

ARTSEEN

JUNE 5TH, 2018

## HELEN O'LEARY: *Home is a Foreign Country*

by [Ann McCoy](#)

LESLEY HELLER | APRIL 20 – MAY 20, 2018



Helen O'Leary, *Home is a Foreign Country #9*, 2018. Polymer, Pigment, Chalk and Constructed Wood, 27 × 25 × 5/ inches.  
Courtesy the artist and Lesley Heller Gallery, New York. Photo: Eva O'Leary.

Helen O'Leary's work, which has its formation in Irish linguistics, gives us an inspired version of an Irish art rooted in a sense of place in rural Ireland. The late nineteenth century Gaelic revival (*Athbheochan na Gaeilge*), advocated for a return to the Irish language, and O'Leary's psyche is firmly planted in that tongue. O'Leary's art originates from a life lived on a farm in rural Ireland, and a spiritual connection to that land and rural way of life. In a time when many younger Irish artists have adopted critical theory, digital technology, and international styles severed from their cultural roots, O'Leary's work possesses a life-lived authenticity and hands-on craftsmanship that sets it apart. O'Leary's art is tethered to Ireland and the Irish language in a way not seen since Brian O'Doherty's *Ogham* works, begun in the late 1960s.

Seeing O'Leary's new work, I thought of the much-ridiculed 1943 radio speech, "The Ireland That I Would Have" by Éamon de Valera, a founder of the Irish Republic. De Valera preached for a return to and celebration of a uniquely Irish rural way of life, and a non-materialistic society that would shed the corrupting influences of British industrialism and culture. O'Leary's art, which uses country materials and skills, recalls this vision in sharp contrast to an art world now characterized by globalist groupthink, materialism, and costly fabrication. De Valera was politically a dark figure—responsible for much of Ireland's civil war cleft. Sadly, De Valera assigned women to the role of brood mares and downplayed poverty's horrors like rampant tuberculosis. Yet, somehow his rural ideal resonates in our age, so lacking spiritual and ecological sustainability, where many are embracing the wisdom of a return to the land. Seeing O'Leary's work, This critic thought the exhibition should have been called *The Irish Art That I Would Have*.

The artist's father, who died young, was a boat builder who wove his own lobster pots, constructed windmills, and could thatch a roof with oat straw. Her mother's philosophy, "If you can make it you can have it," harks back to an Ireland where country people made most of what they used. O'Leary extends this tradition in her art, in which the artist's hand is present in every piece—bits of wood are often repurposed from earlier works, cut and joined, assembled and reassembled like words or sentences in a story. The artist loves techniques like the dovetail joints she has seen on the corners of Egyptian boxes in the Metropolitan Museum. It is as if the boat builder's daughter and the rural knitter and crocheter have joined forces to cobble together every section of her work. All of the twenty-four pieces in her exhibit bore the same title, *Home is a Foreign Country* (all 2018), and felt like a family. While the pieces stood up as entities, they also seemed like they might be combined as parts of a mysterious, extended history. O'Leary has remarked that James Joyce "took the language of the oppressor and served it back almost unintelligible through the vernacular and tongue of Ireland." O'Leary has done the same with her art: taken Abstract Expressionism, and served it back to us transformed through Irish thought processes, a linguistic tradition, and country crafts.



Helen O'Leary, *Home is a Foreign Country #15*, 2018. Polymer, Pigment, Chalk and Constructed Wood, 22 1/2 × 32 × 11 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Lesley Heller Gallery, New York. Photo: Eva O'Leary.

O'Leary thinks of her works as paintings rather than sculptures, and has referred to them as shields propped up on joined systems of supports and buttressing. They have a front surface when they are mounted on the wall, or propped up on shelves or tables, but are just as interesting when seen from the back—suggesting a whole other dimension. In O'Leary's work, the front surface may be composed of cut pieces of wood, either knitted together or joined in groups, or coated with linen and egg tempera to form a continuous surface. Yet, both coated and uncoated fronts have the same structural components. All of her works include the viewer in the history of the labor-intensive process by showing the mechanics of her construction. George Berkeley, the 18th-century Irish philosopher known for his theory of "immaterialism," said that the Irish mind did not follow a pattern of linear logic, but was like a meander pattern from the *Book of Kells*—strands of intuition are woven in and out into complex patterns of thought. The Bishop Berkeley may also have been describing O'Leary's creative process.

Every object in the artist's home held a story, as does every piece of wood in her work; micro histories exist in each piece of wood joined in a new way to its neighbor. They possess the same beauty that can be found in things mended, like patched garments and darned socks. O'Leary says it best in her own words:

I'm also thinking of things like the people who made clothes for us, of dressmakers and knitters, of painting as container and keep-safe . . . of ornament and its opposite, of frugal make do'ism. We had no place for sentimentality growing up, it was hard against hard, the art of survival, of cold, of labor, of jobs too big for children. It was about patriarchy, and the vulnerability of children and the hardship of women. It was of course about magic, about ancient belief, and markers in the land that told us we were somehow keepers of that place, that it had existed before time, it had magic stones, devils marks, places where horses for no reason shied, or the unexplainable forces around us.

The Irish diaspora fostered a portable culture where tradition was kept alive in verse and song, often in the Irish language, rather than the English of the oppressor. O'Leary carries a library of Irish writers and bits and bobs of her art around in suitcases (the works in this exhibition were made in eight different locations). O'Leary is part of a portable cultural tradition, like the Irish storyteller Micí Mac Gabhann (*Rotha Mór an tSaol*, published in English as *The Hard Road to Klondike*), who traveled abroad for work and brought tales of his adventures back to Ireland. The artist also draws deeply on the musical tradition of *Sean-Nós*—songs sung by an acapella solo voice made to accompany work inside and outside and record local histories—and also on traditional keeners, such as Brigid Mullen (*caoineamh na marbh*), who sing at wakes.

O'Leary draws from the deep well of her harsh yet beautiful autobiography; she was a girl who milked fifty cows in a day as a child. There is an authenticity here in the artist's thriftiness with used materials, and in her celebration of lost arts like basket weaving and thatching. She has signed up to learn basket weaving in Galway this summer, and has an interest in traditional crafts that may be dying off.

This old Paddy became nostalgic for a bygone era when, taking the boat at Dún Laoghaire, one might see a boy in his grandfather's patched coat, carrying a tattered Gladstone bag, and speaking Irish. Objects used and reused held a history, and had a rugged beauty. Ireland today is being changed by the ugly consumerism of the Celtic Tiger, and an imported Marks and Spencer's aesthetic fostered by shiny imported goods. The island is now a hub for computer technology, with tax-free industrial zones. O'Leary's exhibition gives us an appreciation for De Valera's non-materialistic ideal, and a spiritual heritage linked to the rural landscape that nurtures the soul in a way that much of life today does not. Her recent Rome Prize, Hennessy Purchase Prize at the IMMA, and summer retreat at her house in Leitrim, with its lucky ghostly muse, are well deserved. *Go raibh míle maith agat.*