

Thom
hinson.

between the
worlds

And

between the
times

VICTORIA
WYNNE-JONES

BETWEEN THE WORLDS

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BETWEEN THE LINES

Journeying on foot along a dusty road, an unnamed narrator wearily unburdens himself of his belongings in E. M. Forster's 1911 short story 'The Other Side of the Hedge.' Forster's protagonist collapses from his perch on a milestone marker, then lies prostrate with his face buried in a dry, brown, crackling hedge. Following an enigmatic "little puff of air" and encouraged by "a glint of light through the tangle of boughs and dead leaves" the traveller forces his way through the hedge to "the other side." Braving scratchy thorns, torn clothes and an unexpected plunge into a deep pool of icy water, he finally surfaces and is pulled up into a large clearing plentiful with "grass and sunshine."

It quickly becomes apparent that Forster's story is an allegory for daily life and what lies beyond it. The road is monotonous and dusty, populated by mostly jeering companions— it is so exhausting that most people drop their possessions along the way. Whilst on the road, one cannot help trying to gain advantage and out-distance others. By contrast, the other side of the hedge enjoys wide blue skies, meadows, beech trees and clear pools. Unlike the road, the other side leads no-where, it merely *is*. But what interests me most about Forster's allegory are its transitional spaces. The difficult thorniness of the hedge, and the baptismal, cold water of its accompanying moat. The presence of a large, white, ivory gate and another one, semi-transparent, made of horn. The hedge as a perimeter, border, boundary.

Contemplating extremities, the edges of works like Thom Hinton's *Two Birds and Two Dogs* (2024) are all knobbly, like the stumps of a pollarded plane tree. These round, crenelated borders take their forms from the artists' fingertips. Hinton's paintings are made on plaster supports that are formed with the aid of a clay border-mould, one formed through the pressure of his finger-pads. When I look at these edges, I feel the force of him pushing the tips of his fingers into the slightly-yielding material, before pouring in his mixed plaster filling. In tribute to a brick-making ancestor, Hinton mixes pigments like iron-oxide into the plaster. Already, the works play with positive and negative, processes of addition and subtraction. Warming with the heat of one's hands, kneading, suggesting... firming-up. Pouring, filling, allowing to dry. I am struck by the object-ness of Hinton's artworks, the way in which they gently assert themselves in the world. Their pressed compactness invokes a Sumerian clay tablet from 4,000 BCE, with its sharp, cuneiform characters. Though not made of stone, the shape and form of Hinton's works also remind me of the tablets Moses brought down from Mount Sinai, inscribed by the finger of God. The way in which Moses is depicted carefully cradling each one in the crook of an arm.

TEXT WRITTEN ON
THE SURFACE OF
SKIN FROM WHICH
AN EARLIER TEXT
HAS BEEN PARTLY

TEXT:

Victoria Wynne-Jones

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BETWEEN THE WORLDS OR WHOLLY ERASED

According to an ancient Celtic narrative, the Well of Wisdom was surrounded by hazel trees. When nine hazelnuts fell from the trees and into the water, they were eaten by a salmon, who thereby gained all of the world's knowledge, so that the first person to eat their flesh would obtain it. For seven years the poet and druid Finnécés tried to catch the fish, but it wasn't until the boy Fionn mac Cumhaill came to live with him that he finally succeeded. Finnécés asked his pupil to cook the salmon, but to be sure not to eat any of it. Fionn carefully cooked the salmon, turning it over and over, but when checking to see if it was cooked, he burnt his finger on the hot fish fat. And by sucking on his burnt finger to ease the pain, he absorbed all of the salmon's wisdom.² This *Salmon of Knowledge* was later Christianised in an account in which St Cuthbert, walking with a young companion, prayed for nourishment until an eagle dropped a salmon at their feet.³ St Cuthbert is sometimes known as 'Cuddy,' hence Hinton's title *Cuddy's Salmon (Diptych)* (2024). Salmon is also a colour, a pastel, watery pink, one that re-appears throughout Hinton's oeuvre.

Aside from their bumpy edges, what Hinton's works have in common with each other is the way that they are constructed or built from various plaster pieces in peach, cream, white, grey, pink. Each seems to be composed of tiles placed together, or broken shards of pottery. The two parts of *Cuddy's Salmon* are made up of rectilinear tiles and pieces that seem to have been torn across, like pieces of paper. The coloured surfaces have layers of drawings and designs upon them, mostly in charcoal or graphite. This layering, together with the torn edges hark back to *palimpsests*, manuscripts written on a surface from which an earlier text has been partly or wholly erased.⁴ In the Middle Ages, before paper was available, palimpsests were common due to the high cost of vellum, a fine kind of parchment made from the delicate skin of young or stillborn calves. Such material was used and re-used, so that texts were written on surfaces still bearing faint marks of earlier ones.

The curvilinear charcoal designs in Hinton's works are mostly automatic drawings, ones made quickly and subconsciously, often including flower and petal-like forms. Those in graphite, made with the aid of tracing paper, were inspired by the Celtic knotwork found in the Lindisfarne Gospels, vellum manuscripts which included examples of Insular, Hiberno-Saxon art from the British Isles at around 698-721CE. After the Roman conquest of western Europe, Ireland was one of the few places where Celtic art survived, and this was expressed in manuscript illuminations as the Christian faith spread. Currently located in London's British Library, the Lindisfarne Gospels were originally produced in a monastery off the coast of Northumberland after the Romans left Britain in the 5th century, a time when there was a great influx of Celtic art that greatly affected artistic output. Intricate latticework borders surrounded lavishly decorated text, Celtic ornamentation was usually abstract with tight, spiralling coils, the forms of foliage and stylized animals.⁵ Many of these forms can be seen in Hinton's *Two Birds and Two Dogs* (2024), the repeated shapes of a dog's hind leg, its paws and claws as well as the beady eye and beak of a bird.

AND

BETWEEN THE LINES

I love the layers in the Celtic narrative of Finnéces and the Salmon of Wisdom –the hard hazelnut shells, the creamy nuts, wisdom passing through well-water and scales into the salmon’s consciousness, soft-flaking fish-flesh. An entitlement to knowledge passing from druidic master to apprentice. Many of Hinton’s works share this predilection for layering, the composed pieces read like shards or archaeological remnants. It feels as though their chalky surfaces could be peeled, chipped or scraped back to reveal hidden layers and designs. I am reminded of the Basilica di San Clemente al Laterano in Rome, a 12th Century Catholic Basilica built upon a 4th century one, built upon an earlier 1st century church, built upon a Mithraeum, built upon an ancient Roman villa.⁶ Just as San Clemente is several buildings within one, (it is known as the ‘lasagne church’) Hinton’s artworks as *palimpsests* bear multiple layers or levels of meaning.

et me tell you about fairies...

I have particular reasons for invoking Forster at the beginning of this text. One is that I happened to be reading his volume of short stories and was exclaiming about it at Hinton’s opening at Tāmaki’s Window Gallery in 2014. Also a fan, Hinton recounted how he had once stayed in the small village of Clun on the Welsh marches by the Shropshire border. It is said that Forster had also spent time there at the Buffalo Inn and that Clun was fictionalised into the village of Oniton in *Howards End*. This conversation stayed with me, and, three years later I included Hinton in *Marabar Caves*, an exhibition based on a section from Forster’s 1924 novel *Passage to India*. But there is also a more tenuous and less exhibitionary reason for bringing in Forster, and in order to explain it, I need to talk about fairies.

When I was a small child, some construction was going on beside a suburban playground in Mont Albert, Naarm Melbourne. Whilst my parents were distracted, I left the perimeter and passed behind a hedge to a nearby clearing. Following a muddy path, I looked down and saw tiny footprints made by fairies in the wet, clay surface of the ground. Pairs of marks progressing along the sodden way. I seldom recall this memory, but it came to mind when I saw some paintings made by Hinton, when we first met in 2012. Organising an exhibition-exchange between Elam School of Fine Arts in Tāmaki Makaurau and Ōtautahi’s Ilam School of Fine Arts, I was looking for artworks to be included. Visiting the studios of Masters students, I encountered an enigmatic painting in medium-grey. Hinton had found a bucket of paint, remnants from that used on the floors of the Elam studios. Applying enamel to stretched canvas, caused the surface to crater and crackle. When I saw the finished work, I remarked that it reminded me of the fairy footprints in clay, and the artist was touched. Curiously, there are layers of encounters, each involving Forster, Hinton and myself. Recalling this childhood memory today, I am struck by the significance of my passing

TEXT:

Victoria Wynne-Jones

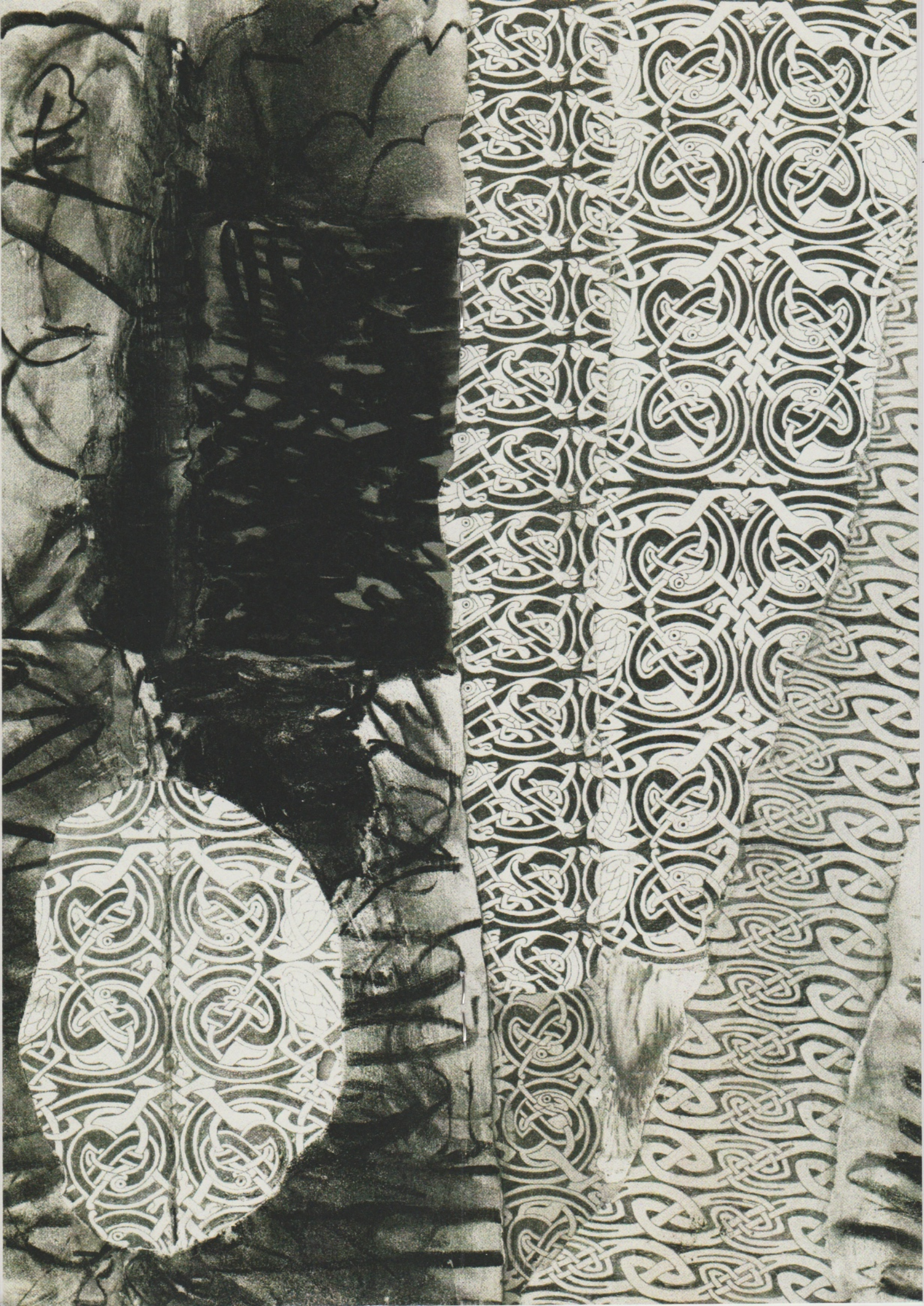
BETWEEN THE WORLDS
through to ‘the other side of the hedge’ and how this presaged an encounter with fairies. In fact, fairies form an important part of this text-construction, one that resembles the very piece-work of Hinton’s paintings.

From SEEMING- through to reading through

It is pertinent that it is a hedge and not a wall that separates the two realms in both Forster’s story and in my own. The border between this world and the next is porous, permeable, alive! There is a gentle obfuscation rather than a blockage of the entire visual field. One can see through the tangled boughs that separate one place from another. Something with more than one layer or level of meaning is again a palimpsest, and in the acts of reading such phenomena, one can switch in-between layers without even realising it. This layering of multiple texts and/or visual languages means that one can not only see-through, one can *read-through*.

Acts of *reading-through* are integral to the way in which Hinton accesses ancestral knowledge. Tracing his maternal lineage, the artist’s ancestors emigrated from Ireland and Scotland to Yorkshire and the Black Country. They were factory workers in brick and glass, who moved for work and due to the Highland clearances. He was born in Worcestershire but also lived in both Shropshire (Welsh marches) and Gwynedd (North Wales) before emigrating to South Auckland, Aotearoa in 2005 so that his mother could work as a teacher. In fact, drawings of the Shropshire hills are beginning to appear in Hinton’s newest artworks. In his research and during his frequent trips back to the UK, Hinton has observed *syncretism* at work, that is, the uneven way in which Celtic cosmologies and Christianity have combined themselves over time. Thus, one way the artist can access Celtic art is through the marginalia of the ancient Lindesfarne Gospels. When visiting a church Hinton found an Anglo-Saxon *sheela na gig* or figurative carving of a woman with a large vulva placed above a door, by the so-called pagan builders.⁷ In Hinton’s latest works *Angel, Ox, Eagle and Lion*, Celtic knotwork has amassed itself within the form of the cross. Visual languages and their attending world-views persist, they are co-present despite attempts at usurpation and destruction by colonising conventions. Through Cuddy’s *Salmon* there is the *Salmon of Wisdom*, and in Hinton’s contemporary art can be found the Celtic.

The persistence of such visual languages brings with them fragments of their attendant world views, something that is also evident in the way that Gaelic words persist in English languages. As Irish language specialist Manchán Magan explains, English itself is a palimpsest in which words from Irish, Scots Gaelic, Manx, Welsh and Breton can be found.⁸ For example, ‘brogue’ is from *bróg*, an Irish style of shoe with holes to let the rain and bog water out. ‘Galore’ is from *go leor*, meaning enough or plenty and ‘puss,’ as in ‘sourpuss,’ comes from Irish *pús*, a pouting mouth. The word ‘slew’ comes from the Irish *slua*, a crowd (or a mob, as seen in the etymology of ‘slogan’).⁹ In terms of the layering of languages, Magan argues that Irish contains insights and elements from “a Proto-Indo-European language spoken five



thousand years ago by nomadic tribes roaming the southeast European plains.”¹⁰ Magan makes the crucial point that:

rather than seeing Irish as a language of the past, it's more apt to regard it as a living remnant of a form of communication that has been used for millennia across swathes of Eurasia – one that recognises the animating spirit that infuses all things, and prioritises the welfare of the land and the soil's relationship with the plants and animals that feed and regenerate it.

Thus An Ghaeilge or Gaelic, as a living remnant has encoded within it accumulated knowledge that “is profoundly ecological, with an innately indigenous understanding that prioritises nature and the land above all things.”¹¹ According to Magan, the very structures of Gaelic mean that it can convey the complexity of an ecological biosphere that sustains human life and that with it can “perceive the underlying connections that our ancestors saw between all things.”¹² Magan adds that the “linguistic legacy” of Gaelic is its ability to convey the magic that “ancestors perceived in the natural world and the other-worldly realms that surround it.”

TEXT:

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In search of CULTURAL INHERITANCE

There are dangers in the pursuit of ancestral knowledges, after all, Celtic knotwork is a favourite motif for the tattoos of skinheads in Canterbury, Aotearoa New Zealand. Hinton's art-school colleague Balamohan Shingade has written about “the ways we may be led astray in our efforts to engage with ‘ancestral knowledges’ in our arts and cultural practices.”¹³ Though writing about the experience of being part of an Indian diaspora in Aotearoa New Zealand, Shingade's expression of caution is also extremely pertinent to Pākehā and other tangata tiriti artists like Hinton. Faced with “deracination” and a desire for continuity and a tethering to one's own, one might take up a traditional practice, as part of a search for cultural inheritance. However, at a time when right-wing movements argue for the importance of the de-colonial and indigenous, “a search for one's own cultural inheritance can become co-opted” and such “aspirations can be rerouted to support some noxious narratives.” As mentioned earlier, the very Celtic art Hinton explores has been co-opted to support racism and white supremacy. Shingade points out that having a sense of ethnic pride is not a helpful motivation for working with ancestral knowledges, as this can result in “simple rehearsals of dominant narratives.” The alternative is “looking for resources with which to turn to our present” and searching for the “relevance of our traditions for facing matters of justice.”

During a studio visit, discussion with Hinton turned to the class dimension of Shingade's arguments. In the context of Aotearoa and Australia, those from settler backgrounds, de-racinated from their ancestral knowledges might lack the resources or education to access these, turning instead to new age religions as a reaction to the disenfranchisement caused by capitalism. There is something about Hinton's works that recall the new-age crystal shop with its collections of tie-dye t-shirts featuring rainbows, wolves and grays; Stonehenge posters; CDs of Celtic music and whale song; books of mythologies; black plastic tattoo chokers and Claddagh rings. Hinton and I have a mutual enchantment with such spaces. I am reminded of arguments made by UK-based religious studies scholar Randall Styers, that “cultural survival” often necessitates an appeal to magic. Hence those with “strong proclivities to magic” are members of those groups “posing the spectre of social disruption: women, children, people of colour, members of lower social classes, other deviants.”¹⁴ Perhaps arts workers could be added to this list? According to this argument, magic can be a tool of emotional resilience, community formation and oppositional organising.¹⁵ Styers' thesis posits “that magic incites antisocial appetites and subversive passions among the dispossessed and thus places good order at risk.” Following this argument, the pursuit of magic is always-already counter-hegemonic, dovetailing with Shingade's point that artistic practices shared with a people's past (and perhaps even an imagined past) hold forms of power.¹⁶ As Shingade argues, it is important in any engagement with ancestral knowledge that one takes care to “redress their past and present prejudices and with egalitarian commitments. One must be “forward-looking and future-

AND

BETWEEN THE LINES

oriented" in one's approach to tradition and magic, seeking out "those who've registered social-political resistance from within such spaces" as "Dissenters, reformers and critical thinkers have always formed a part of tradition-based inquiry."

this living REMANENCE

Thus, the Celtic visual languages that persist, that are present in Hinton's artworks bring with them ecological world-views that perceive magic in the natural world and in the other-worldly realms that surround it. Such perspectives are invaluable during the climate emergency as they provide an alternative to perceiving nature as a mere resource to be exploited. When one harms the planet, one harms oneself. Catholic scholar John O'Donoghue has elucidated aspects of the Celtic spirituality and world-views emerging in Hinton's works which correspond to this way of thinking. According to O'Donoghue, this is "not a world of clear boundaries" in fact, everything is connected with a sense of "the fluent flow of presences in and out of each other."

The physical world was experienced as the shoreline of an invisible world which flowed underneath it and whose music reverberated upwards."¹⁷ Donoghue indicates that the Celtic imagination repudiates any "clinical certainties" which cause separation and isolation:

When saw themselves
as guests in a living,
breathing universe.
When had great
respect for the tenuous
regions between the
worlds and between the
times. The in-between
world was also the
world of in-between
times: between sowing
and reaping, pregnancy
and birth, intention
and action, the end of
one season and the

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beginning of another.¹⁸

Crucially, the presences who watched over such a world were known as fairies. For O'Donoghue, recognition of the fairy world "is recognition of the subtle presences that inhabit the interim places in experience" and fairies are especially at home in the air. A *fairy-fog* blurs outlines until "the interim kingdom becomes visible in a presence that is neither object nor light nor darkness."¹⁹ Donoghue describes the fairy world as one of "lightness and playfulness" one that is "not subservient to the normal laws of causality." Such a world is not just adjacent to the mortal world, it suffuses it with vitality and fluency, thus the Celtic world is "wild and rhythmic," the unexpected and the unknown constantly flow in on human presence and perception and by doing so enlarge them. A fundamental aspect to Celtic spirituality is that "the visible is only one little edge of things."²⁰

Hinton traffics in the in-between, his works are hybrid, ceramic-sculptural-printed-painting-drawings. The artist knowingly activates this space, what O'Donoghue has called "between the worlds and between the times" and that is why I cannot not write about fairies when thinking through them. The intricate latticework, tight spiralling coils, foliage and stylized animals with which Hinton's fills up sections of negative plaster spaces can be read as illustrations of fairy worlds. This patterning, these interlocking forms make up complex designs, like scales on a fish or beaten panels of armour. They remind viewers that animating spirits infuse all things, that the welfare of soil which feeds and regenerates plants, animals and us, is paramount and that there are connections between all things. That there is nothing but a gate of ivory, or a gate of horn or tangled brush that separates this world from the next.

- ¹ E. M. Forster, "The Other Side of the Hedge" in *Selected Stories* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 24–25.
- ² "Finnées," *Oxford Reference*, accessed 17 Feb. 2025, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authori-ty/20110803095819301>
- ³ St. Cuthbert and the Eagle, "Good Samaritan Parish," accessed 17 Feb. 2025, http://www.goodsamaritanparish.org.uk/images/Wel-comePages/St_Cuthbert_and_the_Eagle.pdf
- ⁴ Chris Baldick, "palimpsest," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Oxford University Press, 2015, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/odlpt/9780198715443.001.0001/acref-9780198715443-e-826>
- ⁵ Shearer West, (ed.) "Celtic Art," *The Bloomsbury Guide to Art*, 1st ed., Bloomsbury, 1996. Credo Reference, <https://search.credorefer-ence.com/articles/0m9va0fyd0j06UG0TMXNjlx?uid=256978>
- ⁶ This church is the setting for a murder in Ngao Marsh's 1970 novel *When in Rome*.
- ⁷ Thomas Hinton, email correspondence with the author, "Re: update and magic," 9 February, 2025.
- ⁸ Máchain Magan, *Thirty-two words for field: lost words of the Irish landscape* (London: Itaka Press, 2024), x.
- ⁹ Magan, x-xi.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, vii.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4–5.
- ¹² Balamohan Shingade, "Led astray from a cultural inheritance," *Satellites Magazine*, Issue 6, 9 August, 2024, <https://www.satellites.co.nz/magazine/issue-3/led-astray>
- ¹³ Randall Styers, "Magic and Social Control" in Jamie Sutcliffe (ed.) *MAGIC: Documents of Contemporary Art* (London: Cambridge, Massachusetts: Whitechapel Gallery, The MIT Press, 2021), 35–36
- ¹⁴ James Sutcliffe, "Introduction: Magic: A Grammar for Artists" in *MAGIC*, *ibid.*, 19.
- ¹⁵ Shingade, *ibid.*
- ¹⁶ John O'Donoghue, *Eternal Echoes: Celtic Reflections on our Yearning to Belong* (Harper Collins, 1999), 206.
- ¹⁷ O'Donoghue, *ibid.*, 207.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 208.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 210, 221.

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Victoria Wynne-Jones

THOM HINTON

creative nz

ARTS COUNCIL OF NEW ZEALAND TOI AOTEAROA

This publication and text are part of the
the show 'Annwn' at play_station artist
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Design:

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Images:

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