



Left to right:

The Big Sky: 'White Stable',
2012, by Amelia Stein.
© Amelia Stein, RHA

The Floating World,
from Clare Langan's 2013
Skelligs Series.
Photograph: Collection of the
Arts Council/Clare Langan

Border Road, 1994
by Willie Doherty.
Photograph: AIB Art
Collection/Willie Doherty
& Kerlin Gallery

of nature and convey a sense of the character of a rural townland, its managed and worked landscapes, its inhabitants, the often inelegant merging of form and function. Her print, Hunterstown, from that series, with rainwater pooled in the furrows of a ploughed field, unevenly pruned trees burdened with thick masses of ivy and a cold, wintry feeling, is an eloquent account of actual, agricultural, rural Ireland. Among painters, Martin Gale has also been scrupulous in reflecting the thorny reality of rural life over decades.

Given pride of place in Shaping Ireland, Nick Miller's magnificent From Cogan's Shed is one of his trucksapes. It was painted from his mobile studio, an open-backed truck, and its paint-spattered walls are visible at the edges of the composition. Between them there is a vast undulating sprawl of unruly terrain, not fertile exactly, but fields and scrubland dense with growth, and imbued with bursts of the heightened greens indicative of the nitroge-

nous fertilisers referred to by Ella McSweeney in her text on Ireland's colour – she cites the non-green Burren, represented in its non-flowering, pure limestone season in Barrie Cooke's fine painting. Miller's is a farmed and managed landscape, but there is still something primal and wild in its teeming, unstoppable energy, conveyed in his even, minutely detailed attention to every living piece of the picture surface. It bears interesting comparison with Basil Blackshaw's excellent, post-harvest The Field, painted 50 years earlier.

Geographer Anna Davis points out that the culture versus nature template is flawed in that we are inescapably a part of nature and not apart from it. Clare Langan has long made film and photographic works that anticipate the world post-environmental disaster. What is most disturbing about her work is that it feels less and less futuristic and more like reportage. Equally, Willie Doherty's stark photograph of a blockaded border crossing has an unfortunate topicality.

Shaping Ireland is not definitive or categorical. It is very easy to compile a list of artists, past and present, who do not feature but would certainly merit inclusion on the basis of their exploration of landscape. Rather, especially given the 12 perspectives offered by the diverse contributors to the accompanying publication, it resembles a series of observations and talking points, and it does well in inviting discussion rather than telling us what's what.

In that, it seems ideally pitched as an educational resource, not just in terms of art past and present but also in terms of a broad span of pressing ideas and issues, from climate change to planning.

Shaping Ireland: Landscapes in Irish Art
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