



Sweeney's Unquiet Islands

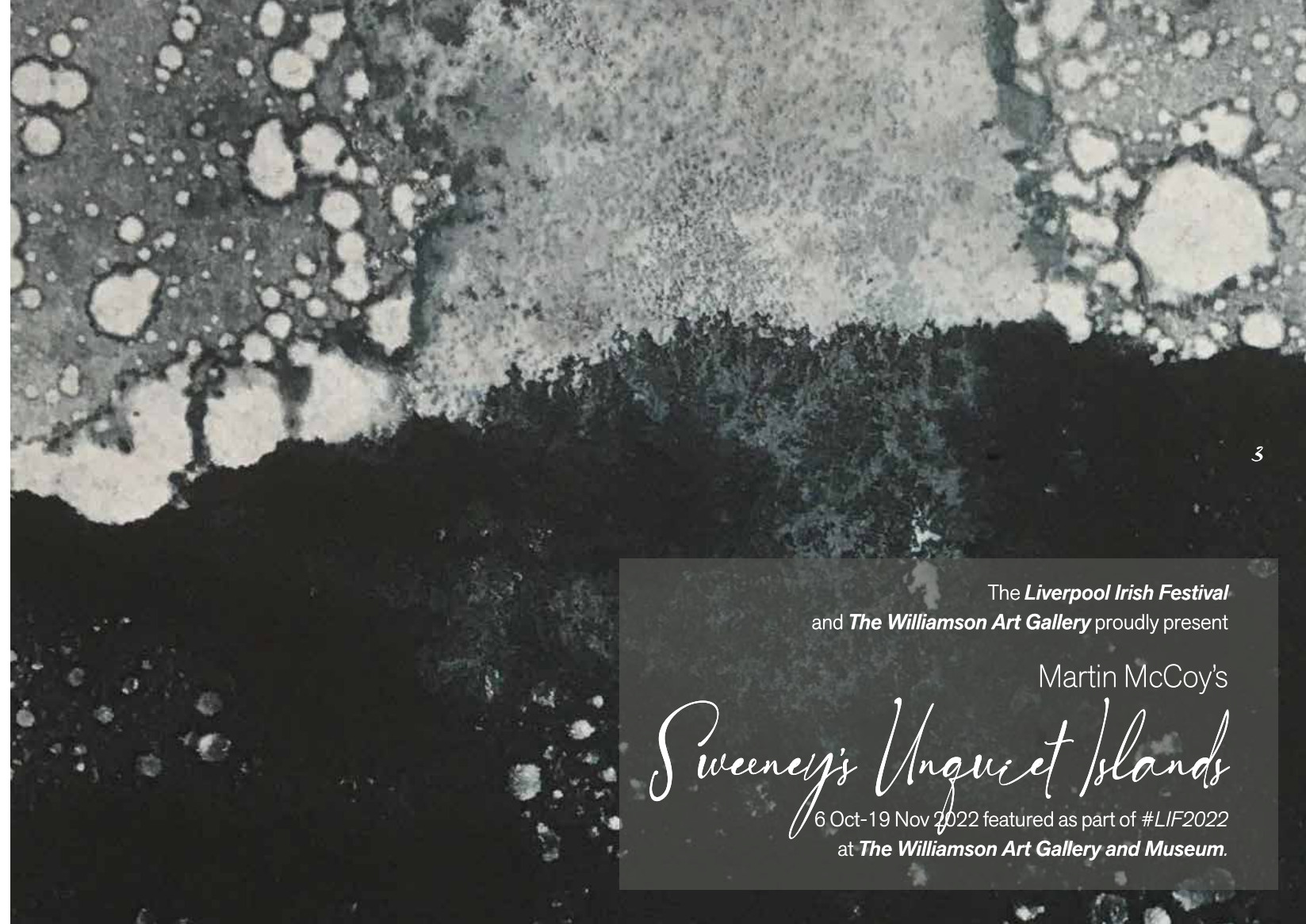
MARTIN MCCOY

LIVERPOOL
IRISH
FESTIVAL



WILLIAMSON
ART GALLERY & MUSEUM

Opposite: *Starry Frost* (detail)



The *Liverpool Irish Festival*
and *The Williamson Art Gallery* proudly present

Martin McCoy's

Sweeney's Unquiet Islands

6 Oct-19 Nov 2022 featured as part of #LIF2022
at *The Williamson Art Gallery and Museum*.

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Opposite: **Open Plain**



Introduction

6 *Sweeney's Unquiet Islands* is an exhibition of original prints by Northern Irish Wirral-based artist Martin McCoy. Martin's images take their starting point from the medieval Irish story: Buile Suibhne (pronounced "Bwullya Hevna").

Through the motif of landscapes, as described in the story, the works are a contemplation on our relationship to place and the role of location in shaping identity.

The story describes the cursed life of Suibhne (Sweeney), King of Dal Araidhe. Having fallen foul of the Christian Church, Suibhne is condemned; forced to spend the rest of his life roaming Ireland and the Western Isles, at night and in all weathers, and in a constant state of anxiety.

Many themes emerge in the text. Suibhne's experience of dispossession, isolation and being stripped of human status -tied with his physical and metaphorical hunger- lead him to question his identity. These are all tangible today. Often these are expressed subliminally through Suibhne's uncomfortable relationship to the land.

Responding to these emotions, Martin has developed a series of etchings. Although based on real locations, through manipulation and improvisation they gain an ambiguous quality, mirroring the way Suibhne's ravings confuse and distort our understanding of the land in the text. Rather than relying on narrative, the etchings ask the viewer to trust their experience of landscape -and emotions about place- to make their own interpretation of the final images the artist has arrived at.



Setting the scene

The story of Buile Shuibhne is a complex one. Taking just the name can lead to multiple interpretations. Buile can mean -depending on translation- rage, frenzy or vision; with Suibhne -or Sweeney- itself having meant 'pleasant'.

Buile Shuibhne is an Irish medieval (5-10 century CE) story, thought to originate in the twelfth century, reflecting on a seventh century battle. Though a nearing two millennia old, the story continues to hold meaning today due to its depictions of mental health; its relationship with faith and authority and its handling of place and identity. The story sits within a trilogy, known as the Cycle of Kings.

As a story, it has elicited many artistic responses, not least from TS Eliot, Myles Na cGopaleen, Seamus Heaney, Desmond Kinney, Rachel Guise, Neil Gaiman and Martin McCoy.

The battle in which Suibhne (Sweeney) 'loses his reason', is the 637CE Battle of Magh Rath, which sets the course of his life thereafter. This story is prefaced by two earlier stories, the first Fled Dúin na nGéd (The Feast of Dú na nGÉD) and the second Cath Maige Rátha (The Battle of Magh Rath).


Set in what would now be recognised as the Counties of Antrim and Down, in east Northern Ireland, readers meet St Rónán. Previously known as Rónán Fionn; he was a Christian abbot and bishop, with a church in Dal Araidhe, now operating as a Christian evangelist in the lands of the pagan King of Dál-nAraide, Suibhne.

For the purposes of this text, all future mentions of 'Suibhne's' name will be as 'Sweeney', unless we are quoting the title of the work.

A fuller account of the story is given on page 26.

Opposite: *Swell* (detail)





“Landscape by itself is meaningless but it works on our feelings in profound ways, arousing in us a sense of ourselves in relation to the outside world”.

Christopher Neve, quoted from
Unquiet Landscape

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Meet the artist

Martin McCoy

Statement

I came to Buile Suibhne by way of Seamus Heaney's translation, **Sweeney Astray**. I'm an artist for whom landscape -and what our relationship to it can reveal about ourselves- has been central to my practice. I was immediately attracted to what Heaney describes in his introduction as 'a poetry piercingly exposed to the beauties and severities of the natural world'.

12 I was drawn to the universal themes the text explores, such as the nature of power, politics and religion and their relationship with human intimacy, loneliness, penitence and dispossession. These seem as poignant and relevant in the modern world as to that of seventh century Ireland.

The travels of Sweeney -as described in the text- seem to me to be closer to a dream, albeit a waking one or perhaps a nightmare. Rather than an account, it reads as the panicked rout of a dispossessed and spiritually haunted monarch.

The settings are real enough; I have known many of them since childhood. However, the frantic pace of his journeys and the fantastic distances -often travelled in the space of a single night- make a literal reading of this story impossible (although more compelling for it).

Time seems to shift with nights; days run into weeks and months; seasons merge and locations shift from one end of the country to another. Throughout, the tormented Sweeney recounts and laments his past history, alongside his current troubles.

It is something of this dreamlike quality that I wanted to depict in this series. Rather than faithful representations of places mentioned I wanted to make images that suggest -or evoke- a sense of the landscape described, as well as Sweeney's troubled paths through it.

The images are dark, suggesting travel by night or between conscious states. Landscape forms are layered offering multiple readings; islands become mountains, cliffs become chasms and -although based on existing locations- such juxtapositions obscure and resist straightforward depictions of the landscape. This allows the viewer to bring personal experiences to reading the work.

In making the series I was able to think about place. In this case the north of Ireland, and my relationship to it and its troubled history. Sweeney's island is my island and coming from the north myself I naturally gravitated towards the familiar. The Antrim coast, hills of Mourne, bays of Strangford or wetlands of Fermanagh all hold memories and associations for me, as do many of the wider reaches of Ireland mentioned in Sweeney's travels. Place names remind me of stories and histories; descriptions of landscapes conjure images and feelings and these -entangled with my own memories and past experiences- suggest an affinity with place that is beyond nostalgia.

Martin McCoy, August 2022

Biography

Martin McCoy (b. Belfast, 1967) studied fine art in Manchester (1985-1989), developing his practice in painting. In his early years, Martin's primary focus became motifs of landscape and figure, with particular emphasis on working 'en plein air'. Although Martin remains based in the North West of England he returns regularly to Ireland. There he maintains his connection with the Irish landscape, Irish history and contemporary Irish visual arts, and has found that poetry has become increasingly important in the development of his work.

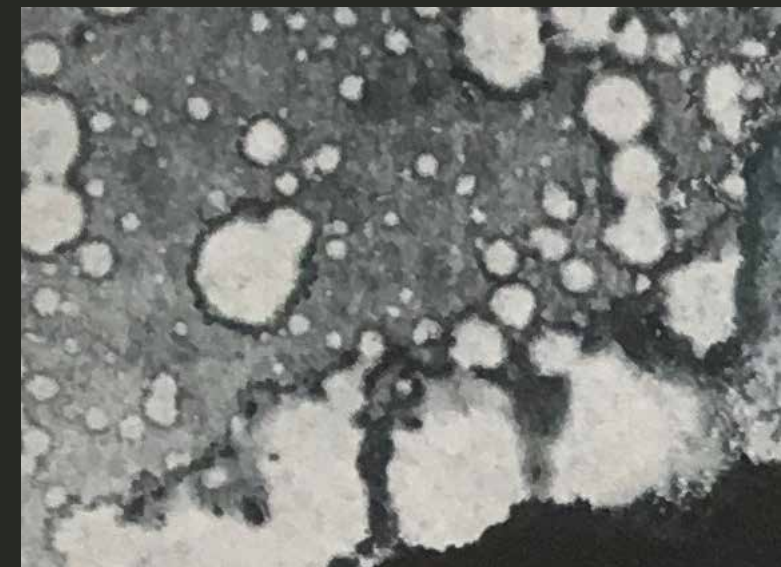
In 2018 Martin returned to printmaking, a discipline unexplored since his early years in Manchester. Since then, he's been an active member of **Hot Bed Press** (Salford) and regular user of **Bluecoat's** intaglio studio (Liverpool).

Martin's paintings incorporate traditional oils, as well as experiments with mixed media and collage. Printmaking techniques include intaglio and relief printing processes, such as hard and soft ground etching; aquatint with spit-bite and sugar-lift; dry point and carborundum, often combining processes on a single plate.

Etchings

The following pages present Martin's etchings, measuring 297mm (wide) by 210mm (deep). Learn more about etching on page 39.

Below: *Starry Night* (close up detail).





Field
Two plate aquatint etching



Unsheltered Hills
Aquatint etching

**Crag**

Two plate aquatint etching

**Towards Dark Clouds**

Two plate aquatint etching

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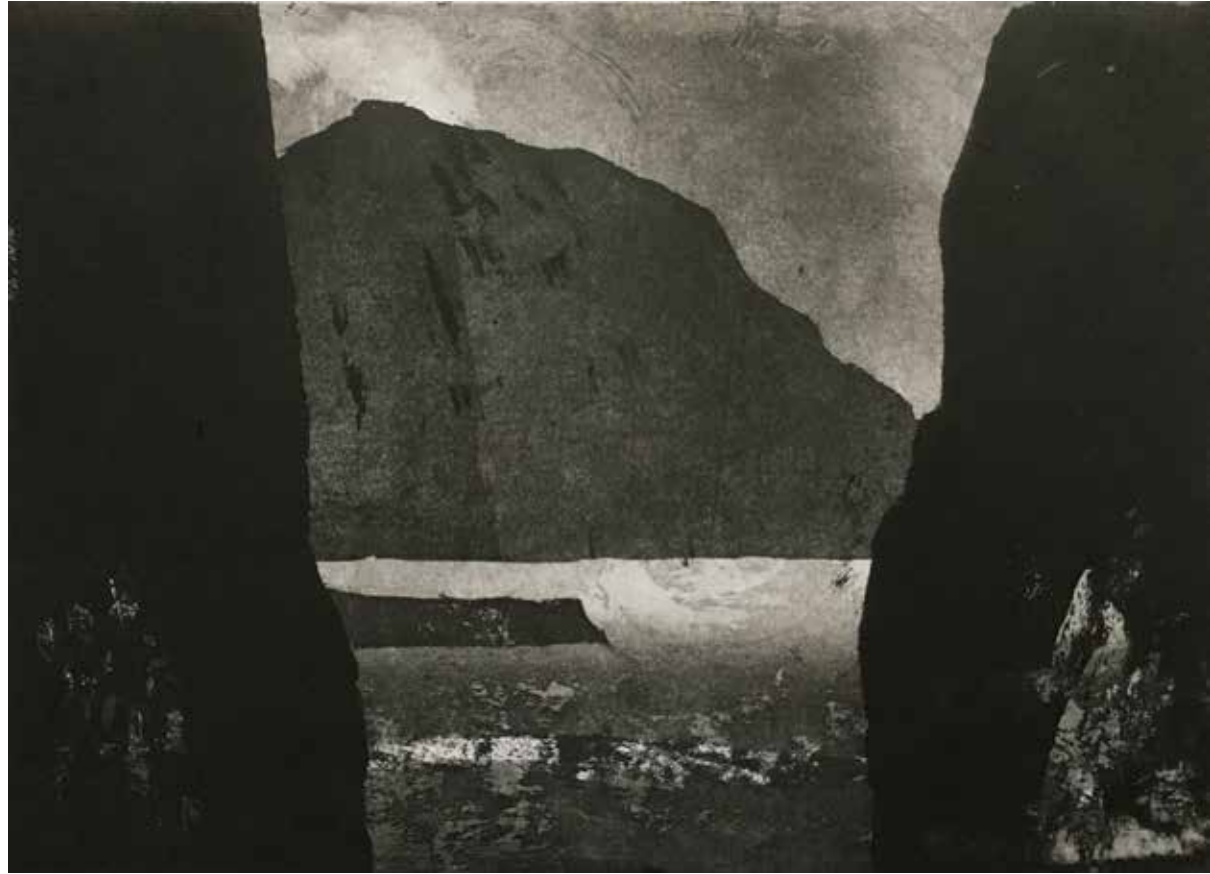
Black Lough
Two plate aquatint etching

18



Ebb
Two plate aquatint etching

20



High Peaks

Two plate aquatint etching

21



Island

Two plate aquatint etching



Propsect

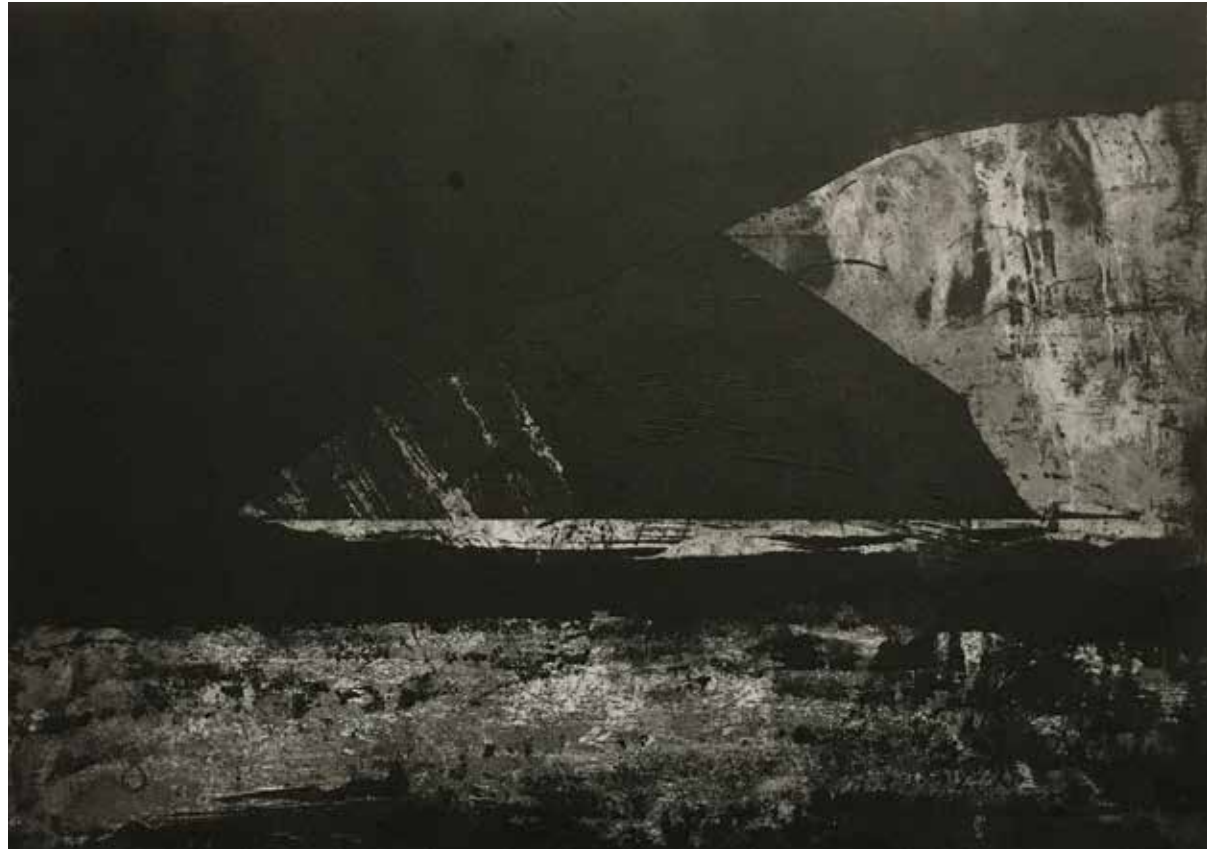
Two plate aquatint etching



Heights

Two plate aquatint etching

24



Hard Lodgings
Two plate aquatint etching

25



Low Ground
Soft ground and aquatint etching

The story

St Rónán, keen to attract people to Christianity, rings his bell for all to hear. Angry at the liberty taken in his lands, Sweeney -acting against the wishes of his wife, Eóránn- storms from his castle. In his haste, and Eóránn's attempt to dissuade him from violence, Sweeney's cloak is lost and he leaves the castle naked.

Furious, Sweeney took St Rónán's psalter -a collection of liturgical materials, often including devotional illustrations, calendars, psalms and litanies- and threw it in to a nearby lake (in some tellings, an otter returns the psalter to its owner). In his ire, Sweeney goes to harm St Rónán, but just as he lays hands on him a messenger from Congal Claen calls him to service at the Battle of Magh Rath. St Rónán, praising his Christian god for sparing him, curses Sweeney to a life lived naked, wandering the world.

Stories differ on the details, but to curb the fighting between warrior groups, St Rónán intervened. Whether making a blessing over both factions that included Sweeney, or only on the opposing side, this causes rage in Sweeney.

Rejecting the blessing, Sweeney launches a spear at St Rónán, which clatters broken from his bell. In some tellings, a second spear kills a psalmist, causing St Rónán considerable grief. Whatever the detail, the act of aggression causes St Rónán to issue a second curse: that Sweeney fly through the air like a spear and die by the impact of another.

Attempting to return to battle, Sweeney was reduced to a trembling, frightened, levitating heap. Unable to fight and endeavouring to seek protection, he is thrown in to a yew tree.

The break in his leadership failed his warriors, handing the opposition -Domhnall son of Aodh and grandson of Ainmire and his men- victory. Despite attempts from kinsman, Sweeney finds himself unable to return to his people and his life. Cast out by fear, he flies about Ireland, spending long periods in rural settings. One of these is the Glenn Bolcáin, known as the Glen of Madmen. Solace is found in treetops and isolation. Reports of him growing feathers add to his story, blurring lines of mythology, science and mental and physical health. Time becomes elongated and inexplicable; varying wildly between accounts, adding mystery to his already ruptured memories and the narrative line of the story. What follows in our outline is not an historical chronology, but a collection of things that happen across his time in the wilderness. In addition, for deeper readers, there are stories of goblin chases, meetings and pacts with Ealadhan and other melancholic indulgences.

Throughout these ordeals, Loingsechán -referenced as a brother- remains faithful to Sweeney, rescuing him from the wilderness on three occasions, bringing him home. Eóránn -who remains Sweeney's wife and committed to him (though variations on this, too, exist)- moved to live with the King of Connaght, Guaire. Despite her love, Sweeney tells her she'd be better without him. During spells of clarity, St Rónán's prayers and curses push Sweeney back to his darkness.

In pursuit of Christianity, St Rónán forces Sweeney in to nature, paganism and poetry. Eventually, Sweeney -recuperated courtesy of Loingsechán's care- is placed in the care of a mill woman. Though sworn not to speak with Sweeney, she breaks her troth by offering her ward a leaping (flying) contest. Taunted to accept, the leaping sends both characters back in to the wilderness. Clinging to Sweeney, the woman dies when she falls from a leap at Dun Sobairce (Dunseverick), which forces Sweeney to flee to Ros Comain for fear of Loingsechán's reproaches.

After years of travelling Ireland and England, Sweeney arrives in Tech Moling. There he is rescued by Bishop Moling (sometimes referred to as Saint Mo Ling), who was busy teaching from the Psalter of Caoimhghin (St Kevin). The Bishop tells Sweeney the meeting was preordained and that this place would be his final destination. The cleric takes down Sweeney's life story at night and, showing kindness and care, entrusts him to his cook and parish woman, Muirghil, who supplies him with milk (an act that would result in Sweeney's downfall).

The woman's herder husband -Mongan- grows jealous hearing rumours that Muirghil's affections have shifted towards Sweeney. Mongan spears Sweeney in jealousy, brought about by gossip.

Whilst dying of his wounds, Sweeney receives the sacrament from the Bishop, absolving him from sin and permitting heavenly reward; an about turn on St Rónán's curse (love the sinner not the sin) and his own pagan faith (after his rallies against Christianity). Sweeney's passing concludes the story of Buile Suibhne.

Monotypes

The following pages present Martin's monotypes, each measuring 297mm (wide) by 210mm (deep). Learn more about monotypes on page 39.



Open Plain
Monotype



Bogland
Monotype

30



Territories
Monotype

31



Bare Mountain
Monotype



Coldest Wind
Monotype



Starry Frost
Monotype

34



Depths
Monotype

35



Swell
Monotype

36



Flood
Monotype



37

Air
Monotype

Hot Bed Press

The prints in this exhibition were all made by the artist at **Hot Bed Press**, in Salford, one of the largest and best equipped open access print workshops in the UK.

They have been providing expert facilities and support for printmakers since 1994. As well as membership and access options they offer a range of courses in print and book arts.

The large open-plan workshop boasts specialist facilities for screenprinting, etching, relief printing, letterpress and book arts, as well as 21 artists' studios.

Hot Bed Press. The Casket Works, Cow Lane, Salford, M5 4NB.
hotbedpress.org
@hotbedpress on all socials



What is etching?

Etching takes many forms, but -in essence- it is the act of cutting in to a surface -by chemical or surface agitation- to create a texture from which you will create a print, by layering it with ink. It can be used alone or in conjunction with other printmaking techniques to produce a final image.

Traditionally, the surface used to create the etching was made of metal (usually zinc, copper or steel), forming the 'plate'. Parts of the surface may be protected from being cut in to using wax or other masks. The remainder of the plate is then subjected to acid or other cutting techniques to alter the texture of the surface, ready to receive ink, which will be absorbed by the paper when compressed.

In this exhibition, Martin uses aquatint, soft ground and monotype printing.

Aquatint helps an artist to develop tone. By dusting particulate matter -usually resin melted to the plate surface- and dipping the plate in acid the artist creates tonal complexities to the final prints by deepening the texture created on the plate.

In soft ground etching, the whole plate surface is covered in wax. The artist then reveals areas they want to print from before introducing the plate to the acid to bite in to the exposed areas.

Monotypes use a single plate on which are placed the inks the artist wishes to transfer. They may stay in their original daubs or be lifted using scrims or other materials. The initial print taken from the plate is a monotype; further prints using the residual inks are known as ghost prints.

Combinations of the above -as well as many other techniques available to the artist- lead to unique images. The quality of paper, ink, cleaning back the plate surface and pressure all contribute to the final piece.

Web references

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Sweeney's Unquiet Islands

This catalogue presents Martin McCoy's exhibition, displayed at **The Williamson Art Gallery and Museum** as part of the 2022 **Liverpool Irish Festival**. The exhibition was funded using **Arts Council England**'s **National Lottery** project funding, with support from **Wirral Council**, via the presenting partners. Our collective thanks go to each.

liverpoolirishfestival.com

williamsonartgallery.org

10 Oct 2022 is *World Mental Health Day*, following on from *Mental Health Week*. In response to the toll of coronavirus and the cost of living crisis, Liverpool City Council -working with the *NHS*- are running a campaign to destigmatise 'mental health', raise awareness of services and provide practical actions (see right). You are not alone and you can ask for help. It's ok to tell someone how you feel. Don't struggle alone.

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IT'S OK
NOT TO
BE OK

More bad days than
good and struggling
to cope?

Free hints and tips or confidential
support can help. Visit:

KindToYourMindLiverpool.co.uk



Look after you

NHS