Walking Keshcorran: The view from here

Walking Keshcorran documents the responses of seven artists – Julianna Holland, Ruth Le Gear, Sarah Ellen Lundy, Christine Mackey, Kate Oram, Kiera O'Toole and Tommy Weir – to the Caves of Keash in south county Sligo, initially visited by the group in October 2020. Seventeen cave entrances penetrate the white limestone cliffs on the western face of Keshcorran Mountain, the most visually distinctive caves in Ireland.

Geologically, the caves were formed millions of years ago, long since abandoned by the rivers that coursed through them, slowly sculpting passages and chambers through solid rock. The valley beneath the caves was scoured out by massive glaciers that amputated the caves leaving behind the stubs of what originally had been much longer passages. Archaeological investigations in 1901 led to the recovery of an eclectic assortment of finds: bones of wolf, Arctic lemming, bear, red deer, seal, horse, bird, cattle, hare, pig; remnants of hearths that once provided light and heat; bronze pins that fastened cloaks; bone needles for sewing; an iron saw for carpentry; human teeth as ritual offerings; an armour-piercing arrowhead; a Viking comb; and a stone axe. Such fragments offer glimpses into past lives, lives lived hundreds of years ago and thousands of years ago. The ancient biography of these dark mountain caves is at the core of this exhibition.

The passage of time permeates these works. The caves themselves are testimony to the power, patience and persistence of a single drop of water across deep time, echoed in the beauty of Ruth Le Gear's sound and video installation of droplets within the caves. The hypnotic and rhythmic quality of Kate Oram's '*Drip*' evokes both a sense of timelessness as well as the cyclical nature of time. In '*Attainable*' she invites us to imagine what is almost unimaginable to the modern mind – a landscape where humans and their impact have been erased. Julianna Holland travels even further back, before the caves existed, to the formation of limestone – the '*withdrawn sea*' and the shells it left behind. Any conversation on deep time inevitably leads to thoughts of decay. Part of Christine Mackey's installation, a chalked drawing of the 1901 cave survey, anticipates erosion. Tommy Weir's images capture the slow attrition of the exterior face of the caves as the elements slowly grind away at the cliff face.

Caves contain. They contain experiences, feelings, events, memories, artefacts, bones, sediments, the dead. This theme winds powerfully through Holland's poetry – the '*stilled wing*', '*fractured skull*' and '*nests of hair*'. In '*Things we leave behind*' she infuses the objects that have survived the passage of time with a human touch, bringing to life the woman, man or child who once held or used or treasured these artefacts. Weir's photography reminds us that what can be contained can as easily be lost. Le Gear references the intangible spiritual dimension of caves. Sarah Ellen Lundy draws us towards the many teeth and mandibles recovered from the cave sediments, representing scores of long-dead creatures disintegrating until they eventually become part of the cave body itself. Absences and voids are found here too. The seeming emptiness of caves can invoke intense emotional responses ranging from anxiety to fear to serenity. But are these caverns as empty as they first appear? The complex and sometimes rapidly changing emotional states experienced in the darkness and silence of caves come through in Kiera O'Toole's felt drawings. Do these feelings ever leave the cave or are they absorbed into the rock? If we feel fear, or awe, or serenity, are these our emotions or those left behind by others? Do different caves evoke different emotions? These questions permeate O'Toole's imagery.

Medieval scribes scratched onto vellum the supernatural nature of the Caves of Keash. Manuscripts recount sagas of omnipotent women of the Tuatha Dé Danann who entrapped the Fianna in the caves with magical yarn. The forge of the one-footed one-eyed master smith Lon Mac Liomtha lay deep inside the caves where magical weapons were wrought. And the infant high king Cormac Mac Airt was reared by a wolf in the most inaccessible cave for the first seven years of his life. This exhibition captures some of that otherworldliness. Lundy's striking film work narrates the ancient knowledge to be found in deep, dark, silent places where the experience of the elders survives. Pre-industrial cultures frequently gendered this wisdom as feminine, as Lundy does here, a wisdom without words. She draws together the core elements that make us whole human beings, if we would only listen.

Across many world cultures, caves are closely associated with the concept of threshold, dark spaces located betwixt and between that lead from one world to the next. This

sense of liminality and the tenuous boundary between light and dark confront us in Weir's images. What is particularly striking is the disorientating focus on the boundary between cave roof and the heavens above. Our gaze is drawn upwards rather than the usual outwards or inwards perspective. He captures the fragile crumbling nature of the fractured cave edges, at once both vulnerable and threatening, mirroring the dual tension of how it often feels to *be* in a cave. Beauty resides here too, in the symmetry of Weir's photographs; Holland's poems folding in on one another accordion-like; the soothing ring of Oram's droplets; Le Gear's orb in delicate suspension; the orderliness of Mackey's listings; Lundy's wild shaman; and O'Toole's blue.

The voices of others whisper through this exhibition. Holland beckons us towards the newborn infant Cormac, sleeping snug with his lupine siblings in the cave, decades before his reign as high king of Ireland. Lundy conjures the powerful supernatural woman, protagonist of medieval myth and recent folktales about the caves. O'Toole invokes Robert Lloyd Praeger, foremost Irish naturalist of the early twentieth century, who had an intimate familiarity with and love of the Sligo landscape. Mackey honours the ground-breaking work of the gentlemen scholars who investigated the caves with great diligence 120 years ago.

The Caves of Keash have attracted almost two centuries of scientific enquiry, enquiry that continues to thread through the exhibition in the form of Kate Oram's meditations of the physics of deep time; Ruth Le Gear's contemplation of the gentle but persistent forces of hydrology; Christine Mackey's observations on ornithology and conservation; Julianna Holland's anthropological sensibilities; Tommy Weir's play on the physics of light and dark; Sarah Ellen Lundy's exploration of the relationship between anatomy and geomorphology; and Kiera O'Toole's study on emotion and phenomenology. In 1901, Edwin Tulley Newton painstakingly identified the avian bones from the caves. Twelve decades later, Mackey's installation illuminates those species that are now endangered – some bird names now sadly foreign to our ears. Her shared-horizon photograph juxtaposed with Robert Welch's glass lantern image from 1901 emphasises the constancy of the caves as they bear witness to the drastic environmental changes of the past century.

The Factory in the heart of urban Sligo provides a sympathetic setting for this exhibition. Entering through the narrow doorway, the visitor leaves the world of daylight, travels through a dimly lit passageway, through another constricted opening, then into a spacious darkened chamber. Shadow abounds, sound echoes. Crumbling plaster and exposed brickwork resemble the eroded limestone beds that encase the Keash Caves. There is little colour; this is a palette of black, grey and white. It takes time to adjust to the space, to orientate. The visitor needs to seek out the installations and images. Artworks become artefacts: some will preserve, some will decay, some will be lost, some will be curated.

Each of us will take something different from this exhibition. As a cave archaeologist, what particularly fascinates me is the diversity of voices, the diversity of approaches and the diversity of responses. Yet this should come as no surprise. We know that animals and people have engaged with the Keash Caves in myriad different ways over the past twenty thousand years. There is no one story, no single understanding. Some of the artists initially experienced the Keash Caves as a difficult subject. This surprised me, considering the rich natural and cultural legacy embodied within these mountain chambers. On reflection, however, their struggle chimed with the nature of human relationships with the subterranean. Caves are never easy places to navigate – whether physically, emotionally or psychologically. Caves take time. These seven artists took the time. For this, we can be grateful.

Marion Dowd