

Destiny and the Republic: Six artists on what Ireland is now

As the centenary draws to an end, now is a good time to visit the Pearse Museum

🕒 about 4 hours ago

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The Museum of August Destiny: Aideen Barry, Mark Clare, Amanda Coogan, Anthony Haughey, Dragan Jurisic and Sarah Pierce

Pearse Museum, Dublin, until January 8th, pearsemuseum.ie

A Different Republic: Amanda Coogan, Suzanne Walsh, Aideen Barry and Corban Walker

The Lab, Dublin, until February 5th, dublincityartsoffice.ie/the-lab

The project was initiated by Lismore Castle Arts and first shown in St Carthage Hall, but *The Museum of August Destiny* has found its perfect venue in Rathfarnham's Pearse Museum. Here, nestled in the foothills of the Dublin mountains, relics of the 1916 Rising cradle frame a show in which six artists recall the aspirations of the Proclamation and measure those aspirations against aspects of contemporary Ireland.

As the year of commemoration draws to an end, it is a good time to visit the Pearse Museum. The winter light heightens the elegiac mood – the shady corridors, the empty dormitory and classroom, the chipped teacups “used by Patrick and Willie Pearse during the last dinner with their mother”, and the countless other reminders of lives long gone.

Though the Proclamation was signed collectively “by teachers, writers, poets, a musician, a trade unionist”, says curator Emily Mark-Fitzgerald, it was “un-authored” in that no one was named as writer. The document speaks of the Irish nation proving itself worthy “of the august destiny to which it is called” through “the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good”. There were, indeed, sacrifices, and arguably there still are.

The constant roar of traffic on the M50 and surrounding roads, and the endless spread of enfolding suburbs around St Enda's, indicate a flourishing of some kind on the part of the nation, but all six artists point to ways in which the Republic is an unfinished project, a work in progress – or, perhaps, a patchwork.

Another anniversary

As it happens, The Lab's *A Different Republic* addresses related material, with two of the same artists (Aideen Barry and Amanda Coogan) showing related works at each venue. The exhibit concludes the Lab's 2016 commemorative programme by casting an eye on another anniversary.

It is 20 years on from the publication of *A Strategy for Equality*, a government report by the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities. Between both shows, the Proclamation's aim of “cherishing the children of the nation equally” clearly ranks high in the artists' attention.

For St Enda's, the exhibitors had stringent conditions: they should address a particular “vision” enshrined in the Proclamation, and what they proposed must be accommodated in a display case borrowed from the museum. They responded incredibly well, and no one more so than Aideen Barry, whose foldout storybook, *Cherish the Children*, incorporates a series of colourful micro-video projections.

The children in question, we realize in following the text and images of her scroll-like creation, include young women who travel abroad to terminate their pregnancies (a recurrent subject), as well as people who are homeless and marginalised in one respect or another.

Barry's approach in *The Lab* is similar. Drawing on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, "a parable about women's lives in a patriarchal society", she makes a series of foldouts, again combining drawings and looped animations, and specifically addressing female experience in present-day Ireland.

At St Enda's, Sarah Pierce's *Betwixt the Devil and the Deep Sea* is succinct and very effective: a single, banal document occupies the display case. It is only a ferry ticket to London, yet we know exactly what she is talking about.

Sad Venus

Dragana Jurisic's *Jessie* is a powerful, black-and-white photograph of a pregnant, nude woman on a bed, beautiful yet austere – a sad Venus. Or perhaps, in this case, an Aisling, Hibernia or Róisín Dubh. The Spartan nature of the setting, bare brick and functional metal, dispenses with any sense of luxury or ease.

In a muted audio accompaniment, Jurisic reflects on her experience and leaves it to us to question whether it lives up to her right to "religious and civil liberty". It is a tremendously complex, layered work.

Anthony Haughey's *Manifesto* consists of three small video screens with headphones. Each video questions the "unfettered control of Irish destinies" from the point of view of those whose destinies have brushed abrasively against the realities of Ireland, including, for example, emigrants and immigrants, and others who experience structural inequality in society. Three screens in a relatively small space may sound excessive, but the work is visually and aurally rich.

You might think, as you arrive in Pearse exhibition space, that an invigilator has wandered off and left their transistor radio turned on. You will know The Stranglers' *No More Heroes*, The Clash's *Know Your Rights* or Daft Punk's *Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger*, but the more cryptic sounds are the Morse code broadcasts about the Rising. They are Mark Clare's contribution.

In the vitrine, Daft Punk's title is embossed as though on a team banner. Clare is alluding to the darker aspects of nationalism, mutating from a right to self-determination to aggressive self-interest and small-minded selfishness.

Significant spud

Amanda Coogan's display case is occupied by wizened, desiccated potatoes. Playing on the idea of the potato print, she has carved letters from the Proclamation into cut spuds, making a metaphor of freshness and decay with particular regard to the historical significance of the potato.

It is as if Coogan monumentally develops this idea in the Lab, where her pram filled with oranges has the hues of the tricolour – white wheels, green pram, oranges for sale. (Left to their own devices, the oranges develop all three colours.) It is backed by a glittering curtain of emergency blankets: practicality in showbiz costume. Look behind and the set construction is apparent.

Also at the Lab, Corban Walker offers his perspective in representing three sites: The Lab itself, the GPO and the house on Mountjoy Square where his mother grew up. His viewpoint is from the floor, looking towards the ceilings.

Suzanne Walsh, meanwhile, produces concrete poetry assembled from the work of Thomas McDonagh, Francis Ledwidge and online comments from forums on housing, environment and wildlife: broadening the question of who or what belongs.

These two shows, one in the inner city and one in outer suburbs, both offering valuable reflections on where we came from, where we are now, and where we should go from here.

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