

## Excavating old ideas

Two shows sum up a difficult year

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Aidan Dunne



**Excavations: Hughie O'Donoghue**



Oliver Sears Gallery, Dublin



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It's been a busy year for Hughie O'Donoghue. *One Hundred Years and Four Quarters*, the centrepiece visual arts show at the Galway Arts Festival, and *The Red Earth*, on view at Visual Carlow until the end of January, were overlapping projects on an epic scale. But he's found the energy to make another, related, but distinctive and beautifully judged solo exhibition at Oliver Sears. *Excavations* comprises two series of work, *Shaen's Furnace* and *Cargo*.

The term excavation could be used in relation to practically all of O'Donoghue's work, not alone because of his copious use of archival, documentary material, much of it steeped in personal, family histories, but also because of the way he works the surface of a painting. It is as though he is unearthing and bringing to light not so much an image, as a mood, an atmosphere, densely packed with layers of memory, reflection and speculation. In being specific, he is not trying to limit the possibilities of interpretation; he is in fact opening them up, finding the universal in the particular.

He is also a fine writer and his texts, as in this case, are not so much about the work as part of it. It touches on sources for both series and makes of them a kind of parable. "The crumbling stones of an old building in a lonely field grew fascinating to me only when I learned that they were the remains of a 17th-century furnace." The furnace was built by Sir Arthur Shaen, who was a landowner in Erris, Co Mayo, the home ground of O'Donoghue's mother's family. It's doubtful the elaborate furnace ever served its purpose, which was to smelt iron. This is hardly surprising in such a harsh setting. Turf proved no substitute for charcoal, and ore was, to put it mildly, scarce.

Something about the hopeless ambition of the project engaged O'Donoghue. There is an echo, perhaps, of the youthful bell-caster in Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev*. The boy does not know how to cast a bell (his father never had a chance to teach him) but sets about doing so anyway, knowing that failure means death. As O'Donoghue writes, "alchemical transformation is an enduring metaphor in art, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*." Some of his furnace paintings incorporate photographic documentation of the structure; others are less specific but in them he clearly relishes the opportunities the imagery affords for an incandescent palette. This from a painter who tends towards the earthy and subdued, but has shown before he can work in quite a different register. There is an inviting freedom to the furnace paintings.

After the fire, the deluge. The *Cargo* paintings take another rich metaphorical motif, the ship, indeed the wreck. Since O'Donoghue first encountered the wreck of the *Plassy* on the shore of Inis Oírr as far back as 1962, the vast, rusting hulk has turned up in his work in various guises. A truly monumental treatment, metallic and ghostly, is at the heart of *The Red Earth* in Carlow. The alchemical promise of transmutation founders on the rocks.

For this latest incarnation of the *Plassy*, O'Donoghue cites a surprising reference. A figure is visible on deck in *Cargo*. The artist has in mind Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, with the *Plassy* as the *Demeter*, the ship that carries the vampire and his deadly cargo "out of the past to the new world", as visualised in FW Murnau's film *Nosferatu*. O'Donoghue is perhaps thinking of the current reemergence of old, corrosive ideas and factional interests, with their roots deep in past enmities and beliefs, at odds with and capable of disrupting and unravelling any tentative progressive gains.