Ciara Healy’s Curatorial Talk for the Opening of Thin Place 10th January 2015.

This project has been a long time coming to fruition, lots of people involved. I am very grateful to all of you for coming along today, to all the artists for agreeing to be involved and for their wonderful work. I would also like to thank the writers in the catalogue for the depth and thought they put into their essays, to the speakers who will be travelling from far and wide to participate in the symposium at the end of February, to Heidi for her amazing design work, to Alicia Miller for agreeing to be one of the judges for the Children’s Writing Competition and finally and most importantly I would like to thank Meg, Kathryn, Seren, Gareth, Chris, Pam and Sian for their amazing support, generosity, good humour, patience and deep understanding and empathy for this project.

A few months ago I went to Cardigan to an event organized by the wonderful Dr. Ruth Jones who invited the teacher, author, storyteller, spiritual activist, farmer and founder of the Orphan Wisdom School to come over from Canada for a series of talks at the Small World Theatre. One of the many things he spoke about that struck me was his description of archery competitions long ago. He said that the main aim for archers was not to see how far they could shoot their arrows, but how many arrows they could keep in the air at the same time. And that is something I hope to do during this talk today.

There are many different elements that inform this show and I hope that briefly I might be able to share them with you so that you may be able to grasp their intention as a whole, or what Scientist and Buddhist philosopher Roger Corless1 calls coinherently. Corless argued that all realities coinhere in every human, which means that we are each capable of inhabiting more than one world-view simultaneously. In this show I propose that this is made particularly possible in a Thin Place.

Arrow 1:

So, here is my first arrow: What is a Thin Place? Well, in an archaeological context a thin place is an anomaly. In a landscape it might look like an unusual mound, a gnarled old oak tree, an arrangement of stones on a coastal cliff. These anomalies were seen as entrances into the Otherworld and often stones or objects associated with ritual were buried there. So Thin Place is a term used by some as a reference to describe archeologically attested entrances to the otherworld or where one world and another might have interfaced.

There are many examples of Thin Places found here in West Wales and in the West of Ireland in particular. This is perhaps because certain points along the Western coasts of Europe in pre-Roman times were believed to be significant entrances into the Otherworld because they were on solstice paths. So because the sun’s light fades in the West, the solstice line system had a certain psycho-geographical logic and it was this perception that was intrinsic to the Druidic creed across Western Europe before the Roman invasion: namely that the soul was immortal and had a life after death.

Arrow 2:
So I have described the physicality of a Thin Place. For my second arrow it might be helpful to consider their purpose. Thin Places were often places where rites of passage took place. We may never know what sort of powers were thought to be embedded in the Otherworld, but the vast number of ritually-deposited materials found during archaeological excavations in Ireland and Wales alone suggest that this world below or above, and the portals into it, were a major pre-occupation in many pre-historic lives and continue to inform the world-views of the majority of non-Western cultures.

Arrow 3:
This brings me to my third arrow, which is concerned with interdisciplinary practice. Some people prefer to use the term ‘transdisciplinary’ practice. In the context of this show I have borrowed a phrase from Geertz and like to think of it as ‘blurred boundaries’ or ‘Thinness’. The term Thinness is a particularly useful term when it comes to thinking about our relationship to Place and landscape today.

I have often found that sacred Western world-views tend to be discussed in an objectified way, often in the past tense. When they become separated from the present it becomes difficult to see how their wisdom could possibly still be relevant to and inform how we live our lives today. Many people I interviewed during my research, particularly academics, had difficulty believing in the empirical possibility that Thin Places might still have a sacred presence today. However they did acknowledge that a need for a sacred relationship to Place still exists in Western secular society, particularly in Western peripheries.
Alun de Botton helpfully contextualised this idea in his book Religion for Atheists when he argued that perhaps the error of Modern atheism has been to overlook how many aspects of the faiths “remain relevant even after their central tenets have been dismissed.”²

And this is what I found in abundance when speaking to the visual artists I worked with during the development of this project. The work around you here today expresses a conceptual imperative that perceives conjecture to be as valid a perception of reality as rationalism. This connects to the literary theorist Marina Warner’s argument that stories of Otherworlds can create what she calls a new “zone of discovery” in minds disciplined by conscientious and “elaborate didacticism.”³

So as a way of initially inviting new and old world views to coinhere in the present, the first stage in this project involved putting together this catalogue, inviting people from many different worlds to write about their understanding of existence.

One of the first people I spoke with was Cherry Smyth, an Irish writer and Royal Literary Fellow based in London. She kindly gave me permission to publish one of her poems from her collection ‘Test, Orange’ published by Pindrop Press in 2012. [Read Poem]. I selected it because it conveyed very clearly the coinherence or Thinness of multiple times, past and present.

The next essay was by Dr Haley Gomez, a senior lecturer in astrophysics at the School of Physics and Astronomy in Cardiff University. Haley wrote about the formation and evolution of cosmic dust, which blocks out optical light and affects our view of the universe. She is particularly interested in where cosmic dust is formed and her latest work suggests that the titanic explosions of massive stars are responsible for polluting galaxies. The inclusion of her fascinating perspective of the world was not only personally revelatory, it also was another important example of Thinness because Haley’s research and discoveries along with others in the fields of Astronomy and Quantum Physics are destabilising and disrupting from within the field of science, the classical objectifying scientific view, as increasingly knowledge is moving from being objective to participatory.

The next essay is by Mark Jones, a psychotherapist, hypnotherapist and soul-centred astrologer working in private practice in Bristol and with clients and students all over the world. This essay describes his understanding of time and memory and in particular the journey of the soul through different lives. He focuses in particular on the direction of the soul in this life into the next and again his thinking is quite thin when he says that nothing from our childhood, our love lives, our dreams, is merely dead stone, he describes it instead as a living alchemy of encounter.

Joseph MacMahon wrote the final essay in the catalogue. He is a member of the Franciscan Order (OFM) in Ireland. I invited Brother Joseph to contribute to this catalogue for two reasons. The first being because I felt it would be important and relevant to include a voice from the Christian Church and secondly and more importantly because his essay reflected on the Franciscan way of life, the legacy of which today in Carmarthen is still present, even if it is buried under a Tesco Superstore. So Brother Joseph’s essay becomes a form of memorial or re-remembering of a way of life that one could argue is still present but no longer visible in this town today.

So each of the essays combined with images of the artists work offer multiple means of engaging with the ways in which we relate to the idea of Place and this brings me to the next arrow.

**Arrow 4:**

When thinking about Place and what Place is in the context of this show, I again found great clarity in the words of Stephen Jenkinson.

He said:

“Human life does not derive from human life.
There is no beginning for humanity that is human.
The first ancestor that gave your ancestor life was an animal.
That animal is your ancestor.
Their first ancestor was a plant.
The ancestor that gave that plant life is Place
Place then, is the ancestor of us all.
Place has kept you alive for so long and it is always waiting for you.
Place is your home.”
Place is your death.

Our humanness and our humanity comes from a Place not a people."

So when thinking about these ideas my research looked beyond Wales or Ireland as geo-political entities and instead tried to cultivate the notion that Place can be more than the perceived categories that define it in the modern world. This is why it was important that the essays in this catalogue discussed existence using more than one register. That was my way of disrupting the tendency in the West to attach ideas to single disciplinary boundaries and benchmarks, which perhaps might not adequately equip us in our current socio-ecological crisis.

So the intention for this show was to curate a project that would cultivate a greater permeability between disciplines in a gallery space in the hope that this would bring about new and meaningful ways of valuing our relationship with Place, particularly in landscapes where human and ancestral relationships were once very well established.

Arrow 5:

So for Arrow 5 so let’s look at the work:

Jonathan Anderson’s work, Pylon Totems (2014), is concerned with time, transformation and constructs of reality. Cloaked in rags and bitumen, his sculptures make pan-cultural references that allude to Crucifixes, Asian Buddhist statues, South American and African voodoo dolls. Yet the inspiration came from the many hundreds of electricity pylons that criss-cross the landscape of Wales. Assembled together, these sticky, black-coated effigies attempted to raise questions about the direction and focus of our worship today.

Adam Buick’s Votive Jar Walks (2014) took place along the Pembrokeshire coast. Made from unfired porcelain, these pots dissolve very quickly outside. Buick captured their transient presence in these photographs. He engaged in an animistic dialogue with the landscape, exchanging his pots with other found objects, and journeying on with these new belongings. He did this whilst contemplating the burial or deposit of objects within the landscape by the people of the Neolithic. He learned that things were deliberately placed in locations that had significance to those people at that point in prehistory. Their

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4 Stephen Jenkinson Talk at Small World Theatre organized by Dr. Ruth Jones November 2014.
objects have been found in well-used locations, tombs or settlements, some however were left are in wild places. This informed Buicks 'votive deposits.' There is a secret votive jar hidden in the gallery.

Christine Mackey’s work blurred the boundaries between objectified natural science and the numinous. She made repeated walks over 2 years in a number of locations in Ireland including Killruddery House and Gardens, Wicklow, Fort Dunree, Donegal and Lurganboy Forest, Leitrim, collecting seasonal wildflowers as she went. These walks became for her like a pilgrimage. Each flower was labelled and recorded in individual log cards. Using the practice of chromatography – an extractive process that draws out pure pigment from each specific plant she created a ‘fingerprint’ or ‘dna-colour code’ of each plant. Stored in vials, the pigments were used to recreate each walk as a painted map or mandala. The technological process of extraction combined with the meditative act of walking and collecting created an alchemical and poetic portrait of flowers found on a particular day and in a particular place.

Ailbhe Ni Bhrian’s film works play with the idea of a place unfolding, unravelling and coming undone. Many different landscapes and environments are represented here coinherently. Layered on top of each other, occasionally interrupting each other, each place possesses an acknowledgement of brokenness, of abandonment, of the cracks in the realities we have constructed and hid behind. This resonates with issues affecting post Celtic Tiger Irish landscapes in particular, but is as affective when considering the history of Wales and its use as a resource.

Flora Parrott’s work explored the tension between the human fascination with things that are nebulous and the ungraspable and at the same time the need to create infrastructure around them. The work produced for show was inspired by visits to the Doulacothi Gold Mines and a residency in a Karstic cave network in the Sao Paulo region of Brazil. ‘Fixed Position’ (2014) refers to the need for certainty, a desire to know that ones physical surroundings are solid and fixed, and yet at the same time the work celebrates the mysterious regions and rituals of the cave, our search for Dark Matter, and the fact that the solidity we take for granted is perhaps always more fragile then we like to acknowledge.
**Arrow 6:**

So I have tried to keep some arrows in the air today, but throughout the show more will be fired through the children’s writing competition, and through the symposium and other events such as the book club and film screening.

These further experiential layers might in some way continue to question the fallacy that an objectified world-view is the only accepted way of existing today. While I don’t want to make any grand claims about the superiority of an experiential approach over an objective rational approach I do want to challenge the notion that Place can fit into a single archaism, a neat reductive category or statistic.

So Thin Place makes the claim that human beings are intrinsically connected to Place.

The show in some ways is an attempt to make the sorrow of the demise of Place literate. But in other ways it also invites the risk of creating a consequence that could be otherwise.

So over the next 2 months at Oriel Myrddin my hope is that this show might renew our intimacy with Place and that it might help rekindle a relationship which might also go by the name of love or enchantment and out of which, possibly, and hopefully, care for the ancestral world might arise.

Ciara Healy

Oriel Myrddin

January 2015.