



A World of Dreams and Ghosts: Reckoning with the
Practice of Conversing with the Dead and Making Meaning
with the Living

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This visual essay uses a practice-led approach to reflect on a series of paintings that respond to different aisling poems and cite images, artworks and literature related to the construction of 'woman' in Irish culture. The essay positions the fluid temporal state of 'girl' as an aesthetic and conceptual device to critically engage with these diverse references and materials.

Content warning: This following is filled with references, often painfully obvious and sometimes pointedly obscure. The quantity exceeds the recommended dose for the essay format, which may result in fatigue, nausea and in extreme cases eye rolling.

Go gently, dear reader x

Have I always been haunted? I'm not a witchy-type. I'm not even all that "woo woo". I'm not. I'm not! (People always assume when you are an artist you're a bit "pseudo" something— spiritual, intellectual, *talented*. Personally, I prefer the prefix "quasi". Largely because it is more fun to say—it has a certain eldritch quality, no? All the same, I'm drawn to "quasi" because it refers less to the falseness of traits but rather to the wearing lightly of certain attributes. A wink. A nod. A slight hue.)

I hate when artists say knobby things like "I'm channeling a spirit" or spout some trite line about a "third hand" or a spiritual "impulse" thrumming through them. I contradict myself of course—as I am wont to do—because once I begin making, there *she* is, that voice: the bitchy teen who sees phonies everywhere. Sometimes I think everything she wants to say could be condensed into two words, "fuck" and "you". She appears to be quite mad, endlessly critical and incessantly present.

American psychologist—a "pseudo" something surely? I mean, did we all *really* agree that it's a science?—G. Stanley Hall describes adolescence as the state of being caught between looking back, at childhood (somewhere between idyllic, so-so and oppressive), and looking forward, into adulthood (somewhere between shit and show). He writes, 'haunted by automatic presentations that take the reins from the will and lead us far away in a rapt state, now reminiscent, now anticipatory, into a world of dreams or ghosts.' *

A world of dreams and ghosts. That sounds about right. That's me, quasi-temporal, *girl*.

The accompanying collection of paintings is called *Aisling Is a Dream*. There are seven of them. Seven is a magic number. I could do a quick Google to cite this fact, to link it to Celtic mysticism or Irish folklore in some way but I won't—sorry! Seven is a magic number. The source is *me*. I've absorbed it, from all of *you*. Each of the seven paintings responds to different *aislings*—*aisling* being *Gaeilge* for 'dream' or 'vision'. It is also the name of a poetic genre where the Irish nation appears to the poet as a woman, often employed to reflect on the political and social concerns of any given times (chiefly, what we euphemistically term—say it with me now—"Anglo-Irish relations").

Across the paintings, I cite *aislings* by Eavan Boland, W.B Yeats, Seamus Heaney, and Aogán Ó Rathaille, among others, to draw connections with themes in Irish culture that inform dominant perspectives on the female condition—yano, 'finding a voice where they found a vision' and all that.* In addition, I lump in iconic paintings by Daniel MacDonald, Michael Farrell and Paul Henry, and gesture towards Greek mythology, Hughes Merle and Renaissance boyos, like Titian, in an effort to poke at prevailing imageries in European art more broadly. I combine these references with personal stories and motifs. I mix religious iconography with handwritten lines of folk songs and the practice of daisy chain making that defined my girlhood. In *I Rose Up*

and *Told My Story*, for instance, I invoke Michael Farrell's painting *Madonna Irlanda* (1978), but instead of reproducing the Vitruvian Man, I pop in a *Síle na gig*.

The fern plant appears throughout my seven paintings in order to subvert (too lofty a claim?) and prickle (ya, that sounds about right) at these references to reverberations in Irish culture. I use the fern as a motif in my practice to reflect on its potential allegorical qualities—its girlish, mischievous promise. The fern's ability to reproduce asexually and sexually through the production of spores, alongside its primeval origins, has generated a rich mythology, in particular that of the imaginary 'fern flower'. It's a curious little plant that I use to gesture towards a grand history and a secret and unfurling future. I'm interested in playing with the tension—the hot and sticky contradiction—between the patriarchal literary tradition of the old boys personifying the landscape as a female (be it a beautiful maiden or an old hag, whatever the narrative or political sentiment commands) and painting the landscape as a young, sexy, virile* female (i.e. my grubby self).

* Truthfully—such is my cross to bear, having thrown my leg in with the “confessionals”—I came across this quote through Tavi Gevinson (of *The Rookie* fame). She cited it in her zine *Fan Fiction* (2024) about Taylor Swift. I've never read any literature by the “Father of Adolescence” but I keep studiously abreast of Taylor Swift discourse.

*Eavan Boland, “Singers” (1994)—but quoted by President Mary Robinson in 1990, Boland let her borrow the phrase for her inauguration speech.

*Is virile a word to conjure a woman?



I Thought Her The Queen Of The Land, 2025. Oil on canvas, 100h x 100w cm

Ghosts: "Róisín Dubh" (late 16th century) - Irish folk song (various)
 and the Blessed Virgin Mary, Brigid's blanket, red roses on Tumblr, The Dubliners
 singing "The Black Velvet Band", all the arts + crafts for our
 Holy Communion, my many, many trinkets and holy medals, ribbons
 day dreaming and mishearing lyrics in the back of the
 car on a family road trip



Aisling Is A Dream, 2025. Oil on canvas, 100h x 100w cm

Ghosts: "Aisling" (1975) by Seamus Heaney
 and the myth of Diana & Actaeon, my granny's net curtains,
 Tia's party Diana & Actaeon (1956-1957), my mother's
 clothes line, Susan Connolly's approach to painting,
 WJ Mitchell's "Thesis on Landscape" (1994) - "Landscape
 is not a genre of art but a medium" the tale of Adam
 & Eve



I Rose Up And Told My Story, 2025. Oil on canvas, 100h x 100w cm

Ghosts: "Mother Ireland" (1995) by Eavan Boland, Irish and Madonna (Ireland) "The Very First Real Political Picture" (1977) by Michael Farrell, Mother Ireland, "The Divine Feminine" and other myths, Silvia Federici's warning not to valorize the body's mother goddesses, the tradition of nude painting, Scott Hike's cup the "paper", the stereo my man painted on my older sister's bedroom only

I fear, dear reader (is this diminutive patronising? The last thing I want to do is to veer into the paternalistic) you might be asking ... *so?* I allude, quote, collage, call to mind, mention, muster, recall, recollect, point to, point at, revive, touch on, tell on, bear witness and show. OK, cool, *sure*. But why does it matter that I'm citing Titian's painting of the Diana and Actaeon myth? Who gives a rat's ass that Seamus Heaney referred to it in his poem "Aisling" (1974) from his politically spicy *North* collection? Why am I forever chewing on his words, ' "Are you Diana ... ?" / And was he Actaeon'?" To what end? What's the actual point, here? "Am I just like that repetitious, manipulative, freak Andy Warhol, spitting the images I receive back out into the world again?", I cry out, in the studio, sweat on my brow, paint up my arms, ghost over my shoulder. I cast my eye on these histories in a kinda dumb and bitchy way, creating connections that suit my humour—still, as Brian Dillon notes in *Affinities* (2023) 'but idiotic too in the original sense of an uncultured, uncivil, private urge.' These are my obsessions. *I'm troubled by these images, so I trouble these images.*



I Gave Her Poems To Say, 2025. Oil on canvas, 100h x 100w cm

Ghosts: 'Glennagile' (circa 1715) by Aogán ÓRathaille
 and Claire Luce-Bennett's novel *Pond* (2015), Daniel MacDonal's Irish
 Peasant Children (1846), the 'colleen' motif in painting, the exhibition
 Potatoe & Comy Name: Art & The Great Hunger that summer when took
 control, potatoe — Sylvia Plath's potatoes + Amanda Coogan's
 the pants of Kevin Mooney



Do This in Parody Of Me, 2025. Oil on canvas, 100h x 100w cm

ghosts "The Midnight Court/Cúirt an Mheán Gíon" (1780) by Brian Merriman and Lunatic of Etretat (1871) by Hugues Meule, The Log Lady from Twin Peaks (1990), court, the posturing of women is Surrealist nah Éireann, the Kerry Babier call (1984) Anna Walayat and her potent use of symbols, how all the statues of women are mythological figures, Oliver Fouere as a giantess in Jessie Jones' powerful film installation Tremble tremble (2017), Irish abstract painter Mairéad Jellett's The Virgins of Eire (1940s) and my proclivity for the moon and lunacy



Motherhood / Birth Control, 2025. Oil on canvas, 80h x 80w cm

Ghosts: "The Wanderer's Dream" (1897) by W. B. Yeats and Paul Huxley, parts of the West of Ireland, Grace Huxley, President Maey Robinson the lamp, the notion of a "Romantic Ireland," the mysterious Motherhood / Birth Control — a twentieth century party by Bertrice Elvey (believed to depict two women huddled by lamp light) and Minna Hemmerson's reveal into this party, the perpetual housing crisis, a book of house designs called *Bungalow Bliss* (1971) by Jack Fitzsimons & Adrian Pincus's reveal into this phenomenon, my family home, artists for reveal the 8th.



Tread Softly Because You Tread On My Dreams, 2025. Oil on canvas, 100h x 100w cm

Ghosts: "Mo Ghile Mear" (18th century) - Irish folksong (various)
 and John Lavery's port of his wife Hazel ~~as~~ Kathleen M
 Houlihan on Irish bank notes, Hazel Lavery the painter,
 Kathleen M Houlihan (1902) - a one act play by W.B
 Yeats and Lady Gregory, Hazel Lavery and The Kead
 Rose (1923) - a painting by her husband John, daisy chain
 making in the summer with school friends Aaisy
 chain making during covid lockdown, Maude Gonne
 as Kathleen M Houlihan on stage at the
 Abbey Theatre, Maude Gonne as Kathleen M Houlihan in the
 presidential inauguration of W.B Yeats, our horrible religious room
 in secondary school - Maude Gonne Revolutionary & Suffragette

And so, here I am, *caught*—somewhere between the past and future, between, history and amnesia, ghosts and dreams—somewhere a way a lone a last a loved a long the riverrun. I'll keep painting, collaging and writing, spying at things with my beady eye—the ghostly dreams and the dreaming ghosts. I hope through my prickling (the “fuck” and “you”) and poking (the undying ruminations) there is the chance something about this life will be revealed, something that's beautiful or brutal or something akin to a kind of hard sweet you can suck on a long drive.

