FOUNTS OF MEANING:
Five Contemporary Artists and the Books of the Irish Franciscans in Europe

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“So that if the invention of the ship was thought so noble, which carrieth riches and commodities from place to place [...] how much more are letters to be magnified, which as ships pass through the vast seas of time, and make ages so distant to participate of wisdom, illuminations, and inventions, the one of the other?”

Francis Bacon, The Advancement of Learning (1605)

In a recent essay for the New Yorker, Teju Cole meditated on the strange possibility of knowing a figure as remote and as powerful as Barack Obama through the books that may be beside his bed at night – Marilyn Robinson’s Gilead, Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon and Herman Melville’s Moby Dick.¹ These books, Cole writes, ‘add up to a picture of a man for whom an imaginative engagement with literature is inseparable from life. It thrilled me, when he was elected, to think of the President’s nightstand looking rather similar to mine’. Cole’s essay, however, titled ‘A Reader’s War’, centres in large part on the experience of disenchantment. How can a reader of these books be involved in such war, in such foreign policy? How can this reality be reconciled with the professed love of such books, the advocates for a more humane world? In the end, perhaps it is impossible to know how or why somebody acts as they do, or, indeed, why or how they read in the way that they do.

Nevertheless, the idea that we might know somebody through the books that they read and keep remains a thrilling one. The intimacy of the act of reading, of selecting a text and keeping it and living with it, seems to allow a kind of window into the interior world of another person, even one remote in time from ourselves. This is as true, perhaps, of larger entities such as nations, as it is of individuals. Great national libraries and archives, in the care, attention and resources given to the preservation of certain texts above others, create a particular and many-faceted mirror of the society of which they are a part. The power of that connection between texts and nationhood, and even the identity of a continent, was made devastatingly clear in the wake of the near destruction of the great library of Timbuktu by al-Quaida-allied fighters in Mali in January 2012. Responding to the news of the destruction, Essop Pahad, chairman of the Timbuktu manuscripts project for the South African government, said that “the manuscripts gave you such a fantastic feeling of the history of this continent. They made you proud to be African [...] if the libraries are destroyed then a very important part

of African and world history is gone'. ² Such acts of censorship must also be reckoned with in a reconstruction of the reading history of a nation. Censorship, whether in the restriction of texts, or in the loss of books and manuscripts, contributes to the editing of a nation’s memory, and to a national and cultural sense of self. ³

In UCD’s Special Collections Library, through the airy reading room, past the literary collections, the maps and the poetry archives, the early printed books of the Franciscan order are kept. Large, leather-bound books on subjects ranging from the topography of China to the life of St. Francis line the metal shelves. The smaller and more delicate incunabula – beautiful examples of the earliest form of printed books – are carefully stored in archive boxes, and locked behind a massive safe door. Nearby, the UCD Archives hold an autograph copy of the Annals of the Four Masters, the restrained and purposeful script covering Irish history from the Biblical flood to the death of Hugh O’Neill in 1616. At first glance, it might seem that the books and manuscripts are quite at home here, that they have always been here; however, this could not be further from the truth, and this collection, above many others, bears out the veracity of Bacon’s meditation that books and letters are ‘ships which pass through the vast seas of time’. Many of the books in the UCD collection were originally collected in the College of St. Anthony’s in Leuven, and were published in important centres of Counter-Reformation printing, including Antwerp, Lyons and Rome. ⁴ The fate of the collection mirrored the fortunes of the friars themselves; books were moved to St. Isidore’s in Rome, another Irish Franciscan college, during the instability and destruction of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, while others were transported back to friaries in Ireland.

A key to the turbulent past of many of these books is the presence of a signature in black ink – the name of the nineteenth-century friar Richard Walsh, who claimed that the books were his personal possessions in order to obtain permission to bring them back to Ireland, and to the friary in Wexford. Later, it was feared that the collections would be unsafe in Italy following the unification of the country, and a new library was built in Dublin’s Merchant’s Quay. By 1872, much of the material from St. Isidore’s was moved there, but was again moved in 1946 to the newly-constructed house of Franciscan studies, Dún Mhúire in Killiney. In the year 2000, a partnership was forged between the Irish Franciscans and UCD, and an important part of the collection was moved to the UCD library, where it now forms a cornerstone of the UCD Micheál Ó Cléirigh Institute for the Study of Irish History and Civilisation. This collection is truly European, and even global, in the material that it contains, in the history of its production, and in the circumstances of its survival. The existence of the books is a testament to the political power of print, and their presence in UCD today bears witness to the importance of the books to the friars themselves, to the idea of themselves as an order, to their sense of history, and of their role and duty in recording and preserving history.

³. In an Irish context, the catastrophic loss of documents in the 1922 fire in the Dublin Public Records Office has had a profound impact on the shape of Irish history writing.
In different and unique ways, all of the works which form the exhibition ‘Shaping Identities Together – Ag Cruthú le Chéile’ respond to the strange intimacy afforded by the survival of the books and manuscripts held in the UCD Library. The surviving collections are tangible evidence of the lives and realities of the people that produced them, bound them, read them for the first time, and returned to them again and again. Hughie O’Donoghue’s work, Scribe, engages with the journeys, both physical and intellectual, taken by the writers and readers of these manuscripts and books. A single figure moves through a dream-like landscape, his stoic posture and the gentle incline of his head create an image of fortitude, of perseverance, and of a long journey unlikely to end soon. The scribe appears to be alone in an uninhabited landscape; while the tree-shapes and cloud-shapes in the background suggest a recognisable space, the vivid red of his tunic, the strangely abstracted and squared clouds, and the solid black and blue of the horizon and sky suggest a landscape of the mind. O’Donoghue’s painterly skill in rendering the facial features of the figure is reminiscent both of Édouard Manet in his fluency and economy, and of Francis Bacon in his achievement of a balance between sculptural realism and uncanny surrealism. This strange face allows the viewer to glimpse the human reality within the almost mythological, archetypal figure. In moving contrast to the planes of colour in the rest of the painting, the figure’s face is delicately modelled, and his downcast eyes and the skin stretched over his cheekbones create a sense of fragility, of aging, yet also of resilience. This combination of the intensely rendered figurative elements with the almost abstract landscape and body creates a striking dichotomy between the known and the unknown, the knowable and that which cannot be revealed.

This tension between figuration and abstraction is as present within the scribe’s face as it is in the landscape: while O’Donoghue has created a way for us to imagine that we can somehow know this man, somehow sense his internal reality, his eyes are not turned to us, and in the end, there is no revelation. The viewer can continue to guess at the life of the mind, but must be contented with signs and clues, such as the manuscripts in his hand, and the laying-out instrument he carries with him. These details link Scribe to the histories of Franciscan writing and book-collecting – from the work of gathering medieval manuscripts from their keepers throughout Ireland to create the Annals of the Four Masters in the seventeenth century, to the transport of books across Europe by the friars as they walked between Franciscan houses. 5

The balance between figuration and abstraction is also at the heart of Eoin Mac Lochlainn’s work. Mac Lochlainn began his career as an abstract painter, and while his practice has now evolved to include more photo-realistic works on canvas, the four works in ‘Shaping Identities Together – Ag Cruthú le Chéile’ reveal his deep engagement with, and exploration of, surfaces, materials and patterns. These four pieces are made with found materials, pieces of wood and cardboard discovered in skips around Dublin. These have been combined with the skill and precision of a sculptor in abstract forms, and constructed with small, beautifully-painted panels which add a sense of narrative to each of the works. Each construction deserves careful examination – what might seem

rough or unfinished at first gradually reveals itself to be a carefully worked construction, each with its own internal balance of colour, texture and volume. These panels, which seem to light the pieces from within, depict a blackbird (Lon Doire an Chairn / Blackbird of Lon Doire an Chairn), a shelter built in an alleyway lit by city lights (Tearmann / Sanctuary), the weathered face of a bearded man (Aisling / Vision), and the moon (Solas na Gealai / Sister Moon). They anchor these works with a specific message. While the abstract qualities and textures of the wood and card delight the eye, the works communicate on a more direct and more urgent level.

Mac Lochlainn’s artistic practice is concerned with social justice in a deep way, and the move from abstraction to figuration speaks of the need for a more direct communication with the viewer about inequalities in the world. In many ways, these pieces encompass many of the facets of the original message of St. Francis. The poverty of the materials, found objects repurposed to create both beauty and use, reflects the famed poverty of St. Francis himself, who threw off his worldly wealth, and that of his followers, who eschewed materialism. The qualities of these found materials – the grain of the wood, the traces of ivy, the rain-stained card – have been half-made by nature itself, and combined with the images of the moon and the lon dubh – create the sense that these are works made in collaboration with nature, rather than through the imposition of artistic intent on the materials. Mac Lochlainn was inspired by the Franciscan attitude towards nature, to the sense of intimate connection and beauty in all things and in all people. This clearly resonates with his own artistic practice in its dedication to shining a light on injustice and dispossession, particularly homelessness, in a wealthy society. In this way, the particular Franciscan ethos, combining delight with a certain fierce action, is reinterpreted in these works.

These are pieces to be read, in the gradual revelation of their sculptural qualities, but also as texts: in Lon Doire an Chairn / Blackbird of Lon Doire an Chairn, the artist has incorporated a section of script in the Louvain irish font. This series of works, when viewed together, take on the quality of pilgrimage stations, quiet stopping-places for contemplation and sustenance. The natural qualities of their materials, the quietness and purposefulness of their sculptural presence, are reminiscent of leachta, the dry-stone altars built on the perimeter of the monastic island of Inishmurray. These were used by pilgrims completing prayer-circuits of the island on August 15 each year, occupying a space between nature and culture, between sculpture and text. Mac Lochlainn’s works have an internal movement and logic, and, like the leachta of Inishmurray, their conception as a group invites movement, from one to the next; looking, following the narrative, and reading.

6. The title of Lon Doire an Chairn / Blackbird of Lon Doire an Chairn is the title of an early medieval Irish poem. This early poem is echoed in Austin Clarke’s ‘The Blackbird of Derrycairn’. Both of these poems celebrate the love and knowledge of the natural world. ‘In the little cells behind a cashel, / Patric, no handbell gives a glad sound. / But knowledge is found among the branches’. Austin Clarke, ‘The Blackbird of Derrycairn’, Collected Poems (Manchester and Dublin; Carcanet with The Bridge Press, 2008), 203-4.

Geraldine O’Reilly’s works for ‘Shaping Identities Together – Ag Cruthú le Chéile’ are informed by her profound engagement with the creation of expressive, meaningful form, and the negotiation of subject matter, technique and materials that is at the heart of her artistic practice. Her work – three large prints based on the pages of an illuminated manuscript – forms a kind of textual palimpsest at the centre of the exhibition. She brings together texts which have played a fundamental role in the formation and expression of European identity, and finds points of connection between them across geographical space and across the centuries. Beginning with Herman Van Rompuy’s 2012 Nobel Lecture on accepting the Peace Prize on behalf of the European Union, O’Reilly creates a link to the song of St. Francis, the *Canticle of the Creatures*, also known as the *Laudes Creaturarum* (Praise of the Creatures) and then extends this to include the Insular manuscripts of the eighth and ninth centuries.8 The relationships revealed by O’Reilly between these texts are real and moving. Van Rompuy paid homage in his lecture to ‘the Europeans who dreamt of a Continent at peace with itself’. These words immediately reflect the work of peace-building following the Second World War, but they also reach back to the thirteenth century, and touch the man who re-imagined what religious life could be, and who, through that process, inspired countless people through the centuries. There is also a beautiful union between the marvellous delight of the pages in the Book of Durrow and the Book of Kells – incredible interlace formed from animal bodies, a microcosm of the spectacular harmony of nature – and the sense of connection which St. Francis felt between himself and all living things – the ‘Brother Sun’ and ‘Sister Moon’ of his *Canticle*. This, in turn, finds an echo in Van Rumpuy’s recognition of the motivating ideal at the heart of European peace: ‘to regain the simple joys and hopes that make life worth living.’9

The relationships between these texts have been explored by O’Reilly through her choice of font. The text of St. Francis’ song is printed in a font modelled on the original Louvain font, designed for printing Irish language texts, while the Van Rompuy text uses another early Irish script style. This close attention to font draws attention to the materiality of the paper, the ink, and to the process and history of manuscript production and printing, as well as the importance of printed words in the communication of ideas throughout Europe. O’Reilly has also used a combination of printing methods, using Tru Grain and photopolymer plate and traditionally etched plates. These different techniques, reflecting process and change, add to the sense that these works are a surface upon which the dense history of script, of books, of their ideas and interpretations through many centuries, is reflected. The embossed Celtic geometric design is also connected to this deep history. While the printed words are indelible, active, naming and expressive, the embossed design suggests the unknowable histories of print – the ways in which a book might stay in and act on the mind of an individual, the books that remained unread, unwritten or censored, and all of the quiet but pervasive ways which print

8. This phrase is taken from Van Rumpuy’s description of Europe after war, where he quoted Winston Churchill. ‘In those grey days, its cities were in ruins, the hearts of many still simmering with mourning and resentment. How difficult it then seemed, as Winston Churchill said, “to regain the simple joys and hopes that make life worth living”’.
culture has shaped the ways that we express ourselves, and know ourselves and each other. O’Reilly’s work expresses the fellowship and the shared identity of books, ideas and readers across space and time.

Colin Martin’s work is concerned with the complex nature of space and symbolism. His single-channel video work, *Basic Spaces*, depicts several different sites, from the document store-rooms in the National Archives of Ireland to the empty, vast recycling centre in an unknown location. The camera slowly pans through each of the chosen locations, moving back and forth, creating a panoramic view. The cool, detached presentation is central to Martin’s investigation and deconstruction of the dynamics of architectural form, echoing, in its crisp technical perfection, the work of Candida Höfer, Bernd and Hilla Becher, and the visionary architectural drawings of Étienne-Louis Boullée (1728-99). Martin has cited Robert Venturi’s description of architecture as a ‘decorated shed’ from *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) as being central to his consideration of buildings and spaces. 10 His engagement with this concept is illuminating in many ways. The idea of the building as ‘decorated shed’ was articulated as a response to High Modernist ideas of expressive form and architecture-as-sculpture, which privileged the grand ideals of a project above all else. Venturi, rather, felt that the ‘decorated shed’, a basic form with applied decoration to provide meaning, could in fact be more significant, lasting and responsible. *Learning from Las Vegas* collapsed perceived distinctions between high and low culture, equating a Las Vegas strip with a Roman piazza, and the parking lots of grocery stores with the formal gardens at Versailles. These provocative analogies forced a reconsideration of long-held assumptions about architecture and value, and about the constituent elements of architecture as meaningful space. These ideas are explored by Martin in *Basic Spaces* – the camera pans across the recycling centre as slowly and dispassionately as it does the office space, or the artist’s studio. The inclusion of partitions, screens, backdrops and flimsy cubicles emphasise both ideas of construction and process, but also the essential impermanence of the spaces, and the fragility and futility of our attempts to build anything permanent or lasting.

*Basic Spaces* also engages with *Learning from Las Vegas* in its concern with symbolic space, and the impact of the symbolic content of different architecture on individuals. The method of presentation – the slow panorama – which flattens the distinction between high and low also facilitates a reconsideration of the nature of the spaces themselves, and in particular, the architectural forms or spaces designed as bearers of cultural value. Like Höfer, Martin engages with historic spaces such as the National Archives, or UCD Special Collections. In the context created, he draws attention to the framework for the material contained within – the institution and its symbolic spaces. Rather than considering a single text or document, *Basic Spaces* engages with the idea of the collection, the amassing of thousands of books and manuscripts, and the meaning of this. The panorama of the National Archives slowly reveals hundreds of archive boxes and rows of plan-chests to the viewer – this space has participated in the construction of histories and identities, of legal decisions and defining precedents. These are powerful texts. Similarly, the Franciscan collection of printed material and manuscripts, now held in the UCD Archives and Special Collections, became an important

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statement of institutional identity and power, as well as providing opportunities for private
consumption and enjoyment. In their study of the Franciscan book collections at St. Isidore’s in Rome,
John McCafferty and Joe MacMahon described the importance of the great library for the corporate
identity of the Franciscans. Regardless of the background of the individual friars, the library reinforced
the fact that they were part of a powerful, international body and tradition. 11 Basic Spaces illuminates
the dynamics of such collections, their architectures, and the impact they have on our self-perception
of individuals, even on an unconscious level.

Robert Russell is a master printer, and his consummate skill in the medium is evident in the
exquisite detail and rich tones of his work. His body of work – from his interpretation of the collections
of the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin (Taking the Air, 2005, from the exhibition ‘Gardens of Earthly
Delight’) to his refiguring of the ecclesiastics on the Breac Maodhóg shrine – is characterised by a
lyrical lightness, and a virtuoso use of colour. 12 This latter work was created as part of a series of
etchings for the 2009 exhibition ‘Île d’Hiver/ Winter Island’, which demonstrated Russell’s sense
and use of the past as part of his own lived reality. In describing his approach to this medieval Irish
shrine, he explained that the idiosyncrasies of the bronze figures, with their wavy hair and odd tunics,
brought him to think about the individuals who made these works, and the people who might have
acted as models – the strange and sudden intimacy of the connection between the past and the
present. In his work for this exhibition at Leuven, Russell combines this engagement with history with
a lyrical use of colour inspired by the stained glass in the chapel of the St. Anthony’s College, now
the Institute for Ireland in Europe.

Russell’s works depict scenes around the movement of the Irish friars to Louvain – an
extremely difficult journey, and one marked by poverty and deprivation during their early years. He
has created scenes that commemorate early monastic culture in Ireland, the process of the journey,
and its aftermath. The jewel tones of the stained glass bring an immediacy to this historical narrative.
The pieces communicate a sense of the warmth of sun through glass and of the glass turning from dark
opacity to luminous colour with the passage of the day, all the different physical, sensuous ways in
which the friars of Leuven would have experienced their surroundings. The physicality of this recalls
the physicality of the people themselves, and the sensations of their bodies – pain, pleasure, fatigue
and vigour – as they lived through what were often strange and challenging times. Russell was also
inspired by the use of colour in the work of the stained glass artist Harry Clarke (1889-1931), whose
breathtaking work drew on his experience of the magnificent windows in the Gothic cathedrals of
Europe. Russell’s work connects these responses – the delight, wonder and inspiration of people across
time – to the great art of Europe. The stained glass windows which inspired Clarke were technically
brilliant in their construction, innovative in their creation, but beautifully simple in their effect –

Historicum (forthcoming).
12. An image of Taking the Air can be viewed at-
An image of Men of Ireland 1: Tómas can be viewed at-
sunlight through coloured glass, transforming into richly glowing colours, their lights dancing through the space. There is a beautiful contradiction between these images of dancing, intangible colour and the deep impress of ink on paper in the making of Russell's prints.

The works by the five artists in this exhibition engage deeply with the the nature of the written and the printed word – the history of texts, and the public and private histories of reading. The works complicate Teju Cole’s hope that we can know somebody simply through their reading – it is one path to knowledge of another, and a powerful form of communication across time and space, the endlessly changing ways in which a book might live in the mind, or in a society, can never be fully comprehended. The books themselves are often enmeshed in difficult and conflicted worlds, produced for and by readers and writers with their own complexities and contradictions. One fulcrum of this exhibition is the idea of book collecting itself as a form of identity formation, something known to all bibliophiles, and explored in the work of many poets and writers. It is no surprise, perhaps, that the people who write books often also write about them. In a recent article in the London Review of Books, Anne Enright recalled her father’s determination to collect books such as The Golden Ass by Apuleius, even smuggling them into the country from his honeymoon, in the face of the repressive censorship laws in Ireland at the time. 13 Walter Benjamin, in his essay ‘Unpacking my Library,’ concluded that ‘for a collector [...] ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them.’ 14 The coming together of reader and text is also found in Wallace Stevens: ‘The house was quiet and the world was calm. / The reader became the book; and summer night / Was like the conscious being of the book’. 15

The books and manuscripts collected and used by the Irish Franciscans have been part of many lives, and many histories, from the most intimate experiences of reading to acts of public, national significance. The works created by Hughie O'Donoghue, Eoin Mac Lochlainn, Geraldine O’Reilly, Colin Martin and Robert Russell in response to their unique and strange journey reflect facets of these histories in different ways. Print, in a way, is similar to memory. It is created, it can perish, it can be subject to conflicting interpretations – it is an impression on a surface, often imperfect, often imprecise, but a record nonetheless, a positive imprint that provides a basis for the future. Pierre Nora’s words on the nature of memory could easily be read in relation to the nature of print:

Memory is life, always embodied in living subjects, and as such impermanent evolution, subject to the dialectics of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of the distortions to which it is subject, vulnerable in various ways to appropriation and manipulation, and capable of lying dormant for long periods only to be suddenly reawakened. 16

Books strengthen our inner reality. Marilyn Robinson, in her essay ‘When I Was A Child’, described how she modelled the intellectual culture of the character of Ruth in her novel *Housekeeping* on that which she had known herself: ‘The classical allusions, Carthage sown with salt and the sowing of dragon’s teeth which sprouted into armed men [...] My brother David brought home the fact that God is a sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. I never thought to ask him where he found it. Emily Dickinson and the Bible were blessedly unavoidable’. 17 Books and their memories flow through us and make us. This exhibition is a testament to script and print as ‘font’ but also as ‘fount’ of life and experience, rooted in the past, continuing to flow.
