





National College of Art and Design

Fine Art-Painting

## KATHY PRENDERGAST: THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF A PERSONAL GEOGRAPHY

b y

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

This thesis focuses on the work of Kathy Prendergast who was born in Dublin in 1958. In 1976, she studied at the National College of Art and Design, and graduated from her BA course with first class honours in 1980. She then trained as a studio camera operator from 1980 to 1981 but found it was not for her and so she returned to NCAD in 1982, emerging again with first class honours in her MA in 1983. She moved to London to study at the Royal College of Art (1983-86). She lives and works in London at present.

I have chosen as a subject Kathy Prendergast's work because I feel an affinity with her as she uses a lot of drawing and graphic material. Her drawings are very detailed and appear functional. Because of her background in sculpture, she attends to detail and indeed the drawings often start off as studies for three-dimensional work as for example *The Body Map Series* (illus. 5). I am interested in the way that Prendergast's work often leaves traces of its origins as working drawings.

In the case of The Body Map Series there is also the whole area of maps. Maps are functional representations and yet they also have particular visual qualities that are a rich subject for artists to explore. Maps are a two-dimensional view of a three-dimensional surface. As Kathy Prendergast's background is in sculpture she is trained to think in threedimensions as a means to map our her thoughts on paper, so cartography must be useful. The 'functional' appearance of her work also derives from the varied sources she refers to in The Body Map Series (illus 5) which is the subject of my second chapter. Here I examine how she combines information usually used by mechanical engineers, surveyors or cartographers with conceptual fine art drawing. It was the intricacy of the drawings in The Body Map Series and The City Drawings that particularly appealed as did the fragility and yet structural strength of her work.

In my own work in first year I used road maps alongside the body and in third year I used architectural drawings along with the body (which was symbolised by the use of underwear). Now as a fourth year student I am fascinated by machinery and particularly taking the view of the body as the ultimate in precision and as a protective object. My work is drawing-based, (the medium is pen and ink) and



also has intricate detailed quality.

Kathy Prendergast's interest in machinery and cartography alongside the body is the subject of my first chapter, where I attempt to place the work in a wider historical context. I studied the history of cartography in Ireland and read up on how the female body is perceived in colonial and postcolonial contexts. The research led me to believe that Prendergast's work is specifically Irish.

Yet it moves on from this 'personal geography' in *The City Drawings* (Illus 6) which is the subject of my third chapter. In this chapter I observed how this new body of work still uses cartography and is still intricately detailed and labourintensive, but the subject is the global village - the greater connectivity between all parts of the world due to new communications technologies etc. This is usually presented in a mechanised and highly technological way, but here it is given an organic quality. Due to the lack of gridlines and colour coding, the map detail becomes intertwined into what appears to be an abstract organic drawing but the organic structure becomes a symbol for the cellular structure in the body.



I have referred to the Renaissance practice of cartography, or cosmology as it was called then. A practice which formed the basis of the study of the body. The work from this period that I looked at is Leonardo's Man in a Circle and Square (illus 1). This is linked to cartography because of the



## Illus. 1 Leonardo da Vinci, Man in a Circle and a Square

Ptolemaic grid and it symmetrical geometric structures. This image resembles an anatomical drawing, a symbol of scientific progress.

I have also referred to Nettesheim specifically in the case of the *City Drawings*. Nettesheim's *De Occulta Philosophia* of 1510 sums up the Renaissance interest in proportion and the links between objects and structures regardless of their scale: "The measures of all the members [of man's body] are proportionate and constant both to the parts of the world and measures of the archetype" (Edgerton, as cited in *The Art of Cartography*). Prendergast uses the cities as members and global society as archetype.

Leonardo da Vinci was well acquainted with cartography and cosmology. There is evidence of this in his *Pianta della citta di Imola* (Illus 2). He had planned to acquaint himself with every part of the human body in the same order as Ptolemy's *Cosmographia* with a view to showing the little world of the human body a "minor mondo". In the *Pianta della citta di Imola* we see evidence of this aligning of cartography with anatomy. The body within its world with its own infrastructure being aligned with the mapped out world.





Illus. 2 Leonardo da Vinci Pianta della Citta di Imola



This study of Kathy Prendergast's work is essentially a look at her work from the perspective of a student who is interested in the ways that cartography and technical drawing can be linked to fine art. This is summed up for me in Prendergast's characterisation of her work as a 'personal geography'.



#### **CHAPTER 1**

#### THE IRISH FEMALE LANDSCAPE

In *The Body Map Series*, Kathy Prendergast looks at cartography within an Irish context. She questions the idea of Ireland's portrayal in definitive terms. Drawing upon the Irish land/body means looking at its experience in a colonial and post-colonial context.

There is difference between 'real' and 'perceived' history, even in territorial mapping. Kathy Prendergast suggests by her body maps how this history can be examined in different ways. The first and foremost symbol that is very important to look at is the personification of land in Ireland as a female form.

The female as a symbol for the Irish landscape remained throughout colonial and post-colonial times. Prendergast introduces the idea of a duality of real and imagined history by remapping Ireland in terms of ideas of gender and national identity in the traditional Irish landscape.



The fact that Ireland was a colony means that Ireland has been invaded and therefore appears vulnerable and this mirrors a classic feminine image.

The native perception of the colonialists was as an urban, masculine restricting presence even though Britain was also represented as female, in the figure of Britannia. She appeared androgynous, leaning towards the masculine. Illustrations showed Britannia with armour (Illus 3) whereas Hibernia was graceful (Illus. 4).

The female body is one site where racial tension between Ireland and Britain is played out. The female figure is charged with political meaning. The nationalist perception of land during colonisation was personified by another female figure coupled with Hibernia. This was the image of women in the west of Ireland, a privileged geographical area possibly because of its remote rural qualities. The west remained sunken on the map, that is, it was underdeveloped in the amount of detail; this land posed little interest to Britain because it was not very valuable and not worth the trouble as it had mountainous terrain.

Therefore this region came to be seen as the 'real' Ireland.







Illus 4



This was a symbol for the future ideal for Irish society. Exactly how this would be represented was argued in the first two decades of the twentieth century. This argument took place between the Women's Military Nationalist Organisation alongside the Suffragette Movement as to women's role in the new state. This threatened the male monopoly of political power and therefore the very nature of the peasant women with her emotional primitive elements like wild instincts and sexuality had to be tamed, but remain rural as opposed to Britain which was regarded as urban.

The way in which to work this was with images of older women and young men. In this way the younger men appear to be the stronger, to be the freedom fighters, while still allowing it to be set in the west. Thus it still remained rural which also permitted the physical appearance of 'the Irish' to be healthy and strong through physical labour on the land. Urbanisation (bearing in mind that this is a symbol of Britain) was set against this.

In addition there was a need to allow for some notion of struggle in the representation of women. Thus images of strong, hearty women, the 'fine big girl' have developed. National dress became so important a national debate grew



up around it, and a rejection of modern fashion evolved. Catherine Nash states:

> Emphasis on the red skirts of peasant women was tied to the symbolism of that colour as an indication of vitality, to the belief in the national love of colour evident in ancient costume, and to the rejection of modern fashion, which was considered to restrict female reproductive functions.

Women were a symbol of Ireland for the Gaelic revival. The Gaelic revival was an attempt to forge a 'native' identity and to reinforce Ireland's right to autonomy.

Ireland in post-colonial times had a post-colonial rage that differed from other models of colonialism. Because the native people were white, the colonial power had to dominate through mind control, and because of occupation in the northern part of the country there could not even be slight acceptance of colonial power, as there tends to be in other colonies. This led to a total re-establishment of what is seen as 'native' culture stemming from the 'real' Ireland.

Attempts to remap or revive 'native' Ireland was troubled by the anglicising of place names during colonial power. Place names had lost their original meaning, and this brought about a dislocation of culture from geography. A play recently shown in the Abbey Theatre examined this



issue: *Translations*, by Brian Friel, dramatises the taking of each Gaelic name and Anglicising it for the first ordnance survey of Ireland. Set in 1833 in a native Irish-speaking community in County Donegal, one of the British soldiers, Yollands, calls the process "an eviction of sorts". Maire Native calls it a "ritual of naming".

The other reason Ireland was troubled by this 'eviction' was it was trying to replace a 'native' culture after a very long period of colonial suppression. To achieve this unrealistic goal, the first untruth was the (re)placement of the Irish language as a first language when very few of the population still spoke it. The second was the constitutional claim over the North of Ireland, a denial of Partition and the border: the 'body' of Ireland had to be whole.

This was an attempt to return the 'real' Ireland to the Irish. The denial of colonial power lead to issues over land ownership. Not only with the constitutional claim over the north, but the dislocation felt in post-colonial Ireland in trying to rebuild a long-forgotten or neglected past. This led to a colonial rage, a sense of being dislocated from our own past. The sense of a body dislocated from the self is evident in Kathy Prendergast's work. Ordnance surveys in Ireland



are taken apart by Kathy Prendergast and re-assembled. She uses the symbolic nature of these maps. The element of control through gridlines and the symbolic ownership of land is again stressed.

This symbolic ownership depended on what type of maps we are talking about. Colonial mapping is characterised by the fact that mapping took place and the content was secret by a foreign body invoking a type of voyeurism of the land. It was only Irish in content not in title because the printing and editing went on abroad so the title becomes important as reflected in Kathy Prendergast's title *To Control a Landscape*.

Estate maps were different: they were not there to control as surveillance tools, they were there to symbolise control, and to a larger extent they were a status symbol. They were ornate as opposed to the ordnance maps, which were purely functional. Estate maps were meant for public viewing and therefore symbolic of how the owner was in the position of power.

The estate map had to be updated constantly, because of change in tenant's dwellings etc. Court cases over the


borders around the land meant "that between the military and the landlords, Ireland was the most densely mapped country in Europe". Post-colonial times brought another ordnance survey, stating in the 20s by the Irish Army so by the 70s Ireland still claimed to be the most densely mapped country in the world. The dense mapping shows the lines of ownerships, reflecting the history surrounding the land.

While post-colonial Ireland still represented the land as female and placed great emphasis on motherhood, women were not allowed the right to exercise control over their own bodies; for example, contraceptives were banned. As enforced by Church and State, the male monopoly of political power in Ireland has been under attack in recent decades. Women, demanding some measure of control over their reproductive system, have been to the fore in this struggle.

Kathy Prendergast's body map scenes coincides with this period. The works show a significant number of gynaecological diagrams, which I take to refer to the politics of the body in Ireland.

## **CHAPTER 2**

#### THE BODY MAPS : OBSESSIVE CONTROL

The first piece I will look at is Enclosed Worlds and Open Spaces (1982-1983), a part of The Body Map Series. I will look at this first because it is the only piece in the series that the whole torso is unticked. The other two pieces I have chosen are To Control a Landscape - Irrigation, andTo Control a Landscape - Oasis These are close-ups of Enclosed Worlds and spaces. Common to all the pieces is the Victorian style colouring. The level of intricate semitransparent attention to detail is equal in all and they all show part of the female body mapped and structured in a cartographic way, with details such as scale, and legends setting out the title.

As Conor Joyce has remarked:

Take the body . . . the way in which it gets larger and larger, the size of a continent, the more intensely it is surveyed, where a nipple is the size of a volcano and expanding, is to do with trying to get the focus right. Focusing is here a matter of enlargement. The bigger the enlargement, the better the focus, but also the more there is to see, the more detail within the first detail to follow up, the more need for further enlargement. And so on. (Joyce 1990 : 11)





Illus. 5 Fig 1: Enclosed Worlds in Open Spaces 1983



Illus. 5 Fig 2: To Control a Landscape - Irrigation 1983





Illus. 5 Fig 3: To Control a Landscape - Oasis 1983

Now the title or place name does not have any cartouche (a decorative drawing around the title). This shows evidence of it being an ordinance survey map a strictly information-based form of map, providing information which would allow the owner to control.

The figure is also female in all these pieces suggesting they carry with them the history of representations of Ireland as female. Therefore they constitute a kind of symbolic history of Ireland.

Enclosed Words in Open Spaces differs in aspects from To Alter a Landscape and To Control a Landscape -Oasis or To Control a Landscape -Irrigation.Turning to the title or place name. The first word is 'enclosed' as opposed to 'control' or 'alter'. The enclosed words implying silence, 'open spaces' possibly meaning a rural landscape. This may be a reference to isolation in a rural landscape. It may also be a reference to the Anglicisation of place names. Enclosed, implying the words have lost their meaning through Anglicisation. 'Enclosed' could also return to the secrecy of colonials vis-avis the ordnance surveys. It is almost the opposite meaning to 'control' or 'alter' which suggests an action.

The position of the arms behind the female's back and the fact that her head and legs are not in the frame of the picture indicate lack of mobility. The body appears passive by this lack of ability to move. This immobile body form is surrounded by water, the implication being that this landmass or body is being debilitated by the water, the figure appears restricted by water, again 'enclosed' in an open space. The land/body now becomes less of a threat and allows the viewer the control of the gaze implying an objectified representation of land/body. The land/body is presented as an object which has no role or say in how it is This alludes to the fact that country contained for the run. most part an Irish population but it was not Irish in title. This is another reference to ordnance survey in colonial times.

These surveys were also a type of surveillance over the land by a foreign body. Though Irish women were symbols of Ireland in colonial times, they remained as such in postcolonial times. The newly independent state did not allow women the right over their own bodies (e.g. women having no access to contraceptives). This meant that women had no autonomy over their own bodies, and it mirrors the way Ireland's population had no control over the running of the



country in colonial times.

The female figure in Prendergast's work appears to have no ability to have a role since there does not appear to be any action in the figure because there is no ability to act or at least that is the way it ?. As we are drawn in, we see a journey or an account of a journey on the thigh. Numbers 1, 2, 5, 7 are stables, 2, 6, `0 have refreshment rooms. Numbers 4, 8, 12 have good inns, are evidence of the colonial context in that they suggest the 'outsider's' or the traveller's view.

This piece appears to be dealing with matters of restriction coming from outside influences like the political climate. Outside influences that affect the self-image of individuals and also a nation. The main issues are 'control' and 'ownership' over land which now appears as a body. This manifests itself beneath the surface. This is the view underneath the surface.

The ability to control the body firstly by the title or place name. "To control" gives the impression that she now has control over her body. By remapping the map becomes and signifies autonomy. A map is a symbol of power of land



ownership by her re-mapping she now has ownership over her body/land.

Therefore she now has control over her own journey. In this case mapping is also a symbol of a journey because of the inscription on the thigh which, we saw earlier in *Enclosed Worlds and Open Spaces*, describes places visited along the way.

The control is echoed in this piece by the emergence of machinery. Machinery and its precise nature. Mechanism was based on the logic that knowledge of the world could be certain and consistent, and that the laws of nature were imposed on creation by God. The primacy of organic process gave way to the stability of mathematical laws and identities.

"A consistent and certain logic" as explained by Mumford is what machinery symbolises. The use of machinery gives a feeling of authority in this case, authority over the body. This is expressed not only in the machinery or indeed the title but also in the inscription below offering a logic to the outcome which is also mechanical. The inscription below reads:

The fire is being quenched, water is pumped onto the care of the mountain and stored in tanks, and as the mill turns water is pumped to the surface through the volcanic duct thus instead of emitting fire and steam the mountain will now exude water and irrigate soil.

The anatomy is particularly significant in this case because it is part of the reproductive system. The breast is labelled in the one piece as volcanic mountains and in this piece as irrigation, and this roots it not only to the land but to machinery. These notions of irrigation, life-giving properties of water, refer to fertility and to birth. In the case of machinery, machinery when first invented was the male equivalent to birth. Machines were thought of as mirroring in some way the female reproductive system. They were seen as assisting God in the harvest. Now we have birth through machinery or man-made objects and birth through the female body. We can see how this birth is highly controlled through the machinery that is supposed to assist it. This is different from the norm in Irish terms because machinery is seen as urban and clinical dislocating it from the rural and organic qualities ascribed to Irish history and identity.

A key functional aspect to this drawing and others in the series is its anatomical quality. The emergence of the mid-

section in anatomical drawing represents a new level of control over the body: the control that follows from regarding the body as a mechanical system. It also allows the body to be severed from its lived experience. The work evokes a scene of dislocation at the same time. This may be a reference to the dislocation between Ireland and its geography because of the Anglicisation of place names. Another functional aspect of these drawings would be the fact that they were originally made as working sketches for planned sculptural work.

To Control a Landscape - Oasisexhibits the same functional aspects discussed earlier. Its title introduces the new idea with the word oasis. Between the stomach and the vulva is labelled desert and a journey is suggested across this terrain. This reinforces Conor Joyce's reading of the Body Map Series as symbolising a journey while also keeping the idea of land and body being as one. The fact that this is another gynaecological diagram of the vulva labelled 'well' or 'harbour', again evokes the symbolism of water as before in irrigation suggesting the life-giving properties of water. Though water has been linked with the body in Enclosed worlds and open spaces in a negative way, enclosing and constricting the body, now the body uses this resource as



life-giving.

This live-giving well is linked to birth as it is a vulva but still retains the ability to act through machinery. These bring together the female anatomy linking it with birth while not allowing its actions to be limited. Thus this work stands in contrast to *Enclosed worlds and open spaces'* where the body appears too enclosed and unable to act and therefore objectified.

Here the body can function and because it was made by a woman who describes it a "personal geography" it could be regarded as a kind of self-portraiture. Portraiture is bound up with issues of positions of power and sovereignty, or as Ferguson describes it, with a "personal dominion and individual colonisation". This remapping in terms of the self-portrait means the artist's body becomes independent. The freedom from the landscape means freedom from that construction of femininity while acknowledgingits history.

## CHAPTER 3

## FINGER PRINTING CAPITALS

The size of each work in this series is 31 cm x 24 cm. On completion of this project there will be 180 drawings of every capital city in the world. At present there are a little over eighty. The work began in 1992 and is still in progress. These drawings are devoid of colour. The medium is restricted to pencil. Every map is circular and could also be seen as a type of finger printing. They take on a structure which is cell-like. They carry no labelling, and again unlike the body maps, they avoid direct contact with the figure. They vary from tightly packed structures to more loosely sprawling forms, depending on the city which is being portrayed.

This work was selected for the centenary Venice Biennial at which the theme was "Identity and otherness". The Venice Biennial is a huge event, involving over a hundred artists from over fifty countries. It has acquired an international reputation within which each nation struggles to represent itself. And so it is also very nationalistic. The pressure on a





Illus. 6a City Drawings Pencil on paper 24 x 32 cm (1992-)





Illus. 6b City Drawings Pencil on paper 24 x 32 cm (1992-)



smaller country, in this case Ireland, regarding space, is great. The year 1995 was no different, in fact worse, because a part of the Italian Pavilion, which usually houses the smaller countries, was given over to the "Identity and Alterity" a curated exhibition which was in fact a brief history of the human body.

As it turned out, the shortage of exhibition space spurred the Irish organisers to find a new context for the Irish presentation. Located in the residential island of the Giudecca, the Nuova Icona gallery was used. The intimate space suited Prendergast's new work. Because the cell-like structure appears fragile, this is a different approach to the portrayals of the city which is not usually portrayed as celllike or intimate. It is usually portrayed as a large overpowering alienating place.

Kathy Prendergast feels that "people seem to see cities as inhuman places". She sees them as organic. We can see the organic quality in the circular cell-like structure of finger print, which her drawings so closely resemble. The structure comes from the planned or unplanned growth of the city over the years it has been in existence. The element that Kathy Prendergast could be picking up on is the



demolition and building that goes on in the city is similar to the way in which cells break down and rebuild themselves in the body.

The fact that people see cities as inhuman places when in fact they are built by humans to function *for* humans may be because people react against proximity to other humans. But the idea animating the *City Drawings* is that individuals collaborate to make up a city through a shared consciousness. Also the idea that the city is part of a larger body/unity is very important to the appreciation of the work.

The structure of each particular city differs from all the others, each has its own particular individuality. Kathy Prendergast describes the difference between each and the reason for this at a talk given in November 1996. She describes them as "having almost a kind of consciousness" (Prendergast, IMMA).

The fact that each city is an individual and has a consciousness means that the collective consciousness of the cities must work together to make up a global society. The uniformity in the piece - each city rigorously treated on a

single sheet in simple pencil lines - is the evidence of this. The uniformity allows a single city to appear as part of a larger body.

To describe a city as Prendergast does, in terms of having a "consciousness" in the structure, and to link that structure to cells or figure prints, enables us to connect it with the figure. Each cell working inside a larger body, is a kind of a miniature of the universe. Renaissance theory proposes that each cell in man's body is seen as the microcosm of the great world or universe. So if man is a miniature of the 'great world', each part of the body is reflected in an image of areas in a map of the great world.

The realisation in recent times that our bodies rely on a more complex ecosystem than we have allowed for led us to an awareness of and a tendency to favour more organic products which are kinder to the land and therefore to our bodies. Thereby linking our bodies once again to the land. As Prendergast emphasises, "the whole structure is organic". Huge organisation within massive capital cities such as Washington or London produce an entity whose very size means it requires large amounts of energy and takes a disproportionate share of environmental resources so



damaging the ecosystem which we depend on for survival. Such cities can promote a sense of alienation: the individual is immersed or overwhelmed by complexities of society and can feel purposeless.

Yet the typical organic nature of a city is described by Lewis Mumford as follows:

From the village the city derived its nature as a lifepromoting environment, stable and secure, rooted in man's reciprocal relations with other organisations and communities. From the village, the city derives the ways and values of an ungraded democracy in which each member plays its appropriate role in each stage of the life cycle.

Mumford suggests that village and city are a "constantly interacting function". This organic theory means that each individual plays a role instead of being absorbed or immersed in feelings of purposelessness. Each individual performs a role that helps to protect the overall society inside the city wall. Prendergast illustrates that the new global society develops beyond the individual 'city wall'. This means that irrelevance of borders is now developing. Communications networks and travel, television, Internet, fax, phone, Concord, Jumbos, Channel Tunnel, all contribute to the opening-up of borders in the European Union and beyond. The structures upon which we work and live are



changing, whereas the idea of a wall around a city relates back to the medieval times where it was used to keep people out, to stop invasion. Now the walls are open. Each city works alongside the next. Society is global, extending into one large 'city', a network of independent networks. Prendergast believes that each city has its own consciousness. It is an organic being, constantly changing and developing. Capitalist growth is undifferentiated growth and capital cities are the places in which it concentrates itself. Capitalism goes hand in hand with obsession with growth and expansion which leads to a loss of flexibility. A confusion, due to loss of communication, takes place at the This has been described as cancerous. cellular level. Indeed cancerous growth comes from a breakdown of old tissue and an over-growth of formless new tissue.

In these drawings the developed capitalist cities are shown as tightly packed, losing flexibility, unlike the South American capitals where loose sprawling forms are shown, with an apparent abandon of flexibility.

The work, because of the removal of Irish and British politics has become less restricted to the specifics of Irish female identity and territorial mapping.



This work, unlike the Body Maps, does not focus on one key issue (the Irish female body). The image of the body as a machine is lost, but cartography and use of anatomy still remain. These now evolve from the rigid control such as scale gridlines and mid sections to less ordered cell structures and a more loose approach to cartography. Initially this still appears to be devoid of emotion. The clinical or functional aspects are still present but do not appear as blatantly as they do in the body map series. The body that the city drawing occupies is functional in terms of microscopic cells. They still are a part of an anatomy but their meaning is more ambiguous.



### CONCLUSION

There is no particularly 'Irish' style or medium in contemporary art. There are, however, particular experiences and concerns that may inform an artist's perspective. In the case of Kathy Prendergast's work, I have shown how the move into a new series of work, the *City Drawings*, represents the abandonment of an idealistic viewpoint towards Ireland and Irish perceptions of femininity. Of course, though, acknowledging this as a starting point on which to build an identity is important to Prendergast's work.

Finding out how the perceptions of the land are related to the femininity was important to my work as it relates to the Irish female body. The title of my project for the degree show is the *Fine Big Girl*. The realisation of how this is directly related to the construction of femininity in postindependence Ireland was an important factor in the development of my work.

The fact that the ideas informing Prendergast's work usually



operate subconsciously and that it often remains hard for her to articulate them verbally is also important to me. It is important not only because I can relate to that but also because I have learnt how these set of theories are valuable tools for standing back from my work and reading into it. By reading the meaning I can then make it clearer to myself but visually articulate it better to the viewer.

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