



GORT MHAOILIR

## The Myler Fields

A Public Art Commission by James L Hayes  
& The Residents of Gort Mhaoilir, Athenry, Galway  
Galway County Council Public Art Programme

# Marilyn Gauhgan

Galway County Council Arts Officer

The Galway County Council Public Art Programme offers opportunities for artists to engage with the County, making new work that responds to the context of the diverse and creative cultural landscape of the County. The Programme intends to create connections and collaboration between different areas of the council's work and interconnection between art, artist, county and the public.

We were very fortunate to have James L Hayes work on this project, it was imaginative, fun and vibrant and it responded to its environment in a creative and meaningful way while maintaining a strong social engagement aspect.

I hope that all who took part are proud of their achievements, a talented choir, a beautiful film, intricate sculptures and a fabulous publication. The community in Gort Mhaoilir should be extremely proud of what they have achieved in this project both socially and artistically. I think this project provided a sense of pride in the community and through the creative process the project became a focus for community to develop further and I would like to think that lasting friendships have been forged through the process. I think that new skills, new friends, new experiences will enrich life in the community for years to come, while the project will have concluded, every family will receive a copy of this beautiful publication as part of the legacy of the project.

I would like to express my thanks and gratitude to the Artist James L Hayes, whose vision, expertise, artistic ability has made this project what it is. It was a truly remarkable project, delivered by a truly remarkable artist. It was a great pleasure to know him and to work with him.

Marilyn Gaughan Reddan.



# About the Project

The main focus of this project was to make an artwork work that centred on the residents, or the community in [Gort Mhaoilir](#) housing estate in [Athenry](#). The central body of the work has taken the form of a performative and inclusive community 'choir' made up of a diverse range of participants from all age groups. After numerous weeks of rehearsals the [Gort Mhaoilir](#) Residents choir performed on the central estate, in the green area, and this performance was recorded, this recording forms the central piece/body of this public art project.

The choir performs the song most associated or synonymous with their home and town land, [The Fields of Athenry](#). The emphasis of the performance aims to investigate ideas related to the misconception of this song and the strange and anachronistic time period it inhabits; it is a recently composed ballad that pertains, or is often assumed to be, from the mid 19th century. As well as having an ambiguous temporality the song has also transcended its spatial references becoming an anthem of the sports terraces in Ireland and further afield. Furthermore, across the globe it has become a symbol of Irish identity.

The [Gort Mhaoilir Estate](#) was recently built on the fields that occupy the periphery of the historic and medieval town of [Athenry](#). This site seemed the ideal point at which to probe the ambiguities of this song, which is so layered in its resonances, its sense of place and ideas about a unique Irish identity. I also wanted to situate this sense of 'Irishness' within the context of multi-culturalism by engaging residents from diverse backgrounds who are intrinsically connected to the 'fictional' site of the song. It was hoped that the sense of place so strongly evoked by the song could be replicated by the residents in their coming together to perform as a choir thus generating a sense of community within their new estate.

An additional part of the project was to work with the younger members of the GME and to install a small permanent sculpture trail that is composed of bronze casts/works made and manipulated by the younger members of the [Gort Mhaoilir Community](#). These works are composed of casts of children hands, indexical drawings inscribed onto wax plates, and multiple casts of objects which the children donated and which act as tokens or traces of their time spent in the community of [Gort Mhaoilir](#).

Finally just to add my sincerest thanks and kindest appreciation to all the great people of the GME and it goes without saying that this project would not have been a reality without their wonderful hard work, commitment and trust. I want to thank them all again for this great leap of faith with me and for always welcoming me so warmly and openly into their unique community.

James L Hayes September 2014

## Sarah Kelleher

Independent art critic & curator responds to  
Gort Mhaoilir Public Art Project & The Myler Fields film work.



Gort Mhaoilir is a small, relatively new estate on the outskirts of Athenry. It consists of fifty or so crisply modern houses, set around a well-kept green. We see it on a breezy day in high summer, the bright sunlight translating into black and white film as strong contrast, deep shadow and blazing highlights. We see a high metal fence, one of those industrial ones that end in spear-like points bent back at an angle. Behind that is an un-mown 'field', more honestly a patch of waste ground, albeit blooming with some kind of spiky flowering grass. The camera dwells on the wind moving through this abundant, vigorous growth. On the neat green area, surrounded by houses, a small crowd is arranged in two arcing lines, one positioned slightly behind the other. There are men and women, teenagers and tiny children, they are as mixed in ethnicity as they are in age. As one they break in to song. They sing 'The Fields of Athenry'.

Although lyrically, it's a desperately maudlin song, it has been adopted by various sports clubs as a rousing terrace anthem, and has become something of shorthand for Irish-ness. It can be heard around the world, in sports grounds or late at night, after a few pints. The melody is undeniably anthemic – full of long sustained notes, as if composed specifically to be sung at volume, in a crowd. Its misconstrued as an old song, a traditional lament, marking the hardships of Irish peasant life during the Great Famine. But it was only written in the 1970's.

Back to the crowd on the green. Men and women, young and old, black and white, all smiling in the sunshine, although some uncertainly. They are a choir, although not a professional one. A certain restiveness is evident, particularly among the smaller children, who are visibly distracted by their companions, or by action going on off screen. The singing is characterized by its rawness – we can make out individual voices, some strong, some wavering, some hovering closer to the tune than others. A choir is a form of community in microcosm; a group of individuals coming together for a common purpose, and like this choir, the community of Gort Mhaoilir is relatively new. The housing estate on the outskirts of Athenry is only 5 years old, and it is managed partly by Clúid and partly by Galway County Council. What this means in essence, is that some of the residents might have had little choice in moving to this estate.

As per their website, 'Since its establishment in 1994, Clúid has provided 4,824 properties to low income families and single people, older people, people with a disability and Traveler families all over Ireland. Clúid provides good quality housing and services to enable people to create homes and thriving communities. In this way, Clúid aims to greatly enhance the sense of 'home' and 'community'. A group of houses does not

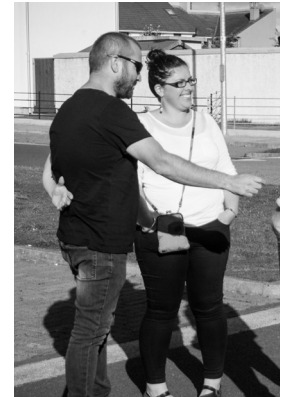
automatically guarantee a sense of community however; community ties and bonds are built over time, from shared histories. How can an artist help to generate or jumpstart a sense of community among a disparate group of individuals who may have little link to the area in which they find themselves? As the public art commissioning group Situations put it, 'community is rarely built out of geography, but rather out of common purpose.' For this commission, James L Hayes, primarily a sculptor and filmmaker, settled on the idea of a choir, a powerful signifier for group effort and for community, and the song Fields of Athenry would not be denied. Of course that's what they should sing. They live in Athenry.

Gorgeously shot, the film has the glamorous sheen of a top shelf perfume ad, and this high gloss production jars in a curious but satisfying way with the quotidian incidental details that populate it – children on bikes, a dog ambling along behind the action, a kid on a scooter rubbernecking the goings-on. This 'jarring' quality is perhaps what is most compelling about Hayes' film. The Fields of Athenry is of course, intimately identified with the town, although it was written by Pete St. John, a Dubliner. It is based on a fictional story, constructed of various mawkish clichés. There is no real connection between the song and Athenry, other than that it uses the town's name. It's a muddle of misconception and mis-information, and the ultimate cliché of kitschy cod-Irishness. The ambiguity of the song becomes compelling when taken up by this newly formed choir, in this newly built estate, populated by what some commentators call the 'new' Irish.

Community, identity and sense of place are nuanced, multi-layered, complex concepts. What on the surface might seem like a simple idea – an amateur choir singing a familiar song set in their home town, is actually a more loaded and, ultimately perhaps, more profound proposition. What does being Irish look like or mean now? What, if anything, can familiar tropes of identity and place offer new communities? Can an artwork really aspire to engendering a sense of community? As an addition to the project, Hayes also involved the younger residents of Gort Mhaoilir to help him design a sculpture trail of small bronze plaques that will be installed around the estate. This more conventional element throws into relief the potential for inclusive, participatory gestures such as the Gort Mhaoilir Residents Choir. It is not a given that the choir will continue once this project finished, although the plaques hopefully, will remain in situ for as long as the houses stand, but links have been made, between the residents and the local music school, and of course between the members of the choir themselves. The Gort Mhaoilir Residents Choir asks us to consider what community is and how a sense of belonging comes about, and these are ideas with a life span far beyond the project that generated it.

Sarah Kelleher.

[http://www.cluid.ie/About\\_Cluid/Default.86.html](http://www.cluid.ie/About_Cluid/Default.86.html)  
Claire Doherty, *The New Rules of Public Art*, Bristol, 2013, p.6

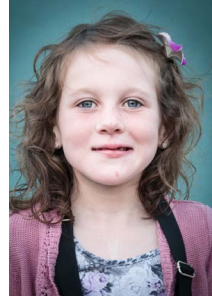


# The Gort Mhaoilir Choir

The choir were rehearsed over seven weeks during the summer of 2014 with kind support and assistance of the Athenry Music School.



Emily Le Cuiche



Faye Turner



Tony & Leo Coffey



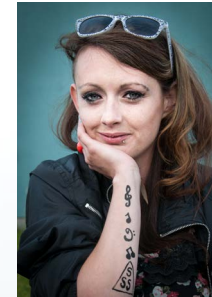
Tony Coffey



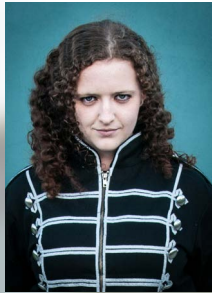
Leo Coffey



Keiran & Ann Connolly



Shelly Carroll



Heather O'Callaghan



Jasmine Tracy



Alexia Bills



Sandra, Michelle, Christabel & Anita Ayeh Gyomera



Tracy Turner



Tracy & Faye Turner



Yvonne Reddan & Caroline Crowe



Yvonne Reddan



Caroline Crowe



Jimmy Erskine



Ruairi & Jimmy Erskine



Maureen Conlon



Sinead Ademonye



Mary Ryan



Therese & Mary Carter



Therese Carter



Mary Carter



Ann Connolly



Suzanne O' Keefe



## The Gort Mhaoilir Choir

As seen on film work on DVD.

Back row - from left to right:

Heather O Callaghan, Yvonne Reddan, Tony Coffey, Jimmy Erskine, Leo Coffey, Mary Ryan, Shelley Carroll, Suzanne O'Keeffe, Ann Connolly, Maureen Conlon, Caroline Crowe, Therese Carter, Mary Carter, Crystal Reddan, Tracy Turner.

Front row - from left to right:

Faye Turner, Jasmine Tracy, Naomi Sheridan, Loughnan O'Keeffe, Sinead Ademoney, Christabel Ayeh Gyomera, Kieran Connolly, Ava Lilly Connolly, Michelle Ayeh Gyomera.

About the Artist:

## James L Hayes



James L Hayes is a multi disciplinary contemporary visual artist and lecturer in fine art sculpture at The CIT Crawford College of Art in Cork, he is a graduate of Limerick School of Art & Design, The University of Vigo, Spain, De Montfort University Leicester and the University of London, UK. His practice is wide ranging and diverse he works continually on both large scale commissioned artworks and has also a sustained gallery based practice where he explores ongoing ideas and concepts via the production of sculptures, multiple sculptural installations, moving diorama's and digital film and sound works

He has exhibited both nationally and internationally in recognised museums and galleries and recent large scale works were featured at West Cork Arts Centre, Redline Contemporary Denver Colorado, a temporary site-specific sculptural work was on display in Camden Fort Meagher in Cork .In 2006, 2007, 2008, 2012 and 2013 he received awards from the Irish Arts Council to attend Sculpture Symposia and residencies in New Mexico, New York and Denver Colorado. In 2011 he received funding from The Imagine Ireland program from Culture Ireland to complete a one person show at The Good Children Gallery in New Orleans.

He has been awarded numerous significant per cent for art commissions, most recently for Galway County Council, Ardscoil Ris & Healy Partner Architects in Limerick , Cork County Council, Cork City Council and Mayo County Council.

Please see [www.jameslhayes.ie](http://www.jameslhayes.ie) for additional recent works and projects.



About the Production Team:

## Ramona Burke

Project Assistant & Artist



Ramona Burke is a visual artist based in Galway City. She graduated from GMIT in 2012 with first class honours in Fine Art Sculpture and was awarded Sculpture Student of the Year along with the Galway Arts Centre 'Graduate Mentored Residency Award' and the LORG Printmakers 'Graduate Bursary Award'. Her work mainly deals with ideas around Landscape and she works with photography and sculpture.



## Katharine Mannion

Choral & Musical Advisor



Katharine Mannion has a starred 1st class degree in Music from NUI Maynooth. She founded Athenry Music School in 2007, which now has 25 teachers and a student body of over 400. Katharine is a conductor, composer and pedagogue with over 20 years experience and has travelled extensively as a violinist, fiddler and lecturer.



## Eilish Coppinger

Choral Instruction



Eilish Coppinger holds a Bachelor of Music from the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, and a Professional Diploma in Education (Music) from the University of Limerick. She has been played both flute and piano from a young age, and now specialises in flute. She has been a member of many choirs and ensembles, including NUIM Choral Society. Eilish now teaches in Athenry Music School and is actively involved with Athenry Youth Choir and Cór le Chéile community choir.



## Ramona Burke, Artist & The Project Assistant spoke to some of the Gort Mhaoilir Residents shortly after their experience of taking part in the project.

Present was: **Maureen "Mo' Conlon, Caroline Crowe, Ann Connolly, Suzanne "Suzi' O'Keefe, Tracy Turner, Mary Ryan, Mary Carter, Therese Carter, Shelley Carroll, Heather O Callaghan, Sophie Le Cuiche, Emily Le Cuiche & Sinead Ademonye**

**Ramona:** What do you think about the project? What are your thoughts on the project as of now?

**Mo:** For me, from my experience, I thought it was wonderful because I'm only in the estate about 4 months and only for the project I wouldn't have met all these lovely people (\*laughter from others...yeahhh\*) ... no I'm being serious, because it was lovely, it can be lonely living there on your own you know and I've made lots and lots of friends – it was brilliant. I thought it was lovely, really lovely, a really lovely experience.

**Ramona:** Have you ever done anything like this before ...individually or even as part of a group?

**Mo:** No

**Caroline:** No

**Ann:** No

**Suzi:** I certainly haven't, I used to joke that I wouldn't sing to my babies because they'd only cry harder (\*laughter from everyone\*). I'd sing along to CD's instead, I was terrified by the thought of it but I just decided to jump in with both feet and into the community mentality



**Group:** yeah, yeah, same as that

**Mary:** I remember I went to see the 'D'Unbelievables' once and I was really terrified because they do all this audience stuff and I was thinking "don't pick me, don't pick me", don't put me on the spot", because I don't like being a kind of performer or participant in something like that, so this was quite good for me really and it reminded me of when I was young I used to love to sing and I used to sing in the church choir. So I don't sing anymore because the my voice is not as reliable and every Tuesday night I'd be thinking "Oh sugar I don't want to go up there, I want to stay in and watch the telly"...but I would go and I would enjoy the singing!

**Tracey:** yeah

**Mary:** I always enjoyed the singing

**Mo:** yeah

**Suzi:** yeah

**Ann:** yeah

**Caroline:** yeah

**Mary:** Once I got there

**Shelly:** yeah it makes you feel better

**Tracey:** yeah I'd be in great form after the singing

**Ann:** everyday my child Kieran would be singing Fields of Athenry...everyday!

**Ramona:** What did ye think of the project guys?

**Sinead:** it was interesting

**Ramona:** and what did you think Emilie?

**Emilie:** it was fun

**Ramona:** Would ye have ever seen any artwork that was a choir or that involved a choir?

**Suzi:** only saw choirs on Youtube

**Sophie:** in school there was a choir

**Mary:** When I was in school we had a wonderful school choir but then they got a new music teacher and the rule was you couldn't be in the choir unless you could sight read

**Heather:** We used to have one as well but then the teacher stopped doing it and I'd like there to be one

**Ramona:** Did you find the project difficult?

**Mo:** No

**Shelly:** No

**Mary:** No

**Suzi:** It was great craic but the commitment surprisingly enough was hard

**Heather:** It was easy enough

**Suzi:** Did you find it easy? I found it was always that we seemed to be in the middle of doing something and we couldn't go

**Mo:** yes I understand I think it was difficult where there was people that have young children, it was easy for me because I have no commitments

**Suzi:** it was a bit awkward to get to the practice because it is at the end of the day, you're knackered and thinking I can't be bothered to go but once you got there it was just brilliant and it was lovely to meet everyone because you wouldn't normally actually hang out together...but everyone was lovely

**Caroline:** yeah but it's all gone quiet now, It's gone back to normality we don't see ye now

**Suzi:** but even if we don't see each other now as

much that the project is finished at least we know a bit more about each other and what's going on for one another so we'd stop and say hello now

**Ann:** but we don't see each other as much now the practice is over

**Mary:** but we're more likely to stop now and have a chat and not just a quick hi, hi, bye.

**Suzi:** we know a little bit more about one another

**Tracey:** I'm normally waving and beeping at everyone now

**Ramona:** Would you say the project has assisted you in coming together as a community? What would you say are the drawbacks or the benefits of the project?



**Mo:** it definitely got us together

**Ann:** yeah definitely

**Tracey:** yeah

**Mary:** the outing was lovely

**Tracey:** but even the outings to the choir practice

**Mo:** yeah – it was so positive

**Tracey:** it was so completely different from anything we would normally be doing

**Suzi:** I think it did give us more of a community spirit

**Tracey:** I think it was good because it came at a good time because it has really been 4 years in the making. If it had been when we first moved into the estate it wouldn't have worked because you are busy settling into a new life and busy trying to make your own home but then after a while things settle down and you begin to notice your neighbours and realise you're surrounded by these people every day

**Ann:** You have to get on like

**Mo:** Yeah you have to

**Suzi:** you realise you need to respect one another

**Tracey:** I used to live on a different estate and there was no interaction between people. It was like a ghost estate sometimes. I like to know my neighbours and I like to know people a little bit more. There's more security even when you know the people around you.

**Caroline:** yeah exactly even when kids are around

**Ann:** yeah

**Mo:** yeah

**Mary:** the timing was very good

**Ramona:** What do you understand as socially engaged art?

**Group:** no – not really

**Mo:** art is a big term – it can be very wide

**Suzi:** it's quite a broad spectrum

**Mo:** yes it can be anything, it can be music, it can be dance, it can be anything

**Mary:** I think it's yet to be revealed because yes okay we all stood on the green in a line and sang our parts and it was sort of performance and it was being filmed but it's impossible really to predict what the film will look like at this stage because it has been edited and it will be interesting to see it.

**Mo:** I love the Fields of Athenry song now!

**Heather:** my brother keeps starting to sing it

**Ann:** Kieran doesn't stop singing it every day.

**Tracey:** you're not going to know it's socially engaged art until you see the art piece

**Suzi:** not necessarily

**Mary:** the DVD is the art piece and that's not made yet

**Ramona:** I think though it's more about the process really – you can realise the different levels of the project from the day-to-day practicalities of going to a choir practice and fitting that into your life, there's the social aspect of meeting all new people, there's the filming process and then there's the process of the film getting edited and being presented back to the participants

**Mary:** I suppose I could compare it to painting and the whole process involved in that, making the stretchers, priming the canvas etcetera that a lot of people wouldn't realise when they look at a painting

**Ramona:** I think that's all the questions I have...unless there's any more feedback you want to give?

**Shelly:** I just want to say that I had the most amazing and brilliant time doing it, it was so much fun I enjoyed every minute of it and I'm sorry it's ended

**Mary:** I liked the idea it was the summer and I thought the timing was really good

**Tracey:** yeah it was brilliant

Ramona Burke & The Gort Mhaoilir Residents  
Raheen Woods Hotel, Athenry, Galway – 2/09/2014

## Acknowledgements

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The residents committee of Gort Mhaoilir: Tracy Turner-Chairperson, Zimele Brown-Vice Chair, Glenda Keady Treasurer, Laura Smith -Secretary

County Mayor Cllr Mary Hoade for launching the project

Ramona Burke – Artist & Project Assistant

Katharine Mannion - Musician & Director - Athenry Music School

Eilish Coppinger - Musician & Music Teacher - Athenry Music School

Photography - Darren Ryan [www.darrenryanphotography.ie](http://www.darrenryanphotography.ie),

Additional images by James L Hayes & Mary Ryan, Artist - Gort Mhaoilir

Brian Cronin - Independent film maker & film making advisor to the project & post production.

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Shane Cahill - Designer

Sarah Kellegher – Critical writer & Independent Curator

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Gort Mhaoilir



James Hayes Group  
Railway Countersign

[www.jameshayes.ie](http://www.jameshayes.ie)