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Lilburn paints on the fly in Ballynahinch

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David Lilburn’s book of paintings, part of an Occasional Press series, displays the fruits of his method of painting frantically while moving

LIMERICK artist David Lilburn is best known for his panoramic, map-like drawings and monoprints. They are pictures of real places, but rather than taking the form of conventional representations of the landscape from a single, dominant viewpoint, they are closer to Chinese scroll paintings in the way they lead us through the terrain. Not only scroll paintings, though: they are also partly diaries, partly notebooks and sketchbooks. Leisurely and meandering accounts of walks taken, they incorporate close-up details, distant views, and records of incidents experienced along the way. Casual and open-ended, they provide us with vivid accounts of encounters with landscapes, people and ideas.

Lilburn was an inspired choice, then, to be included in a series of annual collaborative publishing projects involving Occasional Press, a small publisher based in Aghabullogue, Co Cork, and Ballynahinch Castle in Connemara, Co Galway. Thus far the collaborators have concentrated on purely literary projects, including *Ballynahinch Postcards* (2007), a book of poems by Peter Fallon. But Lilburn’s opus marks a new departure, and in the future the publisher intends to alternate between visual and literary artists (as it happens, the next project also involves a visual artist, Donald Teskey). The basis of the collaboration is that the invited writer or artist spends time at Ballynahinch and produces a body of publishable work inspired by their sojourns.

From their point of view, what’s not to like? Fondly regarded by pretty much everyone who stays there, Ballynahinch is stunningly situated, nestled in its own 450-acre estate in the midst of many thousands of acres of some of the most spectacular country in Ireland. It’s on a good fishing river, the Owenmore, and virtually all of Connemara is within easy reach. Its dynamic general manager, Patrick O’Flaherty, is always keen to emphasise the cultural role and significance of Connemara rather then focusing simply on, say, the undoubted richness of the recreational facilities. The region is, he argues, so much more than a tourist product, and he sees it as vital to Connemara’s future to elucidate the exceptional nature of its cultural history and potential. Hence the partnership with Occasional Press, as well as several other mooted projects.

Jim Savage of Occasional Press is himself an artist of considerable repute. He is primarily a draughtsman, so drawing is close to his heart. He edited *Drawing Texts* in 2001, and in 2005 published *Berger on Drawing* , based on the bright idea of gathering together John Berger’s various writings on drawing. Savage and O’Flaherty see drawing as central to the artists’ books they aim on publishing. He had in mind, he says: “A kind of extended sketchbook produced in response to the Connemara landscape.”

**LILBURN, BESPECTACLED** and with a shock of unruly white hair, has the air of an absent-minded academic. He is a brilliant draughtsman. As far as the drawing part of the project went, he thoroughly enjoyed it, and loved escaping periodically to the wilds of Connemara. The production process he found much more gruelling. He was working with designer Mary Nagle, and she was exacting – much more so than he would have been, he says – in her pursuit of the perfect paper and the whole look of the book.

They’ve done a wonderful job. *Walking Drawing Making Memory: A Ballynahinch Sketchbook* is a book as artwork in itself. It’s not just an illustration of work that exists elsewhere, in other words, but a self-contained piece. Several fold-out sections permit panoramic accounts of the landscape. There are only 300 copies in the edition, 150 of them including an original intaglio print by Lilburn. It’s worth pointing out, in these cost-conscious days, no one is going to make much money, or indeed any money, out of the project. It just seemed to everyone involved that it was worth doing well.

In a brief text included in the book, Lilburn writes about his way of working, and it is quite exceptional. “I like to make what you could call walking drawings. Drawings made quickly, sometimes frantically, while moving or caught up in movement.” That “sometimes frantically” is the key phrase there. As even a casual acquaintance with his work confirms, he is a walker by instinct and inclination. Walking is in many respects the basis of all his work. The passing glance, the glimpse in the corner of the eye, the sudden moment of illumination: all these inform his elegant, quicksilver renditions.

The book includes many reproductions of sketchbook pages, inscribed with urgent transcriptions of things noted on the hoof. Sometimes they consist of just a few lines, sometimes of more elaborate descriptions – studies of plants, for example, or the flash of light on water. Always, Lilburn has faith in what his eyes see, rather than in a pictorial formula, and because he places his trust in what he sees, rather than what he tells himself he should be seeing – picturesque Connemara – his images, whether they take the form of drawings or paintings or prints, made with line or brush or, sometimes, fingers, have a tremendous authority and a kind of joy about them.

His initial, sketchbook notes provide the material for more finished monoprints, coloured drawings and paintings, and a large part of the appeal of the book lies in the way terse, almost abstract marks coalesce before our eyes into more concrete though still spontaneous descriptions. Connemara is a difficult proposition for a landscape painter, who is immediately up against the weight of Irish art history with its iconic representations of “The West”.

But Lilburn doesn’t shy away from the challenge. One of the centerpieces in the book is a three-tiered representation of the Twelve Bens. Lilburn’s solution to the problem of how to describe them pictorially is typical of him. Rather than lay siege to the mountains, he captures them in one swift sortie, with a lightness and brilliance that is unfailingly true to the way the restless light of Connemara constantly redefines the visual environment.