rem Koolhaas, Hal Foster, *Junkspace, with Running Room*, London, Notting Hill Editions, 2013, p. 33. Thanks to Professor Christine Casey, Trinity College Dublin, for drawing my attention to this apt quotation.

notoriously damp climate, as might be expected, water features extensively as artists reflect (on) the environmental conditions of sea, lake and river as well as their symbolic, semiotic and philosophical inferences. While a smallish island may be interpreted as a recognisable physical entity given its reasonably defined coastline boundary (notwithstanding political divisions within), the sea represents, on the one hand, the very means of geographic *separation* but paradoxically, on the other, a conduit *connecting* the island to landmasses elsewhere, both metaphorically and literally.

A century or so ago, the representation of landscape, especially including imagery of water (salt or fresh or indeterminately boggy), was fundamental to the characterisation of a distinctive national identity in Ireland, as evidenced by a host of examples by Jack Yeats, Paul Henry, Seán Keating and others seeking to demonstrate a quintessential Irish character through visual expression². While some images were presented as authentic representations of timeless, if understated, integrity, projecting consoling escapism in a destabilising period of conflict and emigration, as for example Paul Henry's comforting image of a cluster of cottages beside a lake, near Mount Errigal, Co. Donegal³, others addressed the consequences of economic decline with unemployment (among local fishermen) and emigration (across the sea), as well as the more positive potential for modernisation through harnessing water at Ardnacrusha as part of the hydroelectric project, as shown for example in Seán Keating's *Night's Candles are Burnt Out* (1928-1929)⁴. Such images however gave little indication of the potential destruction to water resources in the future; rather these were generally presented in art as part of the background, essentially contextual, a means to an end, and largely taken for granted as ubiquitous, plentiful, virtually guaranteed. Any distinction between facility and threat in the representation of sea, lake or river was within a relatively narrow range and less about the water itself than the human narrative played out against that backdrop.

However, in recent decades, concerns for the environment and recognition of the threats posed to it as resource and environment for various species have emerged in Irish visual imagery. There are some examples of apprehension regarding

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2. Numerous paintings during the early decades of the 20th century feature views of the sea, often including locals with currachs, or of the boglands associated with the west of Ireland. For discussions of the relationship between landscape and national identity, see for example Yvonne Scott, *The West as Metaphor*, Dublin, Royal Hibernian Academy, 2005; Yvonne Scott, "Landscape", in *Art and Architecture of Ireland, t. V, Twentieth Century*, Catherine Marshall, Peter Murray (eds.), Dublin – London, Royal Irish Academy – Yale University Press, 2014, p. 257-264. This theme is included in current research for a forthcoming book by Yvonne Scott on agendas in the representation of landscape, space and place in modern and contemporary Irish art.
 3. This image by Paul Henry was selected as the frontispiece for *Saorstát Éireann, Irish Free State Official Handbook*, Dublin, The Talbot Press, 1932. This significant text provides a kind of "state of the nation", comprising various essays on a range of aspects of Irish economic, social and cultural life, ten years after independence.
 4. For an extended discussion, see Éimear O'Connor, "Encouraging Civic Pride: Power, Pageants, Parades and Pavilions, 1926-1939", in *Seán Keating, Art, Politics and Building the Irish Nation*, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2013, p. 156-197.

nuclear fall-out in Patrick Scott's *Devices* series of the 1960s, but these represent his response to international anxiety about the testing of the H-bomb rather than specifically focused on ecological issues. While that series heralded an emerging awareness of actions whose consequences are largely uncontrollable and whose effects extend beyond the intended target, it was another couple of decades before a more directed response to environmental disquiet became evident in Irish visual art. Since the 1980s, however, emerging ecological awareness in Ireland has led to a fundamental shift in focus and interpretation of landscape imagery, which, in turn, has presented something of a dilemma in how such imagery should be presented from an aesthetic perspective. In current practice, some artists confront the global realities of contemporary life uncompromisingly in work that is discomfiting to observe, but others present visually seductive imagery, and the ecological issue is inferred rather than explicit.

A recent example is an exhilarating painting of the sea by Irish artist Gwen O'Dowd, entitled *Tonn I* (fig. 1), the Irish word for "wave". This image by one of the first artists in Ireland to address ecological issues in their work, is especially relevant, not just because it depicts water, but that it is a representative example of the cultural associations of this element; in particular it exemplifies a central, contentious issue in the confrontation of the challenges and dilemmas involved for commentators on art addressing subjects that carry complex political, social, moral and philosophical dimensions, such as the ecological threat to natural resources. This dramatic, sublime image suggests the power of the ocean and, by association, the power of nature – and consequently, it could be argued, conforms to a characterisation of nature as both resilient and untamed. While thrilling, therefore, in its inherent magnificent power and threat, there are those who will argue that such representations infer that sublime nature is also beyond the necessity for protection from the impacts of culture.

Concepts of wild nature versus humanist culture, as separate, even opposing entities, are understood to have their intellectual origins with the Enlightenment, a distinction which is now understood to be responsible for a separation seen as problematic in a world where humanist interests cannot be pursued unchecked without taking account of ultimately self-destructive consequences. As William Cronon has argued, "[t]o the extent that we celebrate wilderness as the measure with which we judge civilization, we reproduce the dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles"⁵. Further, the projection of a landscape as ecologically pure when it is in reality compromised or at least under threat, while advantageous to certain industries such as tourism and food, also carries the danger that there will be limited incentive to amend environmentally destructive behaviours. This dilemma has provoked recent debates across the globe about the projection of nature and the environment through a variety of media, and the extent to which it generates

5. William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature", *Environmental History*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1996, p. 17.

Fig. 1 – Gwen O'Dowd, *Tonn I*, oil on canvas,
120 x 150 cm, 2014-2015, private collection.

either discouragement or optimism – and in particular how such reactions impact on behaviour towards climate issues, such that activity is seen as either pointlessly too late, or vitally necessary before time runs out⁶.

The seductive romanticism of Gwen O'Dowd's painting is enhanced by the poetic use of Irish language, a regular practice in her work, evoking the exoticism and mystery of the less familiar, as well as onomatopoeic qualities and tonal inferences in words and phrases, such as *glór na mara* ("sound of the sea"), *cladach* ("coastline"), *uaimh* ("cave"), *doimhneacht* ("depths"), and *tonn* ("wave"). It might therefore be tempting to deny such imagery on moral, philosophical or theoretical grounds were it not that such a simplistic dismissal takes no account of the fact that O'Dowd was among the first artists in Ireland, along with Barrie Cooke, to confront the issues of environmental threat and destruction. In 1986, Gwen O'Dowd painted *Sellafield* (fig. 2) to contribute to a fundraiser for victims of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster earlier that year. While no particular theme was proposed for the endeavour, O'Dowd opted to produce an image of another nuclear plant closer to home, with the recognisable twin towers associated with that operation⁷. Significant

6. This issue was a key element in the debates at a recent research seminar, entitled "Visual Cultures of Water", at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand, convened by Dr Barbara Garrie and Dr Rosie Ibbotson, Department of Art History and Theory, 28 April 2018.

7. Gwen O'Dowd in conversation with Yvonne Scott, 22 September 2017.

Fig. 2 – Gwen O'Dowd, *Sellafield*, mixed media, 41 x 46 cm, 1986, private collection.

environmental concerns published in the media related to the measurements of emissions from the Sellafield nuclear reprocessing plant in Cumbria, and fears that radioactive waste was being discharged into the Irish sea⁸. There was a popular perception in Ireland at the time that, while the country itself was relatively ecologically pure, it was impacted by the imported effects of industrial activity in Britain – and it is remembered that the concept of an independent Irish national identity relied on the perceived distinction between the sophisticated, secular, urbanism of industrialised Britain, and the innocent, pious ruralism of agricultural Ireland.

Just a couple of years after O'Dowd's contribution to the Chernobyl fundraiser, the concerns over Sellafield led to a seminal exhibition in the context of a visual response among Irish artists to ecological issues: *Clean Irish Sea* (1988) was conceived as part of a campaign led by Greenpeace, and featured *inter alia* the work of Gwen O'Dowd, Barrie Cooke and other Irish artists⁹, as well as those from the other

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8. *Clean Irish Sea*, exhibition catalogue, Dublin, The City Centre, 1988, unpaginated. See also numerous media articles during the 1980s that reveal concerns for such emissions, for example: Dick Grogan, "Government Reinforces Opposition to Sellafield", *The Irish Times*, 26 June 1984, p. 7; Conor O'Clery, "Pollution of Irish Sea To Be Examined", *The Irish Times*, 17 May 1985, p. 7; Michael Finian, "Fight Sea Pollution, State Told", *The Irish Times*, 25 October 1988, p. 5.
 9. The works by other Irish artists included Dermot Seymour, *They'll Be Breathing the Poisoned Wind As Well* (1988), and John Kindness, *Dublin Bay Prawn* (1988), reproduced in *Clean Irish Sea*, exhibition catalogue.

countries bordering the Irish Sea (fig. 3). That sea is described in the exhibition catalogue as a “relatively shallow, landlocked sea of only 6 per cent of the volume of the North Sea”¹⁰ the inference being that in such an environment, radioactive pollution could be quite concentrated, difficult to dilute or disperse, and likely to constitute a significant threat both to the environment, and to the inhabitants of the bordering coastlines. The catalogue included an introduction explaining the motivation for the campaign, listing a relatively high radioactivity, an industrial dump in the sea near Cork, levels of zinc, lead, mercury, cadmium, and radioactive caesium, along with other pollutants, argued as high compared with the Atlantic, the danger from consumption of fish in the region, and the absence of Blue Flag certification of beaches regarding sewage discharges and associated health risks¹¹. Observation of any expanse of water and its representations demonstrates that such conditions may not be visible to the naked eye, particularly when viewed from outside that element.

While O’Dowd, at just thirty years of age at the time, was developing familiarity with the issues, Barrie Cooke, then in his late fifties, had been aware and increasingly concerned for some time. His interests in nature of all kinds had been inculcated since childhood, and his education in the natural sciences at Harvard (before turning to art history, and subsequently to the practice of painting) together with a passion for fishing, and a consequent lifelong preference for habitation beside a river or lake¹², ensured his intimacy with various aspects of the condition of local watercourses. His candid observations of devastating leakages of effluent in rivers, of algal infestation suffocating lakes, and of the spread of the invasive *didymosphenia geminata* in lakes and rivers, all emerged in his work from the 1980s onwards.

Cooke informed himself through exposure, observation, and through a passion for reading; his substantial collection of books¹³ reveals his obsession to understand and appreciate the natural world of flora and fauna, the geological and aquatic environments they inhabited, as well as the ecological challenges posed by anthropocentric activity. Water in its many guises features extensively in Cooke’s paintings; he responded to the concept that flowing water signified its purity and vitality, and it is well known that his dictum, painted on the gable of his house and studio overlooking Lough Arrow in Sligo, was provided in the words of Heraclitus: “everything flows”. Cooke’s intense interest in nature, particularly involving water, his knowledge of relevant sciences, and his ecological concerns, qualified him as an obvious candidate for inclusion in the 1988 show.

10. *Clean Irish Sea*, exhibition catalogue.

11. “Why Greenpeace is Campaigning in the Irish Sea”, *Clean Irish Sea*, exhibition catalogue. The internationally recognised Blue Flag eco-label was introduced first in France in 1985, and in Europe in 1987, in the year before the exhibition.

12. His location at the time of the show in 1988 is identified as Thomastown, Kilkenny, which is on the River Nore, while a subsequent and final home and studio in Ireland overlooked Lough Arrow. He explained to the author, in discussion, that since his arrival in Ireland, he always chose to live near a freshwater river or lake (Barrie Cooke in conversation with Yvonne Scott, 17 August 2002).

13. His extensive collection of books is the subject of research by the author.

Fig. 3 – *Green Irish Sea*, exhibition catalogue, page opening.

According to Brian Fallon, then art critic of the *Irish Times*, in his review of the *Clean Irish Sea* exhibition when shown at the City Centre Gallery, Dublin, in 1988, “[t]his Dublin exhibition is well timed not only ecologically, but in the sense that it coincided with the ‘Celtic Vision’ show now at the Bank of Ireland”¹⁴. That the coincidence of cultural representation is given equal prominence with the ecological relevance of the *Clean Irish Sea* show indicates the modest significance assigned to environmental concerns at that time. It seems extraordinary now that a show whose title seems anachronistic for the 1980s is given some kind of parity with one that is about imminent, vital concerns. However, it is to Fallon’s credit that he reviewed the show at all, as *Clean Irish Sea* received a relatively limited response in the media. Such modest interest was perhaps to be expected for such a topic given the legacy of the post-war era identified as the “Great Acceleration” of anthropocentric activity. Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer published research in 2000 proposing the term “Anthropocene” to characterise the current geological epoch, to succeed the Holocene¹⁵, and to recognise the unprecedented impact of human activity on the environment to the extent that it represented a discernible layer in geological structures – a key factor in the naming of the successive eons, eras and epochs. While the Anthropocene was reckoned to begin during the 18th century with the invention of the steam engine, this first stage “ended abruptly around 1945, when the most rapid and pervasive shift in the human-environment relationship began”¹⁶. This second phase, or the “Great Acceleration” referred to “the post-World War II worldwide industrialization, techno-scientific development, nuclear arms race, population explosion and rapid economic growth”¹⁷. This phase is therefore characterised by potentially catastrophic levels and types of activity, but not so much by the kind of recognition that might generate the necessary action to curb it.

Fallon’s review finishes by noting the location of the show at the gallery, on City Quay, almost opposite the Custom House; he observes that “it is a sign of the times that you have to ring a bell to be admitted”, a reference to the gallery’s security challenges that precluded a more open-door, unmanned, policy of access. He continues:

Cleansing [*sic*] up the Irish Sea is no doubt a laudable and even a very necessary task, but what about cleaning up Dublin too? It’s not pleasant when so many venues have to live virtually under siege¹⁸.

14. Brian Fallon, “‘Clean Irish Sea’ Show at City Centre”, *The Irish Times*, 2 December 1988, p. 12.

15. Paul J. Crutzen, Eugene F. Stoermer, “The ‘Anthropocene’”, *Global Change Newsletter*. IGPB, no. 41, May 2000, p. 17.

16. Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, John R. McNeill, “The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?”, *Ambio*, vol. 36, no. 8, December 2007, p. 617.

17. Will Steffen, Jacques Grinevald, Paul J. Crutzen, John R. McNeill, “The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives”, *Philosophical Transactions of The Royal Society*, no. 369, 2011, p. 845.

18. Brian Fallon, “‘Clean Irish Sea’ Show at City Centre”, p. 12.

The critic's comments about the show indicate that he was still somewhat unaware of the mounting ecological crisis; but he was not alone – his perspective seems to have been fairly widespread.

Fallon singles out for praise the work of Barrie Cooke and Gwen O'Dowd, each increasingly recognised in Ireland as major landscape painters of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Their examples in that show were each on a large scale (Cooke's is 165 x 201 cm and O'Dowd's diptych is 192 x 280 cm in all) and between them addressed two key dimensions of ecological concern and how it was signified; the symbolism of colour in Cooke's painting, and the layering between surface and depth in O'Dowd's. Cooke's painting *L'azur, l'azur, l'azur, l'azur, l'azur...* (fig. 4) attracted further comment in Fallon's review: "Barrie Cooke has an impressive work which suggests more the azure of the Mediterranean than the cold and greenish waters of our coasts"¹⁹. This observation however misconstrues the significance of the colour, associating it with literal, local climatic conditions in the era of the package holiday and the typical promotion of sun destinations in Europe at the time, projected in holiday brochures as characterised by relentlessly blue skies, seas and swimming pools, to destinations mainly in southern Europe. In fact, there is little evidence that Cooke intended his image to depict the Irish Sea as such, while the language of the title might have prompted the assumption of a clumsy reference to the *côte d'azur*. In any case, repeating the word "blue", rather than *azur*, might have suggested the somewhat negative psychological connotations of the term, rather than the positive connotations of the colour for him.

More relevant however is that Cooke had in any case always been attuned to environmental science not just through his own direct engagement, but also in his interest in the structures and literature addressed to it. He owned, for example, a copy of the text *Caring for the Earth, A Strategy for Sustainable Living*, published in 1991 by three significant organisations, in partnership: IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature), UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme), and WWF (World Wildlife Fund for Nature)²⁰. Described as a "User's guide to Caring for the Earth", it includes chapters on various kinds of aquatic environment²¹. As the text points out,

Life on Earth depends on water. Our planet is the only one where liquid water is known to exist. Falling as precipitation and flowing through the landscape, it is a unique solvent carrying the nutrients essential for life²².

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Caring for the Earth, A Strategy for Sustainable Living*, David A. Munro, Martin W. Holdgate (eds.), Gland, IUCN – UNEP – WWF, 1991.

21. Part I provides "Principles for Sustainable Living", and Part II outlines "Additional Actions for Sustainable Living" that specify the issues and solutions related to particular types of location, including Chapters 15 and 16, entitled "Fresh Waters" and "Oceans and Coastal Areas" respectively.

22. *Caring for the Earth...*, p. 137.

Fig. 4 – Barrie Cooke, *L'azur, l'azur, l'azur, l'azur...*, oil on canvas, 165 x 201 cm, 1986-1988, private collection; reproduced in *Green Irish Sea*, exhibition catalogue.

Briefly outlining the water cycle, the book relates the distinctions between water flowing through the planet and its vital role embodied within organic nature. To quote:

As it cycles, “blue” water (the water in rivers and other water bodies) becomes “green” water (the water in organisms and the soil), and vice versa. How people use the land and change ecosystems affects the quality, movement and distribution of both “green” and “blue” water. And how people use water affects the quality and quantity of both “blue” and “green” water and hence the integrity of land and aquatic ecosystems²³.

Such designations of water by colour are clearly not literal and optical, but indicative and symbolic of hydrological states, and while the *L’azur* painting predates this particular publication by three years, Cooke’s long-standing engagement with ecological movements, their theories and policies, as well as his education in the natural sciences, ensured his awareness of such concepts. He was also, however, a keen observer, spending hours in and around rivers, in contemplation of all around him combining his passion for fishing with that for nature and representation. His work demonstrates also that he was less interested in superficial mimesis, seeking instead the underlying nature and texture, the complex experience of the environment rather than an illusionistic, idealised, or superficial response.

Among his many books on nature and ecology, Cooke owned a copy of *Wilderness and Plenty* (published in 1970) by then vice-president of The Conservation Foundation, Frank Fraser Darling. Described as “an important contribution to the growing debate on man’s responsibility for his environment”, the essays collectively focus on the contemporaneous impact of that relationship, including the exploitation and conservation of water²⁴. Cooke also owned a copy of *Biology of Freshwater Pollution* (1981) by Christopher F. Mason²⁵, an influential lecturer at the Department of Biology in Essex University, who proposed that while freshwater pollution was mainly caused by chemical agents the effects were primarily biological. This text argues for biological indicators of such pollution rather than chemical tests of water purity. Cooke’s concerns for the ecological environment and biological impact are reflected in his paintings of the watercourses in Ireland that increasingly reflected his dismay at the emerging issues of devastating pollution as a consequence of industrialising agriculture, growing urbanisation, and the drainage requirements of burgeoning housing estates.

Decades earlier, in 1954, the relative purity of the Irish environment had attracted the young Barrie Cooke to live there rather than in Britain, where he was born, or the US where he had lived and received much of his education. But subsequently, the increasing evidence of environmental depletion in Ireland led

23. *Caring for the Earth...*, p. 137.

24. Frank Fraser Darling, *Wilderness and Plenty*, London, British Broadcasting Corporation, 1970. This publication comprised the series of six BBC Reith Lectures delivered and broadcast by Darling in 1969.

25. Christopher F. Mason, *Biology of Freshwater Pollution*, London – New York, Longman, 1981.

him to seek alternative unspoiled environments, first in Borneo in the 1970s and then in New Zealand, visiting regularly from the late 1980s, around the time he participated in the *Clean Irish Sea* show. While he had been aware of environmental factors for quite some time, the show seems to have occurred during a turning point for him, in the accumulated recognition of all he had observed. His painting was reproduced in colour in the catalogue, adjacent to his own accompanying text (fig. 4) that charts his growing dismay, over a period of twenty-five years, at the expanding destruction of local aquatic systems, concluding with his devastated observation:

And now, unthinkable, the Sea, the Sea... The North Sea, the Irish Sea are just bigger lakes. Phosphates, nitrates, chemical waste, radioactive waste, it is all so simple: without living water we die²⁶.

As recent research reveals²⁷, during his many visits to New Zealand, Cooke spent most of his time on the south island, fishing and painting the environment that he encountered there, in particular the freshwater rivers and lakes in the wider landscape terrain. As these demonstrate, the colour blue had a particular significance for the artist who was drawn to the great expanses of the lakes of the Mackenzie country, including Lakes Tekapo, Pukaki, and Ohau, applying the intense colour he so much admired as in *Lake Tekapo Painting I* (fig. 5). Unlike the rivers, these subjects tend to be presented as flatter, at times almost abstract, forms, but in a characteristic shade in emulation of the distinctive opaque, blue, glacial water that feeds the lakes²⁸. It also reflects the intensity of the summer sky during the fishing season from around November to February, when he normally organised his travels there.

Other water courses, in particular where they are close to rainforests, and the transpiration associated technically with “green” water, are coloured accordingly, such as the various studies of the Wanganui River or the Ugly River, both on the north western region of the south island of New Zealand. The Ugly River – or at least that part of it visited by Cooke and his friends – was apparently difficult to access due to the encroaching density of forest. It was not unusual that when a particularly fruitful stretch of river was identified, its location would remain a well-kept secret among the fishing enthusiasts who had encountered it. So it was with a relevant section of the Ugly River.

Such blue/green theoretical distinctions are not followed rigidly however; Cooke was an artist and his imagery is rarely literal or slavishly descriptive. Rather, allusions to physical appearance tend to be tangential and selective, with interpretations largely founded in the artist’s deeply-held convictions and concerns for the

26. *Clean Irish Sea*, exhibition catalogue.

27. Research by the author on Barrie Cooke’s artwork in New Zealand is the subject of a funded research project under the title: “Cooke’s Explorations in New Zealand; The Paintings of Irish Artist Barrie Cooke in New Zealand”.

28. Confirmed by the present author’s several visits to New Zealand since 2014 to research the environment of Barrie Cooke’s paintings.

Fig. 5 – Barrie Cooke, *Lake Tekapo Painting I*, oil on canvas, 173 x 173 cm, 1989, private collection.

environment, coupled with his scientific awareness and capacity for observation. He was as interested in knowledge and ideas as he was in patient scrutiny as he stood and contemplated for hours, closely observing his surroundings in his well-worn fishing sandals, up to his knees in flowing water. Thus, a painting of the Ugly River such as *Ugly River and Rocks* (2001), suggests something of the relationship of water with the stone and verdure of the rainforest environment there. Cooke was attracted to the material and mobility contrasts of liquid and stone that revealed themselves in New Zealand during the fishing season when water levels were lower than during the spring thaw. Stone and water provided, also, varying symbols of the experience of time: the immediacy and dynamism of live water in the present, at a different pace to the glacial sedimenting of historic ages.

As indicated, the blue of the painting *L'azur*, as well as the repetition of that colour in the title, suggests Cooke's longing for what it promises rather than any literal representation of topography and climatic conditions in either the North Sea or the Mediterranean. It has been proposed that the title of the painting refers to "a quest for a pure, elusive blue, for a landscape of desire"²⁹. This accords to an extent with the reading proposed here, though without recognising how the artist

29. Karen Sweeney, "Slow Dance on the Forest Floor", in *Barrie Cooke*, Dublin, Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2011, p. 15.

interpreted blue in scientific as well as aesthetic terms. The horizontally-flowing tonal variations in *L'azur* indicate a river rather than the flat, still, geometries associated with the New Zealand lakes, that were shortly to appear in his work. The watery green trickles in the upper register of that painting suggest a drenched riparian zone, while the more defined red and brown brushstrokes could refer, as in other of his works, to either stone or the dense wood of the undergrowth.

Over the succeeding decades, Cooke retained his home in Ireland, but spent substantial periods away in locations that provided the unspoiled wilderness he sought, and his work responded accordingly. Over the next couple of decades, many paintings addressed the devastating effects of pollutants and algae on lakes, depicted with dead fish floating on the surface, as in *Lough Arrow Fish* and *Lough Arrow Algae* (both 2002). Both of these are stylised, to the extent that their meaning may be initially obscured, not least by the intense malachite green and blazing pink tones against dark backgrounds. As artworks, these are aesthetically compelling in their glorious abstracted colours. But as the artist has pointed out, terrible things can appear aesthetically pleasing, that beauty as perceived by optics or convention gives little indication of quality or morality. This observation of aesthetic paradox haunts representations of ecocritical imagery.

In his review of the Greenpeace show, Fallon commented positively on Gwen O'Dowd's painting: "The best picture, I thought, was Gwen O'Dowd's large, two-piece canvas 'Underneath the Waves', which has considerable surface beauty even if the form is a little loose"³⁰. Again we see how aesthetic, connoisseurial concerns supersede recognition of the ecocritical thematics of the work. O'Dowd's seminal painting, *Underneath the Waves* (fig. 6), a diptych on a huge scale, is intended to draw attention not just to the surface of the water, but its depths, and what may be contained there.

While described as a landscape painter, a term that has long been expanded to include seascapes³¹, O'Dowd's oeuvre often focuses on a single element, such as the sea, a strategy that embodies two key characteristics. First, the work undermines an anthropocentric reading as there is no horizon line, coastline, or any defining structures, so the viewer is deliberately denied the usual spatial co-ordinates that enable their positioning, and is offered limited clues to either scale or depth of field. The infusion of encaustic with oil paint, adopted here, has often been applied in this artist's work to convey an aqueous environment that has both surface and depth, whose restless agitation and organic (and other) suspensions deny any glass-clear optical access; instead it remains visually ambiguous, at once both intimate and infinite. It is a compelling if somewhat ominous representation; as O'Dowd recently observed, "it is quite a haunting image in some ways"³².

30. Brian Fallon, "'Clean Irish Sea' Show at City Centre", p. 12.

31. Seascapes became a regular feature of 17th-century artworks often now included under the broad heading of "landscape".

32. Gwen O'Dowd in conversation with Yvonne Scott, 22 September 2017.

Fig. 6 – Gwen O’Dowd, *Underneath the Waves*, encaustic on canvas, 192 x 280 cm, 1988, private collection.

Involvement in the show provided the impetus for O’Dowd to continue to develop the theme, and led to a painting entitled *Doimhneacht* (1987) that evolved eventually into a series as well as to other interpretations of the maritime environment³³. Movement is evidently a key dimension in her work, in both the emotional and the physical sense. She is drawn to spend time swimming in the sea, generating both a somatic and visceral appreciation of its qualities and conditions. Her recognition of the sublime power and potential to overwhelm characterises her interpretations, and she seeks to represent the experience of its proximity and physicality. As her work reveals also, O’Dowd is less interested in evoking specific places than in conveying the direct experience of encounters with natural conditions. She has been described as a painter of “abstract landscapes”, a term that may seem contradictory given the tangibility of the physical landscape. Pure abstraction dispenses with the representation of material objects in preference to emotional or spiritual encounters. However, the term becomes more relevant in the light of her evocative rather than descriptive imagery.

In an era of increasing ecological concerns regarding the future of the planet, Gwen O’Dowd’s seascapes are of particular relevance. The twin hazards of climate change and of pollution have been highlighted with ever increasing urgency, though are not recent phenomena. In the year following the *Clean Irish Sea* show, O’Dowd was awarded a residency in Banff and observed at first hand the impact of global warming on the shrinking glaciers, and found expression in her painting of *Ice Fields* (1990). This ancient and glacial river of ice drew her in turn to the Grand Canyon

33. *Ibid.*

in Arizona, whose deep gorge had been carved out over eons by the relentless erosion of the Colorado River, in a manner that brought to mind selected work by Georgia O'Keeffe³⁴. In the west of Ireland, O'Dowd found parallels in the process whereby the ocean relentlessly wore away at the sheer cliffs of North Mayo. Her images evoke plumes of surf soaring above the cliff edge on impact³⁵ as well as the intimate niches of the *Uaimh* series, a local equivalent to the processes that carved out the Grand Canyon. As a keen observer of the natural environment, particularly the sea, she recognises the intensifying ecological concerns. As she explains, she has never been interested in presenting a "pretty landscape" and, however sublimely romantic her imagery may appear to be, she has remained acutely aware of current issues, both political and ecological; such awareness is "always omnipresent"³⁶.

Recent widespread recognition of the devastating infestation of plastics in the oceans combines with established anxieties about toxic leakages into the environment, a context subtly represented in the artist's work which effectively reveals how, while the destruction remains, it is largely indiscernible on the surface. The view of the sea and sky continues to appear unsullied, around Ireland at any rate, whatever about the reality of its components. However significant and potentially irreversible the anthropocentric impact on these environments, they nonetheless embody a physical capacity that may be occasionally harnessed, but remains fundamentally beyond human control, as the spate of cataclysms in recent times has demonstrated. The widespread, disastrous costs at a grassroots level have been effectively communicated³⁷. Contemporary artists are often concerned to confront and reveal the catastrophic destruction of environments and the consequences, often interpreted in a hopelessly dystopian and grotesque aesthetic.

How then do we evaluate the work of artists preferring to project the sublime romanticism of environments under threat, but whose imagery compels rather than dismays? In addressing the primal force of natural phenomena, albeit subjected to hidden degenerative infiltrations with all the unpredictability of their scope, artists like O'Dowd not only confront what may be irrevocably lost, but more urgently, and constructively, bring to our attention what still remains to be conserved.

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34. See Yvonne Scott, "Georgia O'Keeffe's Landscapes: Modern and American", in *Georgia O'Keeffe, Nature and Abstraction*, Richard D. Marshall, Achille Bonito Oliva, Yvonne Scott (eds.), Milano, Skira, 2007, p. 20.

35. Gwen O'Dowd's *On Inis Mor II* (1992) in the collection of the Irish Museum of Modern Art was shown in the exhibition *The West as Metaphor* at the Royal Hibernian Academy, 2005, curated by Yvonne Scott and Royal Hibernian Academy director, Patrick Murphy; exhibition catalogue, Dublin, Royal Hibernian Academy, 2005, p. 96.

36. Gwen O'Dowd in conversation with Yvonne Scott, 22 September 2017.

37. See, for example, Mary Robinson, *Climate Justice: Hope, Resilience, and the Fight for a Sustainable Future*, New York, Bloomsbury, 2018.