In Full Flight: David Lilburn's Maps and Monoprints.

There may have been a time when an island was understandably regarded as some form of natural 'floating' fortress, distinct and separated from the world that surrounded it. This image of an island is one that has persisted through tradition, finding expression in phrases such as "an island mentality", "an island race", etc. But, of course, the real as opposed to the imagined island isn't, and never ever truly was, a fixed and isolated identity. Through time it is constantly subjected to change, to inflow and outflow. Its edges are continually traversed, they are thresholds of contact and transmission, rather than merely defensive barriers. Across those edges there are arrivals and departures, and all are part of the transitory flux of a living - not a fossilised - identity.

In many ways David Lilbum' s big Irish map: "Coastline" (the centre-piece of his current exhibition "In Full Flight" at the Chris Doswell Gallery in Limerick, September 15th - October 10th.) represents this creative, Heraclitean energy of identity. His island Ireland is in no sense static. It is visibly alive with the dynamics of creative change that brought it, and presently continue to bring it, into being.

Taking as his starting point the visual form of an archaic map, such as would have been used for coastal navigation, the artist has loaded it with teeming historical and contemporary reference, that spill across the coastline of the title to reach out into the world beyond. The very shape of the island itself, its boundary, dissolves under the flurry of activity that crosses it in both directions.

Crammed with allusions to the past and the present - to the public and the personal - to the factual and the fictional, "Coastline" is both humorous and serious. It operates through many 'voices': combining the diagrammatic with the pictorial, words with imagery, the idea of the expressive work of art with the idea of the scientific map; all in a lively, and hugely entertaining, visual dialectic. There is great skill in this chancy juggling of 'opposites', and great draughtsmanship in the vigorous graffiti of the drypoint drawing. It is drawn by someone with ideas - and with the skill to present them: an artist with a strong sense of what it is to make a visually exciting and absolutely individual image resonant with contemporary meaning.

There is a freedom in David Lilbum' s drawing that belies its accomplishment. It is not easy to make a drawing like this. This artist is thoroughly assured in the medium he is using, and he demonstrates quite clearly that he has the confidence and the curiosity to explore and experiment with it. There is nothing uncertain and hesitant. The energy and intellectual passion that went into the making of this ambitious work are visibly there in the image itself, coursing through the outbursts of direct, spontaneous lines and the risky, agile, first-time marks.

The impulse to 'speak' through drawing is self-evident here. In this unusual mapping of his native land is a thoughtful and thought-provoking work of metaphor, making, in its own particular way, a fascinating and intriguing contribution to the contemporary debate about Irish identity and culture in the twenty-first century.

There are other drypoint. maps here too. Smaller scale maps of towns: Kilkee and Killaloe and Kinsale; they also are crammed with the bustle of activity and incident. Layered into these drawings are observations and narratives - fragments of public and private histories. They are the latest maps in the expanding series that has been produced by this artist over a number of years now. He seems to have great fun making these maps. He has taken this visual format as a vehicle for recording and organising his own day to day experience and thoughts - he has personalised this (usually) public form, writing himself and his life into the longitude and latitude of a lived-in place - turning a map into something that exists halfway between geography and diary, and in the process producing some kind of extended self portrait.

(In relation to the artists series of maps, one might mention in passing his huge, idiosyncratic map of Dublin that has been only recently put on show in the restored City Hall in Dame Street.)

There are also a number of monoprints in the exhibition - another form of drawing that this artist has made his own - coloured linear monoprints of landscape, the most minimal that David Lilburn has made to date - pushing at the limits of just how minimal a drawing of landscape can be. Conjured in these spare and excitingly spontaneous lines are not only wide vistas of beach and mountain, of rock and sky and cloud, but also weather and wind. The marks are strewn across the paper like wind blown spume. This is done with such first-time ease and confidence that it looks deceptively casual; however, to express so much with so little, so directly doesn't come out of nowhere. These are taut visual haikus; skilful expressions of authentic experience, honed through (probably) thousands of previous acts of drawing.

Finally there is the artist's book "Paradisi Portae Clausae Sunt", which contains a series of physically linked drypoint prints that open out, concertina-fashion, from between their hard covers to produce a final image 45cms x 600cms. Here it is spread- eagled the length of the gallery. Once again there is that that creative collision between map and diary, as the artist writes himself into the streets and landmarks and history of his own city, exploring the complex interactions between identity and place.

Jim Savage