



GREENHOUSE

17th February – 4th March 2017

DC1 Gallery

By addressing the quiet, unassuming, and highly common appearance of plants in art produced in certain Irish contexts, this exhibition aims to enact the tradition of a winter garden. It gathers together a sampling of species from a particular place and time; the works of contemporary artists whose territories occasionally overlap. The common ground that these artists cover is made apparent by botanical elements, whether incidental or invasive, which recur in their pictures. On its surface, *Greenhouse* offers a pictorial version of its namesake; a stroll through a sheltered, transported and miniaturised landscape, represented through its plants. The proposition is not as innocuous as it seems. Rural landscape generally, and botany in particular, have a complex and often difficult history in Ireland; one that emerges through its writers and artists. Alongside the more romantic and idyllic descriptions of the countryside in Irish art and literature there are the ever present realities of hardship, expressions of darkness, irony and humour, and depictions of bleak and occasionally threatening environments. The Irish relationship to land will always be associated with colonial history and in 2016 the centenary of the Easter rising saw renewed attention to post-colonial frameworks in discussions around artistic production. This is the underlying theme of *Greenhouse*, to explore not just the domestic and leisurely side of the tradition of a winter garden, but also its curious and darker corners, from Victorian superstitions to environments shaped by imperialism.

There is a commonly understood correlation, between the two nineteenth century practices of botany and colonial expansion, which can be demonstrated by terms such as *cultivate*, or *plantation*. The word 'cultivate' stands equal chance of conjuring an image of farming or gardening as it does an idea of refinement or education of an individual. The word 'plantation' is equally semantically balanced. Its use from the sixteenth century, to describe a colony or settlement of emigrants, surely derived from those colonies' reliance on the establishment of a plantation of crops for commercial preservation and expansion. This informal, somewhat vague understanding of the role of plants in the history of colonialism tends to underestimate the central position that botanic

studies held in the exponential growth of scientific knowledge in the nineteenth century, and it overlooks some of the more fascinating details of that story.

At the outset of the industrial era, botanical knowledge continued to represent the cutting edge of industrial innovations. By researching plant uses and improvements, methods and suitable locations for cultivation, and effective means of industrial processing, botanists made a major contribution to the political and commercial success of colonialism.¹ This knowledge could only be advanced by using the foreign plant species found in imperial conquest, and the innovations of the botanists in turn aided that conquest. Foreign plant species, and the other places and people that they signified, were also given careful consideration within every-day, domestic life.

The correct and proper use of exotic species in this horticultural setting reflects the attitudes on social etiquette and national identity that are perhaps even more telling than the role of botanical knowledge in the mechanisms of foreign domination. In the nineteenth century, British gardeners had increased access to exotic plant samples, and the possibility to maintain those plants at home in glass houses became more common, even for amateur enthusiasts. This resulted in the highly prevalent notion that ‘the introduction of foreign plant material to British soil, and more precisely to British domestic soil, was the ultimate horticultural expression of patriotic endeavour.’² Though this was the idea, *in general*, that was maintained throughout the century, the details of how one should conduct this practice were energetically discussed and regularly modified. The otherness of the landscapes, and associated cultures, that such plants represented was always an active influence in that discussion. A simple example of this can be seen in the degree to which foreign species were expected to be isolated from the more refined, indigenous British plants. Domestic species, it was generally agreed, should occupy that portion of the grounds nearest the house, and the wilder plant varieties should be limited to the outskirts of the garden.³ In this and numerous other ways, the respectable lady or gentleman gardener took part in the colonial world view; pursuing an experience of distant, unknown civilizations; but on their own terms, and while perpetuating the important ideas of otherness.

It is out of a curiosity about these attitudes, most directly engaged in **Paraic Leahy’s** paintings, that the idea for *Greenhouse* was conceived. The plants so carefully rendered in Leahy’s artworks certainly resemble exotic species. Those which substitute human features in paintings like

¹ Lucile H. Brockway, ‘Science and Colonial Expansion: The Role of the British Royal Botanic Gardens’, in *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 6, No. 3, Interdisciplinary Anthropology, August, 1979, 451

² Rebecca Preston, ‘“The Scenery of the Torrid Zone”: Imagines Travel and the Culture of the Exotics in Nineteenth-Century British Gardens’ in Driver, Felix, and Gilbert, David (eds.), *Imperial Cities: Landscape, Display and Identity*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999, 194

³ Preston, 205

Make My Flesh Creep have the aggressive, scale-like arrangement of pine cones, or monkey puzzle trees. The abundance of these bizarre trees in Ireland speaks to the extended colonial legacy of the horticultural interests outlined above. They were planted enthusiastically throughout the island during the Victorian period and remain quite popular, particularly in suburban gardens.⁴ As a child I had the faint impression that they were somehow related to a history or a connection with a foreign land, and this intuition is recalled in Leahy's paintings. The combination of alien plants and a kind of mysterious compositional rule in the work stems not just from an interest in a colonial period, but more specifically from those peculiar, curious details of Victorian attitudes and postures to which Leahy is drawn.

Tourism is another feature of Victorian life that has left its legacy in Ireland, particularly in the west.⁵ **Miriam O' Connors** photographic series *Leave No Trace* was produced in The Burren, an environment of exposed limestone plains that looks extra-terrestrial in its barrenness. Ironically, The Burren is also renowned for its remarkable diversity of rare flora and fauna. Visitors to the area are reminded of the fragility of the local eco-systems and urged to leave no trace of their visit, to take nothing away but memories. In the artist's own words, O'Connors' series of images began with 'a curiosity about the paradoxical nature of leaving no trace on a landscape that seemed too enticing to resist and almost too idyllic to photograph. *Leave No Trace* is about 'taking' photographs, about appropriating visual souvenirs from a beyond picturesque landscape. Mimicking the form of a free tear-off tourist map, viewers are invited to take away their own free image of The Burren; images which themselves make direct reference to the lurking presence of tourism in the region. As each sheet is removed, these representations begin to slowly fade, until gradually all physical affirmation of the landscape disappears. This presentational approach encourages meditation on the concept of "leaving no trace" and also invites reflection on photographic conventions and notions of beauty associated with representing the landscape.'⁶ As consequence of producing work along The Burren's coast, O'Connors photographs inevitably features such migrated plant species as New Zealand flax and other coastal grasses. Shown with O'Connors' *Leave No Trace* work are a set of images from the artist's 2011 series *Attention Seekers*, a collection of observations of everyday life. The three works selected from the series each focus on of those innumerable everyday appearances of plants.

Laura McMorrow's digital collages draw similarly on touristic traditions. Taking source imagery from the New York Library's collection of early postcards, McMorrow's *Vintage Postcard*

⁴ Dick Warner, 'No riddle: monkey puzzle tree is just ugly', <http://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/outdoors/dick-warner/no-riddle-monkey-puzzle-tree-is-just-ugly-162050.html>,

⁵ Glenn Hooper, 'The Tourists Gaze; Travellers to Ireland 1800-1900, Cork University Press, 2001, 10

⁶ <http://www.miriamconnor.com/section813701.html>

Collages are digitally combined, re-coloured depictions of rural and domestic scenes from the turn of the century. Influenced by sci-fi films and b-movies, McMorrow's drawings, paintings, collages, films and installations are unified by a pseudoscientific aesthetic. Her work has a very particular wit and visual humour which often refers to the craftsmanship of photography and cinema history.

Greenhouse features a selection of digitally reworked postcards in which plants such as Hydrangeas and Pampas Grass appear. Though funny, there is also a slightly unnerving edge to these would-be souvenirs.

The multi media series *Who put Bella in the wych elm?*, on the other hand, takes on a decidedly dark subject. **Isabella Walsh** describes the project as 'a true story, a murder-mystery involving an unidentified female skeleton found inside a hollow tree in Hagely Wood, Worcestershire in 1943. It is a complex tale of murder, mystery and intrigue. Theories abound as to why she was murdered: ritual associated with witchcraft? Was she a spy or had she connection to German spies? Perhaps she was fleeing an air raid and was unlucky? Despite her description, including a sketch of what she was wearing and dental records being circulated far and wide, nobody came forward with any useful information. Strange chalk graffiti kept appearing in the greater Birmingham area alluding to the case, suggesting that someone knew something more, but the perpetrator was never found. The case, open for 60 years, remains unsolved and the woman's identity unknown.'⁷ The story of a human skeleton inside a wych elm, of a person who remains unknown and anonymous, seems almost a real life counterpart to the figures in Paraic Leahy's paintings. Both artists mobilize similar regions of our imaginations; the combination of human and plant bodies creating superstitious associations which are also recalled in Laura McMorrow's Hydrangea collage.

The viewer's imagination is activated another way by **Robert Ellis**, a documentary photographer whose work, due to the nature of his subjects, is very often enriched with plant life. Returning to the West of Ireland, *New Line* is a body of work that documents the space inhabited by a small alternative community in a forested area on the edge of The Burren. 'By exploring the private world created by the people that live there, his photos adopt a silent and contemplative tone, and seek to engage with the space and its inhabitants, rather than expose it. Through carefully negotiated access and many discussions, the work becomes a catalyst of Ellis's experience and the time spent in its production. Carried out over several years the images reveal the harsh depths of winter and the warm fertility of summer, telling the stories of the people that belong there, but only ever show a glimpse of their presence.'⁸ This community, where people live in such proximity to

⁷ <http://isabellawalshart.com/portfolio/who-put-bella-in-the-wych-elm/>

⁸ <http://www.robertellis.eu/gallery.html>

plants, is represented in images largely vacant of the figure. Images of private dwellings and their surroundings carry the narrative.

Finally, I have also included my own paintings in this show, from a series titled *In The Shadow Of The Structure*, which was produced while on residency in The Burren and while covering some of the same ground and Ellis and O'Connor. Like all my paintings from recent years, they derive from a phenomenological engagement with, and a particular interpretation of rural Ireland. Imagery for the paintings is gathered on cycled journeys throughout areas of West and midland Ireland, when I record various structures and roadside scenes that resonate with my understanding of such landscapes. Apart from lived experience, this understanding is also influenced by literary traditions of depicting remote Irish environments, such as in the dark humour of novelists like Patrick McCabe and Flann O'Brien. *The Third Policeman*, in which the main character is damned to wander the Irish countryside and encounter impossible buildings and structures, is a particular influence. Descriptive terms are borrowed from the book to title paintings in this series. The works selected for *Greenhouse* include depictions of a roadside mirror in Co. Tipperary, communication towers on a hilltop in Limerick, and a discreet camp site on a coast in Co. Clare.

As pervasive and significant as their real world referents, the botanical elements of these artworks are features of context, stemming from a shared cultural environment. *Greenhouse* assembles the works of artists pursuing a broad range of distinct curiosities - an obsession with details from everyday rural life, a murder mystery, a personal approach to documentation, exploring the strangeness of representation, science fiction and wandering in the landscape. As diverse as these investigations are they are all commonly influenced by place, and by a place as famously green as Ireland, where plants carry a compelling account of our cultural heritage.