

“Coastline” is a drypoint drawing of a map of the Irish coastline.

A map is a multi-layered, coded narrative, which can: represent (re - present) thoughts, ideas and stories accumulated over time. A map can be constructed as a way of considering not only spatial relationships, but also issues of personal, historical and cultural identity.

A dense drawing constructed from a multiplicity of drawn marks and viewpoints, plotting a fraction of the multifarious activity centred on the Irish coast: (invasion, banishment, massacres, immigration, emmigration, trade, travel, exploration, exploitation, fishing etc.) on which contemporary Ireland is built, and which informs the continuing debate on Irish culture and identity today.

The Irish Pavillion at EXPO 2000

EXPO 2000, which was held in Hanover, had as a major theme Humankind-Nature-Technology. The Irish Pavillion was designed by Dúl (Irish for Element, Nature or Created Thing) led by Murray O’Laoire Architects and Orna Hanley Architects, who took History culture and landscape as their major themes. The project set out to make tangible elements of Ireland’s rich heritage and traditions while at the same time expressing the vibrancy and internationality of its contemporary culture; to create a journey through Ireland from pre history to the present day and included the work of many contemporary artists, including Martina Galvin, Vivienne Roche, Anna Mcleod & Niall Walsh, David Lilburn, Tom Fitzgerald, Grace Weir, Sean Taylor, Michael Fernstrom, Cian De Buitléar and Simon Spain.

Jim Savage is an artist and lecturer. He studied at Manchester School of Art and The Slade London. He works mainly with drawing and collage. He edited ‘Drawing Texts’ an anthology of writing on drawing, published February 2001. He lectures at the Limerick School of Art and Design.

Coastline.

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 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 Lilburn's big Irish map: "Coastline" 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 Lilburn'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 idiosyncratic 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.

Jim Savage. September 2000.