

Art in Focus: Hughie O’Donoghue – House Number 8

The mixed media work is part of a collaborative project with poet Simon Armitage

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House Number 8, mixed media on panel, 36x41cm, 2019, by Hughie O’Donoghue

What is it?

House Number 8 is a mixed media work by Hughie O’Donoghue.

How was it done?

It is one of a series of 12 panel paintings made as part of a collaborative project with poet [Simon Armitage](#). The paintings complement Armitage’s translation of Virgil’s *Georgics*. Virgil’s largely didactic work explores myriad aspects of agricultural life, and O’Donoghue sought to convey something of the hard reality of rural life in the west of Ireland, the base of his mother’s family. Looking out his own kitchen window in Co Mayo, he could see the remains of abandoned dwellings. These dwellings, including House Number 8, became his subjects. He decided to make paintings “that would have the aesthetic and premise of notebook pages. They would be documents about real places and people.”

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For the pieces he combined photographic images made from above with a drone. The images were printed on Japanese paper and overlaid on pages of an illustrated book on grasses, with handwritten text relating to the location, taken from the 1911 census of Ireland. Then “the paint essentially pulls things together”.

Where can I see it?

It is on view as part of O’Donoghue’s exhibition, *Time, Tide and the Memory of the House* at The Hunt Museum (The Custom House, Rutland Street, Limerick, until January 26th; [huntmuseum.com](#)). The House works feature three paintings each of four dwellings: Houses Number 7 and 8, plus The Sole House at Groaghaun and the barracks in [Bangor Erris](#).

Besides the 12 House works, the show includes the *Time, Tide* series, which centres on O’Donoghue’s engagement with the wreck of the *Plassey* on Inis Oírr. Originally named *The Juliet*, the ship was built as an armed trawler in 1941 and later owned by the Limerick Steamship Company. It came to grief during a storm in March 1960 and was beached by the high seas on Inis Oírr. All of the crew survived.

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O’Donoghue first saw the wreck on a trip to the island with his father in 1962 and has often revisited it since, as it has weathered and oxidised. In these paintings, made on tough canvas tarpaulin, he reconfigures the vessel as a kind of allegorical ghost ship, emerging from dense blankets of mist and spray.

Is it a typical work by the artist?

It is typical. From early on O’Donoghue, who was born in Manchester to Irish parents, has been fascinated by the passing of time, the working of memory and the lives of individuals as they play out against the imperatives of economics and the forces of history. For him, painting is a form of both archaeology and remembrance. While, as he said, rooted in the facts of “real places and people”, the works in *Time, Tide and the Memory of the House* touch on universal themes of human experience. The ship and the houses are powerful symbolic presences, encompassing ideas of place and belonging and, on the other hand, of journeying into the unknown that are as old as humanity.

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