

When the potato famines occurred in Ireland over 150 years ago, large scale emigration to the United States and Canada followed. When they arrived at Grosse Ile, Canada's Ellis Island on the St. Lawrence near Quebec City, many died of typhoid and cholera in the ships



Scott MacLeod, *Digging for Our History*, 1999, mixed media on wood, 46" x 60" (photo courtesy of Bishop's University Art Gallery).

lined up waiting to embark even before they landed. Herein lies the ecological parallel that **SCOTT MACLEOD** ("*The Great Hunger*," *Bishops University Art Gallery*, October 21—November 21) brings to his painting *Digging for Our History* (1999), a mixed media on wood piece that depicts a woman surrounded by children digging potatoes. Other elements include a large scale painted image of a potato plant and smaller scenes of rows—one of the

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crosses of the immigrants who died at Grosse Isle in the St. Lawrence and another of rows of potato drills or lazy beds. The history MacLeod integrates in *Digging for Our History* are cues to an era that has passed, a way of living so crucial to the cultural survival of the Irish people. A context is established in the process that has a lot to do with material culture, with the way we perceive the meaning of things according to our personal experience of them.

The Red Hand of Ulster (1995) references an ancient Irish legend that tells of the Vikings' boat race across the open seas to claim Ireland for their people. It is said that Erik, whose boat was in second place as they neared the Irish coast, cut off his hand and threw it ahead onto the shore and thus claimed Ireland. There is an intense feeling of inevitability and of the as yet unquantifiable suffering and hardship—of Ireland's own "tenants of time" (who withstood 800 years of colonial repression) in the painted profile of a man who stands on the shore looking out at the approaching boats. This work becomes a keystone on which subsequent works build.

MacLeod applies his art to address specific politically determined events in the paintings *Flight From Famine* (1995) and *Starved Blind* (1995). The irony of integrating a packing crate with cocktail glass and umbrella symbols embossed onto it (suggesting its contents are fragile) with the image of a starving black African child whose eyes have been scratched out accentuates the fact that the victims of war, famine, racial and natural catastrophes are not themselves without hope. It is forces beyond their control that have led to their tragic fate. An empty spoon on a bedsheet beside the living corpse of a once healthy child says it all.

In the tipi-shaped canvas *What the Buffalo Provides* (1999), MacLeod pays tribute to the sophisticated ecological integration that was, and still is, part of Native culture in North America. Descriptive texts can be seen around a central painted image of a buffalo. They describe the specific traditional use of so many facets of the buffalo in traditional Native culture: the brain (hide tanning), the horn (cups, spoons, powder horns), the tail (ceremonial ornaments), bone (food, knives, ornament), hide (clothing), and buffalo chips or manure (fuel). The tipi-shape alludes to this economical, ecologically integrated form of architecture that was a common kind of shelter habitation used by Native peoples in pre-contact North America.

MacLeod presents a bridge to two worlds, the poor colonial's and the indigenous natives' in *The Decimation of Our Relatives* (1999), in which scenes of Native and colonial peoples' past are presented simultaneously in the same scene. The

lessons of history are all here, in the image of one of the notorious "coffin ships" that carried the poor emigrants as ballast on their journey to the promised land; in the crosses erected to commemorate over 10,000 Irish immigrants who died at Grosse-Ile; the Quarantine Station situated east of the Ile d'Orleans in the St. Lawrence River with its "lazarets" and bell tents erected to handle the sick and dying; in the image of the buffalo hunt, and the subsequent piles of buffalo skulls that resulted from a shift in technology due to the introduction of the white man's weapons that nearly extinguished the buffalo population in the process; and the Celtic cross whose central circle and radiating struts bears a strange resemblance to the native medicine wheel.

MacLeod's latest paintings are thus less post-historical than proto-historical, for the experience of suffering he communicates is universalized. Nature the provider becomes the link between all cultures, the raw material upon which all civilizations past and present have been built.

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