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► To cite this version:

Marie Mianowski. Post Celtic Tiger landscapes in paintings by Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin. Post Celtic Tiger Ireland: Exploring New Cultural Spaces, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016, 978-1-4438-9763-1. hal-01874244

HAL Id: hal-01874244

<https://hal.science/hal-01874244>

Submitted on 19 Nov 2018

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WORKING PAPER

Post Celtic Tiger landscapes in paintings by Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin

Marie Mianowski

Gazing at Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin's paintings representing the statues and monuments of some of Ireland's most famous national heroes is more than a tour of Dublin's well-known memorial sites – it is a walk through time. The paintings make time vacillate on its plinth, as if, for all the solid fixity of the statues and their strong anchorage in a place to which Irish national history claimed they belonged forever, time started to quiver. The emotions one feels on this pictorial Dublin journey are caused precisely by the moving contrasts between epochs and the paradoxes of the past conflicting with the contradictions of the present. This is reflected in the trembling brushstrokes of strongly contrasted colours under blue skies crossed by wavering colourful clouds and curved lines. The immobility of the statues is counterweighed by the impression of movement in the paintings, drawing strong connections between past and present, the layered strata of the past overflowing onto the present landscape. This chapter focuses mainly on "Young Ireland vs Old Ireland", "Larkin's Despair" and "The Rise and Fall of James Connolly". The title of the three paintings strongly insists on the political treatment of the subject matter. However it will also take into account other paintings by Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin that represent statues of politicians who played a key role in the making of the Republic of Ireland, in so far as they might create meaningful correspondences with the three above mentioned.

Viewed together, the paintings form a coherent series, representing sculptures of national heroes juxtaposed with other monuments in landscapes of contemporary Dublin. But the imposing presence of built space around the statues reveals a chasm separating the statues from the ideals they first aimed at commemorating; just as it questions their place and meaning in contemporary Ireland and the recent rapid changes of the country. And yet, just as the vanishing lines in the paintings lead to slits of deep blue sky overlooking the Dublin landscapes, the paintings transform the separating chasm between past glory and contemporary changes into a space open to the possibilities that the future might offer. In implicitly questioning the meaning of heroic figures, symbols and commemoration, it addresses the representation of political space and public spaces. Thus doing, it reveals a paradoxical contiguity between past and present, while enticing the viewer to gaze at the statues with the eyes of a contemporary, aware of today's excesses and dead-ends. As Avery Gordon remarks: 'the ghost is primarily a symptom of what is missing. It gives notice not only to itself but to what it represents. What it represents is usually a loss, sometimes of life, sometimes of a path not taken. From a certain vantage point the ghost also simultaneously represents a future possibility, a hope'¹. Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin's paintings make the viewer re-evaluate today's perspectives for the future with the knowledge gained, not only from historical facts and events, but also from the symbolic force of sculpture.

Although no direct written indication on the paintings could guide the viewer, the Dublin location is easily identifiable thanks to the statues and the built environment. For one thing, the titles given to the paintings do not only specify the subjects, but also point at the angle in which they should be viewed. "Larkin's Despair" with a statue of Jim Larkin, "The Rise and Fall of James Connolly" with one of James Connolly and "Young Ireland vs Old Ireland" with a statue of Thomas Davis induce the gaze to focus on the particular statues and seek conflicting perspectives. And yet on those Dublin streets, contextualization does not seem to be the first issue: there are no logos on the buildings indicating any specific mission nor what they might symbolically represent. Just as there are no sign-posts showing directions. In "Larkin's Despair" and "The Rise and Fall of James Connolly" sign-posts are deliberately shown from behind and their vertical lines and blank square panels stand as mere markers of public urban space, but no written or drawn message distracts the viewer from what seems essential in all pictures, that is the juxtaposition between the statues representing national heroes and their built urban environment.

The three paintings represent the statues in the actual Dublin sites, where the actors who commissioned the statues decided in their times that the statues belonged. As Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin writes, in a paper devoted to authenticity in the work of art in the global age, 'the photograph as a source has much in common

¹ Gordon, A. 1997, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota

Press, pp.63-64 (quoted in Lloyd, D. 2008, *Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity*. Dublin : Field Day, p.43).

with sources for the writer in the sense that it is based on the generally accepted facts of a situation².’ The paintings mirror the link between the statues representing Davis, Larkin and Connolly and the place they occupy in public space, a place turned historical under specific circumstances, as if to associate for all eternity the fates of those men with the political actions they conducted in that specific place. Despite the reductive nature such a reading of their lives and political commitment entails, it has nonetheless the merit of making passers-by and viewers of photographs and paintings remember and reflect on the role played by the men represented in the sculptures in this specific place in other times. The same could be said of the paintings “Parnell” situated on O’Connell Street near the General Post Office and “Great Famine Memorial” where the sculptures installed on Custom Quay seem to be slowly and with difficulty walking towards the ship that will take them to another land.

In the painting “Young Ireland vs Old Ireland”, the sculpture of Thomas Davis’ silhouette is represented from a very low angle so that the statue seems to be overlooking both the crowd and College Green. The title of the painting echoes the “Young Ireland” movement to which Davis’ belonged in the 1840s, a phrase coined in the first place as a dismissive term by Daniel O’Connell to describe his inexperienced allies in the Repeal Movement. Thomas Davis subsequently became the chief leader of the Young Ireland movement and in the 1870s, the term came to refer to the nationalists inspired by him³. The statue overlooks College Green as a tribute to Trinity College where he was educated and to the University education he wished to promote for Irish students of all backgrounds and confessions. On the painting, both the statue of Davis and the building seem to lean as if they were going to meet. No distance separates the plinth sustaining Davis’ statue and the building of the institution he so revered. The lines of the sculpture and that of the columns of College Green all merge in the sky outside the painting emphasizing a form of communion between the representation of the leader of the Young Ireland movement and the College.

Larkin’s statue is also strongly linked to the place historically. Larkin’s posture on the sculpture and the place where the statue was erected on its plinth just outside the General Post Office in Dublin, echo a very famous photograph taken of Larkin on his return from the US in 1923 where he had exiled himself since 1913, following the Dublin lock-out. As biographer Emmet O’Connor notes about the photograph of James Larkin that inspired the monument and that was taken by Joe Cashman in April 1923 on his return from the US, ‘the less-than-animated response of the O’Connell Street crowd speaks volumes about the difference between 1913 and 1923, and Larkin’s inability to see this⁴. In the painting the statue is represented on the high plinth outside the General Post Office. But it is 2007 and the Spire appears as a distinctive feature of the landscape since 2003. It is a vertical addition to the photograph with O’Connell street vanishing in the distance, bordered by a colourful line of blue and brown buildings with touches of green, pink and yellow, capped by white fluffy clouds with a splash of orange. O’Connell Street is separated from the buildings by a lower line of cheerful looking green and yellow trees which also seem to merge at the foot of the Spire. There is a general carefree atmosphere in the painting as the older buildings on both sides of the street seem to lead naturally to the new Spire that stretches its slender form effortlessly towards the sky, almost mimicking the movement upwards of Larkin’s arms on the painting, with his large hands showing to the people that their destiny in their hands, sending to the sky a handful of hopeful vigour.

In “The Rise and Fall of James Connolly”, the statue of Larkin’s partner during the Dublin lock-out of 1913 stands outside Liberty Hall. Today the building shelters the offices of the Services, Industrial and Technical Union (SIPTU trade union) and until it was superseded by the Elysian building in Cork in September 2008, the Liberty Hall building in Dublin was the tallest storeyed building in Ireland. At the time when Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin painted the view in 2007 it was therefore still the highest building and the angle with which the scene is painted shows a very proud looking Connolly, separated from the building by an empty street onto which his shadow is overflowing, creating an impression of movement, as if Connolly was actually going step into the building. The painting is very symbolic as the Liberty Hall quartered some of Connolly’s key achievements. In the years leading up to the 1916 insurrection it harboured the Irish Transport and General Workers Union when it was created in the early years of the 20th century and the Irish Citizen Army (ICA). As in the other paintings, the past is juxtaposed onto buildings of present-day Dublin creating a city-space in which

² Ó Croidheáin, C. (2010), “The Work of Art in the Age of Globalisation: Social Realist Art and Global Solidarity” in

Global Research. <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-work-of-art-in-the-age-of-globalisation-social-realist-art-and-global-solidarity/18146> (last accessed 7 December 2015).

³ http://cdn.radiocms.net/media/001/audio/000011/63109_media_player_audio_file.mp3 (last accessed 3 December 2015)

⁴ O’Connor, E. quoted by Curry, J. in <http://www.historyireland.com/20th-century-contemporary-history/an-inspiration-to-all-who-gaze-upon-it/> (last accessed 7 December 2015).

different moments of history collide. In the empty street between Liberty Hall and Connolly's statue silence seems to reign. No car passes by on this otherwise busy boulevard, not a soul disturbs the silent statue as it defies the immense building that seems to reach for the stars. And yet the space between the two is thick with tension, and gradually, as the gazer prolongs the observation of the painting, the low buildings in the background appear unnaturally low. The plinth of Connolly's statue is invisible and the statue almost seems alive. Connolly himself seems suddenly overwhelmed and his arrogant posture melts into a shadow onto the pavement, as the orange shape in the sky, reminiscent of the fall of Icarus, hints at Connolly's failure to fulfil his dreams. The contemplation of Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin's paintings reveals spaces in which the imagination has the place to roam in-between past and present, and dream future possibilities.

Just as in "Larkin's Despair", the sign-post is seen from behind and remains blank to the viewer. It indicates that the semiotics of the painting are to be found elsewhere and precisely in the silent, deserted and blank space that separates the statue of a man celebrated like an Antiquity hero, from a building whose apparent power, whether in the shape of the Spire, the 195 feet high Liberty Hall or the financial building looming over the Famine victims, heralds to the world the newly-found globalized power of the people of Ireland in the Celtic Tiger era. In Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin's paintings past and present are not simply juxtaposed, or even opposed. The contrasts created in the way space and landscape are arranged, emphasized by the vivid colours, the strong anchorage of the statues to a specific place within the public space shape an invisible gap between the statues and the landscapes represented on the paintings. The sense of irony that emerges from the paintings calls for a strong re-evaluation not only of what those statues signify in today's public space, but of what they actually commemorate and how they can in fine be reassessed in the light of the transitory wealth of the Celtic Tiger years. Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin's "Parnell" painting ironically shows Parnell's statue pointing at a passing bus on O'Connell street. On the painting, Parnell's stretched out hand points at a passing bus decorated with a huge ad that reads: 'wealth warning'. More explicitly than on the others, the irony is blatantly visible on that painting where 'wealth warning' replaces 'health warning' as if the statue had in turn become a viewer of our contemporary world, revealing how, through landscapes, the past continues to work in the present.

In a chapter on James Connolly and national Marxism, David Lloyd explains how the concentration of wealth in the hands of global élites creates a strong sense of irony when compared to the promises of Marxism and nationalism: 'In the face of the most extreme ever concentration of wealth in the hands of the global élites, the emancipatory promises of Marxism and nationalism have become at best discredited, at worst, risible.'⁵ The sense of irony which emerges from the contemplation of Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin's paintings is indubitably linked to the contrast between the values of nationalism and Marxism embodied by the heroes of national history whose monuments dot the public space of Dublin in significant key places, and the blatantly jarring signs of global wealth that seem to smother the landscapes on the paintings. The irony stems from two different processes. Irony can be the result of a paradoxical coincidence or a discrepancy in the landscape which the paintings emphasize by sharpening the conflict between the two. But irony also stems, on the part of the artist, from a deliberate transformation of reality in order to dramatize the contrast. As a promoter of Social Realism in painting, Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin uses the 'loose emotion of Expressionism in mark-making (line and brush strokes) and the light of Impressionism'⁶ to express 'social and racial injustice, economic hardship, through unvarnished pictures of life's struggles; often depicting working class activities as heroic'⁷. The sense of irony he develops hinges both around the highlighting of contrasts that exist in reality and on the other hand in the transformation of real elements, thus verging on satire.

In 'The Rise and Fall of James Connolly' and in 'Young Ireland vs Old Ireland', as in 'the Great Famine Memorial', the paintings play ironically on an existing contrast. The choice for the commissioners to build Connolly's monument in front of Liberty Hall in 1996 was never meant to be a-political. Similarly, the choice of Custom Quay to install the famine victims' statues around the same years and on the exact spot where

⁵ Lloyd, D. 2008, "Rethinking National Marxism: James Connolly and 'Celtic Communism'", in *Irish Times*, Dublin: Field Day, p.101.

⁶ personal communication of the artist.

⁷ Ó Croidheáin, C. op. cit., <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-work-of-art-in-the-age-of-globalisation-social-realist-art-and-global-solidarity/18146> (last accessed 7 December 2015)

the victims boarded the ships that were to take them to America on risky voyages, is far from neutral. The fact that the building overlooking the famine statues is none other than that quartering the IFSC (International Financial Services Centre) is perhaps a coincidence, but Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin underscores the ironic contrast in choosing a point of view in which the IFSC is the actual background of the group of sculptures. The silhouettes detach themselves as brownish blurred figures whose long shadows taint the atmosphere with a late afternoon mood, the black hue of the shadows being reflected in the colour of some of the windows of the building as to strengthen the link between the two. The viewer can reflect on the causes and consequences of greed and hunger then and now, how the hunger of then may have triggered the relentless greedy appetite of the Celtic Tiger, producing new types of hunger in the Post Celtic Tiger era. The ghost estates and homelessness issues of today ironically loom in the viewer's imagination as the gaze moves from one painting to the next, shifting from the ghastly figures on Custom Quay to the Liberty Hall building. Subliminally linking the Great Famine Memorial to the James Connolly one, the hunger theme rings strangely today, as a big housing strategy conference⁸ was held in Liberty Hall in October 2015 to try and find a solution to the huge housing deficit in Ireland today. It is ironical indeed to remember that on this street the leaders of the Rising assembled before their march to the General Post Office on Easter Monday. On the 2007 painting no one is assembled and the street is deserted. The building James Connolly stares at, in a posture that might also be described as imbued with sadness, is a complete metamorphosis from the Liberty Hall Connolly knew which was the first to be shelled by the British artillery during Easter Week 1916 but faithfully restored afterwards until the present building was built at the beginning of the 1960s.

In 'Young Ireland vs Old Ireland' the ironical contrast also stems from a discrepancy between the past and the present. Davis' statue outside College Green is surrounded by a cheering crowd gathered there to watch a Macnas parade. 'Macnas are master storytellers who inspire and engage audiences by creating big, bold, visual shows and performances through world-class theatrical spectacle'⁹. On the painting a colourful drummer advances, playing on exotic looking drums to an anonymous crowd of hooded youths, and Davis' famous ballad 'A Nation once again'¹⁰ resonates in the ears of the viewer of Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin's painting. As Christie Fox points out, Macnas reinterprets folk tales through contemporary issues, the priority being entertainment over education, a choice that might have startled Davis whose preoccupation with education was paramount:

By interpreting a folk tale or other known text through a contemporary context, Macnas map meanings onto the text, often referring to current political issues or other local topics. Sensitive to the audience's need to be entertained more than taught, the creators of the parade disguise the political content both intentionally and accidentally by making the performance a multivocal, multidimensional event not particularly well suited to political discourse. Macnas enacts these political themes through a form more immediate than conventional drama, and provides an opportunity for the audience to explore such complex issues as the rising tide of immigration in Ireland in a popular and accessible setting. By providing multivalent, multivocal, community-based performances, Macnas helps the community to reunite, if only for a short time, and provides relief from to the increasing urbanization and globalization that are the by-products of the Irish economy¹¹.

As Christie Fox explains, Macnas' aim is not political activism but relief. It is a form of Pascalian 'divertissement'¹² and a far cry from Thomas Davis' engagement for the people of his country whom he thought deserved a proper education to become actively committed citizens of the Irish nation. In his book on Irish culture Terry Eagleton remarks about Young Ireland's cultural commitment: 'Young Ireland was both more politically militant than the O'Connellites and more culturally idealist'¹³. But Eagleton also emphasizes Davis' attention to culture for both patricians and peasants. And, as the viewpoint of the painting seems to suggest, Davis might also have enthused in front of such a crowd. Davis is subtly leaning towards the drummer, with a group of excited youngsters close by. Both drummer and Davis appear feet away from reuniting for the sake of community making. The green white and orange hat of the little girl in the pink coat seems to point at the

⁸ <https://housingconference2015.wordpress.com/2015/11/24/an-overview-of-the-themes-of-the-housing-emergency-conference/> (last accessed 3 December 2015)

⁹ <http://macnas.com> (last accessed 3 December 2015)

¹⁰ <http://celtic-lyrics.com/lyrics/9.html> (last accessed 3 December 2015)

¹¹ Fox, C. (2003), "Creating Community: Macnas's Galway Arts Festival Parade, 2000." *In New Hibernia Review* 7.2: 20.

¹² Pascal. 1995, *Pensées* (1662), trans. Honor Levi. Oxford : Oxford University Press.

¹³ Eagleton, T. 1995, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger : Studies in Irish Culture*. London : Verso, p.247.

political tonality of the parade echoing in contemporary terms the yearning for a sense of nation that Davis' expressed more than a hundred and fifty years ago.

The three colours of the Irish flag are repeated in most paintings as a sort of background colour scheme, especially in 'Larkin's Despair' where the colours of the statue, the plinth and the inscription mirror those of the Irish flag, although not in equal proportions. In 'Larkin's Despair' however, the irony appears through the exaggerations of the painter: a huge white Limo stretches its arrogance along three blocks of buildings as if to emphasize the grotesque exuberance of Celtic Tiger wealth. Also the packed crowd of the 1963 photograph, although less enthusiastic than the 1913 one is reduced to nothing in the late Celtic Tiger period. The streets are almost deserted with only a few people crossing O'Connell street on both sides of Larkin's statue but ignoring it. Larkin is left all alone, with his arms stretched in despair and his head down as if he were quietly sobbing. By contrast in 'Larkin's Delight', the crowd is there, demonstrating and taking its destiny in hands, claiming its own rights out on the street with Larkin's statue thrilled with delight. Similarly, in the painting 'O'Connell delight', a crowd of demonstrators has climbed up O'Connell's monument, as if O'Connell himself were alive again and the street is busy with teeming life.

The critical distance between the statues and contemporary Ireland in Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin's series of statue paintings is not simply a historical distance between then and now. It is a multi-layered distance which needs to be closely analyzed in order to be able to sift through the emotions the viewer feels when gazing at the paintings. As Joep Leerssen notes in his book on public spheres in Ireland,

'unlike the cathedrals with their regimental flags, gravestones and commemorative plaques, unlike the equestrian statue of William III on College Green or the public buildings which themselves testified to protestant-colonial triumphalism, the native tradition had no commemorative markers in public space prior to Emancipation¹⁴.

Leerssen further stresses that there was nothing 'before O'Connell, in the line of monuments occupying a fixed point in public space and marking the public joint's commemoration of a shared past¹⁵'. Leerssen then moves on to pinpointing the emergence of what he calls a 'public sphere' rather than a 'public space' in the wake of Jürgen Habermas, designating 'an informal, largely non-institutionalized feedback mechanism of public opinion exerting a control over government conduct¹⁶, and further stressing that public sphere opened up in Ireland thanks to Emancipation and print media¹⁷. Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin's paintings reveal the gap existing between, on the one hand the political men of yesterday, the historical commemorations that literally turned to stone the acclaimed martyrs and heroes, and on the other hand today's post Celtic Tiger social and economic issues. In letting the viewer's eyes gaze and roam in the gap thus created, Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin both mocks the absurd excesses of Celtic Tiger Ireland and questions the commitments to build a better future. Just like the spectres of the famine victims haunt the pavement outside the IFSC, the statues of Davies, Connolly, Larkin, Parnell and O'Connell haunt the streets of contemporary Dublin as a reminder that in Jacques Derrida's words 'it is necessary to speak of the ghost, indeed to the ghost and with it¹⁸, that 'with this *non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*, without that which secretly unhinges it, without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who are *not there*, of those who are no longer or who are not yet *present and living*, what sense would there be to ask the question "where?", "where tomorrow?" "whither?"¹⁹. In addressing the history of the Magdalen laundries and his studying of spaces of containment, James M. Smith echoes both

¹⁴ Leerssen, J. 2002, *Hidden Ireland, Public Sphere*, Galway : Arlen House, p.29.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.30.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.33.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.37.

¹⁸ Derrida, J. 1994, *Spectres of Marx : The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York : Routledge, p. XIX.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Leerssen²⁰ and Lloyd²¹'s claims that 'memorials often function to contain the challenges posed by uncovered histories [and that] in marking an event historical, they reinstate a safe distance between the past and the present, and sometimes leave a chasm of absent causality between the two²²'. In juxtaposing the past and the present, Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin's series of statue paintings challenges the 'safe distance between the past and the present' and transforms the 'chasm of absent causality' into an ironical distance, while subtly asking the question of tomorrow.

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²¹ Lloyd, D. (2000), "Colonial Trauma/postcolonial Recovery ?" in *Interventions*, Vol. 2, Iss. 2, 212-28.

²² Smith, J.M. 2007, *Ireland's Madalene Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment*. Manchester : Manchester University Press, p.167.

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