

Mairead O'hEocha and Nigel Monaghan

In conversation



Mairead O'hEocha's exhibition *Tale Ends & Eternal Wakes* opened at Temple Bar Gallery + Studios on February 27, 2020.

The paintings in the exhibition depict animals from the displays of Dublin's Natural History Museum, known locally as the 'Dead Zoo'.

In this conversation, O'hEocha speaks with **Nigel Monaghan**, the Keeper of the Natural History Museum, about some of the many fascinating historic stories and collections that the museum holds, as well as its contemporary relevance to the study of the natural world.

Mairead O'hEocha: *Nigel, we met in your office at the 'Dead Zoo' on the 6th of March of this year, before the world as we knew it, stopped. I originally had a set of questions that followed my general interest in the museum, and your experiences as its Keeper. In the meantime, the local and global have collided in an unexpected way: wet markets in Wuhan have provoked bear markets as far away as New York. The COVID-19 virus is having an impact that is forcing everyone to stop and reassess. No one knows for sure but there is a consensus that it all started with the virus passing from the animal kingdom into the human world.*

As a result of this, my interview questions have to start in a different place, from within this state of emergency brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. I have been thinking that there is a lot of confusion, poor knowledge and 'fake news' surrounding the pandemic, which is evident in how political leadership has responded and also within the public in general. Do you think there could be better ways of teaching science to schoolchildren, and also in academia,

so that politicians, as well as the general public, can make better sense of how the natural world and human behaviour impact each other? As an example, should environmental science be a mandatory subject just like maths and English?

Nigel Monaghan: It should certainly be a core subject. I think we are always going to have problems with politicians and the way that they have to work in their universe. It is a bit like parenthood—you can go and study it but you don't have to know anything about it to get snagged up in it—there is no formal qualification. It really matters when you get politicians who have no scientific background, and no understanding of where to put pieces of science, or how to analyse it, which is even more important. It is even more of a problem when they won't even listen to the scientists.

There has always been a lot that science can offer. It is just that people haven't perhaps considered its importance and significance. It is a bit like economics, for example, when we had an economic crash in 2008, we all started to learn an awful lot about the subject very quickly. There are now a lot of people who know quite a bit about viruses who knew nothing at all about them a year ago. But there is always a gap for diluting the clear messages amongst the jungle of everything people chatter about because they simply feel they have to fill space, or they're in a position of responsibility and they have to say something. The more clever people will turn to the experts during times like this but we should all have that basic scientific knowledge. This has been part of what the museum has been doing for over 160 years in its current form by bringing science directly into the general public's sphere of understanding.

As you can imagine, 160 years ago there were relatively few natural history books to pick up. These were full of travellers' tales of derring-do and scary monsters that lived in the oceans or in the jungles. People's understanding wasn't great and they were easily led astray but steadily, the scientific method began to come up with answers and an understanding of nature. We have hopefully moved on hugely since our museum was set up, but it's still a very important place to go physically, and act as a talking point around these topics.



MOH: *The next question moves sideways in a way. It is the subject of decolonising museums, and this is a question that recurs frequently within both cultural and scientific communities. The answers are often contested. One obvious answer, though, is to expand labelling systems surrounding the provenance*

of specimens to facilitate historical accuracy. What is your position within this general debate?

NM: As with any debate you need to clarify the parameters, and I think it is very important for people to understand that there is a big difference between decolonisation or repatriation. What I call the 'Elgin Marbles approach', is based on questionable legality of ownership and making restitution by repatriation. This is where you see something that you consider is illegally taken from your country and your culture and you really want it back, and feel it should be physically relocated.

Decolonisation is much more subtle and complex. In natural history museums we are well aware that our animals, geological specimens and the other scientific materials in our collections have literally come from all over the world. They have at times come from areas with very little occupation at all, and they have come from areas with dense populations and rich cultures going back millennia. The reality is that most of the specimens in our particular museum sense were collected honestly and, for their time—many of them but not all of them—ethically. We do things very differently today, and we have very different protocols in place (1).

There is the Nagoya protocol based on an international agreement that makes sure that DNA and the chemistry of things are not taken from the wild in certain countries to be used by pharmaceutical companies, for example, without there being compensation back to the host country. That is a very different cultural approach to the historical circumstances of going out into the wild (which, in Ireland's case, was usually already populated by somebody else in various parts of the British Empire), shooting an animal as a

big game challenge, and ending up with the stuffed hippopotamus or rhinoceros in a museum.

And it's not just the big objects. For example, one Irish guy who was the director of the geological survey in India, one of his hobbies was shooting and collecting birds, and he added at least 3,000 birds to our museum collections. Nobody else at the time would probably have bothered to collect those birds in the wild and add them to a museum collection but now they remain as a really useful resource. What we can do to sort of pay back (more of a conscience than a legal obligation, as it might be with stolen treasures) is to get the information from those objects and make them available internationally, put them up online and send lots of data to scientists working in those countries to help them understand their own wildlife using resources that might now be on the other side of the world.



MOH: *How can museums write more rounded histories?*

NM: Bear in mind that the museum in its current style doesn't give much information on each object. So we are not replacing existing histories but need to design new text panels, and a more open approach to online and other places where we present new information.

We also need time (and currently, access to paper archives) for research. While we can find out plenty about the biology of specimens in our collections, it is also the social history that is so fascinating to the public, yet not written down much by our predecessors. Our acquisition ledgers are a who's who of the scientific community and many people famous in the politics or society of their day. It takes time to collate what can be found out, and more to research personal case histories. Online resources in recent years have helped hugely.







was driven through a forest at such a scale in front of a hunting party that, from the backs of elephants, this number of bears, tigers and rhinos could be killed and end up as pieces of taxidermy and gifts to museums like ours. In 1913, when that tiger arrived in Dublin, from the King's taxidermists appointed by the crown in London. We got that Tiger when Ireland was still a part of the United Kingdom.

One of the things that I find fascinating about our museum is how it brings together different periods of history, a huge social context, and a very different attitude to wildlife that can be used to broadcast ideas and conversation around some of the things that really matter in today's wildlife conservation.

MOH: *There are examples of specimens in your collection that give some perspective of how they were acquired. I am thinking of a particular artefact from a famous hunt, which struck me when I was in the museum myself (2). You told me a story about how the hunt unfolded. This is a good example of a story that is not described in the museum's displays, but one that I think people might be interested in.*

NM: Yes, we have quite a lot of hunting trophies in the museum as a whole. The one with the best provenance that we can track back is a tiger shot in Nepal in 1911 by King George V (3). The reason for his visit to Nepal, was that he was becoming the King of England, and he was heading off to be crowned as Emperor of India, which is one of the other major titles of the British royalty at that time. In order to welcome him, a substantial hunt was organised over a period of a couple of weeks. At least sixty tigers and rhinos were killed in a period of just ten days. There were even postcards produced to celebrate the fact at the time, and our tiger may well be identifiable in one of those photographs. This is the extent of what people can do in the wild in a short period of time with the support of the authorities. Wildlife



MOH: *Since the founding of the Irish Free State in the last century, there has been a well documented privileging of archaeology over natural science in this country. Not surprisingly, archaeology was instrumental in establishing and re-inscribing national identity in new ways. For example, through excavated artefacts like chalices and Ogham stones, and as evidence of our sophisticated, ancient Celtic civilisation.*

I am interested in this subject and your thoughts on the ways you might think the Natural History Museum lost out to archaeology in this state sponsored manner.

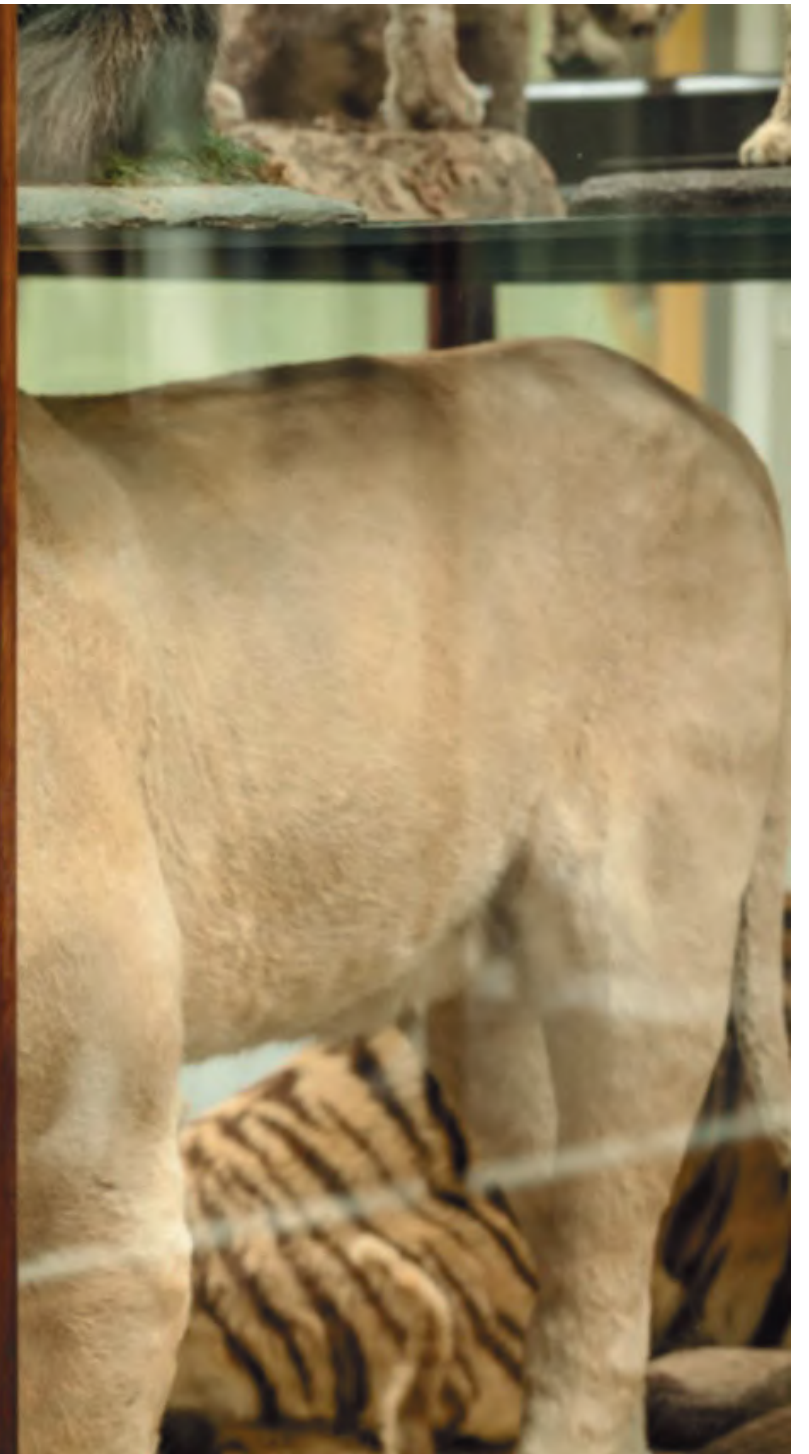
NM: There was a big growing surge of science in the 19th century and when the museum that is on Kildare Street today was constructed and established, it was built as a Museum of Science and Art. It was designed to be a national museum with a bit of everything in it. It certainly had archaeology, mainly coming from the Royal Irish Academy collections. They were the agency accumulating archaeological collections at that time. The Kildare Street museum also housed ethnographical material from around the globe, decorative arts, historical material, and some people will even remember that diversity of display up until the 1980s.

One of the things that was happening in the early part of the 20th century in particular was the Celtic revival and a resurgence of Irish identity. It grew, as we all know, into a political movement that changed the course of history and we ended up with a new free state in the 26 counties, and most parochially within the museum. The director of the museum, who was a prominent politician, had to resign because his son, Joseph Mary Plunkett, executed in 1916, had effectively disgraced him as a public servant in what

was still the United Kingdom's public service. The museum was supported from the 1920s by many political men, and its role was establishing a national identity by looking at Ireland's ancient identity before its colonised arrangement with its neighbours who, depending on your point of view, brought great success in science and investment, or was an oppressive power. The tweedy naturalist chaps who were more likely to die on the Somme than 'for their country' were largely sidelined as a curiosity after partition, with their value as curators being in their bringing some scientific skills to supporting archaeology.

Archaeology gives a safe piece of ancient history, when Ireland was great once before, and the effect was to make archaeology the focus. A director from Germany was appointed specifically with that in mind, and he was there through the 1930s until the Second World War. It was a deliberate focus by the director to make the museum an archaeological Institute. It went way beyond being just a museum where archaeology dominated, it was the center of archaeology in the country. He saw that this was very important from a nationalistic perspective, and that held sway even well after the war (4).

It took quite a long time before there was a balancing out between the various departments in terms of the resources supplied to them and the space available for them to exhibit their collections. The biggest effect for natural history was to be bypassed. It was, when I started in the 1980s, referred to me by my predecessor as the 'Cinderella division', but as another member of staff reminded him Cinderella actually went to the ball at one point. That is why it looks like a museum of the 1910s or 20s because so little changed in all of that time, whereas many things around, certainly even just in the museum



sphere, changed significantly.

Post-war poverty saw stagnation set in for the National Museums Ireland and left the Natural History Museum in particular with few staff or funds, hence the lack of change in exhibits. The lifting tide from the 1980s saw major refurbishment of exhibits in Kildare Street, stirred to an extent by the discovery of the Derrynaflan Hoard. This was followed in the 1990s by the acquisition of Collins Barracks and its focus on Decorative Arts and History, the dedication of Kildare Street to Archaeology, and the development of the Museum of Country Life (Castlebar).



MOH: The idea that nature can be contained and ordered is the legacy of Enlightenment thinking in Europe.

Early natural history museums were designed to accommodate vast numbers of specimens, all labelled according to Karl Linnaeus' binomial Latin model. This extensive undertaking of naming every living species circulated another type of colonisation: that of language.

Indigenous peoples have always named the flora and fauna of their own habitats, through oral traditions, if not always through written text. While not according to taxonomy, they have their own ways of naming flora and fauna. Is there evidence of any indigenous Irish species that hold traces of the Irish language in their labelling, even if framed by the Linnaean system?

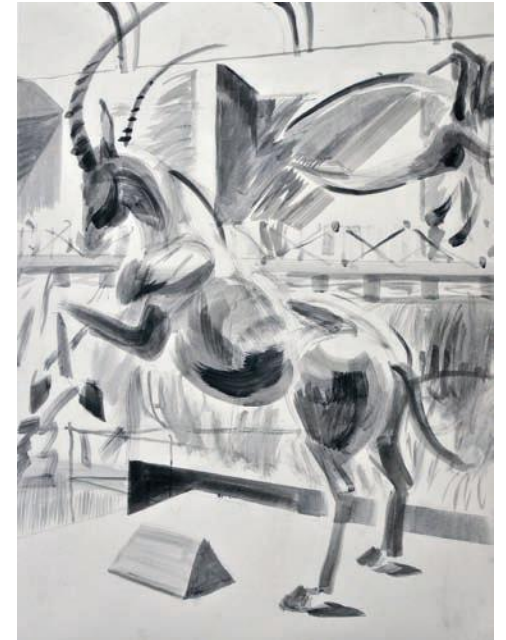
NM: Certainly the desire to structure and organise nature was really strong and it still is. Since Darwin started to articulate it clearly in the middle of the 19th century, we have a much better understanding of why there is a natural underlying pattern to nature. Because things in biology are naturally related to each other as descendants of common ancestors, we have branching family trees, and we still use that more than 200 year old system set up by Linnaeus in the 1750s, to structure and organise.

If you go to other countries, people have local names for their local animals. Take something like our Thylacine in the museum—that's what I would call it—it has a scientific name as well. As it was from Tasmania, people call them Tasmanian tigers because they were stripy. But in fact, they're not remotely related to most other carnivores; they're certainly not related to cats at all. If you asked the local Palawa people in Tasmania over 100 years ago, what would they call it? They might call it *coorinna*, *loarinna*, *laonan*, or *lagunta* in their local languages. You sometimes find a single animal has multiple names in a local language.

One of the poverties in Ireland is that although we have perhaps 30,000 different species of animals and plant, a great many of those have never had a name in the Irish language or even in the vernacular English. This means that the best way to see a lot of species named is in the scientific form where people often don't recognise the influence of the other languages. You will find that if somebody is naming a species today, they will typically name it after a place. So you will see Irish place names turning up and you'll certainly see *Hibernica* turning up quite a bit. You will see things such as a stoat in Ireland that's slightly different to the stoats in other parts of Europe, and it has its own name: *Mustela erminea hibernica*, to note the fact that it is a distinct subspecies from Ireland. So that subspecies has been given a geographical place name. It is also very common that people would name things after scientists and people who have collected objects in the wild, and they often get credit through that form. There can be an element of the colonialism when the person doing this is relatively new to that neighbourhood. There are nearly always people who have travelled to go exploring and looking for things, so they wouldn't necessarily know local languages or local place names. Nowadays, there is less excuse but historically, those names stick when something gets named. It gets frozen as a name, and that is now the name of that species. People have changed considerably in recent decades and you will see local languages and local tribal names for animals turning up in the scientific system.

So if I could put it in perspective, there are about 400 different types of birds in Ireland. Nearly all of those have an Irish language name. A number of Irish language names can be quite confusing and could refer to two or

three different scientific species of bird. Because local people don't care hugely which warbler is warbling in the field, they might have a more generic name for the group. So we don't have something that goes right down to species level, even for very familiar things day to day. And when you get down to insects and invertebrates generally, there are tens of thousands of different species of those and very few have their own discrete unique Irish language name—the same is even true in English language. Many things don't have a common name in any language, simply because the only people who know about them are the scientific specialists and they are working with the scientific names.



MOH: I came across something with regard to naming, that many species have frequently been named by scientists in recognition of supporters and benefactors. For example, the genus *Victoria* is a flowering water plant named in honour of Queen Victoria of



Great Britain. More recently, a species of lemur *Avahi cleesei* was named after the actor John Cleese, in recognition of his work to publicise the plight of lemurs in Madagascar. Is this a questionable practice, or acceptable in the eyes of the scientific community in recognition of philanthropic work they do?

NM: It is quite widespread. It's also even interesting with John Cleese because that's not his real name. It should be 'Cheese' but he thought that wasn't funny enough. So he went with Cleese for some reason. It is quite common for people to celebrate and you will see things named after David Attenborough, of course, he is probably the best known face of wildlife internationally. He has all sorts of things named after him at species level.

The only rules are that you can't use a word that's been used already. So you can't bring confusion into the universe of having two identical names for different species. The other major stumbling block can be that you can't insult anybody in the giving of a name to something. There was a rather bizarre incident a couple of years ago when George Bush and his colleagues, Cheney and Rumsfeld, were very much in the news on a day to day basis and an American entomologist named three little fungus gnats, tiny little flies that feed on mold, after each of the three of them. I thought that was a cheeky insult and I was surprised that was published. But apparently it wasn't an insult at all; that scientist worked with that group of animals and thought these three guys were amazing, wonderful human beings and great at their jobs, and named some of his new species after them. I only realised that when I was actually having dinner with that guy, he'd come over to give a lecture in Dublin, and I thought that was very funny. I asked him how he got

away with it, and he said 'no, no, they're wonderful people'. I must pick my dinner colleagues more carefully in future!



MOH: *There is a rise in interest in the natural sciences facilitated by wildlife programmes on television, and digital and open resource platforms. The Dead Zoo offers a different experience, a somewhat antique and curated context, yet also a multi-sensory and an immersive environment. A visit to the museum, and I speak for myself here, seems to stimulate a range of senses, which can access the imagination of the visitor. What specifically do you think the museum offers to audiences that is not possible in wildlife programmes and digital technologies?*

NM: Well, I think people talk often about the fact that it is based on reality and, to an extent, it is a reality. It's not a clean reality in that you're not actually in the wild, looking at animals in the wild, you're

looking at preserved pieces of taxidermy, that are basically artworks. The thing that you do get in a museum context in our museum in particular, where there is a high density of exhibits and a lot of diversity of different animal types, is you can talk about scale. You are literally standing beside an animal, you can see how big it is. You can't get that close to those animals in the wild or in a zoo, and they're often hiding in a zoo. Zoos have much less variation in their collections than museum collections would have. So you might find that a well-endowed zoo with a really good collection like Dublin Zoo, would have less than 200 species of animals. We have 10,000 species on exhibition just in the public halls of the Natural History Museum. People want to be able to stand around and chat about things in that context.

Our museum isn't one that tells you a storyline illustrated with the stuffed animals in sequence like the pages of a textbook. It is one that people use to have conversations in, and they bring that with them. The one particular thing that our museum brings mostly to people, certainly for the regular Dublin visitors, is it is a nostalgia visit. You might have been there with a grandparent showing you these animals for the first time, and you find yourself there with your own children or grandchildren walking around an interior that hasn't changed since before you were born. Now, that's a very rare experience. Nobody's house is totally unchanged. Even though we make small changes here and there, people hardly ever notice them in our museum. So there is nostalgia for all sorts of reasons, and just the personal feeling of remembering back decades of your own life is quite significant.



MOH: *I agree. So, my last question ends on a lighter note. I believe your interests are listed as: ice age fauna, hyenas, woolly mammoths, and brown bears from 35,000 years ago. And this seems to link back to your early studies in geology.*

The leader of the Green Party, Eamon Ryan is on record as having supported the idea of reintroducing the wolf to Ireland, after the species became extinct around 300 years ago. What do you think of this idea?

NM: Well, I think even the politicians worked out that they might just backtrack on that one fairly shortly after saying it. It is a lot more complicated than people think. And generally, in a short answer, I would say, not a chance! I really don't see the wolf returning to the Irish landscape. Wolves died out here around 300 years ago; they were deliberately hunted to extinction. They had a bounty on their



heads. They were threat to livestock they were a threat to civilization, and it took Oliver Cromwell introducing a bounty, and also plantation settlers with firearms, to finally be able to drive a medium-sized mammal with a lot of skill and ability in the Irish landscape, to extinction in our country.

I don't think people are coping particularly well with the reintroduction of certain eagles. We are still finding that there are farming interests that are causing problems for eagles by deliberate poisoning eagles that they see are a threat to their livestock. The landscape has changed in the last hundred years since eagles were in the wild and even the Golden Eagles that don't seem to be persecuted in the northwest of the country so much, are suffering from poor habitat. They are just about making a living and they're

still commuting backwards and forwards to Scotland. They fly over very large distances to actually make a living as an animal in the wild. So there are a lot of challenges even if we all agreed as a society that we wanted to reintroduce wolves. We would have to change the landscape and the farming practices back about 300 years, and that's the kind of thing that is not going to happen.

MOH: Thank you very much, Nigel. I look forward to visiting the Dead Zoo again soon, and I hope that all of your animals are well out of quarantine before then!



Endnotes:

(1) “*The assumption of Western objectivity is not only divorced from the material conditions in which those objects have come to be “owned” by Western knowledge – knowledge informed by a history of contact on unequal terms – but it also instantiates the exceptionalism with which Western cultures have felt entitled to the final, objective say on other cultures.*” Sarah Jilani, Times Literary Supplement <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/how-decolonize-museum>

This addresses ways in which natural history museums can deal with colonial pasts. It is also worth noting that museums like ours are reflections of society when they were established, and that women get little mention, and it is also fair to say that males dominated the sciences at the time.

See also:

Josh Davis <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/news/2019/july/are-natural-history-museums-inherently-racist.html> and the full essay referenced in Davis’ article by Subhadra Das and Miranda Lowe <https://natsca.org/sites/default/files/publications/JoNSC-Vol6-DasandLowe2018.pdf>

(2) Mairead O’hEocha’s drawing, titled *Lion Head donated by King George V*, depicts a hunting trophy from Africa. A question mark hovers over the origin of this specimen as the Natural History Museum lists it only as African with no further provenance.

(3) There is a good set of images from the 1911 Nepal hunt here: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/history/614921/King-George-V-hunting-trip-Nepal-slaughtered-tigers-and-rhinos>

(4) In the National Museum of Ireland, headed by a German archaeologist and Nazi Party member Adolf Mahr (1934–1939). Archaeology was deliberately developed, way beyond just exhibition and collection, but into a national agency – Mahr saw the role of the museum as primarily one of serving archaeology as a discipline. See the following books on the subject: Mairéad Carew, *The Quest for the Irish Celt: The Harvard Archaeological Mission to Ireland, 1932– 1936*. <https://irishacademicpress.ie/product/the-quest-for-the-irish-celt-the-harvard-archaeological-mission-to-ireland-1932-1936/> Gerry Mullins, *Dublin Nazi No. 1* <http://www.libertiespress.com/shop/dublin-nazi-no-1>

Images:
(in order of appearance)

Mairead O'hEocha
Lion Head donated by King George V, 2019
Gesso and ink on fabriano, 71 x 54 cm
Courtesy the artist
and mother's tankstation Dublin | London

Mairead O'hEocha
Group of monkeys, 2019
Ink and gesso on fabriano, 100 x 64 cm
Courtesy the artist
and mother's tankstation Dublin | London

Mairead O'hEocha
Orangutang, 2019
Ink and gouache on fabriano, 59 x 41 cm
Courtesy the artist
and mother's tankstation Dublin | London

Mairead O'hEocha
Flying Squirrel, 2019
Ink on fabriano, 57 x 47 cm
Courtesy the artist
and mother's tankstation Dublin | London

Mounted African hippo (*Hippopotamus amphibious*). Taxidermy by Rowland Ward. Courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland – Natural History.

Mairead O'hEocha
Bat with wings stapled, 2019
Pigment and gouache on fabriano, 60 x 68 cm
Courtesy the artist
and mother's tankstation Dublin | London

Mairead O'hEocha
Large black monkey, 2019
Gesso and ink on fabriano, 130 x 70 cm
Courtesy the artist
and mother's tankstation Dublin | London

Taxidermy female lion (*Panthera leo*).
Courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland – Natural History.

Mairead O'hEocha
Group of cranes large, 2019
Gouache, gesso and ink on fabriano, 110 x 64 cm
Courtesy the artist
and mother's tankstation Dublin | London

Mairead O'hEocha
Leaping sable Antelope, 2019
Pigment on fabriano, 67 x 50 cm
Courtesy the artist
and mother's tankstation Dublin | London

Male Chapman's zebra (*Equus burchellii chapmanni*). Taxidermy by Jac Bouten en zoon, Netherlands, 2006. Courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland – Natural History.

Mairead O'hEocha
Cabinet of birds, 2019
Ink on fabriano, 87 x 64 cm
Courtesy the artist
and mother's tankstation Dublin | London

Mairead O'hEocha
Guillemots, 2019
Gesso and ink on fabriano, 63 x 41 cm
Courtesy the artist
and mother's tankstation Dublin | London

Grey wolf (*Canis lupus lupus*). Taxidermy by Jac Bouten en zoon, Netherlands, 2006. Courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland – Natural History.

Mairead O'hEocha
Spider monkey large, 2019
Ink and gouache on fabriano, 63 x 85 cm
Courtesy the artist
and mother's tankstation Dublin | London

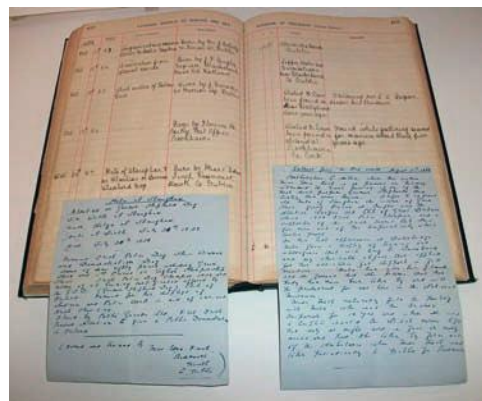
Nigel Monaghan is Keeper of the National Museum of Ireland – Natural History, Dublin, and is responsible for the national collections in the fields of zoology and geology.

Mairead O'hEocha's work has been represented in several acclaimed solo exhibitions including The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin (2015 and 2011); Butler Gallery, Kilkenny (2011), and mother's tankstation, Dublin | London (2018, 2016, 2012, 2008). O'hEocha's paintings have been represented in a number of important group exhibitions and publications that have explored contemporary painting practices, including *Slow Painting* (curated by Gilly Fox and Martin Herbert), Hayward Gallery Touring Programme, UK (2019–2020), *A Painter's Doubt*, Salzberger Kunstverein (2017), and *Vitamin P3: New Perspectives in Painting* (published by Phaidon, 2016).

Additional images:



Historic Interior of Natural History Museum early 20th century



We have registers as far back as the 1830s that record each donation to the museum.



One of 17,000 bird study skins from around the world. This one is from Arctic Canada



Natural History Museum then and now, upper floors 100 years ago and in 2008 with little difference.



Thylacine or in the local Tasmanian language of the Palawa people 'coorinna, loarina, laoonan, or lagunta'



Irish hare (left) is scientifically a separate subspecies *Lepus timidus hibernicus* where the last word reflects Ireland (the ancient Romans called Ireland *Hibernia*, as in 'hibernation' because they saw it as a land of miserable weather and eternal winter!)



The new Museum of Science & Art on Kildare Street in 1890 with the centre court filled with sculpture and art.



By the 1980s as the National Museum of Ireland, all of the ground floor was archaeology, here seen with the exhibition of the new Derrynaflan Hoard.

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