

# **Speculations on a Raft**

**Joanne Laws**



**A text in response to the exhibition:  
The Park Project III / A Portrait: Lough Key  
Anna Macleod & Padraig Cunningham**



# **Speculations on a Raft**

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**Roscommon Visual Arts  
Writer in Residence 2017**

**The Park Project III / A Portrait: Lough Key  
Anna Macleod & Padraig Cunningham  
Roscommon Art Centre  
10th November 2017 – 12th January 2018**

*“She referred to the high-rise as if it were some kind of huge animate presence, brooding over them and keeping a magisterial eye on events taking place”*

– JG Ballard *High Rise* (1975)

It's funny how approaches to architecture fluctuate over time. From this vantage point, above the trees, I can observe all manner of buildings around the vast lake, in various stages of ruin. Each one was originally erected to stake a particular territorial claim. Collectively, they attest to shifting relationships with the surrounding landscape: once the site of hermitage and spiritual retreat or burgeoning imperial dominance, the lake later became a romantic site of wonder and a place for modern recreation. Submerged walkways and tunnel systems extend towards more than 30 islands, offering portals into forgotten histories that settle like sedimentary layers. Standing on the site of the former Rockingham House (a stately home built in 1809, that burned to the ground in 1957) this concrete tower reclaimed the area's original name, Moylurg – changed to Rockingham during the Cromwellian settlement of the 1650s, when the British colonial classes displaced native Irish Catholic land-owners.

The Moylurg Tower was built in 1973, just as modernism's utopian vision was beginning to wither. By 1970, the cost-effective, 'vertical living' offered by concrete towers, came to symbolise sociological disfunction. It was a brutalist building style, defined by clean lines and the stripping away of ornamental details to celebrate raw surfaces. On the shores of Lough Key, this once controversial, grey-turned-brown concrete tower rises from the ground like a totem. Reminiscent of Medieval observation towers that permitted long-distance surveillance, I tend to think of the Moylurg Tower as keeping watch over the lake's entangled histories.

Suddenly, an unfamiliar structure comes into view, gliding slowly across the surface of the lake. Undoubtedly, it's a raft of some description, whose course is determined by a lightweight sail that flaps lightly in the breeze. Upon adjusting my binoculars to full tilt, it becomes clear that the raft serves as a floating device for some kind of signage. An upright steel frame supports



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## A Marketing Campaign

not a sail, but lightweight fabric, emblazoned with hand-stitched, sky-blue letters that curiously form the word 'Mayfly'. This morning, the water is not populated with the usual recreational activities and there are no vessels in the vicinity. I wonder if I am the only person observing this intriguing and hypnotic scene. Like the lone watchman in the panopticon inspection tower, am I the solitary, all-seeing eye? Suddenly unnerved, I speculate whether this is some sort of apparition, a remnant, a premonition or even a warning. With very little evidence to support tangible explanations, I run through a range of hypotheses:

The textual banner bears all the signs of some elaborate advertising strategy, aimed at rousing curiosity in potential customers. Once a place of passage – of industrial commerce, transport, farming and forestry – the lake has increasingly become a site of tourism and the leisure economy. In recent years, the lake and surrounding parklands have facilitated all manner of outdoor pursuits – from fishing, canoeing and stand-up-paddling, to tree-walking, zip-lining and segwaying. It is distinctly possible that this curious 'Mayfly' is a water sports company, seeking to infest the lake with some new craze.

The raft lingers in an overgrown lagoon where corrugated iron boat sheds are incongruously situated between several ancient crannogs. While the rusty sheds display an obvious west of Ireland vernacular, they also have strange continental appeal. Lily pads bob on the surface, mimicking the scenic vistas captured in Impressionist paintings such as Monet's *Bathers At La Grenouillere* (1869). Here, the artist captures the endlessness of water: dark shadowy trees and sun-dappled foliage are reflected in the pond; surface ripples are depicted with bright slabs of paint.

Watching the raft float past Castle Island, I recall the dramatic aerial shot that went viral last year. As the image of the seemingly levitating McDermott's castle hurtled through cyberspace, this lake, for a brief moment, became the most enchanted place on earth. It's no wonder that the poet W.B. Yeats became so enamoured with the beauty and seclusion of this site, that he considered establishing a retreat here, for the Irish Lodge of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn – an influential mystical order devoted to magic and the occult.



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**Supernatural Communication**

This lake is no stranger to the uncanny. In spring, sweet-scented bluebells carpet the ancient woodlands, conjuring a magical blue mist that would beguile even the most rational minds into believing that the fairies are gathering. Many have reported atmospheric ghostly lights dancing across the lake's surface, or flitting over nearby marshes, graveyards and boglands. In folklore, these flickering lights were believed to be recently departed souls, or supernatural beings luring night-time travellers away from safe routes. Scientists have since discovered that these photon emissions are produced through the oxidation of methane and other compounds found in decaying organic matter. However, such logical explanations have fallen on deaf ears among certain New Age locals, who firmly believe that Lough Key sits on an ancient ley line. These sites are believed to release a magnetic energy that attracts paranormal phenomenon, including alien abductions and poltergeist activity. Many séances have previously been conducted in this very tower; contact was reportedly made with the eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish gentry who once inhabited Boyle's Royal Hotel, one of Ireland's oldest coaching inns. To suggest that this mysterious raft is a phantom vessel would be a step too far, but in the absence of a visible crew, I fleetingly daydream about hauntings and ghostly apparitions.

During the 1980s and '90s, the town gained media attention as a hotspot for UFO sightings, through the fantastical stories of the late Betty Meyler, a Boyle resident and founder of the UFO Society of Ireland. I vividly recall, one winter morning on the lake, spotting Meyler in a small boat – her at the front, while a stocky fellow rowed steadily at the back. Like a vision, Meyler emerged from the mist, dangling some contraption over the side of the boat. At the time, I wondered if the pair were searching for sunken treasure, but it transpired they were actually crystal dowsing, with the aim of identifying ley lines and predicting future alien visitations. Meyler later reported her discovery of a UFO portal just off the shore of Church Island. There is no doubt in my mind that, if she were alive, Meyler would convince the town that the 'Mayfly' is an alien spacecraft and that this raft is a form of communication, sent from distant galaxies.



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### A Feminist Homage

*“The engine is beautifully balanced, but all the same the vibration is enormous, and I find that all the nuts dance themselves loose; ... as soon as I have got everything so that it will not shift, I shall take the machine up to the flying ground I have been lent. It is a fine place, 800 acres, but it also contains a loose bull, and if it gets annoyed and charges I shall have every inducement to fly!”*

– Lillian Bland, excerpts from her letter to *Flight* magazine July 16th, 1910.

I recently discovered a little-known fact: the first ever aeroplane designed, built and flown by a woman was a full-scale, bi-powered glider called the Mayfly, developed by Anglo-Irish journalist and aviator, Lillian Bland, in Ireland in 1910. It seems charmingly ambitious to name a vessel of flight after a winged insect. Like the lake-inhabiting mayflies, Bland’s aircraft comprised a slender frame (made largely from bamboo) and had two pairs of delicate, transparent wings, covered with taut calico. Like the aquatic insect, the lifespan of Bland’s Mayfly was also extremely short: the project was abandoned within a year when she emigrated from Belfast to Canada. The recent archival fever surrounding Ireland’s ongoing ‘decade of centenaries’ has, among other things, prompted re-examinations of the role of women during pivotal moments in Irish history. It therefore seems highly plausible that this raft was launched by a group of Irish feminists seeking to memorialise Bland’s remarkable legacy.

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### An Ecological Message

This handcrafted, floating, Mayfly banner recalls a long tradition of protest. Handstitched across Irish history by women – from the Suffragettes to the Irish Women Workers Union – textile banners asserted strong links between domestic and political realms. As the raft drifts among the secluded spots where mayflies spawn each summer, I have the dawning realisation that an ecological message might underpin this endeavour. According to a recent German study, over the last three decades insect populations have plummeted by more than 75%. Ecologists speculate that this pattern of decline correlates with the increased use of pesticides in intensive farming. Some might argue that scientists have failed to sufficiently convey the urgency of this situation to the general public, so it is unsurprising that people might try to raise awareness through less orthodox methods. In conveying the precariousness of life, what better protagonist than the short-lived mayfly? Now increasingly ‘wing-like’, the banner prompts me to consider more broadly water as a site of protest. It is a heart-rending and resilient tale of nimble rafts interrupting nuclear testing in the Pacific, or harassing offshore oil-drilling developments in the Arctic. Sometimes small gestures can make a big impact. The digital age has ushered new forms of protest, including the world’s first hologram protest, which took place in Madrid in 2015, after several physical protests had been disbanded by the authorities. Ghost-like figures marched through the streets holding placards, suggesting that holograms are now afforded greater freedoms than real flesh and blood.

However the raft came to be on this lake, it has been fascinating to speculate on its provenance from the top of this tower. I conclude that the impetus is probably less important than the mayfly's message, which forces us to reflect on how we inhabit this landscape. The aquatic insect functions as a metaphor to connect spatial realms, from the lake's murky depths and its crystalline surface, to the vast and celestial domain of the sky. Marking the point where these realms meet, the raft appears to hover, gathering soft ripples within its own shadows. As it moves across the water, it attests to the domesticity of this site over thousands of years, drawing out these histories like a poultice and framing the lake as a living timeline.

Joanne Laws



All images by Padraig Cunningham & Anna Macleod

### **About Roscommon Arts Centre's Visual Art Writer In Residence**

Arts Writer Joanne Laws is the Roscommon Arts Centre's Visual Art Writer in Residence for 2017. During this time, Joanne will write critical texts on selected exhibitions and projects happening across the county. The intention of this residency is to allow Joanne to experiment with her writing style and the dissemination of her work. Her writings will be available at Roscommon Arts Centre and online as they are published.

Joanne Laws is an arts writer, editor and researcher based in county Roscommon. She has recently been appointed Features Editor of the Visual Artists' News Sheet, where she will commission and develop new writing for an Irish arts readership. Joanne is a member of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) and a regular contributor to international arts publications including Art Monthly and Frieze. She was assistant editor for the online resource publicart.ie and has previously developed research reports and policy documents for organisations such as 126 Artist-Run Gallery, Kilkenny Arts Office and Youth Work Ireland.

Anna Macleod has exhibited widely Nationally and Internationally. Recent residencies include: *Water Rights Residency*, Santa Fe Art Institute, New Mexico. 2017. *Food Water Life*, themed residency with Jorge and Lucy Orta, Banff Art Centre, Alberta, Canada. 2015. *Joya, Arte & Ecologia*, Spain 2016. *Leitrim Sculpture Centre*, Co Leitrim, Ireland 2015 & *Broken Hill Art Exchange*, New South Wales, Australia, 2015. Recent solo exhibitions include: *Water Conversations – A Survey of Works 2007 – 2015* at The Dock, Carrick on Shannon, Ireland. *'Staid na Talún - A State of Land'*, Leitrim Sculpture Centre, Co Leitrim, Ireland, *Water Conversations - Broken Flow*, Broken Hill Art Exchange, New South Wales, Australia. Macleod is the recipient of the Firestation Artists' Studios, Dublin, International Residency Award for 'A Thousand Points of Light' residency in Joshua Tree, California in March 2016. She was awarded an Individual Artists Bursary from Leitrim County Council Arts Office in 2015 / 2016 and Arts Council of Ireland Travel and Training Award towards the costs of residencies in Australia (2015) and USA (2016 & 2017) and the *Jim Dinning and Evelyn Main Endowed Scholarship for Visual Arts* for Banff Art Centre residency in 2015.

[www.annamacleod.com](http://www.annamacleod.com)

Padraig Cunningham moved to Boyle, Co. Roscommon in 2005 and was Artist in Residence in the Dock Art Centre, Carrick-on-Shannon which culminated in a group exhibition, *Convergence*. In 2009 he was awarded a place on the *TRADE* residency, an international residency working with the artist Darren Almond, funded by Leitrim and Roscommon arts offices. In 2011 he was invited to participate on an international project and residency in Bodh Gaya, India. The work was exhibited in Patina, India and in Galway at *Tulca* 2011. In 2015 he completed *SPARK* residency where he collaborated with staff of a technology enterprise centre, the subsequent work *Emergent Properties* was exhibited as a conclusion to the project. In 2016, along with artist Karl Burke he was commissioned by Roscommon Art Centre curator Linda Shevlin to make a collaborative work with a Brothers of Charity group in Boyle, the resulting work *Among Things* was exhibited in Roscommon Art Centre.

[www.padraigcunningham.com](http://www.padraigcunningham.com)

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