

# Na Seacht Scrínte: *Macallaí i nGlenn an Diabhail* (*The Seven Shrines: Echoes in the Devil's Glen*)

by Kat O'Brien

*Il s'agit dans cet article de l'installation permanente d'une série de sept chapelle commémoratives commandées en 1996 en mémoire des sept générations nées après la Grande famine irlandaise de 1845-50 et qui marqueront le 150e anniversaire de cet événement.*

Sculpture in Woodland was formed to establish a wood culture in Ireland, by creating a greater awareness of wood as an artistic and functional medium.



Photo: Kat O'Brien

The project provides Irish and international artists with a vibrant natural environment, resources, and support to create works of artistic excellence. The aim is to create an amenity in the Devil's Glen during 1996–2000 which has environmental, social, and economic benefits for the community.

—Donal Magner, Chair,  
Sculpture in Woodland,  
County Wicklow

*Na Seacht Scrínte (The Seven Shrines)* is a series of seven sculptures for which

I was commissioned by Sculpture in Woodland for the Devil's Glen in the Wicklow Mountains near Ashford in eastern Ireland. The shrines were designed to commemorate seven generations born after 1847, the worst year in a devastating series of failed potato crops in Ireland which resulted in the deaths of an estimated one million people and the mass emigration of two million more to North America and other countries worldwide over the following decades. While this period neither began nor ended famine and emigration for Irish people, it did dramatically rupture and reconfigure the human landscapes of Ireland and North America. It has been noted by many that for an island so small, the Irish voice echoes so large. In this 150th-anniversary year of 1847, many communities around the world are looking forward to a new millennium, and questioning how we today construct links between tragedies and aspirations.

It is the purpose here to bring the images and issues into the intersection of exchange by and

about the women whose lives are affected by the public and private mythologies around which *Na Seacht Scrínte* circles. The shrines have entered into the lore of the Devil's Glen, the discourse of Famine remembrances, and the conflicted spaces of women's bodies. They are an invitation into an array of environments in which ardent growth and contradiction are currently mediating among many pasts and possible futures.

I am of the fourth generation born since the Famine, the midpoint or centre of the seven generations commemorated in the Devil's Glen. This position is a challenged site, strained to look back through splintered memory and forward with dusty vision at places and times too fragmented to ever fully know; yet it is charged with forming tissue to connect these distant layers of growth and to branch out in different directions. It is not a fixed location but a range of mental time in which, with strained effort, one can piece together the bits of personal memory and desire through which to locate oneself in the larger human context. Beyond this range, personal associations are difficult to register and once-familiar occurrences become abstract events.

To this end, the shrines in the Devil's Glen form a pilgrimage of a sort. From the car park beside the protected woodland area, one chooses from two opposite paths into the forest but either entry is soon reminiscent of the physical and emotional darkness in writings by J. M. Synge such as *The Shadow in the Glen* which was inspired by this place. On one path, the first two wooden shrines appear in the sunlight of a lush fern clearing marked by a looming rocky backdrop and a fork in the trail; hanging in each shrine is a larger than life figure constructed of burned and scarred tree remnants found on the adjacent commercially logged

hillside. Heavy chain and conspicuous hardware force the disparate root and trunk fragments into provocative sacrificial animal or female forms which are suspended from the tall wooden shrines, here hauntingly like gallows. A closer inspection reveals that the remnants forming the lower torsos are two halves of the same tree crotch, discovered with one side bleached silver by the sun and the other side stained dark with decay from partial submersion in the wet ground debris of tree felling; gentle folds of the tree's tissue graphically evoke human female genitalia. In

parallel contrasts, the top parts of the torsos are roots. One top is scarred from chain saws and still sticky with oozing sap; the other is dry with age and scarred by incomplete burning at the logging site.

As the walk continues, one must again choose from unmarked paths. One trail descends down a mile through the densely wooded glen to the waterfall, whose distant sound is now only a faint echo of the time before the Vartry River Reservoir was constructed and the crashing water was the thundering voice through the Devil's Glen. The other trail continues high above the river along the edge of the precipice where the remaining shrines await discovery, located progressively further back into the wooded shadows. Some distance ahead, the high rocky backdrop yields evidence of a deep trench sneaking along the mountain-side just above the pathway which in turn traces the steep drop off below. The origin of the partially hidden overhead trench has many stories, each a tale of a rebellion, a famine, a treasure, a feud, a diverted stream—a drama in Irish history. Edging the rocky trench, heavy tree branches form periodic arches like awaiting niches in a woodland architecture. The next three shrines, each positioned out of sight from the others but near the overhead trench and embedded in a circle of rocks, do not stand as representatives of particular generations but as varied watchers at shrine/posts along the path. Two of these figures are single nine-foot tree segments, recently cut in the vicinity and anchored into the ground, as are the shrines themselves. Care has been taken to

alter the segments as little as possible except to invert their branched trunks into the "human" position, to stabilize them into the shrine structures, and to preserve the sycamore's gray fleshy undulating bark and sitka spruce's rich varicoloured mosses. It is expected that as the wooden figures age in the damp outdoor climate, the environment will produce ongoing physical changes to the figures which will be photographically documented each year and added to the context of the work. The small suspended figure in the third shrine is composed of two parts: the top segment is of a sun-bleached and partially burned bird-like form cut from an ash root system. This segment is hooked to a crotch section of sugar maple which is the only fragment from outside Ireland; it was a gift to the project from a Québécoise friend whose great grandmother was born during her mother's migration from Ireland to Montréal after the Famine.

Like the first two shrines, the last two encountered on the path are also a pair but they are situated to beckon the traveller off the path and back into the level wooded area where the rocky trench opens out into a dark and heavily canopied terrain. The figures here, like the first two, are two halves of one rejected segment found partially burned, bleached, and rotted on the nearby commercially logged hillside. The two complimentary halves are suspended in shrines some distance apart but visually connected, facing each other and both directions of the path. If the hiker has entered the forest from the alternate path, these shrines will be the first along the way and perhaps they will be overlooked. If sighted, however, this introduction to the series is much gentler and more enigmatic than that encountered by the first approach. The image of halved swinging torsos is present again but less violently and



Photo: Kat O'Brien

more softly obscured by distance and forest-filtered light. It is only upon emerging from the path that the first-time visitor will understand that the nature of the pilgrimage is circular, a return to the beginning, a completed journey around a centre. Indeed, it is the image of the circle that lies at the heart of the work: concentric circles of water undulating out from a disturbance at the centre, echoes of a sound moving out from the source, growth rings of a tree layering itself out from the heartwood, ancient woodlands of Ireland again in new growth, a small island country with its people globally dispersed.

Yet the circle as image of unity and unbroken whole is precisely what this work is not; the icon of the circle is invoked but growth is not continuous here and the ideological message

is fragmented and conflicted. The shrines may disrupt the hikers' purpose and passage in many ways and, indeed, the Devil's Glen is itself a place of contradiction. It is a commercial forest, proud of its part in returning Ireland to exporting timber after 300 years of decimated woodlands; it is also a protected place of quiet refuge, just downstream from the Celtic Tiger roaring along the highways of the nearby thriving Dublin metropolis; it subtly promises an Ireland of pre—well, take your pick. Here the shrines embody that contradiction through their positioning in an isolated environment of natural abundance laced with human disruption: rocky roads, aggressively pruned trees and shrubs, stone cabin remnants barely visible in lush undergrowth, massive exposed roots growing over huge boulders, vibrant moss proliferation, newly commissioned art works.

As a pilgrimage, the pathway of *Na Seacht Scrinte* is full of questions, restraints, aborted growth, profuse diversions, unmarked paths. The general environment may provide personal solitude but the shrines offer little mental comfort for the nature lover or the weary hiker. The figures enshrined here are born of the nearby commercial forest and speak of fire, decay, uprootedness, chain-sawed parts, and flesh penetrated by exposed industrial hardware. Unlike most commemorations, they are suggestive of no one in particular but of lives lived hard and ended roughly, without note or clear purpose; some silently blend into their verdant surroundings, looming bodies posted as look-outs, suspended or grounded in their places. They are open scars, intimate details framed for the gaze of occasional hikers, but their fuller stories remain to be imagined by each passerby. They are removed wooden fragments, oddly formed like the human bodies who cut them, but repositioned strategically among their

own living kind; the passing hiker, noting the inverted tree fragments as enshrined figures, may extend this vision to imagine the shrines as doorways of inverted moments in a surrounding forest where branching trunks begin to appear as a mass of flailing human beings with their heads embedded in the ground. Vision once extended can imagine many things; the path can encompass more than just its distance; the shrines can loosen their moorings to this physical location.

As a permanent installation commissioned for a publicly accessible place, the shrines will continue to occupy their wooded shadows in the Devil's Glen. In other ways, however, they occupy sites which are not specific places but diverse terrains in multiple landscapes of personal and cultural debate. The notion of *site* has acquired a richly layered focus in those debates in recent years. For artists whose visual practice is the production of material objects and images, dialogue with the viewing public is usually *in absentia* and dependent on diverse information brought to the work by artist, viewer, and many intervening transient factors. Formalism, minimalism, and site-specific installation are but a few of the approaches artists have taken to confront, negate, or otherwise come to terms with these uncontrollable factors. Public art, "permanently" installed in a particular location, has proven itself adept, at times intensely and pugnaciously so, at engaging diverse populations in dialogue on complex issues related to notions of site and cultural meaning. This dialogue takes place in artists' studios but also in design teams, politicians' offices, newspapers, community hearings, and courtrooms; dialogue and debate become a part of the environment not only of a specific sculpture but for all cultural production in the public domain. For an artist, the choice to work with a public site is a choice to work far afield from the confines of a secluded studio practice and protective gallery atmosphere.

In this context, the shrines are situ-

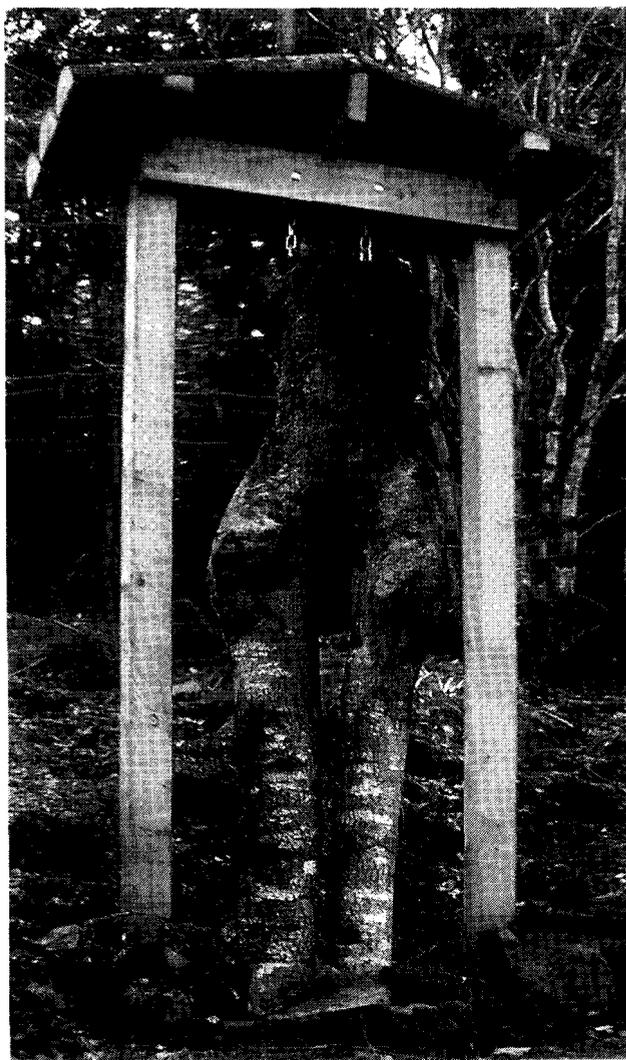


Photo: Kat O'Brien

ated at forking paths in several ways. As personal iconography, they are poised at a crossroad. They represent a recent episode in my 20-year practice of constructed silent scenarios with self-portraits of the female body situated amid fragments of decaying and rejected items from domestic and urban landscapes. Many of these enigmatic installations have best been understood as private commemorations of unheroic anonymous women. These earlier spaces, while visibly accessible to the public, have been read as private moments which, like a love letter found in a street gutter, yield intimate details for the viewer who can only imagine the extended contexts.

While the shrines embody a moment of continuity, they also depart from it; they are commissioned works for a specific place, part of the initial Sculpture in Woodland project whose long-term purpose is to create a wood culture in Ireland and an art centre in the Glen which will serve a variety of community needs. Therefore, the shrines will increasingly forfeit their original nebulous and shifting intent and become more clearly situated in the context of the Glen and its art and social discourse. Despite their quiet enigmatic locations, the shrines also resonate in theoretically contested terrains far from the Glen's pathways. In addition to my own personal *oeuvre*, the shrines are positioned at intersections of multiple sites of debate: 1) proliferation of memorials constituted as public memory sites but critically experienced as places objectified toward the destruction of human memory (Crysler and Kusno); 2) issues of essentialist or violent representation of the female body contextualized within the cultural and historical legacies of women's invisibility; 3) proponents of intuitive image-making at odds with the difficulties inherent in public space and visual imaging through theoretical constructs (Clancy).

These and other contentious issues permeate the shrines. A woman who chooses to work in the forest

with damaged tree segments as female representations strides directly into her own contested feminist/essentialist terrains. Invocation of the Famine on Irish turf in this decade willfully stokes the conflicted fires of agitated remembrance, silent forgetting, and deliberate avoidance. Choosing a site sprinkled with found "tree" objects, landscape machinery, and forest workers' cell phones begs layers of questions about the roles of theory or intuition in the stampede of global electronically driven societies. There is much fibre for contention in the shrines, some intentionally provoked, some to evolve through future discourse.

*Níl easpa béaloidis i dtaobh na háite seo. Nach bhfuil ainm an Diabhail féin ar an gceantar! Ar an gcéad dul stós, cé hé sin—an Diabhal atá i gceist? Is scéalta flúirseacha agus mistéireacha iad go léir, gan amhhras. Ceapann daoine éagsúla gur diabhal i an Abha bhFear Tíre thíos ansin agus ceapann daoine eile gur diabhal é an scódaí millte a ghearr an gleanntán drámata, sléibhteach seo as an gcloch. B'fhéidir gurbh é an Mac Mallachtan céanna 'sna scéalta úd eile nó b'fhéidir gurbh í an seanchailleach nach bhfuil inmhuinte ar chor ar bith inti. Nach cuirtear an milleán uirthi i gcónaí mar gheall ar ár lochta féin! Ar chuma ar bith, níl leachtanna móra anseo is ansíúd in onóir dí. Ach, d'ainneoin sin agus uile b'fhéidir go bhfuil cara sa chúirt aici!*

(There's loads of stories about this place, this one named for the Devil. And who is this Devil whose stories, too, are dark and bountiful? Well, some have it that it's the old Vartry River down below there or the wild one who first sculpted this dramatic mountainous landscape. But maybe it's just the same old Devil from all those other stories, you know the one who's likely as not that old woman

there that nobody trusts anyway—the one who's blamed for everything we don't like about ourselves. Well, you don't see a load of public monuments to her, now do you? But maybe she's had a hand in this one.)

—Brid Ní Ruadháin, Currach Dris, Béal an Átha, Contae Mhaigh Eo

(Translation by Mary Cooney, granddaughter of Brid Ní Ruadháin)

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*Kat O'Brien is a multimedia artist working on a series of outdoor installations and multimedia projects based on Irish-Canadian connections, with focus on the Irish Famine of 1845–50 and dual language history. This research corresponds with the one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the Irish Famine and integrates metaphors of the body with wood, water, and new technologies to examine shifting channels of cultural migration for the twenty-first century. O'Brien is an associate professor, Faculty of Fine Arts, Concordia University in Montréal.*

## References

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