



1 JOE WILSON *LOOKING SW FROM BARLEY LAKE* triptych oil on board 35x105cm

2 JOE WILSON *PHOHO* JAMES O'NOLAN

3 *THE POCKET (SHRONEBIRRANE)* oil on board 35x35cm

Being there

Plein air or plein foolhardy? Joe Wilson takes on the Beara, writes **James O'Nolan** ahead of the artist's solo show at the Catherine Hammond Gallery, Skibbereen, Co Cork



Joe Wilson wasn't always a painter of land, or even a painter for that matter. He has worked as an archaeological photographer, made large-scale sculptural constructions, and when he first left art college in the late 1960s his work was about mathematically precise systems of measurement. These rich and varied interests have fed into his career as an educator but also influenced in a profound way his later work as a painter, which often gives the impression of being excavated or scraped back from the painted surface.

I shared a good proportion of my life with him, probably twenty years, teaching in first year core studies in NCAD, where the force of his personality as well as his beliefs as an artist influenced to a large degree how that course evolved. One of its most popular components, initiated by Joe, was an annual field trip. A bus would be hired and the entire first year student body and staff would decamp to the west of Ireland to

work outdoors for a week. The school calendar dictated the trip had to be held in the autumn, so the baffled students would be led out each day, (most of them) suitably attired and with an additional plastic sheet for protection against wind and rain. The daily programme proceeded regardless of weather or temperature, which could sometimes be below zero. Apart from lessons in perseverance, they learned, like Woody Allen, that eighty per cent of success is just showing up. Most of all it gave them their first taste of plein air in a form that was as far removed from Sunday painting as you could get. After a week no one wanted to go home and many said later that it was the most positive and defining experience of their college years.

I remember fondly too Joe's fulminations at what he regarded as the stultifying regime of traditional life-drawing, so much a part of art college at that time, with its specious rules and procedures. He had amassed a collection of what he called vernacular drawings – a hastily made but lucid drawing of a map drawn on a bag, a surgeon's sketch showing a patient how a procedure was to be executed, a photograph of a drawing made in dust on a window. These illustrated his own

pluralist view of drawing, that it should be both democratic and extemporaneous, claiming its vigour not from dictate but from an urgency to communicate and explain.

And so it is with his exploration of the Beara Peninsula. The work is rarely about surface appearance, it is the immersive and immediate experience he is interested in recreating. When he is not drawing or taking photographs of the landscape he is walking it, and it is the experience of being there that he is after. The complexity of this task means that his work cannot be *plein air* in the traditional sense; he is really a hunter-gatherer and his found material, base metal, is destined for alchemical transformation in the studio. But he has nevertheless taken elaborate photographs in the past, in effect 360-degree views, which lead the eye on a walk back to its starting point, and he has made monumental panoramic drawings that transform the walls of a gallery by placing the viewer directly within the landscape. The painted constructions he has made hint at another way of restructuring pictorial convention by inventing a sort of three-dimensional simulacrum that can expand infinitely in any direction. In the end these brave attempts are destined to be heroic failures, but no more so than say McSweeney's bog-poems, Crozier's epiphanies or Teskey's Promethian attempts to steal thunder. The point is that each attempt generates another and it is this quest that makes an artist both restless and articulate.

Geographically the Beara Peninsula straddles two counties, is bounded by two lakes and has two mountain spines running down its centre, forming the Caha range, the main focus of the work. The place is at once elemental and shamelessly romantic. Even the place names are seductive; Tooth Mountain, The

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Pocket and Barley Lake, its features solidly rooted in prehistory but visually completely fluid and as constantly shifting weather and light dictate, it is by turns intimate or threatening, majestic or bleak and barren. Wilson's paintings and drawings trace these transitory moods directly, often from an aerial viewpoint, employing the lightest touch of ink-wash in some, the fizzle and spark of graphite in others, to the full voltage-charge of colour that only layer upon layer of oil paint can convey. The more stripped back the imagery, the more articulate and eloquent he becomes, often allowing us an un-edited and tantalizing glimpse of the process by which they have come into being.

This is a landscape where, like Heraclitus' river, the only constant is ever-present change, where the role of artist and philosopher, in unifying opposites, become one and the same. These works represent the end point of a journey, to a place where artist and subject are briefly in harmony, a moment of clarity and balance before the restless searching begins again. ■

Joe Wilson 'Beara' 5-30 June, Catherine Hammond Gallery, Skibbereen, County Cork.

James O'Nolan is a director of Stoney Road Press, which publishes limited-edition prints and books.