

Laura Fitzgerald

I have made a place

***A Departmental Report on the Place
that Laura Fitzgerald Made***

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The moment they're out the door, off they canter towards the light that spills from a narrowing proportion of futures. In their eagerness to arrive somewhere they can see themselves in five years' time, we at The Department are wiped from their thoughts. But we don't mind. In fact, it makes our follow-up work easier. When they are with us, they drench everything in downpours of anxious explanation. Without this, their work can at last speak to us in its own terms.

When someone has been gone from us for eight years, we conduct an inspection. We look over the place they have made for themselves and draw up a report. This report logs the physical, cultural and socio-economic features of that place, and contributes to a massive accumulating catalogue of data, by which we calculate departure trajectories and tweak our throw to achieve better results year on year. Unofficially, these reports also provide us with a guidebook of places we might like to visit for our holidays.

Inspection Report #237366

Departee: Fitzgerald, Laura

Date of departure: 2013

Location of place: lat/long: 51.8995978, -8.47276138888889; alt: 23 meters

Inspecting official: O'Reilly, Sally

Geography

Fitzgerald has made a place that encompasses field, studio, road, museum, river, residency programme, sea, admin offices, mountain, biennale, bog. This smallholding at once convulses along with the rest of the world, under viral loads and economic contractions, and holds steady, thanks to deep time and geology overlaid with the soil of home, fertilised with family. Though among the richer places on record, wealth is not broadcast by way of gilded domes or impressive space programmes. The land itself is paramount.

Facilities and Access

Once the main road that cuts through like a whip has been negotiated, walking is available everywhere on the smallholding. Welding is provided in a shed next to the father's tractor, which is stuck in first gear and so must crawl along the road, holding up through-traffic. Drawing is supported over the road in one of three homemade houses filled with sisters and company.

This is not a cosy spot at the fringe of the land, where one rambles untroubled in the tread of ancients. The contemporary artworld is fully accessible. Its ambivalence steals in on digital wagons, leaches into the ground water and turns up in the brightness of local colour. Strike out in any direction and you'll reach, before needing so much as a sit-down, an exhibition opening, a potential Venice Biennale installation or arts funding just lying there for the plucking. Over hillsides, slow-moving mossy layers of familiarity support the prickly furze of risky international energies, which in the high season flower into catapulting opportunities. And that busy road is fed by traffic hurtling down via conventional narratives of career and progress and self-improvement, hitting contraflow systems and the possibility of tailbacks, depending on the smallholding's capacity to cope with expectations from within and without.

Climate, Crops, Cuisine

The weather here is rated 'fine, thanks'. This can be put down to low atmospheric pressure bringing in warm and stable fronts beneath an overcast layer of satire, which provides further insulation against temperature extremes. The light is different here, diffused through cloud cover that knocks naturalism towards caricature, captured so well by marker pens. The scrolling landscapes, with their barns and silage bales and furrowed earth, hoed out of white paper by sighing, panting pens, are superlative rainy-day vistas: medievally flat, allegorically full spaces purged of any details contradicting the thrust of the design. This is intensive image farming at eye-level.

Good ideas can be planted in this lush place and irrigated with wit to produce fruit and vegetables all year round. But frustration and uncertainty are also staple crops, used to produce big flavours in the local cuisine, like mould in cheese. Indeed, the resourceful conversion of

sticking points into fodder is a distinctive cooking technique particular to this place. It gives particular piquancy to the illogics of status, the perennial nut of who gets to be the big I-am.

Architecture and Materials

Social architecture is performed by vocal souls wrapped up as silage bales, ready for transportation. These can be found arguing through the double-doors: Who has it worse, the emerging tenderfoot or the halfway over-the-hill? And anyway, when has an artist emerged so far as to be mid-career? How can such market metrics pinpoint a mercurial sense of self that flows between peaks and troughs of belief and doubt? For the visitor, a warning must be flagged here: do not climb on the artists. A punctured silage bale will rot, like an ego pricked by criticism.

Bales are made of soft cotton tied like aprons to mild steel bought dearly at a peak in the wildly fluctuating Chinese export market and welded for free by a brother-in-law. And over the road and back the road, marker pens bought on a whim three days before lockdown have been set to work on scrolls of paper – the cheapest known to parents and which last entire rainy holidays, all for the price of a bottom-shelf bottle of supermarket wine in normal times, but which last summer ran into silly prices. Alternatively, feel the quality of those smaller sheets of Somerset Satin from a fancy metropolitan purveyor. Luxuriate in the acid-free cotton rag, made all the more special by being stuck in customs for months. Delight in the barns and furrowed fields and silage bales pressed into bright perpetuity by the felt-tip sunlight. This is a place where the tugging and froing of global socio-economics, the chaotic interplay of many interested parties is blotted out, pen stroke by pen stroke. Only the image is left standing. But can we not feel the forces that rumble through the ground?

Transport

Fitzgerald's place is made busy by mixed drives. Guilt, desire and envy are significant motivators behind many a smallholding. I have seen high-performance places fuelled by them, and wrecked places burnt out by them. Here they are hybridised with excitement and satisfaction, and steadied by shock-absorbing long-term tasks like colouring in.

In a smallholding most usually under a canopy of grey, the occasional sunny day turns everything epic, hyperreal. And this doubles the traffic. It is a crime to stay indoors, and so we are transported from drawings to videos. Hear how the sudden, painful beauty of the landscape catalyses sounds of work: of scrubbing and cutting and the thwack and suck of the artist in wellingtons on mudflats. And if you're lucky, you might catch a curse or three as the mud claims a boot for itself. The land gives, but it also takes. Traffic runs in both directions.

Language

The language of Fitzgerald's place is what my colleague at The Department calls 'rural vernacular', though I think this is just half of the story. The rural provides the vocabulary, but 'artworld vernacular' restructures the sense. A barn is at once a practical thing to shelter inside and a metaphor to generate meaning through. A bale of fodder is bounded by a protective casing, but the baleful artist is a porous micro-component in an inconceivably complex artworld. This smallholding articulates and is articulated by all the worlds. When I talk of a tree or a bog here, I can mean anything that branches or anything at the edge of thought. And when Fitzgerald shows me the unpopulated mountain down the road, she ensures I'm also thinking of poor, flooded, ship-bashed Venice, of arts councils with steam coming out their bonnets, of elite party goers ankle-deep in this year's cocktail and insatiable crowds pressing in from all over.

Mythology and Folk Culture

Fitzgerald's smallholding is not a place of tall tales of questing heroes and epic magics, or of gritty theatre or flashy acrobatics. It is a sloping-off, out-the-way place of minor wrangles with materials and customs, of the laborious inching over of surfaces, the over-plucking of common flowers, the self-needling and tiny leaps of absurdity required of an artist to stay the course. And it is a place where orthodoxy is pranked not with a bladder on a stick, but by the Bogman.

The Bogman falls into the mire. He is dressed like a waiter because nothing is as good as a crisp white shirt for emphasising filth. This waiter used to work at The Department, where he taught

the art of letting go. Though on holiday here, he is kind enough to demonstrate his mastery in slow-motion, describing over and over the cruel unfolding of expectation towards consequence.

The Bogman is no bogeyman to be chased out by nightlights or firebrands. He is the dance of the ancients to the music of now. The Bogman is the footing from which the land rises, the swinging bob that makes time run. He is the drag downwards and the hop sideways. The Bogman is the sense of senselessness that saturates unpaved ground.