

An Exhibition of Sculptures by

Aileen MacKeogh

3RD MARCH TO 6TH MAY 2023

GARTER LANE, ARTS CENTRE, WATERFORD CITY



McKeogh, Aileen, 'The Wasteland Ends' (1986) Steel, wood, paper, paint.

ART & THE ANTHROPOCENE

BEING IN AND APART FROM NATURE

Tom Inglis

*The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours.*

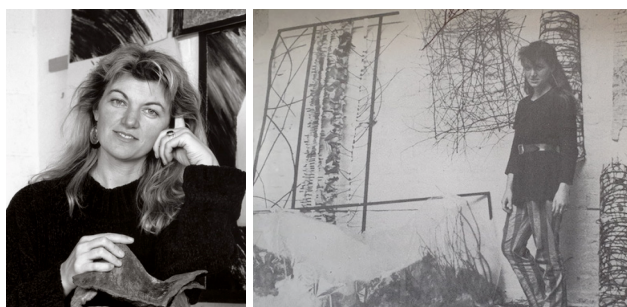
William Wordsworth

We are used to seeing nature as something out there, set apart and different from us. We see ourselves as God's creatures, superior to all other species. We see nature as something to be, on the one hand, mastered, controlled and exploited and, on the other, as a source of pleasure, joy and excitement.

There is, however, increasing recognition that the impact humans are having on the environment is so great that we are entering a new geological age. We went through the ages of ice, stone, bronze and iron. In those times, humans lived harmoniously with nature. Now we are living in the age of the human, the Anthropocene, an age marked by the irreparable damage humans are doing to the environment. We are beginning to realise that humans are out of tune with the rest of nature, that we are destroying the habitat on which we depend.

One of the tasks of visual artists is to challenge the way we see and understand the world. While they may create something that is visually pleasing, it must also make us ask questions about our ways of being in the world. In the case of Aileen MacKeogh, her depictions of forests and landscapes, pose questions about how, traditionally, we see them as external, out there, apart from us; as awesome, places of captivating beauty.

An early theme in her work was the notion of humans having become emotionally detached and alienated from the environment. Was it possible for humans to develop a different sensibility, to reconnect with and care for nature. Could we think of ourselves as healers of the enormous damage that we have caused?



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McKeogh, Aileen, '8 Sticks Make a Forest', 1979, Bronze.



McKeogh, Aileen, 'Bound Boulder.' 1979, Mixed Media.



McKeogh, Aileen, 'Tree after Tree' steel/wood/paper/paint
84"x 18" x 52",

She also posed some key creative questions. Is it possible to break away from the romantic idealisation of nature that has dominated the visual arts and to try to see it differently? How could artists move away from notions of the sublime and spectacular. How might a sculptress respond to this challenge? What themes needed to be addressed. What materials could be used? How could the work be framed and presented?

The idea of bandaging broken tree limbs, as in *8 Sticks Make a Forest*, may seem bizarre and childish. And yet, there is deep within us a desire to make good what has been broken, to heal what is hurt and damaged. We reach out to help other species that are hurt and injured, but what about nature as a whole?

One of the consequences of the dominance of humans over nature, is that not only do we see and read nature from a human perspective; we see ourselves in nature. In the same way that we think that our pets are almost human, we impose our image on the landscape. We see human shapes everywhere as if it is natural for nature to develop human forms. In *Bounded Boulder* we see the coming together of two boulders as a pair of erotic fertile buttocks.

MacKeogh felt, then, that we need to break away from the traditional ways in which we see and read nature. The notion of placing bits of nature into a frame may seem bizarre, but it gets us to think of the taken-for-granted ways we see the world around us. This involves new representations, literally putting nature into a different visual framework. So instead of painting or photographing a forest, she took elements from it, leaves, sticks and bits of wood, and put them in a new frame.

This reframing is evident in *A Break in the Clouds*. Here nature literally and figuratively breaks out of the frame. But it is not just this bursting out that is provocative. The depiction of the landscape, is also unsettling. Everything seems inverted. The forest of dead trees is overwhelmed by the forest floor of leaves and branches. Yet it is the richness of the forest floor that will enable new trees to emerge. We can burn and destroy forests, but they will re-emerge.

This idea of continual emergence, of new life coming back from what was once burnt and dead, of nature's resilience, is also captured in *Mountain Ridge Relief*. Is the emergence of this new life a reminder that we cannot transcend the cycle of life and death? It suggests that if there is an afterlife, it is not in another supernatural world, it is in nature.

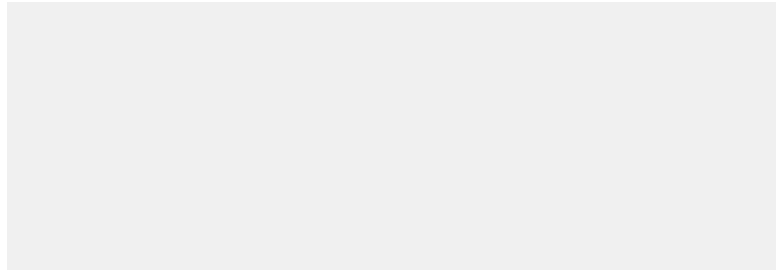
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McKeogh, Aileen, *A Break in the Clouds* 1982, Mixed Media, 157 x 184 x 47 cm, Collection of the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon



McKeogh, Aileen, *'First Forest Landscape'* (1981) Steel, wood, paper, paint 36 x 24 x 71

MacKeogh's determination to rethink our relationship with nature led to a major shift in the materials she used. In 1979, she went to the States to study bronze casting. Early pieces, such as *8 Sticks Make a Forest*, were from this period. But she became disenchanted with bronze as a material: it did not convey the frailty and transitoriness of nature. Bronze lasts for a long time, but nothing lasts for ever in nature. Things come into being, they survive and maybe thrive, and then, over time, they wither and die.

First Forest Landscape was her first piece after giving up bronze casting. When her critics told her that her sculpture would not last, that it was too delicate, that it would quickly fall apart, she responded by saying that nothing lasts forever in nature, that we have to accept that sculptures, like humans, come and go. That was forty years ago. There has been some damage. Leaves have fallen away. Twigs have been broken. It is growing old, but retains its grace and beauty.

Special Thanks to The Arts Council Collection, IMMA Collection, Clare Scott & Sandra Kelly.

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