

## In the Footsteps of St. Finbarre (Part 99) - Beyond the Country

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Written by Kieran McCarthy

Thursday, 17 January 2008

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To get to the paddock you must walk 100 metres up what looks like a narrow lane. It is bound on my right by a hedgerow and on my left by wire fencing adjacent a field. The trackway is worn down. The different shapes within the mud are human footprints, the front and back wheels of a tractor and horse shoes. The churned up ground hinders movement and even directs me to avoid and negotiate a way round the muck. The changing dynamics of the seasons affects the textures of the paddock walk.



Geology in Agharinagh, Lower Dripsey and modern farming in Kilgobnet townland, Co. Cork (picture: Kieran McCarthy)

The warm weather hardens the ground freezing the indentations of movements in the mud. The frosty weather also freezes the ground for a time but only for a time. The wet weather causes my movement to slow down to avoid slipping, on which on many an occasion I have.

In an overall sense, the paddock walk is full of muck and causes me to slow down and look where I'm going. In a historical sense the paddock walk through the varied indentations of humans and animals is bound up with change but also continuity of use. The Lee Valley on many occasions like the paddock walk has caused me to stop, look and be diverted from my original route of exploration. Sometimes, I would stop because something caught my eye in my fieldwork, a feature of the land, natural or human. I enjoy the randomness in nature; it is difficult to capture on camera. I also enjoy examining the human interaction with the land.

Sometimes on fieldwork with local residents I would stop and take a photograph and I would be asked why did I take a particular feature. Of course, on many an occasion, I have asked people I have met what do you see in your local area especially when I'm brought to key sites of history in a local area. Hence in researching an area, the varied perspectives of the researcher and the interviewed are important. If I took 100 people into a place such as Lower Dripsey and asked them to comment on the geographical and historical features, I would not get the same 100 responses. That's one aspect I feel, which makes heritage so vibrant and attractive to study.

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Landscape at times is strongly connected to personal experiences and memories with some contemporary imagery deliberately evoking the recollection of places experienced, perhaps on travels or during childhood. Landscape is an idea. Landscape is not a natural feature of the land but a man-made way of visually organising the natural world in the mind. Landscape is always influenced by specific personal interpretations – what the individual sees.

The paddock walk and a visit to the Lewis Glucksman Gallery, University College Cork, which overlooks the River Lee in its urban canvas, provoked the penning of this article. The gallery's principal exhibition is entitled *Beyond the Country – Perspectives of the Land in Historic and Contemporary Art*. Art is a way of seeing the world differently provoking hidden feelings, stimulating your sense and your mind. Art should be viewed, pondered, admired exhibited, carefully scrutinised and understood from an artist's point of view.

The exhibition "Beyond the Country" invites the audience to consider different ways of interpreting landscape and to reflect on the imaginative possibilities of representing the land. The Glucksman has brought together a number of Irish and international artists who examine and interpret the land in different ways I was intrigued by their art but in particular their artist perspective. From my point of view, I was fascinated by several interesting ideas especially the artists who explored how we interact with the land, how we experience the land, how we construct a landscape in our own minds and how we record and reconstruct the memory of landscape in our minds.

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The collection begins with Walter W. Russell's (1867-1949) A Country Lane, A scene one sees a lot if you wander off the mains roads in the Lee Valley. You will find tranquillity and that sense of getting away from the busy world. Adjacent, you view an image of three figures fishing on the banks of a river not unlike the River Lee The work is entitled Landscape with Figures.

Our interaction with the natural environment is important. All of the biographies of Dripsey people over the last number of weeks talk about the intersection of people and the land, from the stone row to the holy well to the woollen mills. Through a series of short film snippets, Rachel Reupke's work Infrastructure also focuses on the human relationship with the land, our attempts to organise and structure the natural. In her DVD, you view a mountainous landscape with a complex and highly evolved transport network running through it.

James Ireland's two mixed media works point the viewer to our reconstruction of our experiences of nature, how nature and landscape is commonly packaged and framed in advertising and conventional depiction. Nina Canell through a DVD entitled We Lost Wind recalls nature and the forgotten legends around that relationship. Clodagh Emoe's art piece entitled Point of no Return adds to that by focusing on mankind's persistent attempts to chart the invisible and the unattainable.

Richard Walker provides two very entertaining DVD installations entitled Awaiting Imagery and Successive Inconceivable Events respectively. Richard attempts to create a dialogue with the natural landscape. He attempts to characterise, personalise and even romance it. In his second DVD installation, he is viewed sitting on the side of the mountain having a discussion with the land. He proceeds to question the landscape like a lover. He articulates his feelings when faced with the unapproachable distance of the nature around him and its lack of acknowledgement for his own presence.

Sven Johnne's work A Walk in Lusatia, through infrared photography, explores the way in which stories remain hidden in the landscape, which once revealed, can reconstruct the landscape we ordinarily see before us. Johan Thurfjell through his two works Patagonia (mixed material) and Yesterday, today, tomorrow (print/ collage) discusses how landscapes and places are traversed with written language and personal memories. How many of us collect the Lonely Planet Guides or their equivalent or take photos of landscapes when we are on holidays. All of us have a fascination with the 'different' and recording our experiences.

David Claerbout's work attempts to re-animate the past. He takes a picture of the village Ruurlo, Netherlands from 1910 and through technology re-animates or gets the leaves moving on a tree in the picture. One can see his interest in nostalgia and ideas of "good old times" but he tries to open the past landscape up the present. Perhaps that is a good way to conclude the above ramblings. The textures of the landscapes we see whether it be in the Lee Valley or elsewhere are significant and vibrant in our lives. The land can be interpreted in different ways and that makes for great personal and collective ways of life and the creation of varied and interesting heritages.

To be continued...

Beyond the Country – Perspectives of the Land in Historic and Contemporary Art, Lewis Glucksman Gallery, University College Cork, current to 3 February 2008, [www.glucksman.org](http://www.glucksman.org).

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