

IMMA  
COURTYARD GALLERIES

# Kevin Mooney Revenants



## Introduction

*Revenants* is a ghost story - of sorts. As a colonised nation, there are large gaps in the record of Irish art history caused by poverty, famine and mass migration. Kevin Mooney's work reconsiders these absences and constructs a 'speculative art history' which imagines what the 'lost' art of this Irish diaspora might have been like. The traditional mode of historiography was 'top down' documenting the actions of 'Great Men' and institutions of power. Instead Mooney engages with 'bottom up' research, considering how representation of the Irish people was constructed through the eyes of Empire; but conversely how narratives of Irish victimhood are pervasive in popular histories. Mooney's work re-evaluates these notions and reverse engineers the visual production of these fictitious artists that he invents. He imagines what the influences these non-existent painters of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries might have drawn on, what subjects they might have painted, what kinds of cultures they might have encountered when they settled in other countries and how these different factors might have affected their work.

## Room One

In Room 1 *Mutators* is raised high on a stepped platform, leaning at an odd angle as if placed there momentarily. This mangled, abstract portrait stems from Mooney's research into early Celtic head cults, where the head is considered the site of spiritual power and knowledge, and, it has been suggested, warriors might have ritually beheaded the vanquished. *Mutators* is displayed here as if on a rudimentary altar suggesting that it could have some mysterious ritual function, or that it might be intended for worship.

Across the room *The Weirds* depicts three floating, disembodied heads speeding across a night sky. However this work is realised in a very different painting style, as if made by a different artistic persona at a different moment in time. This small canvas references the work of Francisco Goya, considered the most important Spanish painter of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Goya was renowned for his darkly violent images of the horrors of war and of the occult and Mooney's work proposes that perhaps Goya's bleak aesthetic would have chimed with this imagined Irish painter. Both artists would have been witness to famine, poverty and military cruelty and would have shared a deeply Catholic tradition and a familiarity with occult imagery and folklore. This room considers the ways in which ancient folklore and currents of artistic influence circulate and intermingle.

## Room Two

Standing on a skinny raised frame in the middle of Room 2 is *Il Cruthach*, a roiling, bi-gendered, multi-headed being which takes its name from a figure in Celtic mythology. *Aillenn Il Cruthach*, also known as *Aillenn the Mutiform* was a powerful being that had the ability to morph between genders and from human to animal. Like the Púca, another shapeshifting trickster spirit from Irish folklore, *Il Cruthach* draws on early Celtic notions of the fluid boundaries between worlds and between bodies. These ideas are particularly compelling given the recent proposal by some scholars that the word 'queer' might originate in the Irish word *cuair* meaning crooked.

*Il Cruthach* is angled towards a strange landscape across the room, *Island* a mysterious rocky outcrop swathed in cloud that fixes the viewer with one baleful eye. Mooney's work responds in part to the history of Montserrat, also known as the Emerald Isle of the Caribbean, which registered the highest concentration of persons of Irish ethnicity of any colony in the history of both the first and second British empire. How might these Irish immigrants have interpreted this new landscape, its inhabitants and its traditions? The distinctive cloud forms that shroud *Island* make reference to another Irish myth-maker, here Ireland's most famous landscape painter Paul Henry. Celebrated for his silvery clouded landscapes, Henry's scenes were used to promote Irish tourism abroad. Clouds, fogs and mists are frequent motifs in Mooney's work and they abound in Celtic mythology where they function as barriers between mortal reality and the supernatural. In this room, the boundaries between cultures, mythologies and visual languages shape-shift and morph as they encounter each other.

### Room Three

The installation of *Revenants* responds to the elegant architecture of the Courtyard Galleries, invading their gracious proportions with an unsettling presence. A ghastly portrait hangs over the mantelpiece; *Émigré* is a rude abstraction of a skull gripping a clay pipe with absurdly buck teeth. This sinister head draws on the satirical cartoons that appeared in *Punch* magazine during the late 1800s. *Punch* was a publication very much in favour of the British establishment, and its cartoons often played upon and reinforced racist and negative national stereotypes. The canvas glistens with a noxious sheen, as if swiped with some kind of ectoplasmic ooze. Mooney uses different materials to reflect his ideas; aging varnish gives this work its unsavoury gleam, while in other works he uses distemper, an archaic painting material that might have been available to his 'ghost' painters.

Across the room, *Carrier* is a body on the move. This gigantic figure bristling with skulls and coiled snakes, steps forward on massive plate-like feet towards an indeterminate landscape. Some scientists and psychologists have hypothesized that memory is not stored solely in the brain, but in other areas of the body, a concept sometimes called 'cellular memory' or 'body memory', meaning that the body holds within it its history of trauma and of cultural memory. Mooney's monumental figure is a bewildered immigrant hero, one with a bodily cargo of stories, ancestral memory and cultural identity.

Between the graceful sash windows *Peasant* fixes us with bloodshot lidless eyeballs floating in a chaos of orange daubs. These uncanny presences transform the aristocratic proportions of this space within Royal Hospital Kilmainham into a psychotic drawing room, haunted by unquiet spectres.

## Room Four

In *Storyteller*, two clay pipes jut from the empty space beneath a shawl and some neatly parted hair. This work makes reference to perhaps Ireland's most famous story teller, the *seanchai* Peig Sayers. Sayers was a vital repository of Irish folklore and mythology, and her biography *Peig*; dictated to her son Maidhc, who edited it to reflect a view of his mother as a long-suffering 'every woman'; was for many years a mainstay of Irish language education. *Peig* became somewhat notorious for its often bleak account of the harsh realities for Irish people from the rural labouring class. However, this voice or position is important to Mooney as his work thinks through class as well as history. His 'fictional painters' are drawn from the rural poor rather than the landed class, and this in turn informs his distinctive palette. He describes it as his 'bog man' palette; swampy greens, dank greys and raw, meaty pinks - the kinds of colours his imagined peasant painter would have used to represent their surroundings.

Across the room, these dank colours are used to depict a loose grouping of lumpish figures gathered under a pale lamp which radiates whorls and dashes of light. Strange and also strangely familiar, *Blighters* is a mirror world version of Vincent Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters* (1885) a depiction of a peasant family eating a meal of potatoes. Mooney has suggested that van Gogh's *Potato Eaters* 'should be an Irish painting'; he describes seeing it for the first time while an art student and being struck by a moment of false recognition, as if this canvas was a missing link in Irish visual culture.

Indeed, there is a link, albeit an unexpected one, between Van Gogh's work and an Irish visual artefact. Van Gogh's famous *The Starry Night* (1889), with its distinctive swirls of light in the sky, references scientific discoveries made by an Irish man. At the precise moment that the Great Famine was at its height, William Parsons, the third Earl of Rosse, had constructed the world's largest telescope and observed for the first time the whirlpool structure of the H51 Galaxy in 1845. Parsons' sketch was published in 'Astronomie Populaire' in 1880 where it was seen by Van Gogh. The Dutch artist then inspired Irish landscape painters like Paul Henry who looked to him and other avant-garde painters for their colour, vitality and energy.<sup>1</sup> This swirl of influences serves to undermine notions of Irish cultural isolation and suggests a network of interconnected practitioners, who never met, but who influenced each other deeply. Mooney's project asks us to reconsider what an Irish vernacular might be, and points to the surprising and expansive possibilities revealed when it is placed alongside other cultures, hierarchies and registers.

<sup>1</sup>S.B. Kennedy, *Paul Henry*, (New Haven, Yale University Press: 2000), p. 24.

## **Alcove West**

The word 'revenant' describes something that has returned after a long absence, or after death. In this work, a pair of lidless eye balls emerge from a welter of brush strokes, confronting the viewer - this image stares back. Floating, disembodied eyes are a recurring motif in Mooney's work, creating a sense of charged encounter. They function also to remind us of the idea of a portrait; to which face might these eyes belong? Traditionally, the genre of portraiture is reserved for aristocratic or heroic subjects, but here the sitter refuses to come into view. Instead we are fixed by an uncanny gaze. The idea of the uncanny refers to that eerie sensation when the familiar becomes strange and has also been described as the return of the repressed. Mooney's work suggests that we are haunted, not by the ghosts of an Irish art history, but by their absence.

## **Alcove East**

Introductory video by Kevin Mooney and the exhibition's curator Sarah Kelleher.  
6 minutes looped.

## Acknowledgements

### Kevin Mooney *Revenants*

Kevin Mooney *Revenants* is curated by Sarah Kelleher.

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A new monograph *Kevin Mooney Revenants*, with texts by Sarah Kelleher and Seán Kissane is available in the IMMA bookshop, €15.00

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Front Cover:  
Kevin Mooney  
*Ilcruthach* (2021)  
Oil and distemper on jute  
Courtesy the Artist

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