

On the Persistence of the Analogue Ethnographer

We learn a place and how to visualize spatial relationships, as children, on foot and with imagination. Place and the scale of space must be measured against our bodies and their capabilities.

Gary Snyder “*Blue Mountains Constantly Walking*”, in *The Practice of the Wild*, 1990

Drawing can be a meditative act. It requires concentration and attention to detail in the careful act of looking. We tend to think of it as a solitary process. Yet the recent series of drawing projects by Kathy Herbert and Dorothy Smith working individually at Phizzfest (2013 and 2014) and collaboratively at Satellite Studios and the Draíocht Arts Centre, suggest something different.¹ These projects point to an opening out of the drawing process. They represent a deliberate move beyond solitary studio practice in order to bring the act of drawing out into the public domain, into the everyday rhythms of the street and into the neighbourhood. Most recently, with *Walking/Drawing*, Herbert and Smith have brought their public and collaborative drawing explorations to the somewhat unlikely terrain of the urban shopping centre complex. *Vagabond Reviews* caught up with Dorothy and Kathy at the Blanchardstown Town Centre in the north west of Dublin during an intensive, five-day summer residency at the Draíocht Arts Centre. In the main gallery, the artists were developing an eight metre collaborative drawing.

Drawing as Urban Psychogeography

We began our conversation by discussing their individual practices and interests. Dorothy has a keen interest in the built environment and the public spaces, which we all navigate in our daily lives. Various disparate elements come together in her work: streets, walls, surfaces. She is interested in drawing as a form of psychogeography, exploring how the built environment acts as a limiting, formative or enabling force in our lives. In her work she brings drawing and that critical encounter with the built environment together. The work of English painter George Shaw, who has been painting the same housing estate in North England for the last twenty years, is an interesting reference point for her. Shaw’s work echoes her sustained engagement with the physical infrastructure of everyday urban life. Smith draws attention to certain features in the urban landscape, such as signage, anonymous street corners and most recently traffic islands. These are features which we navigate on a daily basis, yet to which we wouldn’t necessarily ascribe a strong aesthetic value. However, in Smith’s drawings, they are isolated from the bustle of the surrounding city life and being expertly rendered on paper they invite (and gain) our respectful attention. For

¹ *weareallinthistogether*, Smith, Phizzfest, 2012 & 2013. *Drawing Conversations*, Herbert, Phizzfest, 2012 & 2013. *Open to the Public*, Smith & Herbert, Satellite Studios, 2013. *Walking/Drawing*, Smith & Herbert, Draíocht, 2014.

Smith it's not about a preoccupation with the exotic: more like a tenacious attention to working where you live, a highly local exploration of place.

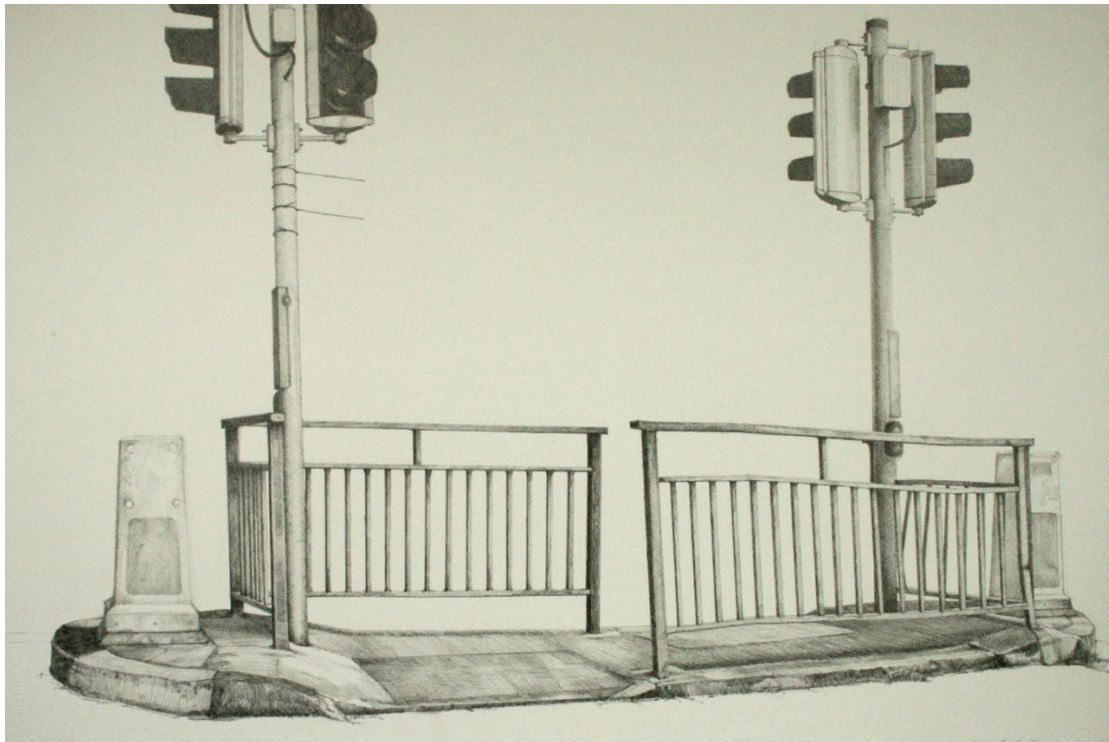


Fig. 1 *Island with Cable Ties*, pencil on paper, 56 x 38cms. Dorothy Smith 2014

I had an exhibition recently featuring drawings of traffic islands. I think I might be the first person to do drawings of traffic islands. That really ordinary infrastructure is essential yet we hardly notice it. I think they're fabulous subject matter.

Kathy Herbert's work is also concerned with questions of environment, coming from what she would term an 'ecosophical point of view'. Herbert connects these large themes to the everyday in her work. Just as with Dorothy's work, Kathy draws our attention to the 'small' and seemingly less significant things that surround us: the shadow a tree casts, line markings in the sand, the wild flower growing through a crack in concrete, she draws our attention to the opportunistic in nature. Although she has always drawn, her influences are rooted in sculpture. As a sculptor, drawing is a way to understand and figure out three - dimensional forms:

In sculpture it's always a question of figuring out the form. It's about dissecting the idea, the image in order to understand the dimensions, the thing itself. It's a question of looking, drawing, learning how something is structured, how it's put together. Drawing is not like taking a photograph, where you press the button and see it that one time. In drawing you have to look and look again. It's about actively looking. You glean the information. You record. You realise what's missing and you

go back. Putting all those little pieces together you build up this body of knowledge about what it is you are drawing.



Fig. 2. *Copper Beech Tuam*, pencil on paper, 42 x 59cms. Kathy Herbert 2011

Phizzio-Therapy

Both artists work in gallery and non-gallery settings and each communicate a strong impulse to connect those practices of visual investigation and presence as artists to broader publics beyond those art spaces alone. They discovered this shared interest when they first met in the 2012 Phizzfest, the Phibsborough Community and Arts Festival. Although working on separate projects they discovered common interests around drawing and public engagement. For Smith, drawing in public is a way of breaking the isolation of the studio:

Working more publicly is a two-way thing. It's really very isolating being an artist, you have an exhibition, which is great but there's very little engagement really. I was increasingly frustrated with that model.

Coming from a background of intensive drawing and life drawing in particular, Smith has discovered a productive tension between drawing and engaging. With the *weareallinthistogether* project at Phizzfest she experimented with rapid-fire portrait drawing, each sitting lasting no more than five to ten minutes, layering one drawing over another. While it demanded extreme concentration it was also energising. It was memorable too for the shift from studio into the flow of a social situation:

I loved the buzz, the people hanging around. A choir came in one day and sang for a while. People asked questions. It was so full of life with all sorts of conversations going on. People love looking at people drawing. It sounds like it's a passive role, but I don't think it is: sitting for a portrait is not a passive role



Figs. 3 & 4 *weareallinthistogether*, work in progress Phizzfest, Dorothy Smith 2012

For Herbert, *Drawing Conversations* (Phizzfest, 2012 and 2013) brought the act of drawing, both its making and reception, out into the street. The device was simple. She set up an easel with paper and pencil and while drawing, invited members of the public to come over, look and talk about what she's working on. She observes that for a lot of people, to be able to regard the construction of these works on paper offers a valid form of engagement with art, an opportunistic encounter in the everyday, which is made possible by drawing in public.



Fig. 5 Drawing Conversations, Phizzfest, Kathy Herbert 2013

Walking/Drawing at Draíocht

Herbert does not see herself in some kind of service role. Rather it's about creating another register, somewhere between the art class and the formal gallery setting where after all, the artist is not usually present. She describes the distinction in the context of the *Walking/Drawing* project at Draíocht:

For a lot of people who are interested in art but not professional artists, the main point of contact is through workshops and art classes. They're always learning how to make art. But there are also an awful lot of people who just want to look at art: for them it's a non-making engagement. They come into the gallery space here at Draíocht and look. But they'll also enjoy it very much when we talk to them to tell them about the drawing. They ask about the drawing. I'll tell them, for example the dandelion in this large drawing we are working on can be seen anywhere in the shopping centre, coming up through every crack. People respond and talk about dandelions in their gardens. The drawing creates a platform for conversation and shared experiences.

For both artists, walking is an essential part of their practice. It formed an integral aspect of making their collaborative drawing at the Draíocht Arts Centre. Both Smith and Herbert feel that walking allows the walker to really see a place, to discern as much information as possible about a territory. In Blanchardstown Town Centre certain areas naturally assumed prominence such as where people park their cars or where they go to the bank. But for Smith and Herbert, entirely

different spaces opened up through their individual walks. Both artists would consider walking as a form of knowing:

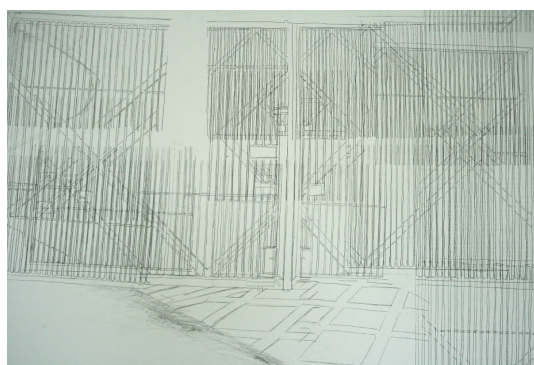
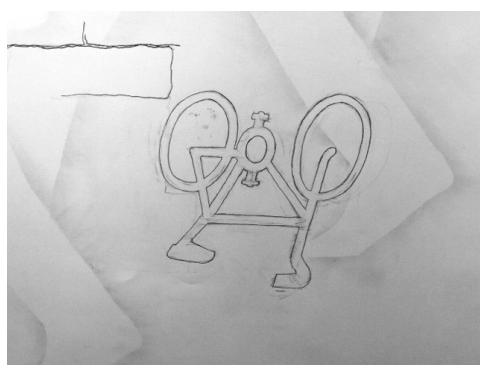
I set off yesterday on foot, thinking about how we are affected by being in certain places. I made notes about how I felt on my walk. If you wander off the set routes here, it's quite uncomfortable. I was on edges, on multi-directional crossings, going through fences and hedges. Desire lines and the paths here sometimes just simply stop. So I didn't feel wanted or welcome as a pedestrian. It made me feel stupid, clumsy, nervous. I felt frustrated but autonomous because I was really determined. I was glad to be fit in order to be able to negotiate the space. Smith

During an earlier six-month studio residency in Draíocht Herbert went walkabout, working in her notebook as a record of those journeys. Building on that experience both artists walked and sketched separately as an initial research process ahead of their residency together in the Draíocht gallery.

We didn't follow pre described routes. We crossed car parks diagonally. We wanted to see where we would end up, if we walked without purpose. We ended up in all sorts of strange places. Smith

Herbert adds:

We both went on our separate walks around the car parks. If you go walking in a different direction than what has been intended for you, you see things differently. Like the back of the bike sign, so in the drawing the bicycle is upside down. It's about going the other way to what was intended, looking for nature in the man made spaces: ferns growing in the shore, the cloud behind the lamp posts, the names of shops seen through leaves, wild flowers, rosebay and dandelions not intended to grow here. The environment was not designed for everything that happens in it. We did our own thinking, our own drawings and came together in Dorothy's studio about a week before we came to work here.



Figs 6 & 7 *Walking / Drawing* details, pencil on paper. Kathy Herbert & Dorothy Smith 2014

Accidental Ethnography

Perhaps unsurprisingly, both artists started out with that perception of the Blanchardstown Town Centre as a world dominated by cars and shopping. When the centre was built 15 years ago at the height of the Celtic Tiger, it did seem like an alien territory, offering little more than the exhaustion of cars and shops. Although Herbert already had a good working knowledge of the area from her previous residency in Draíocht, Smith was less familiar. While she had participated in *National Drawing Day* in Draíocht the year before, the shopping centre was unknown territory.

The artists have inhabited the place through constant walking, talking to people in the gallery and encounters with people who work there. In the course of those *Walking/Drawing* perambulations at Draíocht they have discovered many humanising transgressions and accommodations that work against the grain of the 'big planning' imagination. Counter intuitively the private car owner is not necessarily the main user. In their conversational encounters they have discovered that most people come to Blanchardstown Town Centre by foot. The main mode of circulation is walking and the many desire lines that cut through the shrubbery are testament to that transgressive pedestrian traffic:

Although it's not designed for walking, people walk here. If you want to go somewhere in particular in this town centre, you may not find a path, so you have to go through bushes. There are millions of desire lines here, cutting across spaces that the designer didn't intend for people to move through. Herbert

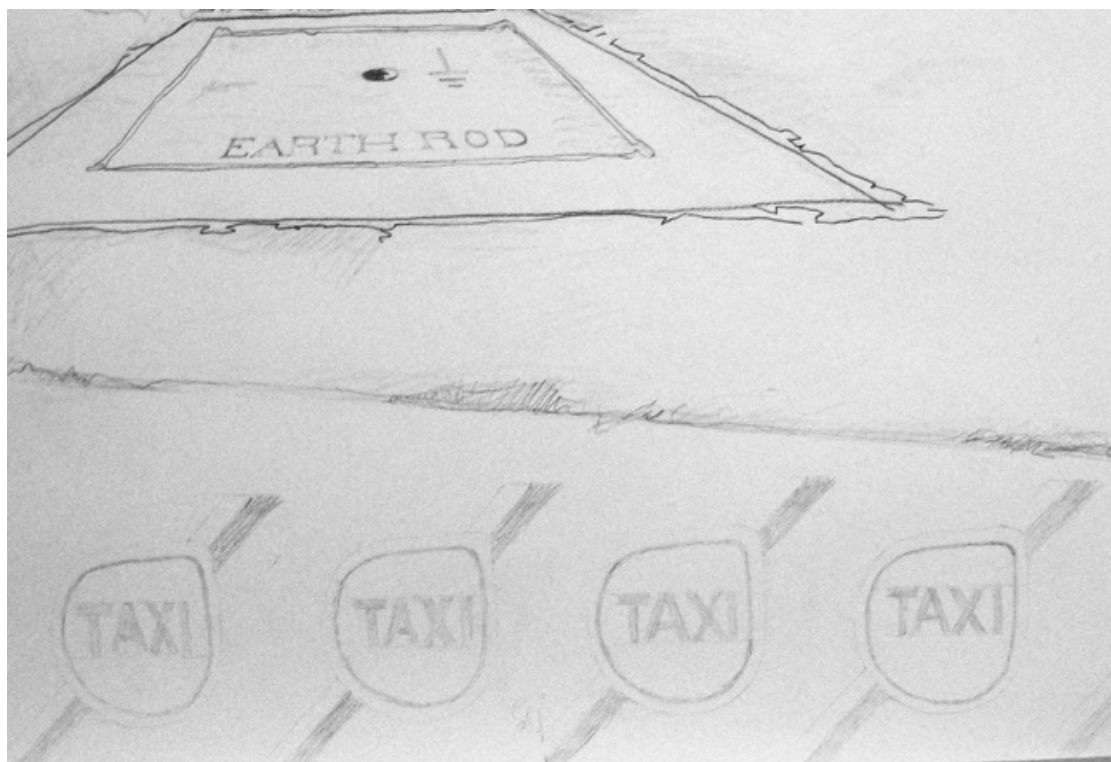


Fig. 8 *Walking / Drawing* detail, pencil on paper. Kathy Herbert & Dorothy Smith 2014

There's a particular taxi rank at the main entrance to the centre that will bring anyone anywhere in the neighbourhood of Dublin 15 for just five euros. Herbert notes: *'People are making a living just from that taxi rank alone'*. From their line of sight in the gallery the artists are surprised to see that the taxi drivers already know many people by name and the destinations of many of the shoppers who get into the taxi. It's a form of both economic and social exchange. A small-scale social economy breaking the assumption of the hermetically closed circuit between suburb, private car and shopping mall.

Collaborative Drawing

The collaborative drawing process began in Dorothy's studio on a table tennis table. There they worked directly on the eight metre roll of paper, a small section at a time where rather poetically, each territorial transgression demanded a return of serve.



Fig. 8 *Walking / Drawing* in progress, Dorothy Smith's studio 2014

When they transposed the drawing to the gallery space in Draíocht, they could see it in its entirety for the first time. They immediately reassessed what was an overly tentative emerging composition in the studio in light of the scale of the drawing in the gallery space. While in their way of working Smith and Herbert do not propose an absolute divide between studio-based practice and 'making in public', there are certain crucial differences. The studio offers a space that can be occupied completely. It holds out the possibility of complete concentration and singular focus. For their week long residency in the gallery at Draíocht the doors

were wide open. As people walk past the artists actively engage with them, inviting them into the space, encouraging dialogue about the drawing process. In that public setting there is a deliberate syncopation between drawing and conversational engagement. In their approach the more visible, public phase of working is supported by the studio practice. As Herbert puts it:

In the studio, the focus is entirely on what you are doing. The focus here in the gallery space is actually on communicating about what you are doing.

While Smith and Herbert have retained the direct relation between drawing and the artist, in the public, gallery-based setting there is a switch from that intense process of drawing on paper to the performative demands of engaging with the public. Through drawing collaboratively, they have experimented with breaking down the lines of separation that maintain physical spaces on paper as personal space. It took time to break that boundary, to become comfortable with the drawings of each artist straying into the others frame.

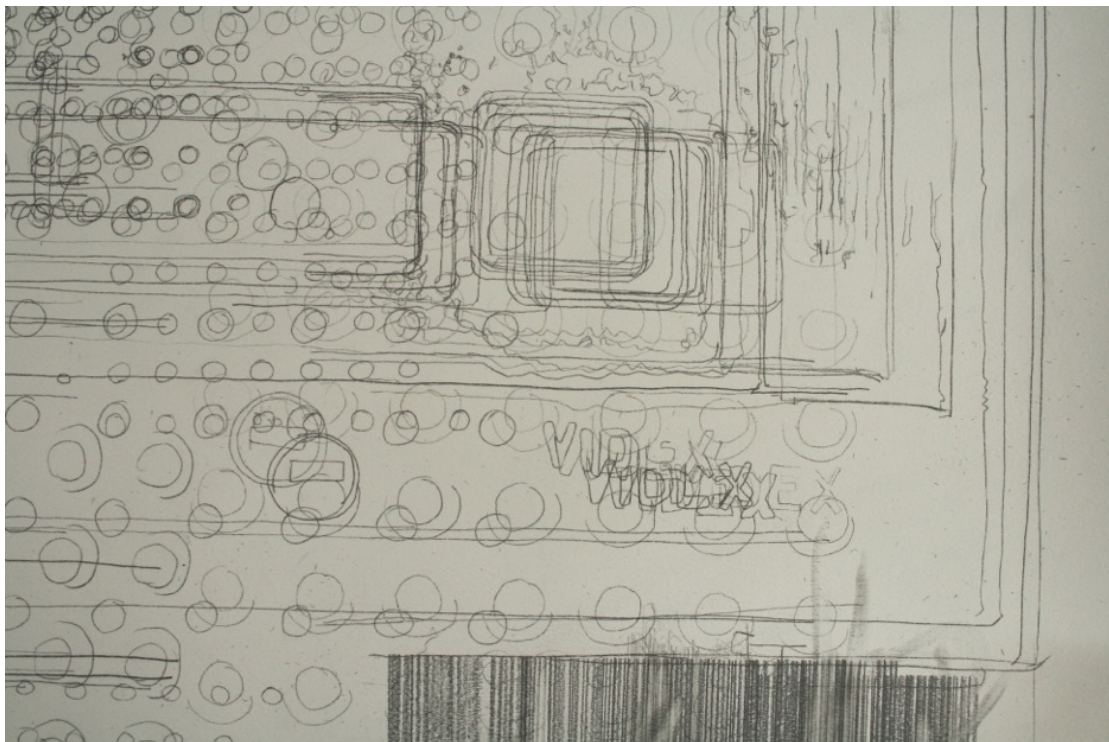


Fig. 9 *Walking / Drawing* detail, pencil on paper. Kathy Herbert & Dorothy Smith 2014



Fig. 10 *Walking / Drawing* detail, pencil on paper. Kathy Herbert & Dorothy Smith 2014

Dorothy would join up some of her pieces to mine. I had to make spaces for them. At first we were veering away from each other. Dorothy's work is much more intricate. Mine is looser so I cover more ground, more paper. I have no problem with the idea of somebody working over my drawing whereas Dorothy is more reticent about that. Herbert

Smith adds her own musings on these territorial invasions:

It's taken a bit of negotiation. You can't just follow your own ideas all the time. We had to push ourselves to move across the drawing. You don't normally draw over someone else's drawing.

These collaborative experiments around making are at an early stage and it remains to be seen where they might lead. To what extent might the work become interlaced? We don't know. For the moment their drawing styles remain very distinctive. They are still autonomous and it remains to be seen if that autonomy would further dissolve. While Dorothy anticipates she might become 'less precious', in Kathy's return of serve she surmises that she might 'get more controlling'. Clearly the possibilities for this process of letting go of the authorial space have many directions yet to be discovered.

Persistently Analogue

Returning to the more ethnographic elements of their increasingly shared practice, it is as though the collaborative, public nature of drawing has allowed for a much richer reading of the context. As Smith puts it:

If you were making work about Blanchardstown in the artist studio at Draíocht it would be completely different to doing the work in this gallery space. The conversations we've had with people really informed our sense of what the place is like. It changed my attitude.

They are well aware that drawing is one, highly specific way of engaging with questions of public space. Nonetheless they have deliberately confined themselves to drawing, employing minimal materials such as graphite pencils, carbon paper and stencils, in order to see where it can go:

It's almost an anachronistic activity to be doing this analogue practice when everything is so digital. Our subject is the environment we move through to get to work: traffic islands, public routes, public space and public life. We've avoided the multi media route that a lot of artists take when making work about the built environment. We've also tried to show something of the work that goes into making a drawing, the materiality of it: ladders, spirit levels, pencils, carbon paper. We wanted to reveal something of the making of the work, as well as something of the place. Smith



Fig. 11 *Walking / Drawing* in progress, Draíocht Gallery, Kathy Herbert & Dorothy Smith 2014

In that spirit of revealing the artistic process, during their five-day residency Kathy and Dorothy also conducted workshops where participants were introduced to the idea of walking as fieldwork, a way of engaging with place and the use of drawing as note taking. Participants were introduced to gathering and making notes while walking. Like many an ethnographer, or indeed the ever more prevalent number of artists operating in site-based work, participants discovered the way 'fieldwork' transforms a sense of place:

The workshop made me think of the possibilities of research as a creative process. I can see the value of what's in front of me. It was interesting for me to expand my way of seeing. I saw the beauty of logos, the leisure plex, the cog connecting - that we are cogs in this whole world, the plex in this big complex world. It was very invigorating. Workshop participant



Fig. 12 *Walking / Drawing* workshop in progress, Draíocht Gallery 2014

Conclusion

Smith and Herbert's collaborative drawing at Draíocht is preoccupied with the present, an immediate response to place over an intensive, five-day immersion. In research terms it's a mode of ethnographic inquiry that literally takes a slice of time and harnesses it as the grounding for an artistic response to place. Such a method naturally invites the idea of return, the accumulation of time-based samples of place where earlier readings can influence, invade and transform later ones like their drawing practice has invaded and transformed notions of artistic autonomy, territory and representation.

The idea of return introduces the creative possibilities of the longitudinal study. It lends itself to the idea of layering, in precisely the same way that some walls contain compacted readings of highly local histories. The process of the peeling back of wallpaper in order to reveal history is reversed and instead, we see here the possibilities of a process of textured accumulation, the building up of papered layers of the present to tell particular stories of place. In short, a 'layering up' as opposed a peeling back. In any case, at the level of the particular, there are things building up and things hidden underneath.

Here we see a familiar epistemological tension between that insular, self-contained preoccupation with artwork and the ethnographic impulse, which opens up questions of place. In *Vagabond Reviews*, that tension has provided a crucial point of creative inflection between aesthetics and knowledge production. In our own practice we are always navigating that re-reading of artistic practice as a form of research. On a purely aesthetic register the drawings at Draíocht can read as beautifully rendered art works. As a persistently analogue ethnography, they can also be read as a series of notations, like field notes that evoke a sense of place via an archaeology of attention to the particularity of things.

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