

# ARTEOLOGY

Contemporary artists are increasingly citing archaeology as a new and exciting influence on their work and to discuss this topic, Hugh Kavanagh talked to Ian Russell, curator of the "Abhar agus Meon" art exhibition which ran alongside the recent WAC conference in Dublin.



*Ian, can you tell me how the "Abhar agus Meon" exhibition came about and your role in its curation.*

The Abhar agus Meon exhibition started with conversations between Prof. Gabriel Cooney at UCD Archaeology and Pat Cooke at UCD School of Art History and Cultural Policy and myself. Prof. Cooney was interested in developing an arts exhibitions programme around the proceedings of the Sixth World Archaeological Congress. We all thought that it would be great to contextualise WAC 6 within the synergy between archaeology and art that has existed in Ireland in the Rosc exhibitions of the 60s and 70s and the From Beyond the Pale show at IMMA from the mid 90s, and I was given the opportunity to develop an exhibition proposal and theme.

For a long time, I've been interested in organising exhibitions exploring the relationship between contemporary art and archaeology. During my PhD research in archaeology and history at Trinity College, I worked as an installer and invigilator in the Douglas Hyde Gallery. Working as an installer, I had the opportunity to meet many of the artists who showed in the space. The conversations were always broad ranging, but I began to realise that contemporary artists and archaeologists were, at times, taking part in a similar endeavour - manipulating material things to mediate ideas and interpretations. This experience prompted me to edit the volume *Images, Representations and Heritage* (Springer, New York - 2006) which brought together archaeologists, architects, artists and cultural theorists to discuss the relationships between archaeology, image making and artistic and poetic expression.

With the success of the volume, I began to explore the possibilities of initiating projects and exhibitions rather than books to explore the theoretical and practical relationships between art and archaeology. It was this direction that led me to curate the Abhar agus Meon exhibitions series.

The intention for the exhibitions was to turn towards the rich etymologies of the Irish language. The poetics of Irish help to undercut much of the theoretical difficulty of exploring the relationships between people and things in the modern world. 'Abhar' carries meanings of not only materials and matters but also subjects and themes, while 'meon' hints at mentality, ethos, and spirit. Through theme, we intended to explore how materials can be tempered through spirit and that through the mediation of mind and matter both become something new.

Funded by Foras na Gaeilge, University College Dublin, University of Notre Dame Office of Research, the Humanities Institute of Ireland and the Sixth World Archaeological Congress, the exhibitions series took the form of four events. A temporal recalibration of a heritage space at Newman House, St Stephen's Green, an exhibition interrogating objects of archaeological science at University College Dublin, an exploration of the palimpsest of heritage landscapes at the Irish Museum of Modern Art and the commissioning of new artistic creativity through the WAC 6 artist-in-residency which would realise a new piece of permanent sculpture on UCD's campus.

*Above, this page & next: Untitled 2007 by Aine Ivers  
Below, this page & next: Roots & Stone 2006 by Michael Jasmin*







I have also co-organised the World Archaeological Congress Fringe Festival with Steve Davis of UCD which saw a number of experimental archaeologists, craft demonstrators and performers explore archaeological themes more directly through interpretative practice and experience.

*There seem to be many synergies taking place between the arts and sciences just now and you mention the work you have carried out in exploring the relationship between contemporary art and archaeology. Archaeological illustrators and reconstruction artists would seem to be ideally placed to contribute to this synergy but from your point of view do you see a role for these highly specialised and technically skilled individuals?*

Yes, I certainly do see a role. Illustrators and reconstruction artists are continuing on the tradition of visually imagining past worlds and landscapes initiated by the early antiquarians such as Thomas Wright, Victor Du Noyer or George Petrie. Many of the first antiquarians' were trained artists. George Petrie himself made most of his earnings from illustrating tourism guide books, and he was also a fairly well known landscape painter.

Antiquarianism and archaeology both have relied on technologies for conveying, transferring and mediating visual impressions of places, sites, landscapes and artefacts. In fact, the visual component of the archaeological narrative is precisely what sets it apart from history. Scientific accuracy is an important aspiration for archaeological methods, but I feel that it is the subjective imagination of illustration and reconstruction that is unique within archaeological process and should be celebrated.



*I imagine that scientists and artists can experience a certain amount of conflict when working together due their divergent approaches to any subject. I know it is a simplification but some might say that scientists look at things in an objective manner while artists look at things more subjectively. How can the collaboration between artists and scientists be structured to ensure the most positive outcome?*

I try not to think about the relationship between art and science through the duality of subjectivity and objectivity. For me, what naturally brings the two together are doubt, uncertainty and faith. Science was born from doubting that the dogmas of the church were sufficient to explain how the world worked. Although science replaced the faith in the church with a faith in scientific objectivity, all good scientists always acknowledge a degree of uncertainty within their hypotheses, theories and even laws. To work through this uncertainty requires faith in the scientific endeavour, that it can make the world a better understood place. The arts revel in uncertainty and doubt, but artists work to produce experiences (sometimes objects, sometimes events). In turning towards post-object art, artists are creative agents within the building of relations in the world. These relations (between things, people and places) are what help create lived and experienced understanding. In a world that is extremely uncertain and in flux despite whatever objectivity science might offer, the relations which connect us with one another and the world are what create continuity, strength and resilience. For me, this is where the collaboration occurs - in the creative forging of new relations and the activation of old or forgotten relations between people, places and things helping create communities of awareness and shared experience to support, mediate and render intelligible and useful the project of science.

Above: Adam Burthom Bogland Book, 2007 mixed media







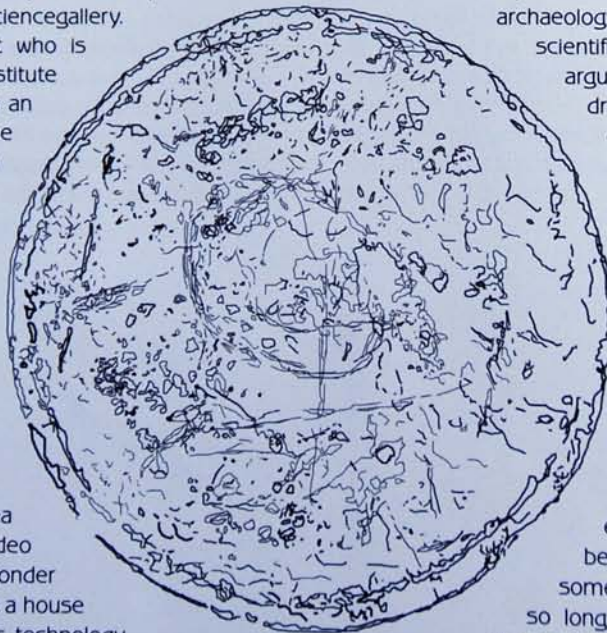
Fiona Coffey  
Sheep at Glendarragh  
(2007/8) bronze

Archaeology has been quick to adopt many new "remote sensing" technologies that have been initially developed for other applications such as navigation, construction and mining. I'm thinking of primarily of GPS, Geophysics, Laser scanning, LIDAR and Photogrammetry. Other related technologies such as CAD (Computer Aided Draughting), 3D digital modelling, GIS and digital photography have become commonplace in modern archaeological practice. Even if we leave archaeology aside, I think we are only scratching the surface of this new language. Have you had any experience of such new technologies and how do you see their application in the arts?

With so many new technologies in science and art, is there a fear that we can become infatuated with the process and miss the point of the work. Are we too reliant on technology?

My experience of these technologies has mainly been as an end-user or researcher, and you're right that reconstruction and imaging in archaeology has experienced a rapid acceleration in technological development in the last few decades. This is something that all of the sciences has been experiencing. The sciences in general have been producing denser and denser information-images using technology; however, these are, in effect, increasingly abstract - though they appear more 'realistic'. This sharp abstraction by technological visualisation in science, I feel is what has created the space for science to reach back to the arts to help explore these abstract and subjective realms. The Science Gallery at Trinity is an example of such an initiative ([www.sciencegallery.com](http://www.sciencegallery.com)). Sarah Sabin is an artist who is currently in residence at UCL's Institute of Archaeology, and her work is an exciting engagement with the 'hard science' of archaeological laboratory work (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/art/index.htm>). And there are more popular examples of this such as with Radiohead's video 'House of Cards' ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8nTFjVm9sTQ&feature=channel\\_page](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8nTFjVm9sTQ&feature=channel_page)). There is an interested 'making of' documentary here for the video (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyQoTGdQywy&feature=channel>). Watching the video and hearing the song makes me wonder whether archaeological science is a house of cards built on faith in scientific technology and hope that truth exists and can be represented.

Yes, I think you've rightly identified one of the challenges of our current situation in research - the balance between technology-led research and technology-enabled research. In many cases, technology-led research is setting the agenda. New technology is built, and then we scramble to apply for funding to do research using the technology, fitting our research agendas to the potentials of the technology. Technology-enabled research simply uses technology to help us do what we already do, but do it better. In the case of archaeological illustration, the question is what is the intention of the archaeologist in using illustration to represent or mediate the experience of excavating a site. Generally archaeology is interpretation (though using scientific methods), so what is the argument for using photography over drawing or painting? If it is to try to depict the site in a more 'real' way, then this is a technologically-led interpretation which places its faith and emphasis on the assumed ability for photographs to capture 'the real'. This can limit our interpretive thinking - in preference of 'documentation'. However, if the intention is to mediate or communicate interpretation or experience of a site, then this would be technologically-enabled practice. Drawing could be selected as the best practice in some instances, as could photography so long as it accepts the limitations of the medium and its impact on the reception of the images it creates.



Above: Brian Fay  
Black Centre Pillar, Woodhenge Circle Series 2007



Much of the work carried out by archaeological illustrators and surveyors is aimed at academic publication but there is an onus on the archaeological community to speak to the wider public. Television programmes such as "Time Team" and "Secrets of the Stones" have presented archaeological illustration and survey to the public in a new and exciting way and again there seems to have been a synergy between archaeologists and TV production designers that has yielded a product that could not have been achieved by working in isolation. From your experience in the wider arts, what do you think is the key to effectively communicating such specialised knowledge to the wider public?

I feel that the key in presenting such material to the public through the arts is not in communicating the science - but in communicating the intention, passion and ideas behind it. Working from this starting point, the visual technologies employed are only a medium through which to create experiences and hopefully understandings of ideas and stories. TV or the moving image in general is a medium which aims to do just this, so I feel that it is only natural that archaeology and TV have worked so well together.

In conclusion, I think that the AAI&S has priceless repository of skills and experience that has had little exposure outside of reports and publications. I think that we could all benefit from developing new perspectives on our work and perhaps there is a way that we could aim to tap into these skills and show them off in a fresh way and innovative way.

I agree completely, and I think it is an excellent time to reconsider the role of illustration and visual mediation of archaeology in general. This could be done in a number of ways and could really capture the public's imagination. I would love to see an exhibition of archaeological illustration in a public venue. It also could be wonderful to contextualise this within the history of archaeological and antiquarian illustration, perhaps exploring the work of George Petrie or Victor Du Noyer. I've been quite interested in how romance, the sublime, expression, impression and interpretation for par for the course of illustration before the advent of photography. Perhaps it would be interesting and fun to invite your members to explore their own practice and their own personal, emotive or imagined experiences of archaeological sites and objects, accessing the core of passion that they share with Petrie and all those before and after who have been compelled to explore the past. It might also be interesting to use archaeological illustration to create criticisms of contemporary art installations given their temporary nature - creating visual documents that interrogate their presence, absence and residual resonances within spaces akin. There are so many possibilities and opportunities to look forward to in the relationship between art and archaeology. I think it's time that archaeological illustration played a central part.

Any illustrators or surveyors who are interested in possible collaboration with artists can contact Hugh Kavanagh at [h.kavanagh@gmail.com](mailto:h.kavanagh@gmail.com)

Below: Julia Midgley: Trench 1, 2007 pencil and acrylic on graph paper

