

Speaking about Resilience: Interview with Mkrtych Tonoyan

Mkrtych Tonoyan

Artist (<m.tonoyan@yahoo.com>)

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SMR: How did you come up with the idea of an artist exchange between Ireland and Armenia?

MT: I always had a personal interest in Ireland and a special connection to this country.

There are many stories about Irish and Armenian connections in medieval time and I thought if the distance couldn't make a barrier back then, why not do it now when everything is so much easier with the forms of communication that we have today. At first it was just an idea but when I met the Irish artist Ian Joyce at the HweiLan International Artists Workshop in Taiwan in 2006 we thought about ways in which this idea could come to life¹. We had shared interests in many things like language, etymology and found – to our surprise – many common Armenian and Irish Gaelic root words.

We decided to start a long-term cultural exchange project between our countries involving our own arts organizations: Akos Cultural NGO, which I co-founded in 2002, and Cló Ceardlann na gCnoc (Cló), which Ian Joyce set up (with Oona Hyland) in 1999 and is located in the Irish Gaeltacht. The following year Ian Joyce came to Armenia for research, then I visited him in Ireland, and he came again to Armenia. The culmination of our collaboration was when we got generous financial support from the European Commission for the *Samkura* cultural exchange project; a project lasting more than 2 years that enabled, amongst other things, Irish artists to come to and work in Armenia and participate in the ACOSS artist-in-residence program and Armenian artists to visit Ireland².

¹ For more information about this artist workshop see <<http://2006hweilan.blogspot.am/>>.

² Also see <<http://www.creativeeuropeireland.eu/culture/projects/case-studies-backup/samkura>>http://www.acoss.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=39&Itemid=58&lang=en (05/2018).

SMR: Please tell us about your first visit to Ireland, and the work you produced there.

MT: My first visit to Ireland was in 2009, when I got a 2-months scholarship to participate in the artist-in-residence program at Cló and to produce an on-site artwork based on the research I conducted there³. During my research, I discovered many similar old tales and legends, similar motives in Christian monuments known as Celtic cross and in Armenia as the Cross Stone (Khachqar).

The work I created in Ireland was a video interpretation of an on-site installation imitating the landscape of Donegal. It relates to the first impression I got when I was walking among the mountains and hills and near small lakes on the bog. The ground there is turf and local people cut this turf in the shape of a brick, dry it and burn in the winter. I asked myself what keeps people here alive here in such an unstable climate and on such infertile ground? How do they sustain life here and build their houses, when the earth itself is so soft? Then when I went to cut the turf, I discovered there were rocks underneath the turf that would allow them to build their houses on top of these rocks. Speaking about resilience, I believe, that their faith and pride in their ancestors is like these rocks. I also discovered that the character of the Irish is as contradictory as his landscape. You must go deeper to see his or her essence, which is like a rock, a rock he or she has chosen for him- or herself. Very similar to the experience or essence of being an Armenian.

This is why when I entered the room of unknown artist (the room of Seosamh Finn) in Min an Lea near Gortahork, Co. Donegal, which was entirely built from rocks on rocks, I told myself that the first part of my installation was already done - done by their history of struggle. I only added natural materials typical for this region: turf, wool, stone and wooden sticks. I photographed every step of the installation and used natural materials typical for this region: turf, wool, stone and wooden sticks. Using all of these photos and sound recordings of the sea waves I made an artist video⁴.

The concept of the work is originally from a skype chat I had with Ian Joyce that I would like to share:

[9:04:42 PM] Ian Joyce said: All days are extreme, it is the days of love and mediation that are for me at the foot of Mount Ararat⁵.

[9:04:43 PM] Mkrtich Tonoyan replied: All days are extreme, it is the days of love and mediation that are for me at the foot of Mount Errigal⁶.

³ Detailed information about the participants and the outreach of this project can be found here <http://www.acoss.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=73:a-new-stage-in-collaboration-with-clo&catid=1:latest-news&Itemid=50> (05/2018).

⁴ You can watch the video here: <<https://youtu.be/stjtaCgPtjM>> (05/2018).

⁵ Mount Ararat is holy for all Armenians in the world and evokes a strong sense of national identity.

⁶ Mount Errigal is a holy for the Irish living in Donegal and has almost the same meaning for them as Mount Ararat has for Armenians.



Fig. 1 – Untitled
Courtesy of Mkrtych Tonoyan



Fig. 2 – Untitled
Courtesy of Mkrtych Tonoyan