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Spring Guide: Grúpat's Irish Oddballs Swoop Into the Chelsea Art Museum

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Courtesy the artist/Chelsea Art Museum



A mythology of . . . something: Violetta Mahon's *My Zang Tam Tuumb* (2008)

Ah, Ireland! Land of folklore and magic and, more recently, of a decades-long economic adventure that took the island nation from crippling poverty to addled success—and then, more recently still, to epic financial implosion. Out of this wild ride, one might well expect some interesting art, and, boy, does the Chelsea Art Museum (CAM) have some examples for you, courtesy of Dublin's elusive "Grúpat" art movement.

Never heard of Grúpat? It comes with credentials. The force behind Grúpat's spring show, *Irish Need Not Apply*, at CAM's Project Room for New Media, is New York-based Irish artist Jennifer Walshe, a rising star in the sound-art scene. Walshe is "one of the leading avant-garde artists of Ireland," in the words of CAM curator Nina Colosi, who presented her piece *XXX_LIVE_NUDE_GIRLS!!!* last year, a sort of abstract sound opera/puppet show, with Barbies.

In addition to playing with dolls, for the past couple of years Walshe has been curating shows of material by various figures affiliated with Grúpat, a loose-knit collective hailing, like

Walshe, from South Dublin. Under Walshe's stewardship, this unlikely group of oddballs, who claim to be influenced by graffiti culture, "outsider art," *Dungeons & Dragons*, and Situationism, among other things, and who go by names like "Turf Boon," "Bulletin M," and "Ukeoirn O'Connor," have received a fair amount of acclaim. On their home turf, the first Grúpat survey was held at Dublin's Project Arts Center last winter, while pieces by several Grúpat members were featured in a show of cutting-edge music at the Contemporary Art Museum, Houston, in 2008, among other places.

Walshe's CAM show will have each Grúpat artist create an installation, spinning fantastical commentary on Irish culture. The flamboyant "Dowager Marchylove," for instance, has taken photos of himself in drag at Coney Island, carrying stones supposedly gathered from another "Coney Island" in Sligo, Ireland, a way to advance the claim that Brooklyn's beach derives its name from the Emerald Isle (it's usually thought to have come from the Dutch). Another Grúpat-er, who goes by the name "The Parks Service," presents a series of photo works reimagining the druidic dolmens of Ireland as antennae aimed at extraterrestrials.

Also expect video art based on Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*; an archaeological display of surprisingly sophisticated ancient Irish alchemical vessels, loaned from an Irish museum; and a recording, *Early Irish Drone Music*, presenting a form of Irish experimental music, "Dordán," that predates American minimal music by some years but unmistakably covers the same territory (word is Tony Conrad has heard the recording and deemed it "excellent").

So just what is the story with Grúpat, anyway? The tale goes like this: The collective first crystallized in 1999, when some of the core members ran into each other at an illegal outdoor rave held in some ruins outside Dublin. Based in the working-class town of Tallaght, they first teamed up as a direct-action political collective calling itself the Avant Gardí (for non-Irish-speakers, "gardí" means "police"), performing guerrilla theater experiments that were confrontational enough that they led to arrests.

Over time, the formation matured into the diffuse, mind-bending arts collective called Grúpat. Its members stuck, however, with their improbable names.

If this mythology sounds, well, a little . . . mythological, it's worth mentioning that the various larger-than-life personalities from the group have been notoriously difficult to track down. At the opening of their Dublin survey, all nine of the Grúpat collective's active members were prevented from appearing by a blizzard in Paris. Walshe, their longtime ambassador, had to stand in for them. *Hmmm*. Finding what's actually real will be part of the fun at the CAM show. If you think about it, the uncertainty as to what parts of Grúpat's scrappy success story are based on a firm foundation makes them perfect to represent Ireland, given recent economic history.

'Irish Need Not Apply,' April 15 to May 15, Chelsea Art Museum, 556 West 22nd Street, chelseartmuseum.org

Spring Art Picks

Henri Cartier-Bresson: 'The Modern Century'

April 11–June 28

Photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson is best known for his idea that picture-taking was about capturing life at the "decisive moment"—and what moments he lived through! He kibitzed with surrealists and Communists, went underground with the French Resistance, helped define the aesthetic of the Magnum Photo collective, was witness to Spanish fascism and the Chinese Revolution, and on and on. MOMA curator Peter Galassi brings together some 300 photos for this retrospective of one of the definitive photographers, and artists, of the 20th century. *Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, moma.org*

Ion Zupcu: 'Painted Cubes'

April 15–May 28

The Romanian-born artist Ion Zupcu works in a defiantly retro style of photography, hand-printing and sepia-toning his own photos. He also has a yen for the timeless subject matter of classic photo still-life, simple domestic objects like eggs, bottles, or folded sheets of paper, dramatically lit. The results are lovely—deliberate and serious—fragments of out-of-time beauty that hark back to early photographers like Paul Strand. *Clampart, 521-531 West 25th Street, clampart.com*

Daniel Bayles, Gina Osterloh, and Patrick Jackson

April 16–May 15

If you're looking for some cool art from the other coast, this show skims the cream from the program of L.A.'s François Ghebaly gallery, giving three Angelino artists their first New York outing. Daniel Bayles makes enigmatic paintings of architecture, while Patrick Jackson creates memorable tower-like sculptures of carefully stacked found objects. But pay particular attention to Gina Osterloh, who stages photos in strange artificial environments she constructs out of multicolored paper. Osterloh looks like a star. *Kate Werble Gallery, 83 Vandam Street, katewerblegallery.com*

Dorothea Tanning: 'Early Designs for the Stage'

April 23–July 23

The full retrospective of late works by ferocious political painter Leon Golub at the Drawing Center's main space is rightly going to draw a lot of attention, but this smaller affair, which opens at the same time, deserves some love as well. The famous painter Dorothea Tanning is known for dark, erotically charged surrealism, but this exhibition showcases her imagination at work in the more genteel world of ballet, making costume sketches for choreographer George Balanchine between 1945 and 1953. *The Drawing Center, 35 Wooster Street, drawingcenter.org*

Shirazeh Houshiary: 'Light Darkness'

April 29–June 19

Iran-born, London-based artist Shirazeh Houshiary has made her name intermingling lyrical abstraction with the Islamic mysticism of Rumi. In practice, what this adds up to are complex, quiet paintings that can be quite expansive but still feel intimate, each one conjuring a diffuse visual mist that's full of subtle variation the deeper you gaze into it. *Lehmann Maupin Gallery, 540 West 26th Street, lehmannmaupin.com*

Liu Bolin

April 30–June 4

Call him the "Chinese invisible man," call him the "human chameleon," call him what you will, but you will not forget the work of Chinese artist Liu Bolin. Liu hit gold with a series of "photo performances" that depict himself standing in various urban settings—in a supermarket, in front of Beijing's famous Bird's Nest stadium—painted head-to-toe to blend nearly seamlessly into the background. The work is massive on the Internet. *Eli Klein Fine Art, 462 West Broadway, ekfineart.com*

Shepard Fairey: 'May Day'

May 1–May 29

The final Deitch Project has arrived, with dealer Jeffrey Deitch set to leave New York behind for the smoggier climes of L.A. And who can doubt that NYC will be more boring without him? For his final exhibition, he has brought in Shepard Fairey, the street-artist-turned-design-entrepreneur-turned-political-postermaker, a pick that perfectly encapsulates the mix of scrappy street culture, celebrity razzle-dazzle, and pop-culture savvy that has characterized Deitch's long reign. Intriguingly, for the man behind the Obama "HOPE" poster, a press release promises works "bemoaning the U.S. two-party political system," among other things. This opening will be huge. *Deitch Projects, 18 Wooster Street, deitch.com*

Christoph Draeger: '1st of May'

May 1–June 5

May Day, a/k/a International Workers' Day, is celebrated in most countries around the world except the United States, where it was born as part of the fight for the eight-hour workday. Swiss-born artist Christoph Draeger plans to tease this contradiction with specific reference to today's Great Recession. To this end, he promises an installation, but, more tantalizingly, a series of as-yet-undefined "actions" around the Lower East Side to mark the invisible holiday. *Y Gallery, 355A Bowery Street, ygallerynewyork.com*

