

Aalto University  
Department of Arts  
Masters Thesis

In Visual Culture, Curating and Contemporary Art

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# This Dream of Abstinence

By Adrian Mc Grath

# Preface

My visual art works are all fed by my life experience, they're not topical, in the current-affairs meaning of the term, but simply personal. I have always found comfort and instruction in James Joyce's quote "In the particular is contained the universal"(O'Toole, F.2015), partially because it consoles me in my expression of the very personal, in that maybe in this processing of my own situation, I may understand it a bit better, and relay it in a digested form, through my art, to others that might also find relation to this experience.

I notably use the word communication in place of expression (though it is suitable for me too at other times) for I really try to get it *to* someone, not just splay it out before them; there is the aspiration that the works may be of modest use. I want them to be accessed simply for the reason that if one might relate in a peculiar and honest way to my works, they may feel for a moment that they are not alone totally, in this small way of feeling at least. As you read further you'll see what I mean.

I wrote all in organic bursts, when the inspiration hit me, trying my best to resist anything too academic, for I feel if the text strays too far into that vicinity it'll die a death after my graduation: it's to be read in pleasure, even leisure; easy reading.

I see no benefit in explaining my art works directly, to do so would only constrict them in the mind of the viewer by fencing in my visual works with my words. The thesis text is totally, and completely *about*, and in, and around, all my works, but it doesn't seek to explain them. The thesis is an environment of feeling, which primes the viewer, to gather a sense of what I'm trying to do in my work, perhaps without any clear thought on the matter, just a sense of things as I have experienced them.

# Introduction

This thesis will have two components: the text itself, and the visual art. The purpose of the text, as I see it, is to put one emotionally in the vicinity of my feelings on the thesis topic: the theme of my art work. I like to imagine the stories, and accounts in this thesis run parallel to, and sometimes even under, my visual art.

If I was to put into words what my topic is (and I am surely expected to here) I would have to pin it down, for the purpose of some grounding, before we get started, as being related to the idea, and sensation, of redundancy, obsolescence, idleness, and the hazards therein. I have encountered all and in so experiencing was tuned into the frequency of such discomfort and suffering, I began to notice it everywhere about me. This was largely due to the timing of my life in which I experienced the economic crash of 2008.

The thesis explores the experiences which inform my artwork. The relevance of each topic, and thought, is always pertaining to some part, or place, in my body of visual works.

# Coal Miner's Daughter

An image of my grandfather, described by my mother, stands clear in my mind's eye: a frosty full moon night, up on Killeshin hill, walking his bike the last stretch across the field to their home, my grandfather would be illuminated by the cold rays of the moon, hitting his frosty, frozen stiff, clothes. Garments, which were already clogged rigid with the coal dust of the mine, would harden in their creases through force of frost meeting the water of the mine's soaking.

The contrast of the glistening frosty highlights, and the shadowed folds of the coal dust creases, moves sculpturally through my imagination as I picture my mother, as a little girl in the warm lamp lit doorway of their home, excitedly seeing the silvery feature of her beloved father, make his way peacefully, and joyfully, at a work days end, towards the house, to settle and sleep.

When she describes this image it is only elegant and visual, so beautiful in that it still sincerely communicates the childish innocence of joy in seeing this frosty figure come home. I internally always consider the practical fact of the man's labour. Those nights cycling home in the minus degrees across the top of the hill, with soaked clothes clogged with coal dust and stiff with frost. I can imagine a sort of sufferance in this time for my grandfather, but I'm told there wasn't, and often quite the opposite: he loved the work.

Rossmore coal mine entered the coal face at a slope. Coal in that area sat practically just a metre below the soil's surface, but the seam of coal continued at an angle gradually downward for two miles into the Earth's surface. It was there that my grandfather would daily (and nightly depending on the shift) chase the coal seam, working into its face continually, extracting lump after lump manually, until the end of his working shift.

As the work was carried out by hand; the workers were limited to removing just the coal, which was relatively much softer than the rock above and below the seam; this meant that the working space was quite cramped: never more than a metre high at the coal face. He would therefore be forced to work on his side, most often lying in the constant water ever present due to natural geological fissures in the rock above, and the steady downward trickle of surface water from the entrance mouth of the mine in times of rain. The water extraction pumps, in use at the time, were far behind those of today in their capacity to adequately maintain a dry working environment. To illuminate the coal face, into which he worked, my grandfather then would only see by light of a carbide helmet lamp. The illumination level would be equivalent to that of one candle flame: a small flame, which would be emitted from the burning of the acetylene gas, produced when the carbide gravel, within the lamp, reacted with water (miners would most often use their spit to controllably induce this reaction).

In the water upon one's side, low lit, coal dust clogging, for an unbroken duration of ten hours at a time, could rightly, to most of us, sound like an unbearable misery, but I can say, with strange understanding now, that he lived for his work. I've asked many sources and they have affirmed that all of the Rossmore miners had an indescribable attachment to their work, and when the mine closed they were lost.

However my grandfather had to retire before the mine's closure, at the age of fifty eight. While squatting at the coal face a large slab of ceiling rock came loose, and pressed his body so firmly further into the squatting position that his pelvis broke. Recovery in hospital took several months, and he was sadly unable to ever return to Rossmore. The mine closed permanently while he was convalescing. According to my mother, his latter days were spent busying himself around the garden, and reading pulp novels of cowboys' fictional tales of adventure in the Wild West. After five years of retirement my grandfather died in his sleep from heart failure.

These are the facts as I have accumulated them, but I always wondered at the effects of my grandfather's forced convalescence and rueful idleness, a man of learned function, conditioned by a lifetime of dedicated linear pursuit, singular means of progression in one direction: into the coal face.

In front was the seam to chase, to work, carve, and extract, deeper and further in, always handling this definite and pure material that literally kept all the families of the area warm, fed, and washed (with warm water) at day's end. His modest labour had an essential purpose: his family was sustained economically by his wages, and so too was his own nature, moreso the needs of his nature. I imagine the clarity of purpose, the simplicity of direction, and the absolute focus afforded by the low luminance of the carbide light's spot, allowed for a most motivating occupation, so rewarding if only in its undoubted progression: guaranteed movement forward through one's committed efforts.

Taking away that clarity of focus, that provision of sustenance, that energy of purpose denied my grandfather access to that part of himself which was most in order, most certain: a labour which determined direction.

# Getting to Tullow

Introduction: I had always been moved by Leo Tolstoy's short story *How Much Land Does a Man Need?* Here I seek to imitate his wholesome sentimental tone in a simple parable of my own:

I had a vision of something that never occurred in reality. It happened only in my mind's eye, so vividly perhaps that I might one day confuse it for a memory:

As a child of seven or eight my mother appeared as the most contented example of a little child in 1950s rural Ireland. With strawberry blonde hair, and cheeks perked with an effortlessly held constant smile, proud of her father, as she often attested she was: "his little pet."

In this vision my grandfather sells the coal, that he mines, at the mart in Tullow town, twenty kilometres from the Rossmore mine, but here in this vision he mines beside their own house in the garden: open casting, a small pit mine, basically a hole in the ground. Bucket by bucket he raises the black anthracite up to a loading deck, into a heap, from which he then shovels it, (rhythmically as any good worker does) transferring, that fuel of warmth, fruit of his labour, high upon the cart for the mart.

Borrowing a neighbour's donkey that Saturday morning, my grandfather, as dawn's light breaches the night, fastens the cart of coal to the donkey's harness, and then when all is set, he tip-toes in to wake my mother, his daughter, gently; not disturbing the rest of the house, to bring her out sleepily and cosily to sit high on the cart's bench, by his side.

From the tales my mother has told me of work in the peat bogs of Rossmore, I can easily imagine my grandfather, in his gentle working nature, kindly having the forethought to prepare a glass bottle full of cold tea, with sugar and milk, and some lavishly buttered brown soda bread, to break their fast upon setting off on the cart to Tullow.

As they're both slowly descending Rossmore hill, they come near to the Killeshin Church, high off the road to the right, and then looking ahead they see the road between Gaffney's two fields: worn asunder by the daily traffic of the milking cows being brought into the dairy for milking. Realising that the donkey could never pull his load across such a trench my grandfather gets down off the cart, lifts his shovel from the side of the coal where it lays, and begins to take shovelful after shovelful of coal to the trench in the road saying aloud: "no matter what happens, we're getting to Tullow" winking to my mother.

With a committed sense of purpose, acceptance of the necessary expense, he filled the trench to a reasonable level, one which the donkey easily could draw the cart over. Having led the donkey across the dark mass of coal filling, my grandfather turned to consider reloading the coal back onto the cart, only to realise this would make return home by night impossible: the donkey would surely be too tired to drag even the empty cart across this ragged ravine, and Brigid, at that hour and this age, could never walk that distance back up the hill. "So I must resolve to leave the coal in place" he said, and turning back towards Tullow, he partially repeated his phrase "no matter what..."

Now gently leading the donkey by the bit, via the reigns (as not to further burden this gracious helpful creature) my grandfather turned to still see his Brigid wrapped in the large woollen blanket she took with her from bed, excited on the journey, and happy to just have time with her Dad after his tiring work week.

As they had just exited the limits of Carlow town, and travelled another country track, they came upon two very large potholes, side by side across the track, initiated by other traffic no doubt, and made worse by recent rains. Seeing that the donkey could at least safely pass between the two deep potholes, my grandfather said as much to himself as to Brigid: "well, no matter what, we're getting to Tullow" and he turned without a pause to grab his shovel once more, and heap and pour the gravelled coal into the two potholes. Then once again carefully leading the donkey by the bit through, and beyond, the two potholes, he grinned in joyous amusement, as Brigid giggled in honest laughter at the side-to-side seesaw, wobbly rocking, of the cart on which she sat.

Once more, reflecting upon the coal dispensed, my grandfather noticed it had already compressed a little under force of the wooden cartwheels, given coal's brittle nature, so he resolved to leave it there in place, and furthermore considered the definite impossibility of Brigid's ability to walk the now fifteen kilometres home from this point. He took precautions for fear that a heavy rain shower might wash the potholes totally of their new contents, and so he shovelled out an extra heap for security, for each pothole, by the side of the ditch, as the cart, Brigid, and the donkey must come back this way. With the donkey's reign in his right hand he looked back over the same arm and saw his Brigid smiling back at him, and then behind her, noticing the coal load was now a third of its original size, and so in suspiration he merely uttered "...getting to Tullow".

The last third of the journey, before Tullow town, meandered beautifully through the Carlow countryside: the fields were a bright green in that low golden wintry afternoon light, while the shadows beneath the trees, and beside the hedges, kept their low light white complexion, granted to them hours before by last night's stubborn frost.

Ascending the last small hill as they approached Tullow, my grandfather forcefully led the now tired donkey with ever greater conviction. Reaching the hill's top gave peace to all the company there, they could see Tullow Town and its market square from where they stood, they rested a moment.

The road remaining was straight, steeply downhill, and without potholes, however it's facing west to Tullow meant it was in the shade all morning long, and the tall hedgerows, lining the silvery track, had kept the afternoon sun from touching any part of the road's surface, it's frosty blanket glistened beautifully, but also menacingly.

"The day's winter setting Sun could still never thaw this track: it's like a sheet of glass" my Grandfather said. Looking down the frosty strait he calculated that even if he scattered the coal thinly, and sparingly, in a line, just enough to provide traction for the donkey's steps back up the hill, it would use exactly all the coal that remained in the cart. So for a moment he considered risking taking the coal to market, and just hoping that the donkey might be able to get them out of Tullow, without slipping and sliding back down the hill on the way home. He resolved to test the slope himself, and soon conceded "we might get down it, but we'll never get back up it" and to this my mother replied: "no matter what, we are getting to Tullow!".

## The Plasterer's Apprentice.

At the age of 14 I was awarded the invite to actually go and work for my stepfather Eddie. However my first few weeks were a type of introductory time in which I was obliged to simply wheel barrows full of soil along the many ridges he had prepared for shrubs.

Only with the benefit of hindsight many years later could I see that this whole task, this most tiring task, was largely created for the sole purpose of "training me in". There I would shovel topsoil into the barrow, wheel it along planks which were curiously laid down, along ground as flat as themselves, and after getting to my drop zone I'd tip the soil into the pre-established points on the raised bed of earth.

Gradually after a few weeks that summer I graduated, it seemed, to the role or rank of plaster mixer, on Eddie's own self build project. I recall it now; the pride I felt at being trusted to mix the plaster that he would "throw on" to his house (meaning trowel on), and also I recall the fear I felt, in that: I was worried it was too soon. Such was the respect I felt for the building trade, I felt what could now perhaps be labelled as impostor syndrome "could I have already risen to this status?", and for myself at the time it was indeed high status, being a teenager I was trusted with mixing a most admired tradesman's working material. I felt enormous pride in being so trusted.

A plasterer's apprentice, as I was to become, needs to operate the petrol powered cement mixer, essentially a rotating drum, much like a slowed down doorless washing machine. Into that mixer one would throw twenty shovels of sand, four of cement, some plasticizer to enhance the workability, and enough water to make the mixture akin to a basin of grey sandy double cream.

This would then be tipped into a wheelbarrow, wheeled up a single plank through the door, into the house and shovelled upon a prepared board, at waist height, from which Eddie would transfer the plaster unto his hawk (a large trowel, that remains horizontal on the left hand, in order to hold the plaster) and from this hawk, onto the wall by means of his razor edged trowel, sharpened by the friction of trowelling such sand and cement for over forty years.

If the plaster was too runny, or too stiff, you'd hear about it; for Eddie would suffer in its application, but the reproach he'd make was not delivered through harshness or blatant admonishments, but rhetorical questions such as "I don't know... I think you're staying up too late at night. Watching them Simpsons?" or "I don't know.. do you be concentrating at all?" "Were ye on the phone or what's going on?" These were always spoken into the wall, which he wrestled with in plastering my "sheep-shite" if too dry or my "scutter" (slang for diarrhoea) if too wet.

I would laugh it off when listening to his feedback, but take it onboard, as this would inform the water I introduced to the next mix. Finding the correct consistency was the art of my job, and I perfected it gradually; not through fear of Eddie's reproach, but pride in his praise, when I got the mix right. It was strangely one of the rare times he would show emotional joy on the sites, and even pride in his own successful coaching of me into this effective worker. To see he was happy with me was a huge reward, it can't be understated, and I mean to see; to see visible emotion meant his usual effort to suppress such displays failed under the true intensity of his emotional satisfaction in having made me a great worker.



I will digress for a moment to a recent matter which displays to me my effort to even still draw emotion from Eddie. Before moving to Finland, we had a puppy born of the old family pet, Eddie showed a heartwarming attachment to this tiny creature and insisted that we keep her. He asked me to name her; I thought for a moment, and then refrained returning the task to him instead, simply for one reason: I knew he loves this dog, and I wished to see what title of endearment would he choose for his little pet, what tone of title would his affection for the creature inspire? He called her *Spot*, because she has a spot on her side. Such is the man.

So to have Eddie appear proud of my work and skill, in which he was a master, was an award above the generous pay (I might add) that he afforded me.

Our working relationship was quite matter-of-fact in our conversations and observations. Though he was not my father, he had been the man of the house since I was nine months old, and yet when I worked around him I was tense as though he were a judgmental father, but felt only as close to the man as if he was just a friend of the family, that's the way he chose to have it.

I recall one instance in particular that gave form to our relationship. One day, while sharing the building site with other construction workers we joined them for lunch. These two lads were of the idea that all builders love to talk about naked women, I almost died when they held open page 3 of the Sun newspaper, to share their admiration for some model's "lovely tits" (I recall that expression with painful clarity). I pretended not to see, nor hear the man, and Eddie did that awkwardly dismissive laugh of his, or more like a bassey exhalation "humf!". Those lads saw they weren't into it and changed their builder bonding tact quick. It was strangely embarrassing, as if I *were* sitting with my father.

I will say, even now, that Eddie was strangely gifted with extraordinary physical ability, and the most deftly delicate, but smoothly strong hand. He could cover a ceiling, (and this I witnessed) of 15 by 6 metres, evenly and in one session of application, without break. He would then bring this surface to a finish replicating the consistent finish of a sheet of glass.

This level of skill was honed across 45 years of plastering houses. Up to his last year of plastering he still loved it, and was clear in why. He loved the system, the structure, and the satisfaction in this process: the clear visual progression of covering block walls. The plasterer is the one worker that brings the coarse building site into the last stage, towards its emotional christening as a home. It's the last stage before the owners can move in.

As I have expressed earlier (and will again later in different terms): to have a singular pursuit or occupation in life is satisfying, and it is more likely that if one will, or can, specialise in this pursuit they'll be good at it. It might give meaning to their life in that it justifiably requires daily devotion, along with that, it's somewhere to go, somewhere one is needed, this gives the worker a sense of place in society among all the other manifold contributions that satisfying labour may instil. I believe manual labour can satisfy one more fully as it is tied to the nature of the human. The workings of the body, under direction of the mind, all pointed towards the completion of a goal, often quite linear, very achievable (in the buildings especially) therefore practically guaranteeing of reward, thus justifying this day's effort, this week's, and this month's, helping one operate with a sense of purpose.

Within the many worlds of manual labour probably the most ordered is the construction industry, surely rewarding as it never strays from a strict plan, which is drafted in the knowledge that *all here is possible*, and reward of effort is granted.

So I state here: I believe work in construction is extremely rewarding, but then within construction I say chief among the most physically consuming, but rewarding roles, is that of the plasterer, not only because you help the client see a house become their home, but more so because of the process one, as a plasterer, is tied to.

We have to imagine a house in rural Ireland, detached two story, totally a shell of concrete block work, with a roof, and newly fitted windows.

The first day we'd land I would spark up the mixer, throw in a mix, wheel it to Eddie, and he'd begin plastering two large walls, at the opposite sides, of the first room. Most often starting in the left bottom corner of the house, as to align with this left to right in-built sense of progression we have as humans through reading (western texts), and observing the day's movement of the Sun.

These first two walls of sand and cement plaster mix would be on by 10 o'clock tea time, then we put on four more after tea, by which time the morning's first two are in the ideal state of drying to be workable enough for us to finish off quite smooth and level.

Then it's lunch time, the drying of the four walls post 10 o'clock tea, decide it's a short lunch break as they're "going off" i.e drying. We get to them in due time, and smoothen them out just before they're too dry to work. Note, this sand and cement stage is divided into two steps: trowel the plaster on, and leave it until it's *just* dry enough to smooth out.

From 9 to 5 you have to work with a material that dries, that decides your time, you work with it, and around it, to allow for tea breaks, but the moment you mix a barrow full of plaster you are on *it's* time, not your own.

This is the process day by day for an entire house. Outside is more consuming of one's energies as the walls are huge and unbroken, but sand and cement plastering is only one of two stages: when the entirety of the inner walls are plastered as such, then one "skims" the sand and cement with a very fine plaster made of gypsum.

Gypsum skim coat was applied very thinly, only 2-3 mm of depth, across every surface of the house including the plasterboard ceilings.

Skim coat is applied by a method not unlike the sand and cement: trowel it on, let it stiffen a little, then trowel it smooth, but then it has the stage of a third run of the trowel; where one brings the almost totally dry skim coat to a glass like finish.

I describe all of this in detail to communicate the all-consuming nature of the job and the reward of seeing moment by moment a surface covered, visible progression wall by wall, room by room, house by house. My stepfather did this for an uninterrupted run of 45 years until 2008.

It was rewarding and wearing, he loved it, but didn't understand the vulnerability of his position. How many other jobs offer this immediate result of desired outcome daily? A job that requires application of one's physical ability, a delicacy of your touch, and artistry of your eyes, a job that pays well, and is viewed admiringly by all your peers that appreciate its technical difficulty.

Much like the wall of drying plaster commands your commitment, the in-built rewards of this work command your attention in life. One is focused, busy and supplied, but hindsight shows us one is also extremely vulnerable. Of course as with many things in life we can't know how dependent we are on something until it is pulled away; that on which we leaned was stripped from under us, and we in turn fell.

## Oh-eight

2008 that year, when I see it on paper it's a digit of such meaning. 1916 Ireland's famed rebellion against the British, 1922 our independence gained, 1945 World War II ends, 2014 the year I move to Paris, 2017 the year I moved to Finland; but 2008... then life ended and began.

We must recall here my intentions, up to the age of eighteen, to be a plasterer: that worked art in, and through, his trade. I had a vision, I had a role model (in my stepfather) a course of action that would both satisfy my artistic inclination, while also bestowing on me the continued respect of being a "great worker".

However just as I was prepared to enter this workforce, my secondary education completed, there was the financial crash of 2008. Famous the world over, not something I go in on now, but it's worth saying that- as I went to take the leap, I suddenly noticed there was no nothing to land on.

When the crash of 2008 happened in Ireland it dealt a disproportionately hard blow to the construction industry, our "economic boom" was indeed a housing bubble, and so there was quite an economic shock to the country, and our family, when it popped.

200,000 jobs were lost in the Irish construction industry between 2008 and 2010 (Fitzgearld, 2019). Eddie then in his early sixties, saw this as an appropriate time to retire. And I have to say as someone then in close proximity to him, but at an emotional distance, I saw a visible suffering in the man. Mostly at breakfast in that time he would speak of what great work we had turning up on Monday morning, throwing on two walls by tea time etc . The rewarding nature of the job was not lost to his intellect, nor his nostalgic nature. A man aware of the necessity of work if only for the occupation of one's mind, he launched himself into landscaping work but struggled, and I feel, by my means of my own amateur assessment, that this work was not demanding enough of his thought: it didn't force a pace like plaster, but he set that pace, and this lessor requirement from his working day seemed to free up time for thoughts, which I know not of, but ones which caused him discomfort, new ailments hitherto never felt, it seemed.

This had quite an effect on me; it concerned me that he was now unhappy, and how uncertain of resolution he was. The figure I followed, that said I would harrow what he ploughed now felt, in truth, quite lost. Of course I was lost too but at a very different stage of life. It wasn't catastrophic for me. I hadn't been conditioned for so long by an all-consuming job. I could alter my path, and I did. Seeing zero opportunities of becoming an artist-plasterer

I went on to become just an artist, and shifted paths to enter art school in the city of Waterford in 2008.

Waterford Crystal Gazing

Waterford, Ireland's first city, was founded in 914 AD, by the Vikings (Lambert, T., 2022). One could rightly say the Vikings were a people of ambition, and improvement of circumstance, their own circumstance of course at the expense of others lives, the natives were greatly afflicted.

Waterford was also one of the first cities in Ireland to be invaded by the British, or rather the then Anglo-Normans. The natives of the area were to experience almost another 800 years of foreign rule (Waterford County Museum, n.d.). We can imagine there is a type of generational conditioning, through browbeating, that occurs in such a populace, to always be ruthlessly oppressed, starved, and forbidden from operating any large enterprise whatsoever for near a millennium. Such deconditioning of a people reduces them to the capabilities of being servants, great employees, hard workers but not great founders of anything; their creative abilities are not required, and were actively discouraged, by the British. Given our knowledge of these conditions, it is no surprise that when an enterprising institution in Waterford was founded, as it's most famous ever company, it was not formed by locals but by two British Quaker Brothers. Waterford Crystal was founded in 1783, and its wares became the county's most popular export.

The purpose of my tone is such for I lead you towards a catastrophic episode of the city's more recent history, and wish to establish that the population of Waterford was used as a great source of factory and manufacturing staff. Generations of locals were used to the presence of industry operated by foreigners, and they trusted their lives to it, above their own entrepreneurial ambitions, for in these careers they found security. It was later, as I will illustrate further on, that the carpet was pulled from under them, so to speak, and they found themselves lost, and suffered more through their loss of employment than one can guess from the distance of a different city.

I'll relate my first experience with this city: as a teen of no more than 14, I was brought on a school tour, two hours away to, Waterford Crystal glass factory. The workers there were busy on the factory floor. They piqued my interest then, as they dressed like builders, were as dirty as chimney sweeps, bore broad shoulders, but were so artistically talented in their touch of the glass. They drew upon these bowls of raw fine Crystal with a permanent marker, before they would bring this object to a diamond disc, and then etch and grind into the marks they had made with inimitable focus, and attention to the edge of their chasing line; minding the depth, and angle, to which the disc sank.

Even as a teen of that age I recall my sense of inspiration: that this famous glass that we all knew was created and cut by the hands of such dedicated artists and not machines.

As a teenager in a family of manual labourers, I always sought a possible route by which I could exercise my artistic nature, through some manually laborious, and crucially useful, effort. The Waterford Crystal workers were one such potential example of a career I tried to conjure in my mind's eye.

That said in my fickle teenage ways I practically forgot about Waterford Crystal the next week, I'm sure.

For the purpose of continuity I now bring your attention towards the cutting of the glass. Crystal glass is of course not actually of the mineral crystal, it's not volcanic, but it is of magic: an alteration of glass, rather an adulteration of glass, in that it is *leaded*. A conscious

contamination of a pure substance silica, with a most toxic metal lead, which counterintuitively, leads to the formulation of a most pure, ideal and clear crystal-like glass that maintains perfect clarity regardless of its thickness, or layering. Standard glass will, for your information, distort the prism of light passing through due to the unsightly occurrence of a green hue in thick glass. The addition of lead absorbs, and refracts light of a silvery crystal-like condition. Gorgeous in chandeliers.

And so before an uncut glass bowl lands in the hands of a cutter a lot of work has gone into the manufacture of the object, and considerable expense.

This focuses the mind all the more. The cutter has to confidently mark the glass work, as I have said with a marker, but then irreversibly, and irreparably cut, scar and scratch a work of a most marvellous refractive ability, and elegant function, into being.

Needless to say the glass cutters in Waterford Crystal were figures of maximum concentration. I know personally they were workers of devotion: finding pleasure in their art, and it's time pressures.

I place this emphasis on the intensity of focus as I want you to imagine this requirement of attention minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, for decades and suddenly to be told your job's gone.

I can't be totally linear for I feel that it would be a bit boring, a chronology of sorts, I'll avoid, so now I collide both Waterford Crystal and myself in an impact, here, of sensible loss, but renewal.

46,931 companies ceased trading in Ireland between 2008 and 2011 (Reporters, 2012) and one of those was Waterford Crystal. At its peak the factory employed 3000 people (CBS News, 2009)

Quite a few of the Waterford Crystal workers, at a loss as to what to do, poured into my B.A. as mature students. All in their late fifties, several of them took to the studies well, but I felt they were always quite self-conscious; not of their age, but their *stage*, in life. There was an air of injury about them, the same air which I felt at home from my stepfather, the event of instigation being the same that drove me to share in this B.A. of repurposed creatures. All at a very different stage in life, but with our thoughts tuned to very similar frequencies; on one of the peculiar traits of this life: that we are all very vulnerable, and easily devastated, and somehow we feel the need quickly to pick up any other daily duty, soon as we can, so as not to be left in that naked idleness, without any cloak to cover the parts of ourselves, that just don't sit easy with life laid bare. We got busy, frantically busy: this project now, that project then; outcomes of our activity to be seen, were pleasantly appeasing.

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Waterford City Itself

Suffice to say that there was a very particular energy about the city of Waterford at that time; and within that particulate, that seemed to float on the very air of the city, within its ancient walls, was a confused sense of loss. In contact with the particles one could smell it, or *absorb* it through the eyes, rather than clearly see it. I inhaled it, and absorbed it in, and soon was sensitive to it.

The Irish name for Waterford is Port Lairge, or “Larag’s Port” in English. Like many ancient cities its name defines it by its function; a function which was tied to the very purpose of this port city. It’s geographic location, in that it is the heel of Ireland, close to Britain and Continental Europe, the depth of its of it’s waterway allowed for ships to dock. The very choice of its location was made for it’s convenience for the Vikings, as seafaring people, to operate from a place better suited, than all the rest, for shipping and trade, in *that time*. So gradually this industry drew people to it, to the heel of the loaf that is Ireland. Families for generations operated in function to this industry, other businesses built up due to the ease of export, such as Waterford Crystal, until we come to a point where it’s shipping industry for the most part died off. Most trade now goes to Dublin, and Waterford is to the side like a cutoff slice, with a population of a few hundred thousand redetermining themselves for the last century.

I would say largely that humans like to survive, so the great majority of them do redetermine, adjust to new conditions, and live for themselves, and/or their families. That is assuming they’re healthy, and of firm enough constitution to even continue and adapt, it’s also to assume a certain stage of life where one is on the *up*, but what if one is on the socially perceived, and personally accepted, *down*? Winding down, close to retiring but perhaps a decade off the date? These are the ones in the most tricky position, because of their age they’re aware that they’re not as employable as they once were, in some cases of course the experience they have is invaluable, and their energies totally undented, but for the larger part I’m aware of the realities encountered by these cutoff slices from the workforce, within a city that is itself the heel of the loaf discarded, of no more use. When you have a few thousand citizens of a city like that, in a situation like that, it creates this foggy atmosphere I mentioned.

Though I can surely say living in Waterford didn’t help my mood, nor my vital energies at a time when they should have been abounding, it did bring my attention to some condition of living that I hitherto have not known. I can’t say it’s an idea, for when I try to get out the words to describe it as such my own understanding, or image of this idea, evades me. It’s more a *sense* of things, a feeling that I feel. I find I can approach it a little, without fully touching it, when I use words like dignity, purpose, loss, shame, integrity, identity. All terms of social construct and the ego, yes, but I think the feeling, a sufferer of redundancy feels, is more confusingly painful, and draining, because it touches something so deep: under their learned states of social being. I believe the injury bruises a part of them that can’t be seen, so deep that the impact itself was hardly felt, but the ache rises slowly, imperceptibly, as the tremor of a very slow quake, that weakens one on the surface; and they would notice it, and find a surface explanation, for the surface symptom, because they

need to, but the tremors continue, the soreness of loss. I don't believe that bruise touches the flesh, but rather a person's very connection to existence, whatever that connecting feature is, it takes a hit, from something so relatively superficial as the loss of a factory job. As I said I can't put my finger on it, as the injury is so deep, I only see the final surfacing: the duller reverberation that has already waved, pulsed, through the person's very being, their layers of reality.

I'm of the conviction that alone as humans we can't handle these things. Where that suffering comes from is a place not one of us has had the ability to truly open up and observe. Our poor capabilities of logic for the search of mental healing appear so readily in the very language we use. Try to describe any mental, intangible illness, by means of words that are *exclusively* of the intangible.

Someone that is feeling mentally unwell could be said to be experiencing depression: the literal pressing of something down below its usual physical level, a dent. Bipolar: of two places. Nervous: of an irritability of the physical nerves. Anxious (the greatest hope of counter to this point) has its origins in tightness, constriction.

So how can we prepare or even warn others of a such a hazard that we all at some point encounter?

If there is to be any hope for one's resurrection, redetermination, one won't be delivered there by the vocabulary of another. Actions might assist, and verbal instruction towards reconstructive actions, but I contest that by means of visuals one can sense and articulate within themselves a feeling of hope, a way out.

Of course I by no means claim to have a way, I don't even have total understanding of what this thesis topic *Abstention* fully means to me, but I am an artist of the visual thereby giving one my thesis in truth by means of the eye, in order to communicate a *sense* of things, not to articulate with precision for how many targets could that well chosen arrow of a word actually hit?

No, I operate by means of the senses and try to affect, like the air of Waterford, that you may feel that which I have sensed, and absorbed through the eyes.

The art I love affects this kind of resonance within the audience, more like a type of empathy. The artists I enjoy, that I feel do it best, say with their works: these are things as I see them, as I have felt them, another human that affords you a simple view.

That, to me, is interesting. People are interesting, those that let you in; all the more so. Because in seeing and spotting some suffering the artist sometimes can create the opportunity for the person on a very deep level to see that they are not alone. That bruised place from which the artist directs the tremors, vibrates with a very particular frequency, that the fellow sufferer may attune themselves to, and in so doing may truly feel that they are not alone in this one discomfort of life at least.



In 2014, truly brought low by that tormented City of Waterford, I decided to leave and try my luck in Paris.

# Empty Nesters

Before I made this first attempt at escape from Waterford (that is emigration), I was painfully aware of the closing off of a significant formative time in my life.

The premature nostalgia that hits in advance of the parting was encouraging me to sit with all the friends, independently one by one, and appreciating, as I imagine someone would were their final days numbered on this Earth, gaining that water on my eyeball in the joyful admiration of their once mundane qualities now rendered invaluable and precious by my knowledge of my impending departure.

Indeed these definite closures are mini deaths, abandonment of a particular location, wherein people of particular memories and lives, remain never to be encountered as they once were again. I'm an incurably morose and sentimental individual at such moments, and was even more so then.

In the initial drive to emigrate I found myself balancing between two complex emotions: that of growth, prosperity and possibility, a happening of the life I imagined as a student, and then: the sense of abandonment, fleeing, and failure to not have made home a workable environment. The former was thankfully the more persistent, or at least the one I clung to most firmly, however the notion of abandonment of my mother was, and still is, a constant agitation which to this day I try to console with unusually frequent visits home. That said, this initial move was 8 years ago, and such a method of appeasement had not occurred to me at that time, I was going to Paris to make it big, recklessly.

The weight of my move, and it's unknown, but impending effect on my mother, was in no way lightened when I met with one of my then dearest friends Paul O' Brien. Paul was a mature student of 58 when he entered the bachelor of visual arts with me in Waterford city, Ireland, and as with so many others in that dent of a city, he sought to repurpose himself and finally mine the bottomless artistic talent that he no doubt possessed (forgive me if I amusing myself by amusing the memory of him). Pertinent to my recollection here is the fact that prior to this entrance to the arts Paul was a devoted high school teacher for most of his life until, when in his early fifties he suffered a severe heart attack, which retired him reluctantly early.

Often, it seemed, to me, that Paul was painfully conscious of his age in the BA program of mostly late adolescent art students, but that provided weak resistance to the full commitment of his industrious energies to the course, and his social energies to us. When I look back to his artistic output, his unfailing attendance, and interest in extracurricular trips and events, I can say he both respected and appreciated the structure and demands of what was quite an intense program.

It was then, just as our Bachelor program had approached the final assessment of our degree show work, that while presenting his art to the assessing lecturers, that I, waiting in the adjoining room, heard a loud shout which I took to be a madly jocular outburst (as was not unlike Paul in his good humoured, and predictable manner) but was alarmed to see next, in good time, an ambulance arrive to take him to hospital. He had unfortunately taken a jolt from his pacemaker while presenting his artwork.

The aftermath of this meant strict recovery time, and Paul deferred his graduation date by a year. This deadline was also not met, as Paul was forced to later undergo a heart transplant.

The transplantation was news to me when I met him post his recovery, just prior to my emigration to Paris. Evidently the new heart had assimilated well within his body, without hint of physical rejection, but sadly, he emotionally, could not so readily accept it.

I encountered that day a much transformed personality, simply lowered in its joyful energies, he moved fine, I forget what time he had post op., but he walked, and sat and chatted.

One particularly endearing aspect of Paul's interactions with me was the disregard he showed from my age: in that he trusted my understanding, and emphatic capacity, enough to always be open and candid with me. Though he was a father of two boys (both a little older than my age of 24 years at the time) he could see me as a friend, and a confidant, rather than merely a peer of his sons. Which strengthened our friendship, and personally gave me honest access to the often concealed workings of an anxious parent's mind.

He did not mask, nor deny, his clear suffering when I asked how he was. Frankly he put it that he was in a heavy depression without will for a single thing: not to walk, rarely to meet and talk, art had been laid aside prior to the transplant, and his intentions to complete our degree had dissipated.

I recall many considerations of his, which understandably preoccupied his mind, and perhaps withheld his full recovery, but one in particular related so keenly to my own, relatively minimal concerns, that it stuck in my memory to this day.

At the time one of his sons was travelling Asia, and the other working in Wales. He remarked upon their neglect of contact: calls or messages, their being so far away, and his being so far from their concern.

He said from the day you have them they are your life in a way, you work to secure their health and happiness: keep your job, buy a house, almost everything substantial in life, is for them, and then "when they are old enough, they just fuck off and forget about you." (taken from my notes of the conversation)

Of course I'm tempted to project my own reasons and amateur psychological inferences into this reasoning but will resist, and allow it to remain there in tandem with the other contents of this thesis.

On a return visit to Ireland (but not Waterford) one year later, I was informed of the sad passing of Paul. I relate strictly what I was told in that: an infection, probably pertaining from the transplanted heart, had become untreatable and its location could not be found.

## In Paris

What encouraged my move to Paris was the lure of gallery representation as an artist, a seemingly well established gallery in the Marais had exhibited me twice and

requested my entry into an informal representative agreement, which would see me both exhibit at their gallery, and at whatever art fairs they might attend.

I couldn't have imagined a more ideal reason to take me to my then dream City of Paris other than to enter on the back of artistic purpose. I began to sense I had a place in society. I walked around Paris as an artist, even introduced myself first as one, secondly giving my name to all I encountered. Cloaked myself in all the foppish garb of an elegant Parisian, as I marched my laps of the Marais, but sadly, as is so often the case I was a broke and unemployed artist.

Unemployed is a very present, matter-of-now term, but as time moves on and one finds themselves unemployed for a sustained period of time gradually they begin to feel that they're *unemployable*. Of course the language barrier was the initial problem: I hadn't a word of French, and the French themselves are particularly unforgiving or such ignorance. I tried every bar and gallery, museum and shop that I could find, only to always find disinterest, or feigned interest, onto outright rejection, in the follow-up call. Gradually this begins to wear on one; what was initially a hunt fueled with the enthusiasm of unlimited possibility, a new life starting, became a series of seemingly searched for denials, life limiting denials.

I think consciously I processed it with the logical understanding of the "business here was just not in need of staff", or accepting that the customers understandably have a right to expect services in their native language, but I think subconsciously all the information that gets down to that deeper part of the self is an outright "NO!" a loud "no to *you*", not wanted, and more harmfully: never needed. I say this as I realise now that my conscious acceptance of my needy situation did not help to arrest the downward sliding of my emotions, and my energies.

As I have said: always marvel at our use of physically descriptive visuals to describe completely intangible, emotional ailments, but that *dip* in my energies was much akin to the *depression* I witnessed in that *dent* of the city in Waterford. Here in Paris I felt in a rut, so to speak (I'm abusing the visuals now), and this notion of depression was quite apt in that my energies were well below their previous level, in fact while standing in this hollow of my mental landscape I could look back, and up, to where they once were, and even marvelled at how out-of-reach they seemed, and then as I turned, still in my hollow, to look forward: indeed only a steeply inclining slope faced me, one which I could not see over the edge, nor imagine ascending, but note I say here: it was not a wall or a barrier, but a *slope*, as I was in a depression, another dent, so going forward was possible, but I swear even the simplest movement met such immediate resistance that the strain itself began to occupy most of my conscious thought.

Gradually I wasn't bounding through Paris on my way to success, but was instead moving against a peculiarly sticky, but invisible, resistance, which barely allowed me to drag my pen across a page, hardly a brush across a canvas, and only ruefully my feet along a path.

If this artist doesn't make art is he an artist? Suddenly introducing myself as an artist inflamed a sense of shame inside me, at my having just lied. The pretext upon which

I moved to Paris was now a sore spot in my memory, and the gallery that had invited me to the city, had morphed into a burdensome source of frustrated expectation. My gallerists favourite phrase "We'd love to see some of your new works" took form as a recurring apparition that haunted me each night before attempting to sleep.

With no money I registered as unemployed, from which I gained zero economic support, but I did acquire a free museum pass: a gratuity afforded to all of France's down-and-outs. By that point, accepting that my artistic output was on strike, I could just about muster the energy to simply absorb, and intake, mostly at the Louvre. Regular visits gradually took me around the entirety of the museum. For hours on end, with a packed lunch in my backpack, I photographed the works I felt pertinent to my then condition of stagnation, the cessation of my will, and just being a walking human tent dent. Again and again I would return to Gericault's *Raft of Medusa*. Of course it's a famous work, an enormous work, and fraught with drama, horror and despair.

The image of the Father (the most alert of the leftward down-and-outs), caught my attention. He's sitting there among the dead, those of hope and excitement are standing in the top right of the work, but he sits in a posture of absolute and total dejection, holding his dead son that lies draped across his lap. The man appears to be but an alert body, ruefully alive, staring off into quiet despair.

While I personally find Gericault's technical rendering of this character mildly clumsy and unevocative, I then projected into his stare the condition of my friend Paul, informed by our last chat, and rather than seeing the man's dead son, draped Pieta like across his lap, I viewed it with my own artistic bias, through the lens of my self indulgent suffering, to suit my own narrative. In so doing I dissolved and diluted what was known to be Gericault's actual intention in this specific scene, and reconstructed the content for my own poetic purposes.



(Digital Sketch of actual artwork in process. The finished oil painting will be present in my exhibition of thesis art works.)

The son, in my work, sits or lays as a child; a symbol, of a human form that exists only as a child: a human that exists in relation to the care of the parent, and as this figure only exists as an upcoming-in-care, the father sits as the male symbol of the upbringer, in my context. The implied hazard in the work is informed by that now discussed in this chapter..

Allow me to digress: while Paul's concerns clearly influenced my interpretation of the scene, I must state that I have no means of access nor can I empathise fully: myself not being a father yet, and not having ever had a close father, so forgive me if I morph this male figure into the symbol and the notion of non-descript parent.

"Parent" as a term a function, as a verb: a *doing* word, but an often underappreciated weighty term in that it only exists in relation to a child, one they are upbringing, and so if we are to draw that child away, completely, we are devastating the very conception of parent, making it a redundant term, and rendering the bearer of that identity painfully obsolete.

At its most basic a raft is a flotation device, at its most poetic it is a non-directional means of transport. That is, it can float any way: sideways, forwards, backwards etc. it doesn't have a port side, nor starboard, bow nor a stern, and in that sense is not so keenly directional as a ship, or a boat. It floats indiscriminately, without the built-in forward-going sense of purpose which the men of the Medusa were trained to prior to their wreckage, and subsequent floating upon, the then present before me, raft. (or at least Gericault's rendering of such)

One aspect of this work that reverberated with my own low frequency at the time was the surrender of the figures, in the bottom left, to their situation. The painting in fact also marks a moment of joy in that the characters in the top right of the work, have just spotted a rescue ship, however the pitiful lot to the bottom left are nonplussed by this sighting, all being either dead, or reluctantly still alive. There is an emotional balance in this composition which I believe in its attempt was a remarkable feat by Gericault. This type of see-saw between absolute despair, and ecstatic relief. I can't resist outlining my already obvious allusion here: that with clear hindsight I was caused to consider leaving my home, maybe by means of considering Paul and his sons in the image of the father.

The painting was poking that pain I had in relation to my mother, leaving her. It also caused me to scrutinise how watery and precarious my personal constitution was in that: my entire identity was constructed, or connected, to my function as an artist, my very stake in society, as I saw it, was dependent upon that notion of my being an "artist". There was a soreness in all of this which there I scratched, and chafed against that oil rendered symbol of deep existential redundancy. That raft of hope and despair, a see-saw that balanced emotionally in a state of stasis for 200 years. I stepped upon one side of the see-saw, and it tilted, steeply, leaning me abruptly home, tipping me eventually, quite literally; through my mother's door, and back into my teenage bedroom.

When I got back from Paris, I'll say: I didn't feel too good about myself. At 24 it was an amazing opportunity to have gallery representation in Paris, and I was sharply aware of how I blew it. Suddenly I was not in my Parisian City centre apartment, but now in my teenage bedroom, in the middle of the Irish countryside. I was low, but I was home, and appreciative of the nature, and nurture, of home. Through the healing presence of my mother around me, and busying myself with jobs my step father allotted me, I gradually was rebuilt.



# We are Of Those That Chased the Sun

In 2012 in that despairing city of Waterford I encountered a most peculiar man that offloaded upon me the contents of his life's work, or so it seemed at least, in an instant. He was a retired admiral from the West German Navy that had settled in Waterford, Ireland. In order to research the archaeological finds of Viking remains in that county (Woodstown area in particular). He was a historian specialising in both the Celts in Ireland, and the Vikings. I don't know what brought it about, but while standing there chatting to this stranger, at an exhibition opening, he delivered a statement of such poetic significance that I still consider it today.

He remarked that his interest in the history of the Celtic peoples had led him to relocate to Ireland. The Celts' settlement on this westerly island had always piqued his interest for the simple reason that they had always been a nomadic people, their migration can be traced in its origins to Central Asia, he affirmed the theory of their original descent from territories around the Himalayas.(Dunford, B. 2022)

Through prehistory, as the dominant theory goes, the Celts migrated across the known world, always moving westwards. From middle Asia, through Turkey evidence of Celtic transmigration has been found (Wilford, J. N.2001). Through the Balkans, into Austria, Germany, France and Spain clear evidence of persistent westward migration across land, through time, people of purposeful movement, until they got to Ireland: there they stopped. For the first time in the history of this ancient peoples, they ceased to move.(Britannica, T.2022)

Here I return to Mr. De Roelman, I asked him why? I recall this conversation so well, I see in my mind's eye where we stood, by the Michael Street window of Hive Gallery, and remember his answer: "the primary deity in the Celtic belief system was Luaigh, the Sun God" (and I paraphrase this of course, but accurately from my notes of the time) "can you imagine the actual manifestation of your God, visible to your sight each day, origin and creator of the world, and all life, and then at the end of every living day he sinks away below the Western horizon, wouldn't you like to see where he goes? or maybe even get physically to him?" He was of the opinion that the Celts migrated Westward for the purpose of getting to God.

Here my mind departed the topical facts, in my then lost-soul state of mind, I could only consider the sense of motivation they must have felt, to have the purpose of their movements in life being to simply get to their God. To really believe it might be possible. The magic and wonder they must have felt in thinking "one day we'll get to

him and learn the untold", feel the unknown, and simply understand, perhaps, why they even existed. I cannot imagine a more motivating notion than such a pursuit: each day rising to get where the Sun God goes. Every meal would have meaning: sustenance for the pursuit. Each plan for the next year would have one certainty: that you'll be so much closer to your God. Each day would feel progressive if one moved but a metre to the West, and then eventually, they get to Ireland: the most northwestern land known then to humans, closest to the setting sun, closest to God.

It was in Ireland that despair would have engulfed them. They would have realised there that they will never meet their God, never attain that desired glory, that all sacrifice in the pursuit of this goal was in vain. It was in Ireland that the people of such divine purpose, born into the motion to God, were forced to concede that all movement must cease. People of direction, now rendered static, on that great island of a brutal stopping.

The fact that the Celts made this Westward journey from Central Asia across centuries, tells me that their nature was probably deeply conditioned by this conviction of the peoples. I'm sure it was integral to their notion of group identity. I like to play with the thought that those of us native to that island are descended from these frustrated natures. Downtrodden, damaged and damply proceeding reluctantly, praying that some effort, worthy of our will, might arise us from the bed with conviction.

What the Celt's would have done at this point amuses me to imagine: they would have sat in despair and sorrow, literally having just been deprived of their purpose as a people, their whole intention for their society, but at one point they would have had to then redetermine, and so they did.

### Dun Aengus

Here I once again must return to my chat with Mr. De Roelman, and the moment in which I broached a topic, rather a structure, that has sat on the western Irish landscape since the arrival of the first Celts. This curiosity, even wonder, which had always puzzled my mind, was a stone fortification off the west coast of Ireland called Dun Aengus (Dún Aonghasa in Irish). What is curious about this fort, is not its large semi circular shape enclosing fourteen acres, nor its approximate date of construction almost 3000 years ago. (Aran Islands, 2021) but the purpose of its existence, in what it fortifies, or rather defends: a cliff ledge with an eighty-seven metre drop into the Atlantic Ocean.

While in De Roelman's presence, discussing the arrival of the Celts in Ireland, I asked him what he thought about Dun Aengus (a mystery to this day it remains) To my query he gave a simple answer, (again drawn from my notes) "Well you don't build a fort that big, in those times, unless you had something extremely significant to defend." The obvious implication being that this Island off the west coast, of the most westerly land

the Celts had ever reached, was of such significance because of its proximity to their God Luaigh, the Sun God.

In those times such constructions were massive projects, the quarrying of the stones alone, not to mention the construction, could be a multi generational project, if not one that took decades, and so one didn't go to such lengths in the construction of a fortification unless they felt the object of defence to be extremely significant.

I believe the Celts built Dun Aengus, I believe they simply had to reform their wills, and set them upon another task of service to their ultimate idol.

Such an idea would be a remedy to their loss, of purposeful movement, (in their choosing some mind consuming effort that is in some way related to the original intention of their peoples) and so they busied themselves with this dramatic defence of the earthly edge of human limits, defence of closeness to God.

I visited Dun Aengus in 2017. On this island there is a natural ascent towards a huge wall of dark grey limestone, six metres high, semicircular, enclosing the aforementioned fourteen acres. Within this outer wall (the first of three) are thousands of jagged rocks, upright poking out of the ground, like weather worn ancient teeth, functionally in place clearly to disrupt any army's attempted charge. The innermost wall contains the most significant feature: the drop.

What interested me about this was a detail, not apparent in any pictures, but noticeable in visiting, it was a raised bed of rock in the centre of the innermost semicircle, running to the cliff's edge. It exists not through construction, nor raising of an artificial floor level, but by the cleaving away the slabs of limestone that must have surrounded it. When one looks upon it, it resembles an altar of sorts, even perhaps a stage, with a backdrop that extends to the limits of the sea's horizon. The midday sun, when at its zenith, sits directly inline with, and behind that altar. This was all central within the innermost wall, the drop being also the Island's highest point. When within this final wall, one notices that the inner side of the semicircle is tiered in three steps, large enough to allow seated viewing of the altar. I was led to conclude, rather my impression was such, that I felt this was an amphitheatre of sorts, certainly not a dwelling.

I will again directly quote my notes (which I wrote the evening of my visit to the fort) on my impressions of the altar:

"April 22nd 2017: The scene from the seats (tiers) is so dramatic that it overtakes all else running through one's mind. On the altar I found myself considering most naturally, and casually, the idea of falling to my death, unto contemplating the sense of jumping to one's death. Here for that time it was hard to consider much other than the awe of the view, the development surround, and the possibility of death. It was this very real possibility and peculiar draw of the mind towards jumping, that set the theme of my mind's thoughts. I had no choice while in the presence of this option but to consider death thus life, not life day-to-day but it's core in living. Walking back happily

from that edge speaks positively, but again I return to this intro point: this altar was carved out in the vicinity of these sensations and considerations, with great purpose.”

Those that built Dun Aengus set about the construction of a momentous project one that occupied thousands of people, I’m sure, for decades. For the sake of the poetry I uphold my theory that it was formed in the energy of a redetermined will.

In my notes, from the trip to Dun Aengus, I noticed the following entry, taken after listening to a conversation among bathers, in a gym’s steam room. Indeed this was part of the same trip but a different location. Those talking were clearly of the rural locality. I must remark upon the uncanny relation my account of their conversation bears to my preceding text on the Sun chasing Celts, of whom we’re born, this relation had gone unnoticed until now. I will transcribe the story directly as it was scribbled moments after I left the steam room, such was my enjoyment that I feared I would forget the tones and terms of the speakers, here is the unedited direct transcription

To mark a story overheard  
in a Roscrea steam room

Two boys, mid 40s, talked about playing the lotto even after you have already, once before, won it. One said it’s greedy, the clean shaven one, he said “once you sort your kids out and yourself leave it at that”. Then the other bearded man with his foggy glasses in his hand said “lads like that, make the million, and keep going, something must drive them on more than money”.

-“What else shur? It’s only the money that matters to them”

-“Ah yeah but there’s a thrill or something in making more and more there’s something in it they care about more than the money itself. They must be after something other than money”

-“Well I’ll tell you a good one” says he “I know a lad who loved the horses he’d work like a bollocks and when it was payday he’d say ‘hauld on to it ‘till next month’ shur everyone new ‘next month’ meant the Leopardstown races, and he work like mad until then, and one time the races came and he made a serious day of it. Then when near all was lost they headed home, and stopped off for a last pint on the way, and there he goes to pay for his pint, pulls a pound note out of his shirt pocket, and here didn’t another pound note come up with it, and Jaysus he let a sigh ‘ah fuck it!’

And we said ‘shur shouldn’t ye be happy?’ and he says ‘shur had I seen it I could have thrown it on that last horse’ and I said ‘shur ye lost four pounds on him as it was didn’t you?’ ‘I did’ he says ‘but I’ll tell ye, five pounds would have been even more fun.’”

We are of those that chased the sun.

## The Dream Itself

By way of introduction to the following dream of Abstention, I feel I should set it in context. Just as my Bachelor degree exhibition in Waterford was installed, and I was to be free of the city, I took a quick nap one evening, as I was tired from installing my works, and wished to recover my energies for the celebrations of the night ahead.

### This Dream of Abstention

A golden evening light surrounds. My arms, I feel, and notice in seeing, are held above my head: they're linked at their fingers, the four of my left, combed through the four of my right. I'm looking out through the frame of my arms held, unfailingly, as such. I could discern that orangey golden hue about me, but under my feet, and extending from them into the horizon, I see a cold grey limestone surface, outdoors, I'm outside, it's irregular but uninterrupted in its uniformity of material, extending itself all the way to the evening sky's horizon. There is no real distance. There's no wind, but a sound on the air, it's a female's voice, elegant soothing, it's one word repeating: abstention abstention abstention. I have nowhere to go, though all is open, all is available, I stay where I am with my arms raised aloft, clasped, held in some standard duty of the dream.

I slowly woke upon my bed, lying beneath my ceiling window, which framed my view of the cloudless sky. It was a May evening. I rose myself to go downstairs. It was then as I descended the staircase that I heard her voice innerly repeating "abstention".

I speak in this thesis of how I absorbed the air of Waterford's forlorn atmosphere, and I feel now in reflection, that these airs permeated through me, to form this strangely soothing, but desperate, vision.

I'll have to return to the dream gradually to recollect how it all made strange sense. The arms held aloft, overhead, clasped, framing my vision, closing off the periphery. All I could see was all I *allowed* myself to see, there was a *within* and *without*: upon this non-directional landscape I was now provided at least with some limit that defined the space ahead as at least being: forwards.

The space ahead here I restate was limestone, a huge flat grey platform extending to the evening light, the sunset: the West. This was Ireland, this was a landscape known as "the Burrin" in county Clare, the west of the island. It's a space of condensed ages: limestone is sedimentary, *of* the sediment of the sea, of life that once was, but now it sits petrified arguably forever. The Burrin is a land stripped bare by the elements, by time, and force of nature: the wind of the West: the Atlantic coast's cutting drafts. The soil is dried by the Sun, and powerful gusts blow it away, this is the natural mechanism that stripped the Burrin down to its 15 square kilometres of flat exposed stone. The floor of my dream was carpeted with this dust of ages.

One may rightly ask. What is the Abstention? It is the *decision* to raise the arms, and to keep them raised. The arms protect the vision of the figure in the dream, thus the mind, from all else save that which is in front, ahead. By choosing to keep them up one is choosing to

abstain from observing that which may slip into view, into mind. On a landscape such as the Abstentive plain, of my dream, that might mean not observing the landscape of no implied direction, for fear of maybe seeing that every direction is equally as pointless as the next.

Again dissatisfied you might ask: what *is* the Abstention? It's the choosing of an occupation, to create a frame of meaning for life to imply a direction: a way worth the walking. The moment one lowers their arms, or loses their job, they are vulnerable upon the Abstentive plain, and they duly scramble to raise their arms again, or leap to the next obligation, but I can't imagine a single person I have ever met that could stand happily upon the Abstentive plain, with their hands in their pockets.

# Road Markers

In order to get to Finland one needs money, even thousands to set up, and ensure survival in the search for work there. To achieve a workable amount I gained employment with a Road Marker, that had just gained the unusual contract of painting the steps of a newly renovated football stadium, and was in need of extra hands.

Early on, the crew of four gained knowledge of my intention to complete an art masters, and so I was given the nickname of “Michelangelo”, which is in fact double the length of my actual name. The job entailed their picking me up from my door at 5:30 a.m. to drive two hours, and begin work at 7:30am. The stadium renovation converted an ageing Pairc Ui Chaoimh into a 45,000 seater stadium, and each new step of the stadium’s stairs required painting with a 30-year guaranteed, cancer causing, heat applied, non-slip paint.

Normally each step requires masking tape for the tidy application of primer, but seeing as my name of *Michelangelo* attested to my artistic ability, I was given the task of applying the primer freehand, in a straight stripe along the edge of each step. In one week I primed the the North side of the stadium’s steps, amounting to 2000 steps of one metre length each (2 km in total). This was done while stooped over, arched, enlisting the resilient services of my lower back, and glutes. In the many weeks I worked there I endured mild mental torment, but only in the dread I felt at the daunting nature of the task. It was a job that unusually laid before you all that was ahead: every bit of painstaking work to be done was there visibly waiting for you, such is the layout of a football stadium, it is designed to offer clear views of the entire space, each day you began work entering the stadium and seeing the tens of thousands of steps that had yet to be painted, I found this to be the most difficult feature of the work, very often we may work on enormous projects that would paralyse one if the full volume of strain was laid before your eyes at each moment, but my situation was such that my move to Finland was dependant on the money this job was paying.

It should also be said that one does feel frustration at one’s situation: at 28 years of age (at the time) relying on such strains to gain a living (and a way out in my case), but the most crucial feeling, or rather insight I gained, was that while in that working phase, in my late evenings after work, I lucidly tried to ponder in-depth the nature of my preceding depression, and remarkably I could not even find it to observe it. To consider it I was actually forced to try recall its *feeling* but to no serious effect, as I probably conscious of the fact that I had to eat in time to sleep comfortably without indigestion, for my 5am awakening. Upon reading Margeuitte Duras’ *Memoirs of Hadrian* I recorded a sentence that struck me in relation to that previous point

“The convalescent once cured, ceases to understand the mysterious truths laid bare by illness” (Yourcenar, 2000)

From my notes I consult some points I made while at the bus stop on my way home from the town of Roscrea where I launched myself each day to paint these steps:

“Another Porlaoise stop off

Notes after a week of typical labour:

- Hardly any morbid thoughts.
- Zero death anxieties.
- Complete exhaustion at night thus tiredness of thinking.
- Minimal idle time leading to feeling of slight stress in denied personal time.
- Mild sense of dread each night at the need for early bed, for early rise.
- General sense of contentment despite often present frustration from need of such labour and money.
- Sadness at sight of other co-workers doing this for life without real choice.

These boys are artists, that's clear even in the narrow sense of the word. They arrive in a blank field of tarmac and are asked to draw out the car spaces, the directional arrows, the handicap zones, the mother and child spots. They draw instruction for the future public to follow. "

I am now by effect of that just preceding, brought to consider the words of my stepfather, in recent years, embarrassedly telling me of how he wakes around 6:00 a.m. and has "bad thoughts which makes his heart speed up and his mind go all mad". I need not to explain the difference between facing those thoughts in the hour before work, and the hour before idleness.

In the time of these labours I can attest to the distinct disconnection from my previously constant depressive fixations. Therefore I can say: an odd energy returns for life, one very distant from that previous one with the constant desire to nap each day away. And in recounting these labours, for the express purpose of illustrating Abstention in action, I hasten to add that Abstention here is not connection to some abstract idea of noble labour, but rather it is such a consumption of the self that it forces disconnection from existential realities, through their removal from being one's most apparent and demanding concern. Somehow the greatest dread, the ultimate end, is simply supplanted by the most immediate one.

## Clean Your Life

I was aware of the cure to be found in labour on moving to Finland, and so in the first four months here without a job, I could say the despair of my uncertain situation was exacerbated



by my unemployment. Strangely, I might add it affected my normal functionality in life, even in regard to my art practice. I can't say the *cause* of my problems was in any way the absence of employment, but what I will remark upon is the noticable dissolution of my problem's powers, their potency, and their hold, in my eventual finding of employment.

By need of financial means was I caused to go to strangers' homes, and clean their toilets, but by *means* of this obligation, did I lessen my burden and suffering.

If my grandfather can be viewed as an extractor, a sculptor of sorts, and my stepfather an artist of application, of plastic works: addition to surfaces, I was in that time a renovator/conservator in my own way, through my removal of the unwanted accumulations of everyday life.

From skin particles upon each gap on the bookshelf shelf, to the toddlers oily smudges on the flat screen TV, from the sex stains on the bed sheets, onto the peculiar shit stains often above the flushing rim, all markings of life's living, that are so draining in maintaining the suppression of their existence, that people often employ the services of someone like me to remove them.

Nothing is so overwhelming to a homeowner, and no less their cleaner, than seeing their layering of days and weeks of life's markings, additions to surfaces, in general, about the home. Such harmless accumulations can cause actual disgust at the self, for example the splashes of last Friday's spaghetti, this Friday, depress us wholeheartedly, and so it is for this reason that I felt no sense of dignity, nor purpose, in doing the job, and needless to say; I also felt no shame in my position as cleaner, but what did actually bring me low, in this job, was the shame of the homeowner:

The shame of their mess, showing me where the bathroom was, knowing that their shit marks graced the inner bowl, the accumulated splashes of their greasy body clouded that shower door, and the misty surface of the stainless steel bin beside the toilet, no longer shiny due the multitude of countless microscopic piss splashes that we can't even see leave the bowl, yes in review now I can say the only indignity I felt was through the customer's own visible shame and their directing me towards it, for the task of removal. So though one might logically say "the healing of cleaning for me lay in the visible progress of bringing things from dirty to clean" I can say no, it lay in the time constrained demand of my energies, the working through my revulsion, and the physically demanding nature of their timed expectations.

So what (I even ask myself) was so *healing* about this job? and I say that stated: Consumption. Consumption of my attention. Even it's causing enormous dread in my evenings was an assistant to my greater well-being. Knowing in January 2018 that I would have to go out in the dark at 6:00 a.m., and wait in what was one day minus 23 degrees, for a bus, and change for another bus, and walk the remaining two kilometres deep into Western Espoo, ate up so much of my thoughts, when at home, that straying to bleak sensations of obsolescence was actually not possible. One could ponder it's worth as a life, the work itself, the sometimes pitiful situation, but I never really had enough free concern to connect with the harrowing realities, for I was always faced with an obligation which I felt was unavoidable. I can in no way say this was contentment, or happiness, but it speaks volumes to say: in order to even *think* of my previous depression, I had to try *remember* it's feeling, and strangely, I realised that contentment wasn't necessary; but living willfully is.

That said, I wanted out of the cleaning game as soon as was possible, which turned out to be three years later.

In consulting my notes from this time I happened upon one amusing frequent frustration, not poetic, nor terribly meaningful, but amusing and sincere in its representation of the time and my feeling. I transcribe the handwritten note here unedited.

21.06.18

The job just completed is one most often started with the light chat of the female half of the custom. I find her chat to be boring in its content, but it is pleasant for the simple reason of her motivation to engage me in some form of respectful interaction.

This day the job began with the Him of the house. Polite, but unpleasant, Jakko opened the door to a soul despondent on seeing him, but thankfully all my outward appearances feigned a most balanced acceptance of his form: dead-eyed and grinning.

Saying to me -"This day could you do the balcony windows?"

. Internally "exploitation!" roared from my chest to my spinal column and drove upward to the loud part of my thoughts, but I resisted saying it, while laughing in disbelief I said "that's usually an extra" he said "yes but you don't need to vacuum so much now because of the robot." Instantly I laughed as he's a child at 60. The robot seems to only access 20% of the floor's area (at the price of 300 euro he could have saved on just leaving it to me). Gradually I returned my interior thoughts to self same requests before: I remembered when I rejected them, like I did the exploitative Gallerist in Paris, only to be immediately shunned and cut free.

I conceded ground: "Okay well I'll have to text the office, it's an extra, and insurance and all... last time your wife booked it, it was 7 hours extra to do windows too"

- "yes but it shouldn't be too difficult"

What a shit.

I went off and started cleaning, pretended to text the office, and came back to him: "Yeah that's grand Jakko, they said it's fine for the windows"

- "okay thank you"

The fucker. I don't mind the odd thanks, but that was one he said so mindlessly.

## Recycling Room

Taken from my notes, in 2020, pertinent to *This Dream of Abstention*:

As I ventured to my rubbish room just now, five children of ages from 3 to 6, (I would guess) were idly hanging around, chatting loudly and joyfully, outside of the rubbish room. I opened the locked door to enter, and I heard a child roar "it's open!"(in Finnish) I laughed as they unabashedly squeezed through the door with me, and ran to the few objects left out of the bins for interested parties to recycle.

I turned to leave, and passed the tiny girl that was entrusted to hold the door ajar. As I entered my apartment I could hear the children's voices outside, one floor below: "...Nee-naw nee-naw..." two of them carried an ironing board, as though they were paramedics, back to a few of their pals playing in the neighbourhood sandbox. They lowered the ironing board in sync, to the ground, and allowed a friend of no more than four years to lie down, only to be picked up with remarkable care, and carried around. Then two young boys came, also from the direction of the paramedics origin, one with an oversized wok, the other with a small milk pan. Immediately they joyfully shovelled sand about with no clear aim other than to use their new shovels.

One little girl that was a consistent native of the sandbox, at her apparent 3 years, had a stick which she gained two distinct sounds with, as it hit the pan by a gesture of her curious hand.

Then I watched the once shy door-holding-girl bring the ironing board to a seat. She sat there at it, as if it were a shop counter, two boys laid a saucepan upon the surface, and began retrieving sand from the box to fill it. The small girl with the stick, barely tall enough, managed to stir the sand in the saucepan, which the one as store owner recognised as a good action, she took the stick from the little one, and began handling all the pans as if she were preparing their dinners. As I look down, out my window, to still see them at this new iron board shop/restaurant/mammy's kitchen, I notice that the whole time I wrote this their animated voices are audibly telling me of the excitement they have found, but I can't understand their Finnish!

# -HOUNDSTOOTH-

The hound without a jaw is a hound that cannot bark or bite.

Yes he can: breathe, see, think, love, move from here to there; shit, piss, walk and wag tail in joy, but bark or bite he can not.

Probably this is only the imparting, if not projecting, human-ness into such a hound to say his identity is intermingled with his more characteristically “dog-like” actions, and I even encourage this: let my doggy be thy mirror. Like this, or not, it's a condition of most people I know to see the function, the action, as the identifier among animate objects. So henceforth *Houndstooth* may stand for: a Hound that can't Hound.

Now the unfortunate notion of a creature (here present) such as a dog that can't bite or bark, appears to you as spontaneously and unexpectedly as it did to my own eyes some years previous to this. While ambling wide and watery-eyed through the many galleries of the Vatican, I happened upon the most sorrowful beast in marble since the Dying Slave: this dog my *Houndstooth*. His bottom jaw broken, from God knows when, displaying the inner marbling of his marble. His eyes sustaining the same harsh vigour, and nobility, that his maker had endowed him with all those years ago when he saw his hound as a symbol of first and foremost an unambiguous beast of a hound, a dog that does not even allow the minutest doubt over his mandible.

How did my Houndstooth's jaw fall off? I could say heavy-handed moving men, or even an unintentional uppercut from a speedy cleaner but no, it is one of these two options, if not both: he yawned too thoroughly, or bit down too firmly.

A statue such as my hound is not a human, and yet the human would mimic the stoney beast (perhaps “petrified”); so that when function falls off in the human they will feel the need to present as though it hasn't, like my noble seemingly unaffected hound. Maintaining his composure and proud tilt of the head, sitting like the king of it all.

I know many a figure like that, if I may refer to a highly scientific anecdote, well then I might here now: When I graduated from my bachelor in 2012 in the depths of Ireland's banking crisis and deepest recession (I fib, the 80s were worse I'm told) I took the welfare allowance of the state, and each day, if not all days, I'd stumble from cafe to bar writing and rattling (fueling both by caffeine) one needs a reason to sit anywhere; even caffeinated rattles suffice. It was on my daily route of lingering about that I began to spot some like-minded characters doing the rounds of Waterford city's cafes, but now most peculiarly to me one particular figure springs to mind: this man in his 50s, with substantial hair, dark tinged with a little gray, just

sitting dead-eyed over his coffee's edge, sitting/pinned into a repurposed Church style booth, of dark oak, by a large table, which he claimed daily for himself, in Geoff's bar of Waterford.

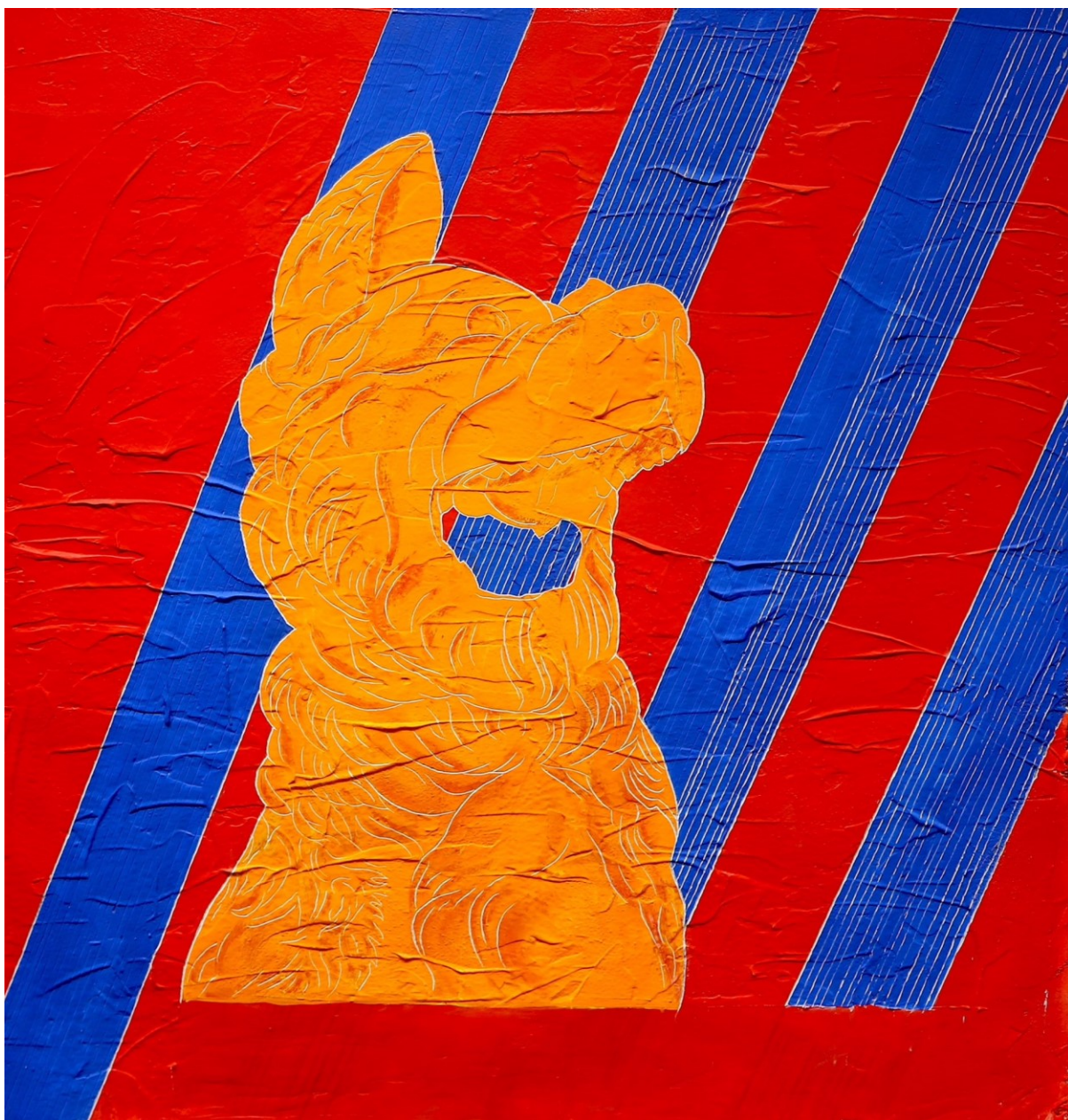
The most distinguishing detail found in this character was not his lingering through late afternoons, and my not catching him doing the same routine in other cafes earlier in the morning, but it was the distinct air of shame which hung about him. his self-conscious presence always seeming to think "they're wondering why I'm not at work", please bear in mind this city had one of the highest unemployment rates in Ireland.

That man is almost like my hound: one in that I'm wildly projecting into him for the sake of my own illustration, yes, but two (and more pertinently): that this man was a faux-worker, a statuesque form to his family of: the *man of purpose* heading out at nine, coming home at five, "how was your day love?" "oh hectic".

This was a phenomenon of the time, I recall it's denouncement on Irish radio, people taking months to tell their partners that they had been laid off and were hanging around cafes like idle teenagers at shopping centres, but that's what teenagers do at least it. It was a hard thing to measure but it happened and I mourned their performance, and yet could find no solution.

--with his pointy hound's tooth on display, my unfortunate beast postures something fierce, a thing of ability and drastic function, but in truth he can't even nibble at his fleas or his dust mites.

--sitting prone with his Hound's tooth on display one could almost mistake him for a beast of function, even action, until we see with review this statue can't even suggest a function



***Houndstooth***

180x180cm

Pure pigment in egg tempera,  
on gypsum plaster, on carpet



# The Wayward Ascension

This is a topic I have played with since *The Dream of Abstinence* itself in 2012, back then, In order to access the emotional literary consciousness surrounding the sense of the topic (as I saw it then) I headed towards the French existentialists, for a start, myself then being a faithless figure, at a loss in face of, the awaiting real world (after graduating into said massive recession), their works resonated with my adolescent thinking (at 23-5). I knew they were quite depressing, and that I ran the risk of empathising too much, with their pathetic fatalistic attitudes, if I submerged myself too long in their universe. However I trusted myself to always lucidly maintain some emotional distance, as I imagine a psychotherapist must do with their patient, and intended to read deeply but safely, protecting my mental health. While pouring through my notes from this time of deep reading, I found a statement of my own, sitting there as though it was a radio signal from a buried miner, a fallen in grave digger, transmitted from some deep place of catastrophically failed intentions:

COUNTERSINK-SUNK-BURRIED  
WITHIN.THIS-MEMBER-LOST

It'll remain in my work storage now as I like it, it's a work to come. The notion of a "countersink" is interesting, it's usually a drill bit, designed to bore down just enough, but not too far, thus the "counter" sink: to *intend* to delve, but not sink. I had these same ambitions in simply dipping into these authors, but did indeed, as the SOS signal implies, sink beyond finding.

However I was naturally led in this period towards Dostoyevsky, and perhaps that was my saving grace. Dostoyevsky resonates at the same level of suffering and existential angst as those French softies, but this resonance of his is not stuck in the pits with them, he simply drops it down, lowers the emotional mood of his work just long enough for the reader to vibe with it, here then when you're upon the frequency of his suffering, he gradually draws you up, like water from a muddy well you are, you'd poison yourself if you drank it, but gradually the sun of the D. man clarifies you, edifies you, I am now drawn in a most peculiar way to reference Tolstoy! (A world away stylistically speaking) but his collection of short stories is published under the lovely title *When There is Light Walk in the Light*. (Tolstoy, L. 2021) Conveyed to the surface I was, by a writer of lowest depths at one point, that somehow rose.

When in the pits with the French lads, I was all accepting of their thesis that life is shite. Samuel Beckett compares it to an elongated bowel movement (Quelle Surprise he spent his later life knee deep in the same Parisian mud) (Beckett, S., 2012) But thankfully I was led to Dostoyevsky, and arose by means of him. It wasn't a magical awakening, I read all his works and felt lowly still, as I related to the

lower vibe characters of his, but the magic of Dostoyevsky is that he's like a good old soap. One can't wash oil off his hands with water alone as oil is hydrophobic, water can't breach its substance. Tolstoy was then, to me, for example; water to oil: pure and lovely but it didn't wash, I repulsed it as oil does the water.

A good soap is somehow both; hydrophilic and hydrophobic, at the same time: much like Dostoyevsky. He is *of* the oily, sticky, suffering nature of the French Existentialists, (he writes a most convincing atheist) but so too, at the same time, he is of the light, clear watery life, Eau de Vie! (in its literal translation, not the alcoholic one). Being an adolescent in my attempt to get down and dirty with Camus and Sartre I was fool hardy and naive to think I could ever operate as a countersink, thankfully the true countersink and soapy balm, that is Dostoyevsky, cleared me of the sticky stuff, and rose me up again, I feel a little bit soapy myself now to be true, but I'll still, very warily, hazard a glance at the ramblings of those lost French lads.

Even in writing this work I was intending to return to Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus*, I couldn't stomach it, and so it'll remain without this text, but one detail of the work always interested me: Camus chose an interesting character to illustrate and ground his points in Sisyphus.

Sisyphus, to summarise, was a great trickster of a man, he died not once, but twice, and both times he managed to scheme his way out from the underworld and return to life. This got so bad anyway, that the big man Zeus had to intervene himself. He sent Sisyphus directly down to Hades and condemned him to an eternity at one task: rolling a huge boulder up a hill, only to allow it to roll down the other side, and then from the base of the other side, to repeat the action again and again, ad infinitum.(Cartwright, M. 2022)

Camus used this all quite well to illustrate his thesis on the strain, suffering and absurdity of life. What I found most interesting, which stayed with me for years, was Camus' attention on the moment Sisyphus releases the boulder to let it roll down the other side, and how, in that moment, he has a chance to think, and probably there lies the greatest sufferance, and not in the actual strain of the pushing before hand. (Camus, A. 2005) This clicked with me as it related nicely to my Dream of Abstinence, the moment you lower your arms and are without the notion of direction, you're in trouble.

A timely segway has appeared to me just now in my unplanned explanation of Sisyphus' condemnation: Sisyphus was the man that cheated death, that died and rose, only to be condemned to eternal hard labour. Another figure of my fancy, that was cruelly implicated in a similar game, was the aforementioned Dostoyevsky. In 1849, at the age of 28, Fyodor Dostoyevsky was swiftly establishing his name as a significant up-and-coming writer on the Russian writing scene. At the time he had published two works: the first, *Poor Folk*, was hugely successful. The second, *The Double*, wasn't, but I still like it.

It probably was an exciting time: his talent being affirmed, his success almost assured, and then devastatingly while on this ascent, he was arrested for being part



of an alleged conspiracy that was up to no good, implicated in subversive activities considered severe enough to warrant the maximum penalty: Dostoyevsky was sentenced to death by firing squad. At the last moment, as he was due to approach his end, the process was interrupted by a person reading a pardon from the Tsar himself, Dostoyevsky has his sentence commuted to four years of hard labour in Siberia. (History.com Editors, 2009)

Why am I interested in this angle? I have a feeling that impending doom has the very definite effect of concentrating the mind. Knowing your death is oncoming, quicker than you first thought, at a set date and time, suddenly would have the power to dismantle and dissolve most of the issues that were troubling one's mind before, and so too at the same time give value to many things gone unappreciated and taken for granted. In Dostoyevsky's letter to his brother, after his pardon from the firing squad, he expresses joy at what now seems to be a second chance at life and awakening through the true belief that he would die.

"I was at death's door today, I lived with that thought for three-quarters of an hour, I faced the last moment, and now I'm alive again!

When I look back at the past and think how much time was spent in vain, how much of it was lost in delusions, in errors, in idleness, in the inability to live; how I failed to value it, how many times I sinned against my heart and spirit — then my heart contracts in pain. Life is a gift, life is happiness, each moment could have been an eternity of happiness."

(Popova, M.,2019)

I feel this might be a reason why some people enjoy activities of such a closeness to the edge, one such character in particular who had a draw for the edge (and beyond) was Saint Sebastian.

## Saint Sebastian (not knowing whether he's coming or going)

St. Sebastian, might have been from France, little of this is known, but it is known that he joined the Roman Army in 283AD. At a time when it wasn't so cool to be Christian, St. Sebastian couldn't stop himself from going around converting people. Naturally this began to cause quite a stir, and it should be said that he held quite a prominent position in the Roman army: he was promoted to serve in the Praetorian Guard to protect Emperor Diocletian.

I can imagine there was some tension within his heart; for Diocletian was known for the slaughtering of Christians, so St. Sebastian kept his beliefs and practices of conversion a good secret until all was at once found out. The emperor made an order that Sebastian was to be tied to a stake on the archers training field and riddled with arrows: a death sentence. (Catholic Online, 2021)

Here I picture Sebastian suffering the same harrowing considerations as Dostoyevsky, knowing every moment counts down to your impending last, wondering why you spent time on so much nonsense, and not enough time on what mattered, but one consolation Sebastian might of had, that Dostoyevsky didn't think he had at least, was that he was headed for martyrdom. Martyrdom was to die in God's service, like many others of prominence in his faith, I'm sure he could take comfort in this thought; that now his purpose of a Christian was to become a Martyr, this was his calling, his identity. I have composed a poem for the moment of St. Sebastian's execution.

### The "Martyrdom" of St. Sebastian

Straight up along the spine  
Against weariness he's held  
Visible to him beyond  
Current airs  
Where his flesh dreaded  
And was chilled  
Was the image of slow  
Drifting seaborne clouds  
Beyond what's known

The fabric of his will  
Lay prone in the haze  
His patient subjection  
In a day pointed to an end  
He passed from trembling  
Onto firm land again  
He saw a balance of rise and fall  
He heard confused music glow in flight

Whisps of ends soaring, to fall.  
Wild, his breath came faster  
That sunward mist of arrows launched  
Had but to fall  
A cruel device: this timed descent  
The end he had been reborn to.

He raised his eyes  
Mortal drops  
Atoms in the air  
Landing, breaching tiny holes  
To lead him through  
To expense unknown

His ceaseless petition  
Met with  
Hail of intent  
One moment of cessation  
Infinite.

.....

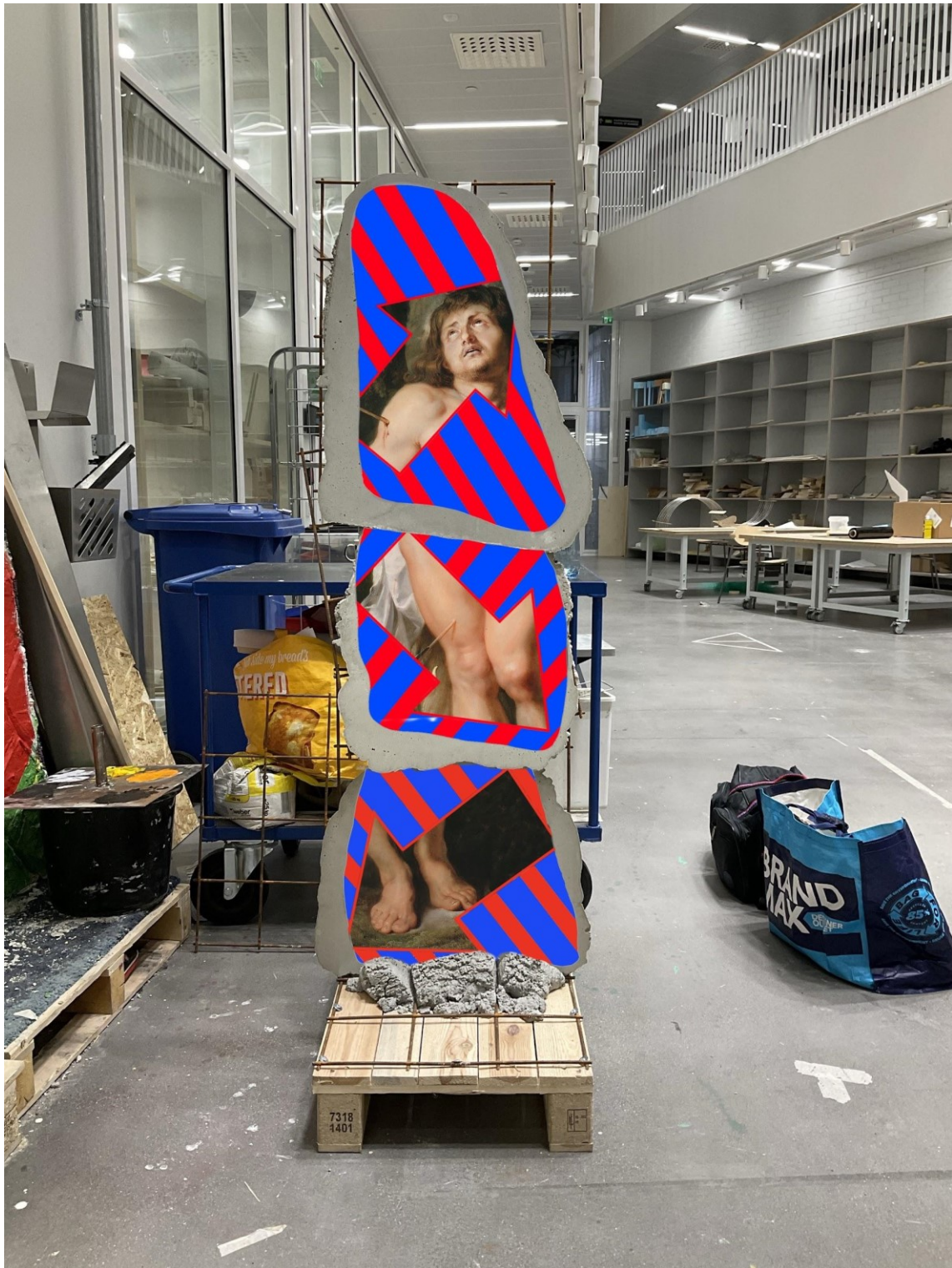
A noble way to go. So I imagine it was with a most peculiar confusion that St. Sebastian, after seeing the arrows coming at him, feeling life grow dim, suddenly woke up! Indeed, in much of the Baroque paintings in which he is frequently celebrated, we see him pierced through with countless arrows, dead, but this is in fact only the penultimate episode. St. Sebastian, *apparently* dead (left looking like a pin cushion on the training field) was in fact not dead. A local woman (later to be known as St. Irene of Rome) found him in a very bad state, and nursed him back to full health, in secret, in her home. (Catholic Online, 2021)

So few facts remain from these times that we can only speculate as to what Sebastian might have been thinking. If it was you, or I, we imagine he'd be happy, that he might experience a renewed appreciation for all of life's little details, to grab his second chance greedily, but no; sadly we can infer from his actions this was not how he felt. As soon as Sebastian was well enough, he found out where the emperor Diocletian was, and hid in a stairwell, waiting for him to pass. Diocletian approached, Sebastian jumped out before him, as much to say "Ye may do better than that!" and so the emperor did better, and had Sebastian clubbed to death. This death sentence was conclusive, and Sebastian did in fact die. (Catholic Online, 2021)

What interests me about this tale is that in the context of this thesis, and through my shameless projection, Sebastian had fixed himself so firmly to the notion of being a

martyr in the first place that he couldn't bear living without that identity, to put it more clearly: the idea of martyrdom was of such value that it gave his life the ultimate meaning, and to be a martyr, by definition: one must die. When he didn't die, life thereafter was meaningless. The loss of identity Sebastian experienced was a death while alive, a death that so many encounter in seemingly simple but devastating ways, ways outlined in this work: loss of a job, a career's ending, ending of a parenting role, ending of a relationship, all things that are of a relatively similar effect. They are potentially disastrous, often catastrophic but hardly ever are such things forewarned of.

On the building sites I worked there was hazard signs for falls and hitting your heads, even loud noises, but I've never seen hazard signs for potential redundancy, nor the extraction of your self worth if this factory closes. That's the point of the visual works I make and the motivation behind them: that there are intangible dangers upon the track of life that we often don't even have succinct language for, not to mention clear warnings.



***St. Sebastian (not knowing whether he's coming or going)***

Concrete, steel, egg tempera and oil

Note: This is a reference image, digitally drawn, the finished work will be in my MA thesis exhibition, appearing exactly as illustrated above.

# Akseli's Mam

The following text is taken from an entry in a notebook for August 2021. I felt the immediacy of the thoughts and the unbroken flow of my hand written entry makes this a statement which conveys my feelings on the related art work more honestly and accurately than a composed "artist's statement" style writing on the piece:

## Re. AGK's Mam

At the moment it's just a mechanical process of completing the work technically, but I never forget the significance of the mother in the work.

It warms me to know that Akseli painted his own mother as the model for the work (AteneumArtMuseum,2018): an image of a son reassembled by his mother, while she stares to the heavens in hope of his reanimation, reignition, conversion: back into the son she knew before the world dismembered him.

We can't ignore the frivolity, nor the foolhardy bravado, of Lemminkäinen's effort to strike down the sacred swan, and perhaps the resulting catastrophe was just desserts, but regardless of this fact his mother's love is resolute, permanently present like the granite shelf belying every step we take in this city, not warm, not soft, not soothing, nor inviting, but forever there. Her love sustains. It sustains through all strain, and catastrophic comedy, boyish bullheaded chasing of targets unknown. Wrecking in the chase.

The purpose of a parent might be the closest one may come to divinity in this waking world that I see. To encourage the growth of another human to go beyond us in time. A purpose deeper than consciousness, in the foundations of the will, persistent in its motivations. To pray, and hope for the best imaginable outcome for this being, this child, despite the suffering it may cause the self, the suffering one might feel in their child's parting, in their adventuring, to chase some temporarily valuable goal, while their parent ages to an end at home.

And so I see it as a most cruel trick of life, that it seems a child's nature is: to be drawn towards all that takes us away from home.

Hopes and ambitions, truly of little value, hardships most unnecessary, constantly I was tumbled home by the waves of fortune forbidding my effort to live beyond my mother's reach, the reach of her embrace.

Indeed I fell hard home from Paris, I fell hard home from Berlin, and now I rebound sustainably to this land where their hero of a painter, of mythical heroes, so too has noticed the cruel determination of a parent to embolden their young to venture, and

thrive, only to see them parted, independent, transformed into eternal visitors, that pop back the odd time to see how all's going.

I could only paint Akseli's mother without her son, it was the only way to show and mark that unforeseen hazard awaiting parents to be, and to, at the same time, iconise those parents that have been abandoned for fortune's quest, only to reform their young in preparation for the next attempt in this unforgiving world.

05.08.21 Leppavaara





*Akseli's Mam*  
130x80cm  
Oil on linen



# “By the Sweat of Your Brow”

We always look for someone to blame when something's not right. Not ourselves, but someone, or something else. I have found them. I used to try to find out: what is it that I think we're actually abstaining from? I'll now only ever say that I don't know. This ambiguity for me, is conducive to an excitement for the visual exploration of the topic. It is with this acceptance of our limits that I don't seek to explain, but to blame.

I'm interested in this story we all know of Adam and Eve: God said don't eat the fruit and then they did. Many know the initial punishment as expulsion from the garden of Eden, but the actual meaning of this is expulsion from the truest liberty imaginable: unconditional provision. Adam and Eve, up to that point, did not know work, all was provided for, their punishment was their condemnation to a life of labour:

“Cursed is the ground because of you;  
through painful toil you will eat food from it  
all the days of your life.  
It will produce thorns and thistles for you,  
and you will eat the plants of the field.  
By the sweat of your brow  
you will eat your food  
until you return to the ground,  
since from it you were taken;  
for dust you are  
and to dust you will return”

Genesis 3:14-15

This work communicates a sense of that moment when they first break soil.

*Later on...* I don't do my work justice, as well as having this about the first fall, I also wanted to comment on some relationships in how we debase ourselves to stay in them; accept a devaluation, a climb down from the planned height, and just get on with it. This is a work on the *sense* of “getting on with it” while that part of the self momentarily roars a question “Why?”. For me Abstention is the combination of these two sensations, consubstantial with one another: simply going on.



***We Two Sinners***

198x158 cm

Plaster, and pigment (in acrylic binder), on carpet



## Conclusion

By way of conclusion I offer here a potent note I made while busy in the cleaning game, and transcribe it here, as with all my notes, unedited. I had overlooked it many times in my rereading of my many manuscripts, seeing no place for it, but now I see it captured a most sincere, and realistic, organic conclusion of my thoughts on the whole topic.

### Life's Matters: Most + Musts (from notes)

I have found myself lately to be disconnected from my real feeling for the topic of Abstention. As I write this I realise why: for I have switched from being an observer of the abstentive condition to being conditioned to abstain.

Life's Matters: mosts+musts  
\_\_\_\_ SMOTHERED INTENT

Maintaining a life in Finland has requested of me much of my energies. Making ends meet has reduced me to chasing my tail. To simply exist one must participate in all manner of engagements that are most consuming of his non-essential aspirations, all hopes beyond that of subsistence are deemed not completely necessary, thus their slippage completely from the list of priorities.

If you wake at 6am to go clean a rich person's apartment, under pressure, and in finishing that job you are so tired that you nap away your 3-hour gap between that and your next rich person's apartment, you will not think too deeply nor creatively that day. Especially if after work you have to hurriedly prepare for your next day's work.

These are sordid excuses only increasing one's ire for an inescapable situation...

The main point is that I reflect less and live more, and am, I can say with certainty: less depressed than ever.

Call it what you may - a distraction, consumption or abstention.

The busy boy catches less existential angst.

Strike at the heart of it though:

You have lived and proven your point: Arms firmly held aloft, I suffer much the lessor.

Kaunis Kampela 25.07.2019

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