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Ghosts of urban decline fade to panoramas in the West



Donald Teskey's drawings, in pencil and ink, and his watercolour and acrylic paintings, respond to the restless, shifting light and character of Connemara, writes AIDAN DUNNE

THE BIENNIAL Ballynahinch Castle/Occasional Press Project represents an inviting prospect for an artist with a particular interest in landscape.

Using the Castle "as a base from which to visually explore" the exceptional surroundings, the artist produces a body of work amenable to publication in a limited edition artist's book. Donald Teskey is the second artist to be invited to take part in the project and the book that has emerged, titled *A Connemara Folio*, is a really beautiful piece of work. There are 500 in paperback and just 150 in a limited hardback edition, each with a signed and numbered hand-tinted intaglio print.

Teskey, who over the years has gradually moved out into the natural landscape after becoming established as an urban painter and, prior to that, as a quintessentially urban draughtsman, was an interesting choice. His track record suggests that he can rise to a challenge, and that proves to be the case. Connemara is an inviting but frustrating subject for a landscape painter. It is spectacular, but the light is notoriously fickle and transitory, as a mobile patchwork of weather moves constantly over land, sea and lake, alternately revealing and obscuring tracts of bog and mountain moment by moment.

Originally from Rathkeale in Co Limerick, Teskey's surname derives from his Palatine ancestry. German Lutherans forcibly displaced by the neighbouring, Catholic French, the Palatines were exiled at the beginning of the 18th century. Some 1,200 or so of them were welcomed in Rathkeale, overseen by the imposing stronghold of Castle Matrix. Skilled and industrious farmers, they contributed hugely to the area.

Teskey's immediate family were joiners and builders, and he grew up used to the workshop environment, applying some of its paraphernalia to his early experiments with painting. But drawing was at the centre of his approach to art and, quite unusually, he concentrated on drawing when he studied at the Limerick School of Art. When he had his first solo show at the Lincoln Gallery in Dublin in 1980, it consisted entirely of drawings.

Titled Ghosts, the show comprised technically accomplished, large-scale drawings of urban landscapes with an aura of neglect and decay: not dramatically, so, just the kind of nondescript urban environments that city-dwellers encounter every day without a second glance. Each scene was animated, though, by a bright, fleeting, presence, resembling a piece of paper or plastic carried on the breeze. For Teskey, these drifting scraps were the ghosts. They didn't mean anything in themselves; the point of them was to animate the compositions, to energise the images.

That desire to bring the picture to life remains with him. Subsequently he made charcoal drawings of urban landscapes by night, dramatic views framed as if from high above, inspired by the swooping topography of Milltown, with the relatively steep valley of the Dodder spanned by the high viaduct. Explorations of other areas of Dublin evidenced the same responsiveness to the underlying terrain, the way that the skin of roads and buildings was laid on the larger physical fabric of the land. Views of streets and buildings were infused with a great sense of movement. They also marked his decisive move into paint and colour as well as the monochrome of graphite and charcoal.

Then, in 1996, Teskey was invited to spend time at the Ballinglen Arts Foundation in Ballycastle in north Mayo, close to Downpatrick Head and a huge, elemental landscape that stretches west to the Belmullet Peninsula. The eventual result of this initial visit was a noteworthy exhibition at the Limerick City Gallery, Tidal Narratives, in 2005.

Mayo's epic scale impelled him to paint big, and led to a series of ambitious works centring on the relentless clash of sea and rocky coastline. The structure of the faulted and fissured rock replaced the architectural framework of the urban landscape in the Mayo paintings but, as the artist noted: "Structure was always central to the work."

The problem of landscape was, for him, the problem of "finding an organic structure that allows the paint to speak". With his Connemara work, he has done that. The drawings, in pencil and ink, and paintings, in watercolour and acrylic, are exceptionally freely made, responsive to the restless, shifting light and the peculiar character of Connemara, with what Robert Lloyd Praeger described as its intricate entanglement of water and land. In place of the stark opposition of rock and water found along the north Mayo coastline, everything is merged in an interconnected mass of detail, wonderfully vivid and alive.

Selected original works from A Connemara Folio will be on exhibition during Clifden Arts Festival, September 15-25

**A Connemara Folio by Donald Teskey, Occasional Press, Limited edition hardback €180, paperback €45.
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