

Tra Na Rosann - Stones and Paper

This work began with little more than a loose direction of where it would go, standing as instance of going to this personal place to see what would unfold once I was at the site. Such an approach stands as an example of seeking through practice a means to understand how I was feeling in response to the research narratives – indeed in identifying and locating what research themes were finding prominence – as I found myself led to engage with the biographical site of Tra Na Rosann. I also conceived that the work made here would allow me to somehow carry something of the landscape back home with me, creating a conduit to Tra Na Rosann following the physical departure. As with the other work, which I had planned to engage with here on the shore edge, there was a sense of wanting to embed myself into the history of this place, as that which would become a means of creating a shared affinity with Agnes, relating my own experience of the space with her own. In knowing that she had grown up, eyes wandering into the distance of the horizon here, with the ancestral homestead located just above this shore, I felt I was able to engage with the voice of a woman who had reacted to such. It was also significant that in my own symbolic gesture of return I felt as if I was positioned ‘just in touching distance’ with a collective depositary of family histories, where in knowing that generations of family had lived upon this landscape, I was able to experience emotional registers,, which were authenticated in knowing that they had physically happened on this site.

As I was only going to be in Donegal for a few days I wanted to commence this work immediately on the first day of my visit, allowing time for whatever developments unfolded from such engagements to have time to be explored during the remainder of my stay. At this stage, as described above, I only had the beginnings of a work in mind. I wanted to leave materials – sheets of paper - out in the environment of the landscape and see the traces, which would form upon it, then collect at the end of the stay, travelling back to Scotland with them. From this act I anticipated it would become both a material that had absorbed traces of the surroundings, and also that through my experience of firstly leaving the paper, and then returning to collect what remained may evoke and offer connection with notions of loss and return. In effect, it would give me a certain positionality and relationship through that which I made the paper represent as symbol and also through the very material of it as artifact.

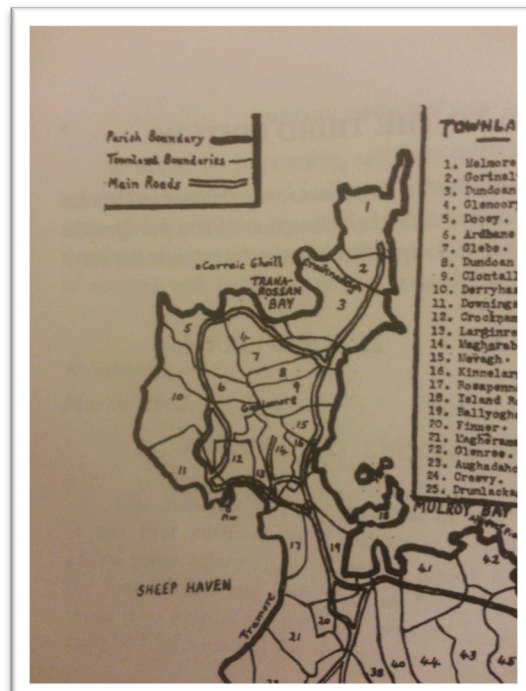


Figure 1 *Unknown*. Hand drawn map of Rosguill Townland divisions from local archive (n.d.)



Figure 2 *Unknown*. Artist's impression of Tra Na Rosann (n.d.)

I had decided that instead of bringing paper from Scotland with me I would buy paper locally and on arrival the evening before had sourced several sheets of simple off-colour newsprint from the local shop. It was a paper type, which I seemed to revisit time and time again, with the same type of paper being used repeatedly in a series of drawing works undertaken at art college. What had then, and significantly now, drawn me to this particular paper-stock was that which could be implied its everyday and inexpensive quality, as a physical medium that was both fragile and vulnerable through its lack of durability. This echo back towards undergraduate work signaled myself seeking resource from artistic practices and process, which had previously offered me means to understand, realise and articulate that which I found to difficult to express otherwise. Other pulls towards such would feature within this visit, with polaroid photographs from another work from this period being used in a work at Tra Na Rosann a few days later.

Arriving in Downings Bay, I checked into my accommodation and laid out my materials and camera, ready to leave early the next morning for the shore. As I was doing so I came across four stones that I had taken from Tra Na Rosann on a previous trip over (see **Error! Reference source not found.**). I had returned home with them over six months ago, intent to use them somehow in the work I was hoping to develop. At the time I had thought of perhaps capturing a sense of journey through the stones, from shore - to Scotland - back to shore, gesturing through them a sense of time apart from the landscape they were taken from, to then find rest in coming back, through return. As I now came back across them however, I decided to have them become part of this developing paper work.

I arrived at the beach early the next morning in the hope that I would find the space deserted. Fortunately, it was, and I stood within the space deciding which specific location to leave the paper. Although I was open to and aware of the fact that I had no control over what may happen to the paper on leaving site, I did want to offer some sense of shelter and concealment in order to protect and afford some time to take on the 'marks' of the space. I chose to leave the paper within a shallow opening within the rock face, facing out towards the sea. It was a slightly damp space though the surrounding grass, which was growing over the surface meant that it was at least partly shielded from the wind.



Figure 3 Documentation of Tra Na Rosann - Stones and Paper work (2011)



Figure 4 Documentation of Tra Na Rosann - Stones and Paper work (2011)

Deciding to guard it further I took out the stones, which I had brought back with me, making a small enclosure around the rolled up paper, as symbolic fortification. I was struck by experiencing this role where I felt the need to protect the paper. The paper had come to represent, in some way, my grandmother – or at least her memory.



Figure 5 Documentation of Tra Na Rosann - Stones and Paper work (2011)

After three days I returned to the rock face to collect the paper and stones. In my time away from this particular spot, I had been engaged in other acts at the site but had decided to keep a distance from where the paper and stones were resting. In creating this absence and distance I believed a deeper elicitation of departure would be felt when I came back in contact with the assemblage. Looking into the stone gap I could see that the October weather had affected the paper as it lay wrinkled and slightly warped by the dampness of surrounding haar¹. Gathering the paper, marks of soft indents were visible upon the paper where the stones had been placed to weigh down the sheets. These marks were signs of experiences endured in my absence, of the rain and the mooring resource of the stones. Discovering the presence of these marks took on new creative sway, offering a story, which had unfolded in my absence. They presented another symbolic capturing of the afore mentioned narratives of familial bonds and the impact of migration and absence, of both that which is left and that which leaves. The marks on the paper connected with being ‘weighed down’ or ‘being anchored’ to a physical place. Moreover, I was now myself engaged in an act of return and revisiting that which had been left, now responding to witness the effects upon the departed objects.

¹ Fog/Mist

Tra Na Rosann - Photographs Taken Away By The Sea



Figure 6 Documentation of Tra Na Rosann – Photographs Taken Away by the Sea (taken from distance by mother) (2011)

This work stemmed from rediscovering a series of photographs I had taken in my last year of Art College. They were images that I had used at the time to work through and solidify some reflections I was having regards the work I was making. At the time I had become stuck and unsure of what I was expressing in my work, and although I never actually used them in terms of exhibiting them, they had been very special in the development of my work. I had used an antique Polaroid camera (complete with old film inside) which I had bought in a charity shop, using it to capture low light and barely distinguishable close up views of the body: A foot, wrapped in a bed sheet, as if to communicate a body sleeping; the intimate curve of a bare waist, with skin picking up a distant exterior light; and the base of a curled up back turned away. Each of these pieces were intended to evoke and articulate in some physical form the intimacy of such spaces and the personal exchanges which occur when experiencing these private states of ourselves. In them, I had recognized that strange experience of isolation and distance which forms when looking at images of ones own body. Due to the medium that they were taken on - vintage Polaroid stock - these photographs had become things which represented a medium and format, which was in itself holding its own record; it didn't have either the dual picture and negative set of traditional photography or indeed the multiplicity of the digital photography format. Moreover, due to my decision to keep

these images private and not explicitly use them within the imagery of any of my work during this time, the photographs represented a further layer of privacy. Embedded deeper than their physical materiality, there lay questions unanswered surrounding why I chose to keep them unearthed and apart from the bodies of work I had developed through subsequent years. There was a notion that these pieces of work had required this period of leave in order to become part of this emerging and unfolding work now present. For me, this seemed to add into what was forming of a personal journey within my over-arching practice, with fragments of the past finding significance in these present responses, which were themselves indicating towards echoes of that gone before. The notion of a prolonged and suspended coming together of things was very much building through engaging with this archive of resources and my personal relation to them.

Having found them slid in-between the pages of an old notebook, I felt an immediate return to a sense of self, which had existed when I had originally taken them. In connection with 'Stones and Paper' work above, it is notable to consider the way in which I was now taking back to Scotland sheets of paper which I felt had been imprinted with a source of memory of similar nature to these old photographs, both offering to translate or conjoin myself being two separate moments.

I was also struck by how fond I was of the images – I remember at the time being stirred by the possibilities of how they could eventually develop in my work. Interestingly, the fact that they had helped to facilitate a realisation at the time, but had been kept apart from 'formalized' work – existing as part of a performed engagement which had allowed for the creation of other work – the framing of a body of work which unintentionally emerged from that which pre-dated the PhD commencement can be seen.

There seemed a resonance between those objects, which sit out and remain physically present – for example of the shelves displaying the spines of sketchbooks and albums – though somehow become distanced from day-to-day thinking. Things, which were filled with meaning, and indeed route to recollect such, can be present in a space, yet without an act, which elicits engagement, can remain lost. Through this consideration I was reminded of this relationship between my research practice and the way in which I was drawing upon the historic narrative attached to this site in order to connect to experiences of collective familial belonging. Additionally was the thought of Agnes living

with a sense of homeland being ‘stored’ whilst she was elsewhere, with this the act of my own return here signaling a re-opening to draw upon such source.

They were both physical objects – of visual and creative content - and also representative of what they had brought me to realise in my work – punctuated in their absence and return. As another layer, these photographs existed as standalone objects in terms of reproducibility, with no negatives or digital copies. I made a conscious choice to have them exist as sole records, resisting the desire to scan copies of them, capturing their vulnerability to becoming lost with absence. I wanted to engage in an act, which would allow me to experience the loss of the materiality of such. Through this, I would be able to find a means to perform a conceived sense of the loss and departure felt by Agnes - and others involved in such migration - as they engaged in the physicality of letting go or losing something, with the only remaining means to bring reunion existing through one’s remembered sense of the thing. In effect, the realisation that something had gone, becoming that which existed only through experiencing the remembered sense of such.

As stated, the photographs had taken on a particular importance as both material and context. In addition they existed as irreproducible works within my back-catalogue of practice. The loss of items, which possessed such value could present a route through which to relate and empathize on some level with the experiences conceivably experienced through migration. It is worth noting also, that the narrative of the loss of Stephen² was also drifting into my awareness, as I sought to find means to create spaces offering a repose for Agnes and that which she never found a rest place for.

I engaged a performance during which I let go of each photograph into the sea at Tra Na Rosann, with each one slipping away in turn as the tide carried them away. Laying them by the shoreline I made an effort to try and fix the image contained in each photograph in my mind, with that representing my last physical experience and engagement with them. The water would most likely erode away at the materials of each, though I felt it important to *lose* them intact – that my last memory of them would be whilst they were in this complete state. I felt this was also resonant of the way in which the memory of the object carried on living, in such fixed state, with the person.

² Agnes’ son/my father’s brother



Figure 7 Photographs being washed out to sea (taken by self) (2011)



Figure 8 Photographs being washed out to sea (taken by self) (2011)

Having laid the photographs in the water, two became settled together and looked as if they were lodging in the sand below the shallow surface. The sea washed over them a few times, working away to lift the edges of them. It was a last temptation to not rescue them back and keep the photographs. As one seemed to sink into the wet sand bed, the other started to become caught in drifting surface wash, rallying against anchor of the other. Using the strength of this motion it was leaving the water edge and drifting further and further out.



Figure 9 Photographs being washed out to sea (taken by self) (2011)

The remaining photograph appeared to be weighted in the underneath of the sand, with a thin layer of water and sand mixing on its surface. Eventually, as I watched, it started to drift away towards the other. Becoming unfixed at the shore edge I watched as the final photograph pulled further out, eventually disappearing, drawing below the surface.

Tra Na Rosann - Lighting the Candle and Collecting Water



Figure 10 Documentation of Tra Na Rosann – Lighting the Candle and Collecting Water (taken from distance by mother) (2011)

Two other significant works occurred during this visit to Tra Na Rosann. The first involving collecting water at the shore with view to bringing it back to Scotland with me, and the second, the lighting of a candle at the sea edge³. These works were carried out during the last day of this visit in October 2011, concluding the set of engagements.

³ As with the material used in the paper and stones work, I also wanted to buy the candle, which I would burn from somewhere local. I wanted to create a detail to the work of it being formed through that which was gathered within close proximity and from within this landscape.



Figure 11 Documentation of Tra Na Rosann – Lighting the Candle and Collecting Water (taken from distance by mother) (2011)

As with the paper and stones work, the act of collecting water from the site, to then bring back to Scotland with me, was another example of wanting to initiate something whilst in location without yet knowing how the work would develop as a more definite work. Something appealed to me of having the sea water become an invisible presence within a work I would go on to develop, involving the water into other materials with little visible sign on the surface of whatever work was made. This again showed example of the situation and context of, a piece performing another layer of meaning, indeed in turn extended if audience was informed of such an element being part of the work.

I wanted to collect and bottle the water on the last day of this series of visits to site. I had planned to light a small candle at the water edge during this visit also and it seemed that in performing these works on the same visit would mark a conclusion of sorts. This also led to deciding to collect the water from the same spot on the beach, as I would light the candle, with the water taken from the source where the candle had burned. It is worth noting that, as with the previous Polaroid photograph work, I wanted to carry out these actions in alone. Experiencing this solitude whilst engaged in performance would become a core motif in subsequent works carried out^{4 5}.

⁴ The need to be alone during performances was something which featured heavily in the work I created prior to the PhD also. Video sequences, audio recordings and performances on screen were in the main carried out whilst on my own.

The idea of engaging in lighting a candle is unavoidably reminiscent of the religious symbol of a burning votive. Although this surely filtered into my decision to draw from an act embedded with the social culture of this ancestral legacy, my choice of burning a candle at Tra Na Rosann was chosen due to being that which represented to me a dedication and of creating means of connection with Agnes' memory, rather than a commentary on the broader associations connected with this Catholic practice. As other examples of work that use similar practice are told I will further address these connections. There is clearly a difficulty in trying to decipher what weight the wider connotations of lighting a candle bore upon my decision to use that gesture in this work. It was in the first instance a process through which I could communicate and create a means to mark the loss and departure of Agnes from this site, with the wider iconography of the form admittedly perhaps directing my decision to engage in such. In reflection, the custom of lighting a candle in prayer was something which would have itself been familiar gesture for Agnes and in lighting a candle, taking this into view, there was another layer of connection formed. Whilst I would position all of the work done at Tra Na Rosann as, that which represented an act of devotion, lighting a candle was something which would perhaps have been the most direct and identifiable means to understand the devotional aspect of what was being explored in the larger body of work.



⁵ For documentation, my mother stood at a distance with a camera equipped with appropriate zoom lens.



Figure 12 Candle burning for Agnes (taken by self) (2011)

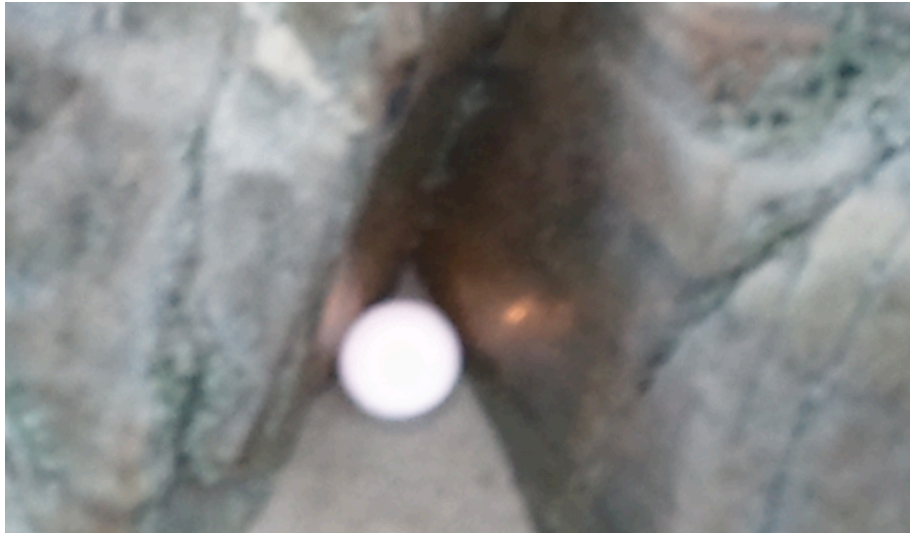


Figure 13 Candle burning for Agnes (taken by self) (2011)

The flame of the candle at the water edge wavered against the wind, which persisted to extinguish it. Having moved into a slightly more sheltered area it burned with stronger hold. With the candle flame providing a focus I thought about my grandmother over the years visiting this area in front of her family cottage. Through this act I was yet again drawing upon the narrative and the emotional experience of evoking such remembrance. As before, the biographical relevance of the landscape was underpinned with my emotional experience within it. With this, these sculptural and performative engagements became that which now gave me a deeper relationship with the place, as a specific site involved in an extended narrative of self.