

CITY LIMITS



Images: John Kelly

THE GARDEN SHED

In Arnold Böcklin’s (1827-1901) painting *Isle of the dead*, white stone buildings are highlighted by their juxtaposition with the clump of tall dark green cypresses that rise out of the rocky island and climb into the gloomy grey sky. Cut into the rock is the light rectangular doorways that form the tombs of the dead. A small boat with a white shrouded figure silently pilots the craft towards the jetty. What might be a coffin lies across the bow of the boat; it is a beautiful, poetic painting of an island full of the deceased, but the boat is a container of hope: somewhere over the water there is a place for the living. Five different versions were painted between 1880 and 1886.

I am thinking of Böcklin’s painting as I stand in the shadow of the enormous steel latticed Älvsborg Bridge that crosses the Göta river in Göteborg. I am standing outside the Röda Sten Art centre, looking at interlocking crates that form a garden bed where potatoes grow under a leaden sky. It is an installation by Åsa Sonjasdotter, who has planted varieties of potatoes that are no longer commercially available. It is a project that traces the migrant potato from South America to its globalised incarnations and on to those that are outside the system of classification and are therefore deemed illegal. At the end of the project, she will create an interior installation and give these ‘illegal’ potatoes away.

Sonjasdotter’s potato beds are visually connected with the island 933 metres away (the length of the Älvsborg Bridge). Across this bridge is the island that triggered my memory of the *Isle of the Dead*. It is not something out of the picturesque Mediterranean, but a testament to the 20th-century industrialisation of Sweden. The white steel rectangular structures reflect the sun that breaks through the cloud while the concrete chimneys and domed petroleum tanks create the architecture. Maybe it is because the white cylindrical tanks are constructed on a base of exposed yellowish stone against a backdrop of green woods, or because ships silently glide up to the terminal to connect with the island, that I am reminded of Böcklin’s painting. It is both a place of mystery and also something strangely familiar to somebody who has lived in the port cities of Melbourne and Cork.

My work, ‘The Garden Shed’, has travelled by ship from Ireland to Göteborg via its fabricators, Container Services and Repair (CS&R), a company based in the Tivoli Industrial Estate in Cork. It now rests outside the Röda Sten, a few metres from the planted potatoes and under the 45m-high bridge. The Röda Sten, like some other contemporary galleries (Tate Modern for example), is a red-brick building and a former power station. In its former role, this art centre used to send electricity to the nearby red-brick factories of Carnegie and Co. The industrial heritage of Goteborg forms the backdrop and aesthetics of the biennale, not just in its industrialised landscape or the architectural remnants of the interior, but because curator Sarat Maharaj directly addresses the idea of creativity in this post-industrialised landscape by drawing upon the experience of Udavalla, about an hour’s drive from the city. In this small town, Volvo once had a plant that undertook radical investigations and experiments into the way workers might introduce their creativity into the production process of what normally is a strictly non-creative system: the assembly line. These 1990s experiments lasted only briefly; after

two decades of the mobile factories and expendable workforces, it seems much longer ago.

Göteborg is an industrial city. On my first visit, I was struck by how sea containers were used as a covered walkway to the Röda Sten. The sea container has its own history, beginning around the Korean War when they were used for officers to transport their personal items. Göteborg’s port is full of them, whether waiting on trucks or being used for storage or other uses. This port has seen a long history of trade. In the 18th and 19th centuries, it was an entrepôt to the French, where goods could be imported and exported without paying import or export duties. The Swedes exchanged this free port for the island of Saint Barthélemy in the Caribbean, which was also declared a free port. While it proved an unsuccessful sugar plantation, Saint Barthélemy formed an important trading link between the Caribbean and Europe, allowing the import of goods such as sugar, tea and coffee that could bypass political or economic obstacles during the drive for the abolition of the slave trade. Interestingly the last slave was freed in Saint Barthélemy in 1847, a date that connects with my work ‘The Garden Shed’.

A few days before 1847, on Christmas Eve 1846, a letter from N.M. Cummins was published in The Times of London describing harrowing scenes on South Reen peninsula in west Cork, Ireland. Shortly before Cummins’s letter was published, 340 people lived on this picturesque peninsula. By 1847, as that last slave was freed, nearly all those on South Reen were dead. An Gorta Mór (The Great Hunger) killed them. I was given a copy of this letter shortly after moving into our house, which is on the site where these deaths occurred.

Others refer to An Gorta Mór as the Great Irish Famine. The latter gives the impression there was no food; however, this has been shown to be untrue. There was plenty of food: in fact, Ireland exported foodstuffs during An Gorta Mór. As Klas Rönnbäck points out in his 2007 Göteborg University paper[1], it is an historical coincidence that sugar was making the move from luxury item to staple during this time and maybe it is no coincidence that, after the mass starvation of the Irish population, the first sugar factory opened in Ireland in 1851. Sugar derived from beet is just the same as cane sugar from the Caribbean and beet requires large tracts of farm land.

In 2009, I attended a lecture by Catherine Marshall’ entitled ‘Visualising the Unspeakable; An Unresolved Dilemma for Irish Artists’. Marshall addressed the fact that there was a scarcity of visual art relating to An Gorta Mór. “Irish artists did not paint their history because of a perception (so widely held that it was not always documented) that such work would not be acceptable to the establishment.”²

In a strange coincidence, as An Gorta Mór was decimating the population of Ireland, Henry Tate accumulated wealth from his string of greengrocer’s shops in Liverpool, later selling those shops to invest in the sugar-cube patent, the success of which allowed him to become a great collector and benefactor of British art. But there were no images of An Gorta Mór in his collection of 19th-century art or later in the Tate Gallery.

To explain why, Marshall recounts the story of R. G. Kelly: “... an Irish artist who exhibited a painting of an eviction scene at the British Institution in 1853...Strickland, in his Dictionary of Irish Artists, records that the painting, *An Ejectment in Ireland or A Tear And a Prayer for Erin* was ‘much criticised as a political picture, which the artist never intended, and was actually discussed in the House of Commons.’ Kelly got the message and appears to have avoided such subjects for the remainder of his career...The problem was not the depiction of poverty... but rather the politicisation of that poverty in a colonised country.”³

Cummins’s letter is a document that ‘paints the picture’ the artists could not and forms the starting point for my work ‘The Garden Shed’. This sculptural installation is a physical interpretation of the Tate Modern in London, but also houses a smaller model of room six, level three of the former Bankside power station. In this model, I have etched Cummins letter into steel and hung it on a wall. It is a graphic description of people literally starving to death on what is now my vegetable patch. From another text, I have also quoted this piece on the wall of the gallery.

“Doctor Donovan and I are just this moment after returning from the village of South Reen, where we had to bury a body ourselves, that was 11 days dead and where do you think? In the kitchen garden. We had to dig the ground, or rather the hole, ourselves, no one would come near us, the smell was intolerable. We are half-dead from the work lately imposed on us. It is now as I write eleven o’clock, and I have not yet dined.”

N.M. Cummins died in poverty. Sir Henry Tate’s motto on his stationary was “Think and Thank”.

At the other end of the sea container is another smaller wooden model of the Tate Modern, inside which is a video of my parents. My father explains his journey from Ireland in 1950 to England where he became an itinerant worker until he met my mother. From there they began their journey to Australia. At the same time—and with their voices interacting on separate tracks—my mother tells of my journey from childhood to becoming an artist and then my journey back to Ireland. In some ways, this work is a thank you to my elderly parents for the opportunities they created for me. This smaller work is titled Mum and Dad @ Tate Modern. In short, the works tries to think and thank.

Footnote

The title The Garden Shed was chosen because we realised that in this perilous economic pandemonium, it is unlikely anybody else will want this work. So when the exhibition is finished, we plan to bring it back to South Reen ... where it will become our garden shed.

John Kelly

[1] Klas Rönnbäck, From extreme luxury to everyday commodity Sugar in Sweden, 17th to 20th centuries, Göteborg Papers in Economic History, No. 11. November 2007 ISSN: 1653-1000

[1] Catherine Marshall is an art historian and the lecture was delivered in Skibbereen, West Cork.

[2] Marshall, Catherine, <<http://www.19thcenturyart-facos.com/artwork/irish-famine>>

[3] IBID