Left to right:

The Big Sky: 'White Stable', 2012, by Amelia Stein. © Amelia Stein, RHA

The Floating World, from Clare Langan's 2013 Skelligs Series. Photograph: Collection of the Arts Council/Clare Langan

Border Road, 1994 by Willie Doherty. Photograph: AIB Art Collection/Willie Doherty & Kerlin Gallery

BIG COUNTRY

The National Gallery of Ireland's new exhibition combines works from its collection with contemporary explorations of our relationship with our landscapes

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Landscape emerged gradually as a subject in Western art, beginning as the backdrop to the foreground activities of deities, mythological protagonists, royalty and aristocracy, peasants and pilgrims. Once landscape had emerged as a source of interest in itself there was no stopping it.

It is fair to say, though, that its backdrop status persisted in the sense that, even in epic visualisations of the sublime, say, natural majesty evokes divine power in contrast to human insignificance. God is pulling the strings.

In 1975, bringing things down to earth somewhat, the geographer Jay Appleton proposed that our aesthetics of landscape hinge on a prospect-refuge duality: our evolutionary history meant that we were likely to judge an environment, and representations of an environment, in terms of the scope and, on the other hand, the protection it might offer.

From a Marxist perspective, John Berger famously analysed Gainsborough's portrait of a land-owning couple on their estate as an assertive declaration of class, privilege and ownership, a neat bundle of prospect and refuge. In Shaping Ireland, Robert Hunter's portrait of landowner Peter Le Touche from 1775 facilitates a comparable interpretation.

In a similar vein, more recently, Gerard Byrne juxtaposed photographs of the Guinness Brewery in Dublin with a Guinness estate in Co Wicklow, underlining the unstated connection. That, or one of his Beckett Waiting for Godot photographs, seems like the ideal Byrne to include, though the photograph that is included, of the Phoenix Park deer herd, descendants of the herd introduced by the Duke of Ormond in the 17th century, has a similar import.

Given the scale of the subject, Shaping Ireland: Landscapes in Irish Art risks sounding like a more comprehensive exhibition than it is. A more accurate description might be Irish landscape, as shaped by human activity and intervention, in art. Two structural patterns of organisation emerge in a show that includes 72 works by artists spanning a period of 250 years: one is to juxtapose landscape works from the NGI's historical collection with contemporary approaches to landscape.

"The collection was the starting point," as curator Donal Maguire puts it. This works out in a very direct and straightforward way and, refreshingly, it's not a case of contemporary artists patronising their blinkered precursors.

Maguire notes that: "It was gratifying to discover so many connections between artists who lived hundreds of years apart" or, indeed mere decades. Numerous fruitful and illuminating dialogues and correspondences are evident. Outstanding works by Evie Hone, Mainie Jellett and Norah McGuinness, for example, all seem to talk directly to Mairead O'hEocha's recent view of the railings on St Stephen's Green.

The second structural element is how artists relate to a landscape that is never purely or entirely "natural", but shaped to a greater or lesser extent. You could say landscape in the Anthropocene era, because that is the starkly topical thrust, but the start date of the Anthropocene is still not quite agreed. Currently the generally accepted date at which the level of human activity tipped over from registering on the planetary environment to decisively and detrimentally impacting on it is around the mid-20th century.

Outside of any strict definition the Anthropocene, as concept and phenomenon, is a constant preoccupation in Shaping Ireland. Even though the earliest works included date back to the 18th century – two excellent, richly informative topographical studies, of Beleek and Ballyshannon, by Thomas Roberts – they are all about people occupying, shaping and changing the land. Oddly, though Nano Reid often painted the packed archaeological terrain of the Boyne Valley, she is represented in the show by a West Cork landscape. But the antiquarian George Petrie's watercolour of Dún Aonghasa on Inis Mór does dramatically evoke an even earlier era of shaping, on a monumental scale.

That should surprise no one. The arrival of humans usually signalled the beginning of conspicuous and, often, problematic environmental practices. Extinctions and destruction followed in our wake pretty much from the beginning. Not that life was idyllic before us – ask a dinosaur – but humans were and are the bull in planet Earth's china shop.

Shaping Ireland is arranged thematically, in five chunks (wild areas, settlements, agriculture, parks and gardens, and industry) rather than chronologically, with 12 texts by interested observers with various specialties. Natural history filmmakers Cepa Giblin and John Murray don't gild the lily. The wild Ireland they depict is, they acknowledge, a highly selective edit that simply ignores "the grim reality of much of the Irish countryside . . . there is hardly a square foot of truly wild natural ground left on the island."

Idealised representations

Naturally, such selectivity is not confined to filmmakers. Attitudes to and representations of landscape are habitually framed by cultural imperatives and considerations, and virtually every representation of landscape is a pictorial construct (even those made casually with a smartphone). Witness William Ashford's Claudian, though topographically faithful, views of Dublin from vantage points north and south of the Liffey. Equally, George Barret's beautiful View of Powerscourt Waterfall. Or the progressively idealised representations of the West of Ireland in the work of Paul Henry and others. Not surprisingly, incidentally, the show includes work by Henry at his best. Amelia Stein seems to comment on this romanticising tradition with her photograph The Big Sky.

Visiting the West of Ireland pre-Famine, William Evans of Eton managed to see beyond the picturesque and document a great deal of the poverty and appalling conditions endured by the local people. Jackie Nickerson's photographic project Ten Miles Round is a remarkable attempt to look beyond a selectively framed fragment of nature and convey a sense of the character of a rural townland, its managed and worked landscapes, its inhabitants, the often inelegant merging of form and function. Her print, Hunterstown, from that series, with rainwater pooled in the furrows of a ploughed field, unevenly pruned trees burdened with thick masses of ivy and a cold, wintry feeling, is an eloquent account of actual, agricultural, rural Ireland. Among painters, Martin Gale has also been scrupulous in reflecting the thorny reality of rural life over decades.

Given pride of place in Shaping Ireland, Nick Miller's magnificent From Cogan's Shed is one of his truckscapes. It was painted from his mobile studio, an open-backed truck, and its paint-spattered walls are visible at the edges of the composition. Between them there is a vast undulating sprawl of unruly terrain, not fertile exactly, but fields and scrubland dense with growth, and imbued with bursts of the heightened greens indicative of the nitrogenous fertilisers referred to by Ella McSweeney in her text on Ireland's colour – she cites the non-green Burren, represented in its non-flowering, pure limestone season in Barrie Cooke's fine painting. Miller's is a farmed and managed landscape, but there is still something primal and wild in its teeming, unstoppable energy, conveyed in his even, minutely detailed attention to every living piece of the picture surface. It bears interesting comparison with Basil Blackshaw's excellent, post-harvest The Field, painted 50 years earlier.

Geographer Anna Davis points out that the culture versus nature template is flawed in that we are inescapably a part of nature and not apart from it. Clare Langan has long made film and photographic works that anticipate the world post-environmental disaster. What is most disturbing about her work is that it feels less and less futuristic and more like reportage. Equally, Willie Doherty's stark photograph of a blockaded border crossing has an unfortunate topicality.

Shaping Ireland is not definitive or categorical. It is very easy to compile a list of artists, past and present, who do not feature but would certainly merit inclusion on the basis of their exploration of landscape. Rather, especially given the 12 perspectives offered by the diverse contributors to the accompanying publication, it resembles a series of observations and talking points, and it does well in inviting discussion rather then telling us what's what.

In that, it seems ideally pitched as an educational resource, not just in terms of art past and present but also in terms of a broad span of pressing ideas and issues, from climate change to planning.

Shaping Ireland: Landscapes in Irish Art
Curated by Donal Maguire. National Gallery of Ireland, Merrion Square/Clare Street, Dublin, until July 7th Tickets €15/€10/€5, Friends and under-18s free
nationalgallery.ie