



Sarah Pierce

Pathos of Distance

A collaboration with the ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art

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National Gallery of Ireland
Print Gallery
Admission free



Energy for
generations

ESB CSIA
Visualising the
Irish Diaspora
Research Project

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Sarah Pierce
Pathos of Distance
a collaboration with the ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art
at the National Gallery of Ireland

Exhibition curated by Donal Maguire
Exhibition assistant: Kathryn Milligan

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Front cover shows detail from, 'Brig. Gen. Michael Corcoran,
of the Irish Brigade late Colonel of the Gallant NY Sixty Ninth', 1860s.
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Notes on making *Pathos of Distance* by Sarah Pierce

Sometimes we feel we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools.

— Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-91*

In 2014, I began work on an invitation from the National Gallery of Ireland. The proposal was to enter into a project with the ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art based on research already underway at the centre, involving historical representations of an Irish diaspora. For over a year, Donal Maguire, Kathryn Milligan and I collaborated on an endeavour framed by questions: is there a visual culture of diaspora, what types of images might it include, who created them and for whom? The guiding principle for the project was to make a new artwork to discover what it might mean to present this material in the context of a national, historical art museum. I have made a series of 'hybrid' interventions installed on platforms in the three rooms that comprise the Print and Drawing gallery of the National Gallery of Ireland. Each piece combines items of used furniture sourced in Dublin with digital images sourced from collections around the world.

Without the *pathos of distance*... that other, more mysterious pathos could not have developed... that longing for an ever-increasing widening of distance within the soul itself, the formation of ever higher, rarer, more remote, tenser, more comprehensive states...
— Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, 1885

Nietzsche's philosophy of self formation involves a conviction that one's place in the world rests on unstable foundations. Places change and these changes act on our bodies, our needs and desires, our pleasures and discontents. Identity marks differences passed between generations and across distances. The corporeal and social constitution of who we are involves a pathos, our pathos, where the self is distant to others, and yet longs for connection. A real and imagined diaspora subject arises out of similar (trans)formations. Diaspora refers to movements of large populations of people, away from an original homeland. On a fundamental level it is material shift from one place to another. It is also a scattering; less a geographic zone than a zone of displacements, dispersals and imagined returns. A diaspora identity is dislocated, marked by 'a widening distance', which contains, always, a secondary, affective dimension of losses and intimacies that summon a remote place.

It is here the artworks of *Pathos of Distance* begin – by looking at the rhetoric of diaspora, produced visually as much as through any other narrative form. Following on the work of theorists such as Edward Said, Stuart Hall and Irit Rogoff, the exhibition is itself an allegory for conditions that involve fluid and unfixed subjects not easily categorised, that in turn challenge what it means to *be Irish*. For Hall, the diaspora subject corresponds to a hybrid identity that works in two directions, on the one hand

defined by a common, originating culture that prevails despite mass dispersals around the globe, and on the other, a complex and dislocated sense of self. The *distances* that emerge through experiences of migration constantly produce and reproduce a conception of identity that is neither pure nor essential, but rather constituted by transformation and difference.

The exhibition design involves three adjoining rooms, each offering a set of images displayed among pieces of innocuous furniture culled from the stocks of second-hand suppliers in Dublin. Hybrids. Displacements. New arrangements. Items bought and sold to furnish houses, apartments and bedsits, where occupancy and ownership shift according to one's changed status in the world. They represent a national collection of sorts, a projection of collective preferences and a reminder of the role material culture plays in processes of representation. The dismantling of clear distinctions between what is and is not worthy of representing the Irish nation, asserts an irreducible present – or presence – where the appearance of regular, everyday items in the National Gallery of Ireland fundamentally reorders a shared national culture.

The research is ongoing. Each artwork is a pause – a moment of gathering that features a core set of historical images selected from a vast assortment of digital material, purposefully drawn from collections originating outside of Ireland. They appear in the exhibition as copies that exist (or *belong*) elsewhere. Their presence is completely reliant upon technologies that make an image reproducible – *and this changes everything*.

Despite links to nation, diaspora is not a call to nation. The diaspora is an experience of leaving combined with the experience of *having left*. For this reason, the diaspora subject is never identical to the subject who leaves, because they are never in the same place. Having lived most of my life outside the country where I was born, when I am 'home' I am often identified as being 'from' somewhere else. This is not a unique condition, but it is not exactly shared. It shapes how I view cultural identity and national representation, and why I identify more with the paradox of living out the conditions we inherit beyond the communities to which we are born, beyond nation, beyond tradition and beyond the imaginaries of a 'homeland'.

Pathos of Distance is one such paradox.

— Sarah Pierce, Dublin 2015

Sarah Pierce is an artist who lives in Dublin. She holds a PhD in Visual Cultures from Goldsmiths College and an MFA from Cornell University. Since 2003, Pierce has used the term *The Metropolitan Complex* to describe her project. Despite its institutional resonance, this title does not signify an organisation. Instead, it shows a broad understanding of cultural work, articulated through methods that highlight a continual renegotiation of the terms for making art: the potential for dissent and self-determination, and the slippages between individual work and institution. Her work is deeply invested in uses of the canon and collections, and the potential for these to open up to experimentation and self-determination. In addition to *Pathos of Distance* at the National Gallery of Ireland, in 2015 Pierce mounted major exhibitions at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin and the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven.