



*Dinnseanchas* – Reflections on craft practice as a tool for change.

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In modern Irish, *dinnseanchas* means topography, yet in a more ancient version of the language, it means the lore of a place – the names, traditions, events and characters woven into the land. Many of Ireland’s coastal upland communities face depopulation, reduced farm incomes and erosion of the Irish language, while iconic species and habitats decline amid worsening climate conditions. Against this backdrop, I was awarded a year-long residency, called *Dinnseanchas*, with West of Ireland nature restoration charity Hometree, funded by Creative Ireland’s Climate Action Fund. I spent the year immersed in the upland communities of Donegal, with a base on the shores of Gartan Lough near Glenveagh, exploring through my craft practice how making and farming intertwine and how my understanding of making might help us reimagine these uplands.

In Ireland, craft is rarely just about making. It is a way of grounding oneself in a place. It becomes a way of knowing, through making, what it means to live within the rhythms of land, weather and community. At its most essential, craft, for me, carries a quiet knowledge, not loud or self-promoting, but deeply embedded in the relationship between oneself, the material and the environment. Like farming, our material culture has been shaped by necessity, geography and resourcefulness. An understanding of tradition, a readiness for innovation and a continual dialogue of problem-solving is needed to carry it forward. Craft embodies a respect for the local, for specific materials, places and histories.

This connection to the land also brings with it a code of ethics – care for the material, environment and a connection to community. Craft communities in Ireland, particularly in rural areas, have long served as informal networks of support. Quiet gatherings of makers offer sociability, where knowledge is shared through doing rather than explaining. In the absence of large-scale systems, these small, intimate circles of practice become vital sites of resilience and continuity.

In Donegal, the weaving of tweed is a craft that has become a signature of the land – woven cloth with slubs of coloured wool fleck the surface of the soft textured patterns. Donegal tweed has such a particular character that it will soon earn its own independent geographical appellation. Although Donegal is famous for its native wool, the region's tweed manufacturers have stopped using it because of its coarser texture and switched to more in-demand softer merinos from Australia, New Zealand and Argentina.

Donegal also hosts some of the most precious and endangered parcels of woodland known as the Irish temperate rainforests. Ancient native trees such as sessile oak, downy birch, holly, willows, whitethorn, rowan, hazel, ash and alder hang on only in deep ravines and vertical gorges. Deer, sheep and the rapid propagation of non-native plant species, such as rhododendrons, are having a particularly damaging effect, preventing new growth and light reaching woodland ground areas.

Like craft, farming sustains cultural memory and identity without insisting on nostalgia. It allows for continuity and change to co-exist, where traditional techniques can sit alongside innovation. This adaptive continuity ensures that the knowledge is never static but can be constantly shaped by new hands and fresh minds. In this way, craft becomes a form of cultural resilience – preserving what matters while remaining open to evolution.

Creating gathering points for conversations was a key strategy I adopted in the belief that dialogue is a way of creating change. I made a temporary meeting point in *FarmGate* by creating the familiar visual icon of a handmade gate painted in red oxide. It became a catalyst for conversations that might not otherwise have taken place. It is a good reminder that even the smallest acts of making can open the largest spaces for dialogue. Easily erected at agricultural shows and events, the materials and presence of a traditional structure act as a magnet to gather and draw people to it. People just LOVE a gate!

By meeting sheep farmers, shearers, wool manufacturers, weavers, designers, makers and association leaders, I could create a comprehensive picture of the story of wool in Donegal. In Donegal, tweed is rooted in the essence of place; in the process of making, it connects with the land through inherited skills of spinning, dyeing and weaving. Its materials are drawn from the land and from the generations of farmers adapting to methods and practices through years of production. Tweed is a woven memory, an

identity of place, an environmental witness. Drawing from my experiences of the temperate rainforests, I created drawings and sketches, palettes of colour and texture, which have become engraving plates for printing, sculptures and studies for further activism.

One such project was working alongside students from the local Gaelscoil. We spent two days in the landscape, immersing ourselves in different parts of the rainforest, then spending time where the trees had been cleared to understand for ourselves what changes come with their absence. Sketching, observing, filmmaking, printing, using Irish words to describe the land and constructing temporary sculptures from found objects was a method of discussing the impacts of climate change and land use.

Working with raw fleece, we created two large-scale works from farm materials. Working with local students alongside farmers, we created ANOIS/NOW, a bilingual protest work crafted from waste fleece, deer fencing and twine. For the students – many from farming families – it was not just an artwork but a declaration. Through their hands, discarded material became a newfound cry for climate action and evidence of how craft can turn awareness into agency.

Weaving as a form of environmental thought is part of an ongoing conversation around cultural continuity, sustainability and resonance of the land. I am in the process of collaborating with a young weaver to create tweed swatches, which will be incorporated into clothing and pieces of home decor for national and international catwalks and salons. In this work, tweed becomes an ecoregional artefact, a memory keeper, a map, not just of topography, but a land memory, a call to action, a signal of intent. In developing this work, engagement is ongoing with older weavers, wool producers, teachers and journalists. How does the damp winter woodland, the rich textures of soft moss, lush epiphytes, gnarly oak trunks, flexing hazel rods and the smell of new soil being created translate to a material object? How can these feelings be translated to a cloth? How can this material speak deeply of these qualities?

Standing in the woodland I am using all of my senses, to note, feel, observe, taste and hear the land, understanding the materiality of place, the light and sound of where we are describing. The answers are not found in a digital colour chart but in a deep connection to the experience, creating resonances of the land. In crafting an understanding of place, we are looking to interweave the past with the present to create something that resonates into the future. Giving this process time is an essential part of its evolution. This is its value and worth. The cloth we make is a small step in a much wider conversation. It

is the tool with which we then craft a future dialogue. It is one that can endure as long as the forest itself; like the growing forest, we need to afford it that dignity.

Demonstrating craft processes became a way to explain the fragility of the landscapes we seek to protect. At Earth Rising at IMMA (Irish Museum of Modern Art), *FarmGate*, weaving and engraved glass-printing plates became tools for dialogue. Each print carried not only an image but a story of the rainforest and resilience sent home with participants as a tangible reminder. Here, craft encompassed education, activism and cultural transmission, simultaneously intimate and collective. Using found glass as a material to describe the rainforest's resistance and vulnerability gave voice to the critical nature of these environments. Interwoven in the workshop instruction was scientific information, Irish words, folklore and regional identity.

Sustainability lies in community-based thinking, where culture represents both the problem and possibility. Involving urban communities in rural conversations is essential to the dialogue and solution. Understanding the value of nature by identifying with craft and culture in this way can lead to cultivating moral responsibilities, which become a catalyst for environmental change.

Craft, like the rainforest, needs patience. It needs resilience and care. In Donegal, I witnessed how making can serve as a tool for change; not in loud gestures, but in small, deliberate acts that open conversations, strengthen communities and reconnect us to land. *Dinnseanchas*'s meaning in Irish is a rich and deep word. The English translation leaves it short of the nuanced weight of its origin. Working in Donegal, I experienced how *dinnseanchas* is a living dialogue between past and future, a weaving of memory and possibility. In crafting cloth, objects and encounters, we also craft the conditions for cultural and ecological renewal.

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