A People's sense of belonging: Dislocation in Post Celtic Tiger art.

(Extract)

"What determines validity in contemporary art practice is not whether abstract or figurative art is uppermost, but whether it is capable of intercepting the crucial concerns of the day".
Joan Fowler, 1987[1].

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain: Dislocation, Estrangement and Alienation

The emotional and cultural resonance of the ethnoscape, a site as much as a place, is even more perceptible in a series of video works by Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, who admitted that "this crisis has certainly inscribed the landscape and our relationship to it with another layer of strangeness."[2] She creates depopulated, hybrid imaginary mindscapes, in black and white mostly, which explore man's relation to space, places, sites, and home. The unfolding of the scenes constituting the videos tells us sorrowful stories of departures and exiles. Ailbhe Ní Bhriain pastes together fragments of autograph films and photographs to compose surrealist landscapes, which are accompanied by non-narrative sound-tracks. The videos develop at a slow pace with images imperceptibly drifting and fading out, transmogrifying space.

In Ní Bhriain's works, as in Haughey's *Settlement,* nature is often opposed to man-made environments. The lack of human presence suggests that man's occupancy of the land is but temporary. In *The Suspension Room* (2009) or *Great Good Place* (2011) **(ill.4)**, the scenes combine formerly inhabited spaces and fields or the sea. Due to subtle shifts in these reconstituted landscapes, the boundary between interior spaces (e.g. offices, derelict houses, museum rooms) and the natural landscape is constantly eroding as the windows, opening up onto vast expanses of land or sea, change in shape and size while water gradually invades the rooms. In *The Emigrant* (2010), the clouds and blue sky are reflected in an interior sea covering the concrete ground. In the third part, the strict delineation of space by curtains, window frames, and walls contrasts with the boundlessness and formlessness of the sea. The sound tracks, mixing natural noises, such as the cry of seagulls or the blow of the wind, and artificial noises or shrill technical sounds heighten the dream-like atmosphere in the works while making the construction of a narrative impossible. In *Great Good Place II,* the noise of an electric fan

1 Fowler, Joan, 1987,' Contemporary women artists: Practices and issues into the future' ,Irish women artists: from the eighteenth century to the present day, Ryan-Smolin, Wanda, Elizabeth Mayes and Jenni Rogers (eds),Dublin: The National Gallery of Ireland, The Douglas Hyde Gallery, p 77

2 Unpublished interview with the artist.

nostalgically parodies that of the wind while the noise of a waterfall conjures up images of a natural, primal landscape.

In these works, nature eventually re-conquers space: in *Great Good Place I,* the space occupied by an office is gradually reduced to a thin line that stands out against the seascape and the closing image shows an unpopulated island topped by a lighthouse. However, the black bird which incongruously comes up in the office lies dead in the last image and, in the fourth film, one of the last frames shows a fox lying lifeless nearby a stone wall in a deserted field. Nevertheless, the narrative structure of these films does not dictate an unequivocal interpretation.

Death and absence permeate Ailbhe Ní Bhrian's works as the spectral veiled marble sculptures that populate the museum room in the second video of *Great Good Place* demonstrate **(ill.5)**. Central in many works are the themes of departure and exile. The plastic chairs piled up in the corner of a tent and the debris of a celebration in the third part of *The Emigrant,* as well as the deserted house in *Great Good Place* with personal belongings strewn across the floor, hint at departures. The artist has long been interested in "the actual conditions of exile that have been such a powerful motif in Irish mythology, history and literature."[3] The scenes she composes are metaphorical evocations of an "internal exile," which is endemic to contemporary Ireland:

...more and more it is hard to dismiss [in Irish culture] the sense of internal exile, the sense that Irish people feel less and less at home in Ireland, that Ireland has become somehow unreal. In one way or another, very many Irish people have experienced a sense of the familiar becoming unknown, unrecognizable. Ireland has become so multi-layered, so much a matter of one set of images superimposed on another, that it is hard to tell home from abroad (O'Toole 1997, 89).

Ní Bhriain's technique of overlaying, echoing O'Toole's multi-layeredness, enables the incongruous, or unfamiliar to emerge within a homely familiar landscape. By disrupting the sense of space and the unity of place, the works equally destabilize our sense of belonging and our identity.

As space is disembodied, the body is dislocated. As a matter of fact, space and body are ontologically correlated: many philosophers have underscored the power of place as a source of unity. Within a phenomenologist framework, the body is tightly linked to both place and time: "Just as it is necessarily 'here', the body necessarily exists 'now'" (Merleau-Ponty 162). The disappearance of boundaries, walls and limits in Ní Bhriain's works is therefore unsettling. The acute sense of adriftness oozing out of her fragmented landscapes originates in a disruption of both hereness and timeliness.

[3] Unpublished paper by the artist. Cited with her kind permission.

Equally pervasive in the artist's work is the theme of memory. In several series of videos by the artist, the ordinary linearity of the narrative is replaced by a circular unfolding. On the one hand, the process of over-layering lets dormant images resurface, on the other hand, fragments of space appear in different scenes. Incoherent changes in light equally evoke a disordered chronology. This disrupted temporality reminds one of the conflation of past and present associated to the ruin (Trigg 2009, 99) as well as of the disorderliness of memory.

The latter is symbolized by the ubiquitous presence of water and is keyed to the artist's interest in exile. The sea in *Great Good Places, The Suspension Room,* or *The Emigrant* **(ill.6)** is not merely an invitation for departure, or a symbol of freedom. The water, progressively engulfing the built environment in the three aforementioned works, brings to mind Plato's myth of the Atlantis. The overwhelming presence of water heightens the dissolution of spaces into mindscapes, metamorphosing them into pieces of architecture that "float on the surface of an earth which has lost its materiality" (Virilio and Redhead 12). In Greek mythology already, flowing water symbolized the stream of memory and rivers were the very sources of forgetfulness. In *The Emigrant,* the presence of the fish, roaming the flooded terrestrial space, reminds us of Seamus Heaney's celebrated poem, *The Perch,* in which the fish and water are used to allude to memory. As water invades man-made spaces in Ní Bhriain's videos, the past reemerges, flowing over the boundaries in which consciousness tries to contain it.

The presence of water evokes the unconscious process of recollection and oblivion in the emigrants' minds. Interestingly, in the second part of *The Emigrant*, we view the sea through a window, which could be a boat's stern window but the movement of the water is reversed so that the departure becomes a return. In his preface to *The Lake,* George Moore evoked "the return of a man to his native land, to its people, to memories hidden for years, forgotten, but which rose suddenly out of the darkness, like water out of the earth when a spring is tapped" (Moore ix). Focusing on the migrants' relation to place, Vijay Agnew concludes that "memories are not stable and static but fluid and temporal" (Agnew 10).

The presence of water is also conducive to placelessness and adds to the dream-like nature of the places. The sense of adriftness that percolates in *The Emigrant*, as it suffused Brendan Kennelly's *Islandman: a Poem*[4], is further conveyed by the unidentifiable shapes that mysteriously float in the landscapes, evoking the "stranded consciousness" (Trigg 2006 38) of the exile whose recollections of the past haunt the present. In *The Emigrant,* forests and fields appear in muted shades of grey on white walls, drapes or curtains in the same way as recollections of distant but intimate landscapes are at times projected onto the screen of our memory. The landscape is interiorized, confirming the existence of subjective, remembered landscapes that persist in our minds once we leave a place and that condense

[4] "This dream return. The island is running, running through the sea/ But whether in pursuit or escape/ Is beyond me," Islandman, 29, (1977), 513-528.

our emotions and our affective relation to the outside world (Miéville-Ott and Droz 12). The once inhabited dwellings are transformed into sites bearing traces of former experiences of hereness. They are the ruins of a former life, untimely resurgences that disrupt the course of time. "The individual living in the Diaspora experiences a dynamic tension everyday between living 'here' and remembering 'there', between memories of places of origin and entanglement with places of residence, and between the metaphorical and the physical home" (Agnew 4). Again, the artist's techniques of collage and projection epitomize memorial commingling.

In *Great Good Places* and *The Emigrant*, the hybridized mnemoscapes resemble sites in which the exile's memories of things past are rooted. They become emotional ruins since, "unlike the 'felicitous' space that characterizes Bachelard's domestic enclosure, allowing time and place to coincide as unitary phenomenon, the formal features of the ruin are situated in an ambiguous zone, whereby what remains is defined by what is absent" (Trigg 2009, 295). The disruption of narrative, the discontinuity of time, and the loops in the two video works make past and present overlap while, for the exile, "the foundation of home is disrupted by the opposing fluctuation between the desire of the present and the perishing of the past" (Trigg 2006, 40). Eventually, the sense of displacement collides with a sense of never being present to oneself since there is a dissociation of mind and body. The artist is aware of the complex legacy of displacement in Ireland, and the prevalence of spatial issues in literature and the arts, what she calls "an obsessive concern with the search for roots, for self-definition and for clarity of the vision of the self."[5] The floating, unidentified objects in *Great Good Places* encapsulate the various meanings of dislocation – i.e. adriftness, placelessness, and loss of selfhood. "The further we stray from our home, the greater our disbelief that such a home ever existed. Apparitions, traces, and vague allusions to a past haunt us," Dylan Trigg observes (Trigg 2006, 43). As the forlorn places in *The Emigrant* and *Great Good Places* are flooded, the memory of places, lying deep in the exile's mind, interfere with his re-localized self: "The viewer, in looking at these displaced Irish landscapes, is presented with the relationship between 'being in' and 'being out', a manifestation of the connection between place, image and exile," the artist comments.[6] *The Emigrant* deals with the emotions springing from the separation with the homeland while evidencing the fact that the homeland is not a real geographical place but the spatial expression of origin, an ideal encapsulated in a river, a field, an island, symbolical images strangely appearing in the videos.

Ní Bhriain's mutable, hybrid landscapes illustrate Appadurai's notion of the ethnoscape as an erratic, reinvented and relocalised idiosyncratic landscape. In some works, *Aftermath,* or *Perimeter,* Asian landscapes, Vietnamese or Cambodian landscapes are juxtaposed with imagery of the Irish landscape. *The Suspension Room* shows rural Irish landscapes artificially colored in muted shades and includes

5 Unpublished paper by the artist. Cited with her kind permission.
6 Ibid.

theatre seats so as to suggest a distance between the archetypal constructed images of landscape and people's present lives **(ill.7)**. The composition underscores the constant reinterpretations of the landscape as cultural construct and source of selfhood or identity. The second scene includes a ruined Irish cottage, and, in the forefront, two white telephones, which enables the artist to oppose former isolation to modern communication while hinting at the way new means of communication abolish spatial distance and challenge absence.

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's cinematic assemblages, or arrangements *(agencements)*, to borrow from Deleuze and Guttari (88), that is to say a jumbling together of independent parts likely to produce many different effects and produce different meanings, revisit the ethnoscape. Here, it is literally a floating, displaced, deterritorialized space: an *"esplace"* (Goetz 5-8). The sense of belonging, which was so paramount in Irish culture and politics, is thereby contested. The homeland, which is constitutive of one's identity no longer fosters a reassuring merging with the self but is reduced to an immaterial, subterranean presence. "We do not fully recognise these places and yet respond to them emotionally, intuitively, so that a certain melancholic tension, a sense of something dark, of something strangely other is allowed to swell from the crevices of an internal mind" [7] (Shaffrey, unpaginated). However, the landscape remains familiar because "the past is always with us and it defines our present; it resonates in our voices, hovers over our silences, and explains how we came to be ourselves and to inhabit what we call our 'homes'" (Agnew 3).

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[7] Her works are "fictional, impossible, yet strangely evocative of places we sense we might know of from afar or vaguely recollect from dreams or memory." (Shaffrey unpaginated)