

Rowena Dring: *Skyline – landscape and memory*, Rahn Contemporary, Zürich, 30 August - 25 October 2008



Rowena Dring: *Heathers at Loch Gill*, 2006, stitched cotton, 170 x 440 cm; image held here

My first encounter with Rowena Dring's images of Ben Bulbin and Lough Gill felt like a robbery. Having spent countless weeks of my childhood in counties Leitrim and Sligo, my relationship to the material of the landscape there is more direct and passionate than with Belfast where the mechanics of school and daily life took place. But Dring's images of this area transform the familiar profiles, which remain recognisable yet have an alien perspective. Views I felt were secure in my possession had been destabilised and taken over by this different reading; I did not initially want to share this vision.

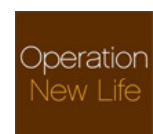
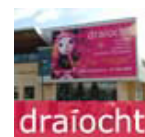
Four large landscapes are currently on show at Rahn Contemporary in Zürich. Seen first hand, they are minutely detailed patchworks – literally. The artist begins with a snapshot, taken with an artist's eye, but still an image that could be from a tourist's camera. This is overworked digitally, reframed and enlarged, to become the design for an enormous jigsaw of hundreds of matt fabric pieces which are stitched together with a sewing machine. The initial image has been broken down, then reassembled with a leap of faith that it shall re-emerge with its identity intact.

Heathers at Lough Gill is thus a scene of tough windswept bushes which crowd the foreground; in the distance the hills are gently sloping. The sharp highlights on the heathers signal bright sunlight, of a kind that is as unreliable as it is beguiling. Blades of grass are crisply outlined, while further away the hills have become abstract patches, a camouflage pattern in comparison to the graphic diagrammatic clarity of the grass. To a viewer standing before the work, ground level becomes monumental. The scene offers the eye no ease, as piercing accents of colour pull one here and there over the canvas; it shows Dring using her technique to full effect.

Her hybrid medium is the fruit of a long development. After her degree from Chelsea, Dring did a Masters at Goldsmiths in London in the late nineties, when it was a centre of the then-hegemonic conceptualism. Painting was not yet back in favour, landscape painting even less so. Her technique emerged as a result of what she calls a 'fuzzy logic' at the time when New Labour, No Logo and personal events collided; this was a way of working that allowed her to pursue her interests yet stay within the art establishment. Claire Woods, whose household gloss-paint works have bottomless depth, studied a year below Dring at Goldsmiths and equally needed to challenge

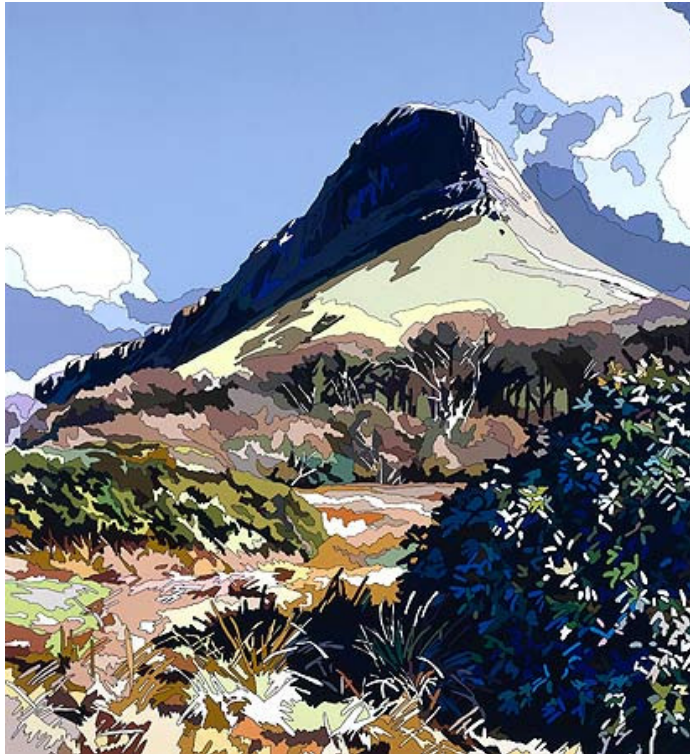


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the landscape format. Dring has subsequently honed her process, but still it takes approximately two years from photograph to finished image, and her output is fewer than ten works a year.



Rowena Dring: *Ben Bulbin*, 2005, stitched cotton, 250 x 220 cm; image held here

Crucially, choosing landscape as subject matter is the start of a process that is far from passive. Dring's works concertedly examine the construction of romanticism and formation of identity. Much of her art is provoked by literary figures, such as D H Lawrence and, of course, W B Yeats, who made nature and scenery the bearer of their narratives. Yeats is the reason tourists flock to Sligo, his words were the captions my parents taught me for the hills and lakes. Dring pursues the romantic idyll of these authors, and although she doesn't shatter the illusion of wilderness, she does shake the frame of reference. The image that first stopped me in my tracks is not the famous angular scarp of "bare Benbulbin's head" but a view from one end, so the mountain's breadth is hidden and instead it rises as if it were a rounder peak. This approach renders the familiar foreign. In this work, the fore- and background are less distinctly described; a deliberate confusion is instead focused on the middle plane, underscoring a sense of uncertainty.

I had no right to claim possession of this landscape, and Dring also does nothing to deprive the viewer; her works are noteworthy additions to the canon of admirers of the west of Ireland. In creating the unstable view, in both her original shots and in the sophisticated play of colour and line, she is honest about her mediation of landscape. In making the surface such an obvious 'painting by numbers' production, the frame cannot be ignored and cannot be unconsciously digested.

Aoife Rosenmeyer is a curator and writer based in Zürich.

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Circa Art Magazine
43/44 Temple Bar
Dublin 2, Ireland
Tel / Fax: +353 1 6797388
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