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Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks: 2001 – Tawnanasool, by Hughie O’Donoghue

Memory is the emotional driver of all O’Donoghue’s work. In this painting he reconnects with childhood holidays in Mayo

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Catherine Marshall



History-laden hills: from Tawnanasool, by Hughie O’Donoghue

Hughie O’Donoghue was born in Manchester in 1953 to a family with close Irish connections. His grandparents on his father’s side had left Co Kerry four decades earlier; his mother had come from north Co Mayo in 1937. She returned to Erris every year, bringing her family for their holidays throughout O’Donoghue’s childhood. Her connection to home never weakened.
 O’Donoghue recounts that when his father suggested giving up his job and heading to Bolivia she refused to go, saying that “it will only be another Manchester”.

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After 20 highly successful years at the heart of English painting, with a residency at the National Gallery in London, scholarships to Italy to absorb the lessons of Titian and Michelangelo, and a teaching position at Goldsmiths, his London University alma mater, the now married artist decided to bring his family to live in Ireland.

He settled first in Kilkenny, then went back to northwest Mayo, to reconnect with his childhood and with the ancestral memory that is locked into the fields and place names from which his mother emigrated.

Memory is the emotional driver of all O'Donoghue's work. The personal – his grandfather's journey to Manchester, or his father's experiences during the

    Memory is the emotional driver of all O'Donoghue's work. The personal – his grandfather's journey to Manchester, or his father's experiences during the second World War – is given universal significance in his paintings by being melded, either through his treatment in scale and pigment or through more explicit content, with epics from world history, such as Christ's Passion or Xenophon's account of the return of 10,000 Greek mercenaries from Persia.

O'Donoghue believes that although memory is not always accurate "it is always true: it tries to represent the truth as it is felt". While the big narratives of international warfare can be checked for accuracy up to a point, O'Donoghue entered different territory when he turned to his mother's past. *Tawnanasool/Field of the Eyes*, first shown in an exhibition called *Naming the Fields*, was modified later that year.

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The titles are important, the overarching one because it reminds us of the significance each field had for those who worked, lived and died in it for hundreds of years, and of the history that the original names contain, threatened now by ribbon development and summer homes.

Tawnanasool sits close to Srahnplaia (Stream of the Plague) and Knocknaloer (Hill of the Lepers), both of which are names of other paintings, and all of which evoke a different atmosphere from the holiday buckets and spades.

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Where O'Donoghue's other work has a distinctive human presence, grounded in photographs and the correspondence that his father sent home from the second World War, this body of work is less figurative, less specific in its reference. It brings the atmosphere of those history-laden hills and bogs mysteriously into view.

In questioning the source of the name *Tawnanasool* we unconsciously validate the other names and are forced to reimagine the leper colonies of medieval Ireland, the epidemics of plague and the presence of watchful eyes, even in the most remote areas. O'Donoghue abandons figuration in these paintings but retains the intensity of colour and scale of gesture that led Aidan Dunne to describe him in this newspaper as "one of the relatively few contemporary artists to convincingly attempt history painting in the grand sense of the term".

He can do that even without the specifics of figurative detail, reaffirming the naked power of brushwork and colour at the same time as he reminds us that modernity won't work without an understanding of the past.

You can read more about this week's artwork in the Royal Irish Academy's Art and Architecture of Ireland; ria.ie



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