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## **Surrealist Ireland: the Archaic, the Modern and the Marvellous**

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### **Abstract:**

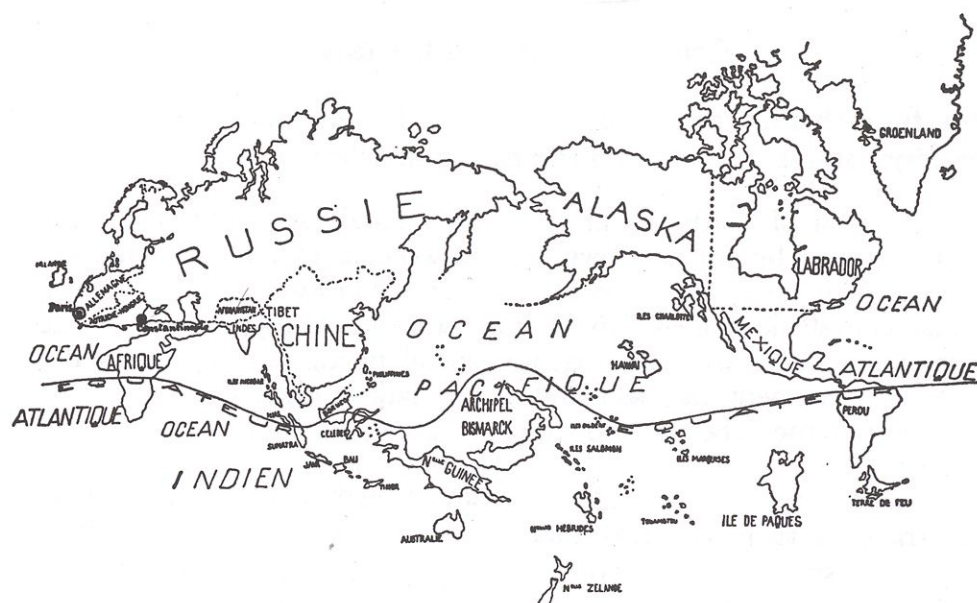
This essay has a dual focus: the representation of Ireland in Surrealism and the significance of Surrealism for Irish artists. The redrawn Surrealist map of the world (1929) gave Ireland a prominent position while Irish writers such as Swift and Synge played an important role in the formation of Surrealist ideas of the marvellous from an early stage. The disjuncture of notions of the archaic and the modern also informed the ways that Irish artists engaged with Surrealist strategies in their work.

Relationships between the marvellous, the archaic, the modern and notions of femininity are examined in the work of Colin Middleton and Leonora Carrington mid twentieth century, and in the more recent practice of Alice Maher. A restaged Surrealist inquiry by Gerard Byrne also problematizes relationships of archaic and modern with relevance for gender politics in Ireland.

### **Keywords**

Surrealism, Ireland, Antonin Artaud, Colin Middleton, Leonora Carrington, Alice Maher, Gerard Byrne, archaic, modern, marvellous

In 1929 the Belgian journal *Variétés* published a map of the world remade from a Surrealist perspective. The different countries of Western Europe have been replaced in significance by the islands of Polynesia, while the great bulk of Alaska dominates North America where the remainder of the United States used to be. Ireland is prominently included, floating off the coast of Europe and looming over the tiny blob that represents Britain. France, Britain's fellow imperial power, has disappeared completely, while Paris is now attached to the distorted remainder of Europe. The map indicates that Ireland had a distinct significance for the Surrealist group as a source of the marvellous. But how important was Surrealism for Ireland? The meanings of Ireland and Irishness within Surrealism are far from unitary; conversely, encounters with Surrealism by Irish artists have also been varied, taking a range of different forms in relation to other facets of their practice. This essay looks at selected aspects of this dual relationship. On the one hand there is the construction of Ireland within Surrealism itself, while on the other, the diverse meanings of Surrealism for the Northern Irish artist Colin Middleton, or the painter Leonora Carrington, or indeed more recent practitioners Alice Maher or Gerard Byrne.



**Fig. 1, 'The World in the Time of the Surrealists', (1929), *Variétés*, 26-27**

This is a line of enquiry that becomes possible in the wake of several exhibitions in Ireland in recent years, two of which were at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin (IMMA). *The Moderns* (2010-2011), an ambitious exploration of the development of modernism in Ireland between 1900 and 1975, in turn opened the

way for a major retrospective (2013-2014) of the work of the Surrealist artist Leonora Carrington. Meanwhile a further exhibition on a smaller scale, *The Surreal in Irish Art* staged at the F.E. McWilliam Studio Gallery in Banbridge, Northern Ireland in 2011, provided an overview of the significance of Surrealism for Irish artists from the 1930s onwards. These exhibitions have opened up opportunities to probe more deeply into the relationship between Irishness and Surrealism. This raises questions of the role of Irishness within the formation of ideas of the marvellous, yet it additionally involves discussions of temporality, the relationship between the archaic and modern that is also more broadly speaking a feature of modernism itself. The selection of artists whose practice is discussed here also foregrounds issues of gender politics, fundamental to an understanding of the role of desire and the irrational within Surrealism.

### **Surrealism, Ireland and the Marvellous**

André Breton and his fellow poets and artists were systematic in their pursuit of the irrational. This included careful documentation of their activities such as the early experiments with hypnosis and automatic writing or the slightly later “Recherches sur la sexualité”, an inquiry published in *La Révolution Surréaliste* in 1928. They also, however, produced comprehensive lists of writers they admired that included their cultural antecedents, some of whom were Irish. This emerged in the journal *Littérature* edited by Breton with the poets Louis Aragon and Philippe Soupault, an important precursor for the emergence of Surrealism in Paris in 1924. The March 1921 issue opened with a league table of famous men – the central figures themselves, their friends and their heroes - graded by Breton and Tristan Tzara. Jonathan Swift comes in at number sixteen, just below the Marquis de Sade (Ades 1978, 165). Swift was the Irish writer figuring most frequently in these citations, praised in the 1924 Manifesto of Surrealism as “Surrealist in malice”, and featuring in a table published by Breton in 1930. “Read... Don’t Read” systematically classified the achievements of both the Surrealists themselves and their precursors, whose presence helps to validate the late writers’ and artists’ own privileged access to the unconscious (Breton 1978a). It includes a selection of Irish figures with Swift and Bishop Berkeley near the top then further on both the early nineteenth century Gothic writer Charles Maturin, author of *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), and the playwright John Millington Synge. In addition

to excerpts from Synge, Breton also included excerpts from Swift's *Modest Proposal* and other writings in the *Anthology of Black Humour* (Breton 2009, 122, orig. 1940).

Irish writers were clearly a part of the pantheon of the marvellous invoked by Breton as a means of undermining the institutions of Western capitalism and imperialism. Surrealist politics also included opposition to French attempts to crush an uprising in the Rif area of Morocco in 1925, an early instance of the group's anti-colonialism. As Luke Gibbons has observed, one of the notable achievements of Surrealism, certainly as far as Ireland was concerned, was "to recast the relationship of modernism to the colonial periphery – and, not least, to Ireland on the periphery of Europe" (Gibbons 2011, 91). Yet this move also takes place within wider conditions of the emergence of modernism, bound up with the development of the nation-state as an entity distinct from late Victorian imperialism (Armstrong 2005, 44). And the first nation to gain independence from British rule in 1922 is right there at the westernmost edge of the Surrealist map.

What would happen if we were to continue to shift the oblique view of this map even further, to look back from its western extremity? Ireland then becomes the point from which the cultural formation of Surrealism and, by implication, the rest of European modernism, is observed. The Surrealist gaze positioned Ireland in relation to their own place within the competing avant-gardes of 1920s Paris; Ireland's associations with the marvellous and the irrational became part of the development of both literary and artistic representational strategies that privileged the disruptive power of the unconscious.

From the early years of the twentieth century a fascination with the marvellous and the fantastic, areas of prime interest for Surrealism, was also a central feature of the Celtic Revival, primarily derived from an engagement with Irish folk culture. The significance of the mythological in W.B. Yeats' poetry or James Stephens' fiction was accompanied by the mystical visions of "AE's" paintings<sup>1</sup> However rather than being a retreat from modernity this interest in a Celtic timelessness should be seen as a

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<sup>1</sup> 'A.E.' was the pseudonym of George William Russell (1867-1935), an Irish writer and painter associated with the Celtic Revival.

particular response to its conditions. Terry Eagleton – among others - has argued that this is to do with the tension between the archaic and the modern experienced by Anglo-Irish Revivalists such as Yeats and Synge (Eagleton 1995, 251). In a similar fashion Geoffrey Castle has also proposed that it is the “tension between the archaic and the modern that characterises Irish modernism generally” (Castle 2001, 207). Yet this dialectic of old and new is actually much more pervasive. As Tim Armstrong observes, modernism operates “with notions of temporality which overlap, collide, and register their own incompleteness” (2005, 9). This is a recognition that helps to situate Ireland more fully within wider analyses of the development of modernism itself.

The “archaic”, however, is not just a feature of the survival of Celtic mythology. It also figures within a fascination with the peasantry of the Western seaboard who also represented an outmoded way of life within a gradually modernising Ireland, heroically depicted in the early paintings of Jack B. Yeats or John Millington Synge’s photographs of the Aran islanders and plays such as *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907). Synge’s representations of the Western peasantry played a significant role in the construction of a notion of Irishness within Surrealism. Although initially featuring in an unpublished list of proto-Surrealist “great writers” in 1920 (Breton 1920), it was only in 1940 in the *Anthology of Black Humour* that Breton more fully elaborated his respect for Synge. The *Anthology* included the scene from *The Playboy of the Western World* where Christy Mahon graphically recounts the killing of his father to the widow Quin and three admiring girls - a description of gratuitous violence in an Oedipal murder that fitted well with attacks on bourgeois morality found elsewhere in the *Anthology*. In his introduction to Synge, Breton admired the play as a significant piece of contemporary drama, characterised by a sexual realism that had prompted riots in Dublin and New York; he also identified Synge’s use of the lyricism of peasant speech as a source material, praising his ability to “strip this magnificent primitive tree down to its very sap” (Breton 2009, 251). However, as Sinéad Garrigan Mattar has observed, Synge’s primitivism was due neither to any presumed empathy with “primitive” peoples nor to a “superhuman objectivity in the way he viewed them, but rather to his modernist belief in the otherness of the primitive psyche” (Mattar 2004, 131). There was possibly more in common between Breton and Synge than might at first appear.

Admiration for Synge's ability to tap the sources of the primitive, similar to the workings of a Surrealist ethnography, was not just confined to Breton. It also prompted a visit by Antonin Artaud who visited Ireland in 1937 in "search of the sources of a very ancient tradition". This quest had already taken him to Mexico the previous year, where he had sought to reinvent his identity through contact with primal forces he believed could be accessed through the peyote ritual of the Tarahumara. Now it had brought him "to the land where John Millington Synge lived" on a mission that was similarly transformative (*The Dublin Review* 2000-2001). Artaud arrived in August without either passport or visa but with a letter of introduction written by the Irish Minister Plenipotentiary in Paris, Art O'Briain. He was carrying a cane that he believed once belonged to St Patrick and hence possessed great mystical power; Artaud's aim was to return this relic to Ireland, where it would help to trigger an apocalypse once restored to its rightful home (Barber 1993, 91). Following his reading of Synge, Artaud believed the geographic remoteness of the Aran Islands to mean that they were also far from the destructive effects of civilisation, and so this is where he journeyed to await the impending cataclysm. After a stay on Inishmore, the largest of the islands, he left once more for Galway and then for Dublin, still hopeful that the magical power of St. Patrick's staff would produce the desired result. Unfortunately at this point Artaud managed to lose the cane in a fight with the police. His mental condition had also deteriorated to a point from which it never fully recovered; deported back to France, he was immediately incarcerated in the first of several psychiatric hospitals where he remained for much of the rest of his life.

### **Surrealism in Ireland**

Rather than a generic "Irishness", then, there were different ways in which Irish writers could be appropriated to the interests of Surrealism. Swift's satirical advocacy of cannibalism as a solution to over-population in the *Modest Proposal* resonated with the Surrealist attack on the bourgeois family and the state. For Artaud and other Surrealists, meanwhile, a reading of Synge positioned Ireland as a further source of the primitive and the marvellous. This was in turn conflated with the celebration of an archaic past located in the remote West of the country. In Ireland of the 1930s, however, the West had very different connotations. The representation of the region

had played a strategic role in the cultural work of decolonisation; as the area most remote from Britain, the counties west of the River Shannon were celebrated as the home of a hardworking, Gaelic-speaking, Catholic peasantry. Despite the increasing poverty of rural communities and the escalation of emigration to Britain or the United States the mythologizing of the region continued throughout the decade. This ruralist agenda of ethnic nationalism was also predominant in art practice through the academic realism of painters like Seán Keating or the increasingly schematic western landscapes of Paul Henry that played upon the nostalgia of their urban audiences (Barber 2013).

Throughout the decade Surrealism began to spread within the European avant-garde, extending to Britain in 1936 with the formation of the British Surrealist Group. However despite Breton's acknowledgement of Ireland's associations with the marvellous there was no comparable grouping in Ireland itself. In the context of what Terence Brown has called "the unruffled conservatism of Irish intellectual and cultural life of the 1930s" there was little that could be described as a collective avant-garde (1995, 29). Surrealism, however, did take on a particular significance for artists in Northern Ireland, distinct from the Irish Free State after Partition in 1922. In Northern Ireland's provincial art world of the 1930s Surrealism signified contemporary internationalism. This was certainly the case for Colin Middleton or Nevill Johnson, for both of whom the visual language of Surrealism subsequently developed into a means of articulating a response to the Second World War.

For artists in relatively remote areas such as Northern Ireland print media was the main source of information about contemporary art practice. During the 1930s this meant that the work of Salvador Dalí was probably the most accessible version of Surrealism for artists lacking other sources. Dalí consequently proved to be a significant figure for both Middleton and Johnson. Colin Middleton had been a member of the Ulster Unit in 1934, a short-lived attempt at establishing the first avant-garde group of artists in Northern Ireland (Kennedy 1991, 73-77). Always interested in assimilating innovations from contemporary modernism within his own practice, he may have encountered Surrealism first-hand early in the 1930s on a visit to Belgium (Coulter 2010, 12). The Surrealism that he adopted, however, was that which was

readily available in reproductions in the art press back in Belfast. By 1938 in paintings such as *Spain: a Dream Revisited*, which made explicit reference to the Spanish Civil War, or *Winter*, the influence of Dalí or similarly illusionistic painters associated with British Surrealism such as Edward Wadsworth or Tristram Hillier is clearly visible in Middleton's work. However the significance of Surrealism really becomes apparent in his paintings from the early years of the Second World War. Unlike the Irish Free State, which remained neutral during the Second World War, Northern Ireland's status as a part of the United Kingdom meant an active involvement, although it was not until the "Belfast Blitz" of 1941 that there was a loss of life comparable to that in Britain. Many of Middleton's paintings from after this date, such as *Strange Openings*, engaged with the uncannily transformed cityscape that resulted from the bombings (Woodward 2015, 151-164).

However prior to this event the visible presence of refugees from mainland Europe and a degree of rationing were continual reminders of the conflict. Middleton's *Paysage des Rêves Mauvais* ("Landscape of Bad Dreams", 1940) is full of elements of instability and uncertainty that combine to give a sense of unease signified by the title, which, untranslated, also acts as a reminder of occupied France at this time. The painting overtly acknowledges Dalí in its staging of the irrational within fully imagined perspectival space and precise draughtsmanship that also derives from Middleton's training as a damask designer. A semi-clad female figure depicted within her barren setting appears to be teetering unawares on a cliff edge, barely supported by the bent ladder on which she is leaning, or the spindly tripod that she grasps with one hand. A regular feature of Middleton's work was the inclusion of personal symbolism; here the experience of collective trauma can be read as reinforced by grief following the unexpected death of his wife Maye in 1939. The motif of woman in a landscape setting was one that he had used earlier, in *Winter*; rather than the deconstructive methods of Freudian psychoanalysis more commonly advocated within Surrealism, Middleton consciously drew upon holistic Jungian archetypes of femininity throughout his career (Coulter 2008). However there can also be read here a wider significance beyond the personal. The use of apparently ahistorical archetypes to articulate a response to contemporary cataclysm situates Middleton's Surrealist paintings much more firmly



within the relationship between archaic and modern that lies at the heart of Irish modernism itself.

### **Leonora Carrington and the Diasporic Twilight**

In 2013 the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin (IMMA) staged a major retrospective of the work of the Surrealist painter Leonora Carrington who had died two years previously. Carrington has repeatedly figured in feminist re-readings of Surrealism focused on the role of women as producers of art rather than just its subject matter or inspiration (Allmer 2009; Chadwick 1991; Conley 1996). The IMMA exhibition, entitled *Leonora Carrington: The Celtic Surrealist* additionally emphasised the role that Irishness played within her work as both a painter and a writer. Although she was born in Lancashire in 1917, Carrington's mother was from Ireland; both Irish literature and mythology played a significant role in shaping her identity as an artist. For artists in Ireland of the 1930s and 1940s such as Middleton or Johnson Surrealism offered an alternative to provincialism, in enabling them to situate themselves in relation to both a contemporary avant-garde and the international conflict of the Second World War. Although this is coterminous with Carrington's early career, a relationship between Irishness and Surrealism as developed within her own practice took on a very different form, mediated through other aspects of her own distinctive position: including her role as artistic muse within Surrealism, as a survivor of a traumatic mental breakdown, and as a diasporic artist. All of these factors contribute to the ways that the relationship between the archaic and the modern is played out within Carrington's paintings.

Leonora Carrington's involvement with the Surrealists began when she visited the *First International Surrealist Exhibition* at the New Burlington Galleries in 1936. At this time she had left her family home at Hazelwood Hall in Lancashire and was studying art at Ozenfant's Academy in London. At the Surrealist exhibition she was particularly impressed by the work of Max Ernst, which she encountered there for the first time. A year later she had embarked on a serious relationship with Ernst, who was twenty-six years older, following him to Paris where her youth, beauty and independence meant that she was rapidly accepted in Surrealist circles. For Breton she represented the *femme-enfant*, the embodiment of Surrealist womanhood whose naivety, irrationality

and intuition mean that she stands outside of bourgeois convention and hence closer to the unconscious, where she then becomes the source of inspiration for the male artist. Carrington, however, was less interested in being a Surrealist muse than in the opportunities for her life in Paris to further her continued rebellion against the repressive restrictions of her Anglo-Catholic family.

In 1938 she and Ernst moved to St. Martin d'Ardèche, a small village in the South of France. However her relationship with Ernst ended suddenly in 1940 when, for the second time, he was imprisoned in a concentration camp in the South of France as an enemy alien. Deeply traumatised, Carrington suffered a severe breakdown exacerbated by the need to flee from St. Martin d'Ardèche with two companions. Although initially finding refuge in the relative safety of Franco's Spain, her precarious mental state resulted in her being confined in a psychiatric hospital in Santander where she was treated with Cardazol, a drug that induces convulsive spasms similar to those produced by electric shock therapy. *En Bas (Down Below)*, her account of this period, was subsequently published in 1944 in the Surrealist journal *VVV*. On her release Carrington was eventually able to escape to New York by the expedient of marrying the Mexican diplomat Renato Leduc; here she played an active part in the activities of the exiled Surrealist group reconstituted around the figure of Breton. Leduc and Carrington then travelled to Mexico and subsequently parted; Carrington meanwhile found her place within a thriving community of artists who, like her, had found themselves exiled from Europe as a result of the war. She established lasting friendships with two women, the Hungarian photographer Kati Horna and the Spanish painter Remedios Varo, who had initially come to Mexico with the Surrealist poet Benjamin Péret. Carrington remained in Mexico for much of the rest of her life, increasingly recognised as an artist of some significance within the Mexican avant-garde.

Although Irish-derived imagery played a significant role throughout Carrington's career, this had its roots in memories of her childhood. Her mother Maurie Moorhead came from Moate in Co. Westmeath in the centre of Ireland. The family was extremely wealthy; her father Harold Carrington was the principal shareholder of Imperial Chemicals, and was reputedly also related to Oscar Wilde, thus compounding the Irish

lineage. It was, however, her maternal genealogy that was more important. Carrington's childhood was filled with Irish stories and myths told by her nanny Mary Kavanaugh and her mother. Maurie additionally claimed kinship with Maria Edgeworth, the early nineteenth century author of *Castle Rackrent* (1800), a satirical account of the Anglo-Irish landlords' mis-management of their estates. These associations of Irishness with narratives of the fantastic were in turn reinforced by the tales told on holidays with her maternal grandmother; Grandmother Moorhead claimed descent from the Tuatha dé Danann – the "People of Danu" who were ancient supernatural figures reputed to have been the country's rulers and who later survived as the Sidhe, mysterious inhabitants of Ireland's fairy mounds. The oral narratives of these mythological stories were reinforced by Carrington's own childhood reading of Celtic Revival writer James Stephens' collection *The Crock of Gold* (1912), itself an imaginative retelling of the Tuatha dé Danann sagas closer to the early romantic primitivism of W.B. Yeats than Synge's modernism. However she also read Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. As Seán Kissane points out, Swift was not only a significant source for Carrington's later work, but as the vicar of Larecor early in his career he lived close to Moate; the tiny settlement of Lilliput is situated several miles away (Kissane 2013, 61). The strong association of Ireland with the marvellous and the irrational was similar to that also proposed by Breton and other Surrealists, both in terms of the primitivism of the Celtic revival and Swift's iconoclasm. Yet rather than functioning as an exoticised source of "Otherness", a sense of Irishness figured within Carrington's practice in very different terms, and was deeply embedded in the formation of her identity from a very early age.

The relationship of Ireland, Surrealism and the fantastic in Carrington's work was far from static, as can be seen in a comparison of two paintings that engage with these themes, albeit very differently. *The Meal of Lord Candlestick* (1938), an early work that dates from Carrington's move to Paris to live with Ernst, depicts a nightmarish feast, a table-top spread with fantastic food and ornately baroque foliage and fruit, at the centre of which a horse's head crowned with flowers confronts a skeleton on a platter, already picked clean. The diners are elegantly attired ladies with elongated, equine necks and in one case a mane of hair. The figure on the right, meanwhile, uses her fork to make an initial stab into the belly of a young child carefully laid out as part of the

banquet. In 1729 Swift's satirical essay *A Modest Proposal* had advocated the uses of cannibalism as a measure to address the overpopulation and extreme poverty of the Irish Catholic poor, suggesting that "a child will make two dishes at an entertainment for friends and when the family dines alone, the fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable dish..." (Swift, 38). Carrington, whose mother had presented her at court in 1936, fiercely rejected the upper class milieu that her parents inhabited. Kissane suggests that *The Meal of Lord Candlestick* can be situated within a contemporary political context, commenting on "class and inequality at a time when... King Edward VIII impotently said of the poor in Wales in 1936, 'something must be done'" (2013, 67). There is also a more direct family reference; "Lord Candlestick" was the name that Carrington gave her father, who, like a bloated Green Man, appears in the bottom left corner, his face surmounted with leaves. Yet Carrington also identified strongly with horses, the animals that form the substance of this meal; at a time when she had so recently rejected the restrictions of her life in England it is hard not to read this scene as embodying a fear of being devoured by her family and their social class, with all that these represented.

Breton later included Swift's "A Modest Proposal" in his *Anthology of Black Humour*, which also contained Leonora Carrington's short story "The Debutante" written in 1939 (Carrington 1978). In a fantastical retelling of her own presentation at court, the author's place is taken by a hyena wearing the face of the maid, whom the animal has conveniently eaten; in addition to the story's Swiftian amorality, while the ball is taking place the narrator sits down by an open window to read a copy of *Gulliver's Travels*. Yet Swift's viciously black humour was superseded in Carrington's later works by a different engagement with Irish culture, also derived initially from her childhood reading. *The Sidhe, the White People of Tuatha de Danann* (1954), like the earlier *The Meal of Lord Candlestick*, depicts a communal feast, but with significant distinctions. This dimly lit space surrounds a group of magical beings engaged in some kind of ritual in which the viewer becomes an initiate; these are the mythological Sidhe, now enclosed underground in the timeless space of their fairy mound.



**Fig 2: Leonora Carrington, *The Sidhe, the White People of Tuatha de Danann*, 1954 oil on canvas 59.5 x 78.5 cm, private collection**

By the time this picture was painted, Carrington had been an active participant for approximately a decade within the cosmopolitan hybridity of the European artists' community in Mexico City. Yet her identity had also undergone a fundamental transition as a result of her terrifying experience in the psychiatric hospital in Santander some years earlier. Both of these are factors that are significant in relation not just to a shift in her personal imagery, but in terms of the wider cultural significance of the configuration of Irishness, Surrealism and the marvellous that this can be seen to represent. Initially, Carrington's survival of her mental breakdown meant that she was perceived by Breton as having metamorphosed from *femme-enfant* to another highly ambivalent category of femininity, the *femme-sorcière*. In Susan L. Aberth's words this represents "an ambassador back from the 'other side'... who had returned from the underworld armed with visionary powers" (Aberth 2010, 8). Carrington, however, resisted this categorisation as merely another type of Surrealist muse and instead seems to have adopted it on her own terms. Instead of the use of Swiftian rhetoric in a savage depiction of youthful rebellion against her family, an Irishness more closely associated with the concerns of the Celtic Revival now becomes part of a more complex range of references bound up with nostalgia, hybridity and a more affirmative and holistic view of femininity.

On the altar-like table top of *The Sidhe* are a group of items that suggest a relationship between aspects of Celtic and other mythological traditions, in addition to a reference to the culture of the artist's adopted home in Mexico. The soup bowl and ladle are reminiscent of the regenerative cauldron of the Celtic Triple-Goddess that figures in many of Carrington's other paintings, such as *The House Opposite* (1945) in addition to playing a significant role in the plot of one of her novels, *The Hearing Trumpet* (Carrington 1976). Scattered nearby are two different kinds of fruit: a yam, indigenous to Mexico, and pomegranates, mythologically associated with Persephone, daughter of the Greek goddess Demeter and who, for half the year, is confined underground like the Sidhe themselves. Carrington's use of the signs of archetypal femininity in her work suggests comparisons also with Colin Middleton's use of Jungian constructions of female identity. In both cases these are images that convey a temporal disjuncture characteristic of the experience of modernity, in that their archaism is in sharp contradiction to contemporary reality, whether this be wartime Belfast or cosmopolitan Mexico. By this stage, however, Carrington's hybridised phantasmagoria had become characterised by esoteric references from a multiplicity of sources, whether diasporic – unlike Middleton's - or otherwise. This was further supported by her reading in 1949 of Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* (1948). Similar to the late nineteenth century scholar Johann Jakob Bachofen, Graves proposed a prehistoric matriarchal religion, subsequently superseded by the advent of patriarchy; for Graves this was derived from a reading of comparative mythology. Although this thesis has been widely criticised for a lack of archaeological and historical evidence, its language of poetic imagery also translated readily into visual form. Carrington was later to state that reading "*The White Goddess* represented the greatest revelation of my life" (Chadwick 1991, 186).

The theme of the tabletop ritual in *The Sidhe, the White People of Tuatha de Danann* appears frequently in Carrington's work. In her earlier painting *Three Women with Crows* (1951) the three female figures seated round the table appear to be undergoing some kind of magical transformation. This is a painting that can be seen as a mediated representation of the bonds of female friendship that she had formed in the exiled European artistic community. Rather than the public space of the café, associated with masculine formations of the avant-garde back in Paris, Carrington, Varo and Horna

spent considerable time in each other's kitchens discussing art, photography and politics in addition to the concerns of their families; Varo, like Carrington, was also deeply interested in occult traditions. For Carrington, the domestic functioned as a potent site for interconnected transformative processes – magic, cooking and painting (Aberth 2010, 63). In *Grandmother Moorhead's Aromatic Kitchen* (1975) the kitchen is identified with the memory of her Irish grandmother's magical tales, yet it also contains Mexican implements: a *comal* (griddle) and *metate* (mortar) for grinding corn (Moorhead 2010, 83). The themes that Carrington derived from Irish and pan-Celtic mythology, further shaped through an embedded knowledge of Surrealism's focus on the irrational and the marvellous, therefore become reconstituted and transformed into the articulation of her place within a hybridised diasporic culture in mid-century Mexico.

### **Shifting cartographies: Surrealism and contemporary Irish art**

In 1929 Ireland was situated firmly at the western edge of the Surrealist map, positioned there by a modernist projection that privileged Paris as its main point of reference. Ireland was still positioned relative to the perceptions of a European avant-garde, for whom Irish literary antecedents were as much signifiers of Parisian cosmopolitanism as the relics of tribal African cultures in Breton's personal collection. By this point Ireland had been politically independent for the past seven years, removed from the colonial relationships characterising the connections between Britain and Europe from much of the rest of the world. Yet Irish art was generally perceived as marginal to innovations elsewhere within a canonical designation of centre and periphery. However in the more recent context where hybridity, fluidity and cosmopolitanism have become the norm, the situation for artists in both Ireland and other "peripheral" locations has changed considerably. This also involves the potential for selective encounters with the past in relation to the needs and interests of contemporary artists. This final section focuses on work by two contemporary Irish artists, Alice Maher and Gerard Byrne, whose work engages with Surrealism. Although there are considerable differences between their respective practices, for both artists aspects of Surrealism have figured within wider projects of the deconstruction of gender stability, temporality and the modern.

## Alice Maher

Alice Maher's work is frequently recognised as having affinities with Surrealism, and a photograph from her *Portraits* series (2003) was featured on the cover of the exhibition catalogue for *The Surreal in Irish Art* (2011). Yet her Surrealist affinities extend beyond similarities of imagery and iconography to include aspects of both source materials and the methods used to work with these.

In *L'Université*, a site-specific work included in the artist's mid-career retrospective *Becoming* (2012-2013), small spotlights illuminate the wooden surface of desks racked in the darkness of a disused lecture theatre. The exhibition took place in an annexe of IMMA, a nineteenth century building in Earlsfort Terrace in the city centre that had formerly been the site of University College Dublin (UCD). Originating as part of a political initiative to challenge the hegemony of the protestant Trinity College by establishing a catholic university, UCD played an important part in the cultural life of the city during the drive towards independence and subsequently; James Joyce was one of its former students (Kissane 2012, 9). The tiny pools of light on the desktops of the old Medical School lecture theatre draw attention to the "successive curtains of graffiti" carved out on the wooden surface (Alice Maher, email message to the author, 27 June 2015). The names of bored students, drawings, song lyrics, declarations of love, despair and obscenity provide an experiential record remaining long after the subject matter of the lectures themselves has been forgotten. Some are particularly poignant: "I Miss Her 11/10/99" is followed by the equally grief-stricken "I Still Miss Her 1/12/99". The single lights suspended from leads looped across the space of the lecture theatre made visible a selection of these different inscriptions; Maher specifically selected those that stood out as unique, historic, emotive or uncanny. *L'Université* highlights an alternative genealogy to the official history of the institution, yet the randomness and anonymity of the desktop inscriptions also suggest the graffiti photographed on the walls of night-time Paris by Brassai, and published in the Surrealist journal *Minotaure* in 1933. In their evocation of hidden desires Brassai's photographs draw upon the Surrealist perception of the city as a site of the irrational, located within the areas overlooked by the progressive drive of modernisation. One of the earliest instances of this is recounted in Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant* (1926). Like the disused lecture theatre transformed into Maher's *L'Université*, in Aragon's account



the nineteenth century Passage de l'Opéra, soon to be demolished, becomes a site of the marvellous and the uncanny; both are instances of outmoded spaces that jar against later moments of modernity.

The temporal disjuncture implicit in Alice Maher's *L'Université* can be seen in terms of the contradictory relationship of archaic and modern characterising modernism in Ireland, just as it also evokes characteristics of Surrealism. Issues of heterogeneity and fluidity of identity are also central to her work. Although additionally containing references to Celticism, the past that emerges within her practice is predominantly the hybridity of the Anglo-Norman period in Ireland, rejected by the Celtic Revival "in the search for their identity, going back to a more archaic Irishness in search of a 'purer' ancestor" (Barber 2004, 96). However the return of the past within the present in Surrealism was often figured not just as the outmoded, but in terms of the disturbing effects of the uncanny (Foster 1995). This is something that also resonates within Maher's work, as in the film-drawing *The Double* (2009), where the staging of the uncanny co-exists with other aspects of her practice reminiscent of Surrealist aesthetic categories, including both the found object and the chance encounter, in addition to the questioning of constructions of femininity found in the work of women Surrealist artists.



**Fig.3, Alice Maher, Still from *The Double* (2009) Video animation with sound by Trevor Knight. 5 min 5 sec.**

Drawing has played a significant aspect in Alice Maher's work since the series *The Thicket* (1991), where the image of a young girl engaged in a range of different activities emerges out of the palimpsest of markings and erasures layered onto the paper's surface. Similar processes of transformation and metamorphosis permeate the later film-drawings. *The Double* (2009) and its companion piece *Flora* were part of an installation entitled *The Music of Things*; each had their own musical sound track written by Trevor Knight. Approximately five minutes long, the looped projection of *The Double* provides an ongoing phantasmagoria in a succession of images that continually shift and metamorphose between human and non-human, animate and non-animate. The film records drawing as a physical process (Krčma 2012, 113); working on the same sheet of paper, Maher drew until she had an image that she wanted to capture. After scanning into a computer, the image was partly erased and overdrawn until the next stage was reached and the process repeated. In the film-drawings the narrativity inherent in *The Thicket* now becomes explicit and more open-ended, while also retaining traces of the past uncannily visible within the work's surface through the buildup of erasures. In the final sequence of *The Double*, a sphinx-like female with a modern hairstyle and triple breasts suckles three severed male heads; these are reminiscent of Maher's earlier sculptural work *Gorget* (2001), in which a small ring of heads evokes an ancient Celtic necklace. In the next stage of the film-drawing, the additional breast has become re-absorbed into the sphinx's body and the third head disappears before she discards the remaining two. Finally she sits alone, her arms folded in a gesture of self-containment. The image of the sphinx, as a symbol of female wisdom, also figures in Carrington's work, an artist with whom Maher has declared an affinity, finding "many mutual friends amongst (Carrington's) lexicon of creatureliness" (Maher 2013). However rather than the arcane frame of reference in Carrington's work Maher's sphinx with her elegant hairstyle and dangling earrings collapses the categories of archaic and modern within a hybridised temporality.

### **Gerard Byrne**

In the work of Middleton, Carrington or Maher encounters with Surrealism have been linked to representations of femininity, albeit in different ways. The focus of feminist readings of Surrealism from the 1980s onwards has also been largely on the prominent role played by both constructions of femininity and the activities of women artists

themselves within the movement. In the work of Gerard Byrne, by comparison, Surrealism provides a focus on the formation of masculinity, specifically in his multichannel video installation *A Man and a Woman Make Love* (2012). Yet this project can also be situated in relation to the continued development of gendered readings in, for example, Amy Lyford's interrogation of Surrealist masculinity, or David Hopkins' analysis of the homosocial in post-Duchampian art practice (Lyford 2007; Hopkins 2008). This focus on masculinity has been a consistent feature of Byrne's practice, closely allied to a deconstruction of fixed and determinate views of history, as he clarified in an interview with Kirsty Ogg,

I think that historical discourses... re-inscribe patriarchal forms and norms. Part of the critical traction of what I've been doing for a while involves a certain deconstruction of these patriarchal representations. Not so much in an explicit activist gesture, but deconstructive in the sense that the works reproduce, or re-enact these historical referents in ways that make them palpably vulnerable...

(2013, 23)

Initially commissioned for Documenta 13 in Kassel, *A Man and a Woman Make Love* is a re-enactment of the "Recherches sur la sexualité", published in the eleventh issue of the journal *La Révolution Surréaliste* in March 1928. From about 1998 onwards, a particular feature of Byrne's work has been on a number of "magazine projects" focused on a restaging of the printed word as a series of dramatised and filmed encounters that both reveal and yet undermine the aims of the original, and in turn, open up questions about the progressive and utopian rhetoric of modernity. Yet Byrne's sources are also media that have become outmoded within the digital culture that provides the means of production of the magazine projects – a temporal disjuncture not unlike that between archaic and modern emerging within readings of Maher's work, or even that of Carrington and Middleton in this context. One of the earlier magazine projects most relevant to *A Man and a Woman...* is *New Sexual Lifestyles* (2003), based on a round table discussion published in *Playboy* forty years previously. Similar to the later work, a group of actors play the roles of the original participants discussing a wide range of sexual activities and preferences. Although the "Recherches" and the *Playboy* round table were separated by some forty-five years,

both events can be seen as articulating prerogatives of sexual libertarianism, and in both instances their restaging reveals the contradictions that underpin these claims. In the original transcript of the “Recherches” published in *La Révolution Surréaliste* a group of Surrealists, all male, discuss their attitudes to a wide range of sexual practices. Those taking part were artists and writers, yet their accounts have more in common with the clinical tone of the emergent scientific discourse of sexology as they assess the desirability or otherwise of brothels, fetishism or homosexuality. Despite this, however, individual prejudices still persist that reveal the underlying heteronormativity of Surrealism; in particular, when Raymond Queneau asserts his acceptance of homosexuality, Breton, who is controlling the shape of the discussion, abruptly changes the subject.



**Fig. 4 Gerard Byrne *A man and a woman make love* (2012) Multi-channel projection, Duration: variable loop of approx. 19min. Commissioned by dOCUMENTA 13, Kassel, 2012**

This succession of desires, preferences and aspirations provides a cross-section of Surrealist masculine attitudes towards sexuality; that these were predominantly heterosexual was reinforced by the inclusion in the next edition of *La Révolution Surréaliste* of the montaged individual photographs of members of the group, their eyes closed, surrounding a painting of a female nude by Rene Magritte. This montage was reconstructed, albeit in an altered form, for Byrne’s *A Man and a Woman...* using

photographs of the actors playing the parts of the Surrealists in his restaged version. Here however there is a different spatial relationship between the variably sized photographs, jostling each other across the picture space rather than the original version's systematic layout. The omission of Magritte's painting also shifts attention away from the objectification of women found throughout the narratives of the "Recherches" and helps to make it clear that this is now a project as much about relationships between men as it is about the redeployment of modernist representational strategies that are used in their investigation.

The authority of the quasi-scientific discourse of the "Recherches" is subverted in *A Man and a Woman...* by use of a range of different strategies of production that defamiliarise the narrative and encourage viewers to question what they are seeing. This piece shares some of the production features that Mark Godfrey identified as common to Byrne's earlier magazine projects (Godfrey 2007). The actors stick closely to the transcript of the "Recherches" rather than adding any degree of improvisation, and the finished film has been edited in such a way as to undermine any sense of narrative continuity. When *A Man and a Woman...* was shown at the Whitechapel Gallery as part of the artist's retrospective in 2013 its discontinuous and sometimes overlapping sequences were shown across different screens placed obliquely across the gallery; the spectator then had to consciously negotiate both the exhibition space and the process of looking itself in order to view the work.

This degree of the spectator's active involvement in the production of the work's meaning is reinforced by the presence of another set of viewers who also appear on the screen. Breton's flat in the Rue du Château, the location for the discussions, was reconstructed as a set in front of an audience invited to the filming of the piece in the Dublin studios of RTE, the Irish state television station. The set, and the work of both filming and editing, are all intermittently visible. As Byrne has clarified, the staging of the piece in the manner of a 1950s American teleplay reasserts the performative nature of the production in that he was "interested in the studio audience because it theatricalizes the performances of the actors, and it also reinforces the spatial duality of live broadcast" (Gerard Byrne, email message to the author, 29 June 2015). It is, furthermore, the conditions of the work's production that add further levels of

meaning to the piece. The gap between the contemporary technology of television production and use of period set and costume leads also to the perception that the opinions presented by the actors are themselves outmoded. *A Man and a Woman...* was specifically conceived with Documenta in mind, however once distinct from this context other connotations become apparent. The use of Dublin-based television studios and audience, plus Irish actors playing the parts of the Surrealists further erodes any naturalism within the production of the piece, but it also draws attention to the shift in attitudes towards sexuality in Ireland in recent years, particularly homosexuality.

### **Conclusion**

Rather than just an exoticised curiosity, Surrealist Ireland becomes revealed as a repository of multiple meanings. Within Surrealism itself the different interpretations of Irishness had affinities with aims and desires already existing: Swift's recommendations in *A Modest Proposal* correspond to Surrealist challenges to conventional morality, while Synge's writings on the West of Ireland resonate strongly with the modernist primitivism of Breton and other figures such as Antonin Artaud. Conversely, for Irish artists an engagement with Surrealism itself has taken on a variety of forms that in turn open onto further questions around the uses of the irrational in engaging with contradictions within the experience of modernity. Although for an artist like Colin Middleton, Surrealism engendered a means of articulating a response both to personal trauma and the collective experience of war, to what extent, for example, might this apply also to artists in a later period of Northern Ireland's history – the years of political conflict from 1969 to the 1990s? Other lines of enquiry arise from a reading of both Leonora Carrington and Alice Maher's lexicons of phantasmagoria. Although in Carrington's case this initially drew upon both Swift and the Celtic Revival, the issues opened up concern more generalised readings of archaism and nostalgia within a hybridised modernity. Maher's shifting and fluid construction of both femininity and temporality similarly is not just restricted to an Irish context, while one consequence of the disjuncture between outmoded and the contemporary in Gerard Byrne's engagement with Surrealism is to resituate Ireland within a wider gender politics. In some ways, these conclusions return to the Surrealist project of a revised cartography, where the significance of the peripheral and the allegedly primitive were

re-evaluated; the difference here is that Ireland is now situated within a map that no longer emanates from Paris, but within a projection that is now planetary.

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