



Last cups and saucers used by the Pearse Brothers in Scoil Éanna, Pearse Museum, St Enda's, Rathfarnham

The Museum of August Destiny

17 July – 4 September, 2016

**St Carthage Hall, Lismore Castle Arts
Lismore, Co. Waterford**

Aideen Barry
Mark Clare
Amanda Coogan
Anthony Haughey
Dragana Jurisic
Sarah Pierce

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Edward Said drew a classic distinction between 'beginnings' and 'origins', arguing that the former arose from human action through the 'intentional production of meaning'; while the latter required a myth claiming filiation with the divine.¹ Traversing the two, and making visible the conceits of commemoration that have shaped the legacy of 1916, are the central concerns of *The Museum of August Destiny*.

The *Museum* manufactures a temporary site of memory where the social and political aspirations laid out in the 1916 Proclamation are recalled and re-evaluated. The Proclamation occupies an imposing and iconic place in the national imagination – both as material document of history, and as a visionary (and militant) declaration of Irish sovereignty. It is also a document that embodies a series of paradoxes. It was unauthored—signed collectively by teachers, writers, poets, a musician, a trade unionist—but with no single individual named as creator. It was a cheaply printed physical document with makeshift typographic solutions, which now commands stratospheric prices at auction. It is a call to power, invested with an imagined national destiny, yet it was a manifesto that anticipated an immediate consequence of creation wrought through destruction.

¹ Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975).

In a year replete with public stagings of the meaning of the Easter Rising, our concern here is how the Proclamation's status as revered national object might be translated instead into something intimate, personal, contemporary, and tangible. The exhibit adopts, quite literally, the final words of the Proclamation as its structuring principle:

*In this supreme hour the Irish nation must by its valour and discipline and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worth of the **august destiny** to which it is called.*

We invited six artists—Anthony Haughey, Dragana Jurisic, Sarah Pierce, Mark Clare, Aideen Barry, and Amanda Coogan—to respond to the six 'visions' of this august destiny as set out in the Proclamation: (1) sovereignty and 'unfettered control of Irish destinies'; (2) religious and civil liberty; (3) equal rights and opportunities for citizens; (4) the pursuit of happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and all of its parts; (5) cherishing the children of the nation equally; and (6) oblivion of the differences 'which have divided a minority from the majority in the past'. Installed in six museum cases borrowed from the Pearse Museum at St Enda's, Rathfarnham – and joined by a seventh case where Lismore residents were invited to respond to the same prompt – the *Museum* displays material objects and images that speak of a contemporary Ireland where the past continues to exert profound agency.

In adopting both a sonorous title and museal form for the small space of St Carthage Hall in Lismore, the *Museum* explicitly appropriates the technics of exhibiting memory. Its presentation of seven museum cases filled with contemporary art objects invites recognition of how scale, behavior, setting, and time regulate our relationship to the material of the past.

1916 commemoration has often dominated Irish public space—from the bombast of the state-centric ceremonies of 1966, to 2016's multivocal yet multitudinous events. The massing of bodies in ritual parades and processions; the construction of public monuments dwarfing human scale; the expansive rhetoric of commemorative speech evoking effusive public displays of emotion and affect: size, in public commemoration, is no small matter.

The inverse of mass ceremonial culture is the cult of personal relics. The investment of ordinary or mundane objects linked to the body with supernatural powers of intercession and faith has long correspondence with the legacy of the Rising.² Images of its leaders, ephemera and objects associated with Easter 1916 inspired wide public, personal and institutional forms of devotion. This culminated in the National Museum of Ireland's Easter Week Collection, built upon donations of such items, and now comprising more than 15,000 objects, initially displayed in cases identical to the ones installed here.

The *Museum* thus joins this history of display and material witness. In borrowing cases from a site already deeply imbued with relic value—St Enda's, Patrick Pearse's revolutionary Irish school and crucible of the Rising (now the Pearse Museum)—the *Museum of August Destiny* further attempts an act of commemorative transfer. The objects and images presented within and through the cases—a potato; a flag; a ferry ticket; a song—are no more inherently precious than those that now populate our national memory store, but they reference a legacy of image and experience stretching far beyond any singular encased object.

Few individuals are so closely associated with the cult of republican relics as Patrick Pearse: his iconic side profile and its reproduction on all manner of paraphernalia is but one example of the manner by which physical objects have promulgated narratives of national origin and sacrifice. One of the centerpieces of the Pearse Museum's new exhibition (opened in 2016) are the chipped teacups used by Patrick and Willie Pearse during the last dinner with their mother before the Rising, which she subsequently preserved as a relic to her lost sons (Fig 1). They are among the most affecting and popular objects in that museum – but why? Glowing and isolated within their case, the teacups refigure the Pearse brothers in domestic and familial terms. They present a moment of intimacy made precious and momentous in the after-knowledge of its fragility. The family's preservation of the cups—twin Irish Holy Grails imprinted with the touch and physical act of communion with the Pearse brothers—and their contemporary display, magnify the ordinary object into a mythic moment: the brothers are us, but not of us.

² For an excellent and diverse range of essays concerning materiality and the Rising, see Lisa Godson and Joanna Brück, (ed.), *Making 1916: Material and Visual Culture of the Easter Rising*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016.

Is this reading of the Rising as a crystalline, transformative moment one we should revere, revise, or resist? Whether or not we believe the aspirations of Pearse and his co-signatories could be or have been realized, to what degree did the Proclamation legitimately denote a before-and-after? The artworks in *The Museum of August Destiny* offer no simple answer, but a sense of disillusionment at odds with official rhetoric pervades. The sharp edges of recession, globalization, inequality, decay, and dispossession repudiate any professions of faith in commemorative pieties. They recall Sarah Clancy's defiant poem instructing a post-Proclamation nation on 'Cherishing for Beginners':

Cherish the meek
cherish the ranchers
cherish the guards
cherish the bankers
cherish the virgins
then ride them and cherish their sisters,
cherish tax exiles and entrepreneurs
cherish the rewards of intergenerational privilege
or if that's too hard for beginners
sure cherish the Rose of Tralee for starters,
cherish the goal and the point and the foul
cherish the priest's dirty sheets
but not the woman who washes them,
don't mention her
or what she might need,
go on and cherish the IFSC
and its type of laundries-
those ones are fine, they are grand sure.
Cherish Them.³

In Jorge Luis Borges' short story 'Funes the Memorious' (published in 1942) he recounts the fable of a man who, as a consequence of a fall from a horse, is unable to forget anything. Ireneo Funes' miraculous mind becomes so consumed with an excess of memory that it precludes true knowledge and understanding: 'In the teeming world of Funes, there were only details, immediate in their presence.' Borges' story has been interpreted as the tragic and paralytic consequence of an unrelenting obsession with the past, and in recent years, often referenced within critiques of 'memory booms' in contemporary society.

Yet Borges is not entirely pessimistic of his encounter with Ireneo. He sees also in Funes' prodigious world of commemorative cacophony an ability to see that which is generally obscured:

A circle drawn on a blackboard, a right triangle, a lozenge – all these are forms we can fully and intuitively grasp; Ireneo would do the same with the stormy mane of a pony, with a herd of cattle on a hill, with the changing fire and its innumerable ashes, with the many faces of a dead man throughout a long wake. I don't know how many stars he could see in the sky.

For Borges, Funes' immersion into hyperrealized detail, whilst ultimately repressive, contains also a strange beauty and clarity. It is at once fragmented, overwhelming, and poetic. The marvel inspired by Funes' abilities is based on his reorganization of attention, and of knowing: 'We, at one glance, can perceive three glasses on a table; Funes, all the leaves and tendrils and fruit that make up a grape vine.'

There are parallels here with why we seek out artistic responses to commemoration. Not by assigning superhuman qualities to artists' abilities or to their productions, but by allowing a different form and concentration of vision to give us a sense of wonder, reorientation, and pause. By presenting in this *Museum* a collection of new attentions to the past, our present, and its futures, we consider whether Ireland has lived up to the expectations of that 'supreme hour'. In so doing, we may glimpse something more than the limits of what these cases contain, or the histories to which they refer. We may see the edges of memory itself, and know it better.

Dr Emily Mark-FitzGerald
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³ Extract from 'Cherishing for Beginners' (2015), reprinted with kind permission from Sarah Clancy (www.salmonpoetry.com).