

Elaine Reichek

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New York based artist Elaine Reichek's exhibition *Home Rule* is a timely one. The recent quincentenary of Columbus' 'discovery' of America has forced onto the cultural agenda the continuing plight of the indigenous American peoples and their struggle against the colonialist legacy. We have seen attempts by artists and others to undermine the dominant historical narrative - Columbus as the harbinger of the great European civilising mission in the Americas - and to re-frame the quincentenary rather as a celebration of five hundred years of native Indian *resistance* to the European plunder of that continent. But Elaine Reichek's work brings this intervention closer to home.

Reichek explores through her assembled photographs, texts and woven works, two worlds normally thought of as oceans apart: that of the north American Indian and that of the Irish native and nationalist. The documents she assembles here - real and imagined - explore a common experience of colonisation. In particular, she attempts to plot the 'creation myths' that have come to enshroud the 'red Indian' and 'Gael' as figures within the mind of both coloniser and colonised.

At the centre of the exhibition is her uncovering of the story of Grey Owl. He was an English schoolboy from Hastings, Archie Belaney, who was enthralled with the stories of the Indians he had encountered through magazine and musical hall. In his later life in

Canada he tried to emulate this image of the noble savage by adopting Indian ways and dress. With a keen entrepreneurial eye, he sought to satisfy the growing commercial demand for Indian memorabilia, by marketing self-assembled 'Indian' costumes. Reichek's piece *Ten Little Indians* consists of a row of ten mail order 'Indian' coloured waistcoats hung up in a line as in a nursery school classroom, and bounded by a portrait of 'Grey Owl' and one of his printed clothing patterns. We are invited to reflect on our complicity in the fabrication of Indian identity and history as the stuff of popular myth. After all we've all played Cowboys and Indians - well at least all the boys. As one of her chosen texts puts it, '*Indians must be redefined in terms that white men will accept even if that means re-Indianizing them according to the white man's idea of what they were in the past*'. But the empty jackets strung up on hangers and hooks provide us also with a chill reminder of the bitter fruit of the frontier spirit - the decimation of the native American peoples at the hands of the white settlers and their armies.

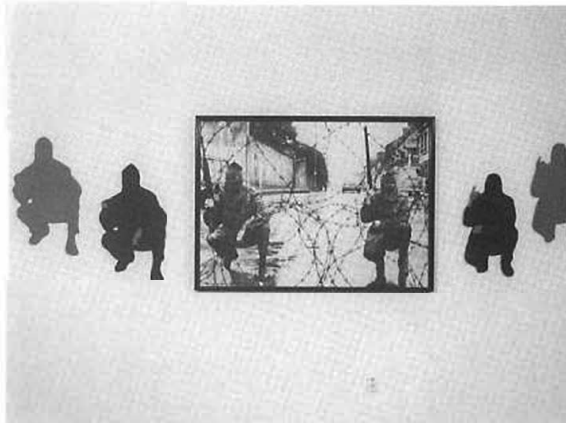
In a parallel manner, with *Men of Aran Knit* and *White Wash (Galway Cottage)* Reichek playfully explores stereotypical images of the west of Ireland. Besides the standard tourist photograph of islanders shouldering an upturned curragh, she positions a rendering of this image knitted in 'traditional' Aran gansey pattern, only here in black wool. The traditional whitewashed cottage like the woollen skirt beside it becomes a tourist icon that, as the title suggests, serves to obscure a real history of famine, exploitation and emigration. She deliberately employs womanly means - knitted works, texts stitched on flannel and above all the use of the embroidered sampler - to enter a

male dominated world of political discourse and historical account and to problematise it. It's strange how political rhetoric, in this case, the polemic of militant Irish nationalism, when it is embroidered neatly on a traditional sampler rather than engraved on a marble monument, changes its meaning. Other subtle transpositions of meaning occur in *Letter Lilies* where a large blown-up photograph of balaclava-hooded and gun-toting IRA Volunteers is etched in representations of these figures in wool but shorn of their public props.

Reichek provides us with a series of conceptual signposts on our journey through the associative freeplay of Indian and Irish history and myth. She displays a selection of quotations from historians on the subject of colonialism. Again, their meanings are inflected by their spindly inscription on the fabric of male bourgeois respectability, the pin-striped waistcoat of the business suit. These draw to our attention the historical relation between the English plantations in America and in Ireland, identifying a common colonialist mindset which either demonised or romanticised the native according to the ideological needs of the settler at a particular point in history.

Yet the artist's intentions remain unclear. Is she on the side of the natives or the nationalists? As we all know, they are not necessarily the same thing, located as they are in different class positions with access to different cultural capital. Indeed, nationalist intelligentsias have often sought to monopolise representations of peasant and native and in so doing have drawn on the language and myths of the coloniser. We have conspired in our own misrepresentation. Indeed, despite Reichek's best efforts to establish a historical parallel between the native American and Irish experience, one feels that the web woven to link the struggles of American natives distancing themselves from 'Indianization' and the case of Irish nationalists, many of whom actively embraced the 'Gachersation' of Ireland, starts to unravel rather quickly when picked at.

At one point in the exhibition, Reichek assembles a work within which the distant worlds of native American and nationalist Ireland are brought vividly together. During a visit to Canada in October 1919, Eamon de Valera, US citizen and Irish rebel, addressed the Chippewa and was adopted into the tribe as chief 'Dressing Feather'.



The promotional poster for the event, which Reichek displays, warns those planning to attend, to bring picnics as 'a regular restaurant is not available in the Indian village' [at the time, the Chippewa were suffering from the effects of famine]. Given the somewhat patchy record of Irish nationalism on racial oppression elsewhere, we don't know for whose benefit this encounter between patriot and Indian nation occurred. However, as with Reichek's other installations, by exploring the symbolic manufacture of identity and contesting the stereotypes around which images of identity calcify, she has set us thinking.

Above Right Sean
Kearney, *Night's Candles
are Burnt Out, 1928-19*.
(Oldham Art Gallery).

Desmond Bell

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