



Photos: Alan Keane
Left: View from porthole.
Right: Painting log book.

Artists Practice

THE MARITIME WORLD OF CHARTS, MAPS AND SOFT ROCK

ALAN KEANE'S DIARY OF HIS TIME ABOARD THE MARINE INSTITUTE'S SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH VESSEL THE CELTIC EXPLORER

An important strand of my artistic practice has always been the relevance of place. My travels as an artist over the years have brought me to many locations including the Baltic States and Central Europe. The experience of different people, languages, rivers, history, architecture and light have informed my decisions as to how I make art.

Last year, I was artist in residence on the Marine Institute's scientific research vessel, The Celtic Explorer based in Galway. My artistic output has always drawn inspiration from the sea. Without the sea – no rivers, no rain, no life. We play at its edges and we understand very little about it. Is it warming, is it rising. How does it work and what is down there? Less than one hundredth of a per cent of the ocean floor has been mapped. It still scares us.

For five years I have been in touch, on and off, with the Marine Institute about the possibility of getting a berth on board its ship. Eventually after several meetings and emails my perseverance paid off, thanks to the late Ray Keary, Carol Maloney and John Breslin of the Marine Institute. I was also grateful to receive a grant from the Arts Council to fund this project. This self initiated residency offered me a period of time away from distractions: noise, bars, cars, and so on, in order to concentrate for one month on developing my practice in new and interesting ways.

Prior to going on board, I had to undertake a sea survival course. This was very informative and entertaining. It involved wearing white boiler suits, jumping from heights into swimming pools and watching 1970's educational videos on how heated spuds placed under your armpits can help counteract hypothermia. The boat left Galway on June 29 with 13 crew members and 15 personnel comprising scientists, engineers, surveyors, geologists, data processors and one artist – me. At this stage I was aware that our survey operation would take place roughly 200kms west of Donegal, that it was a dry ship (no alcohol) and I would be sharing a cabin. I had a rough idea about the seabed survey. I had my inventory of artistic tools, 35mm camera, video camera, tripod, paper, ink, acrylic, brushes, books, notebooks, mini-disc player, recorded music, microphone and headphones. I wondered what my sea legs would be like.

June 29

Out at sea now about two hours. Sharing a cabin with an English geologist. He doesn't snore, which is good. Feels like a lazy calm dream with the hum of the engine. Breakfast 7.30am. The head scientist is a Russian, with French, Italians and English on board. First impressions: calming numbed sense of elation. I am still getting used to the layout of the ship, the dry lab, the wet lab, the galley. Walking is difficult. The crew who work on deck wear orange suits. Feeling a bit un-centred. No plan yet as to how begin work. I listen the seamen tell sea tales about an elephant who was washed ashore on Tory island from a circus – the King of the island asked for cement to cover the elephant to stop the spread of diseases and then used the cement for all the driveways on the island and left the elephant exposed. I listen to stories of African seas with beautiful sunsets and flying fish.

June 30

My iron stomach works. Blue grey day, with gulls, no sign of land. Painted on deck as gannets and dolphins fly and swim by. I go up to the bridge and then climb up to the crow's nest, my smallest studio – a glass enclosed space with barely enough room for one person to stand and observe. It starts to get rough. White on top and deep green blue below. Up here you get to feel what it must be like to sway like a classic drunk. Tranquil dream feeling still with me as I read 150 feet up surrounded only by ocean. Everybody seems to speak low, almost tuning into the hum of the engine. A lot of people seem to be seasick. The language of science intrigues me – listening to the geophysicists discussing research experiences.

July 1

Sea is rougher and darker. I begin work in my painting logbook. The crew assist the scientists as they drop the magnetometer, a torpedo shaped device that measures the earth's magnetic crust. The sun seeps through and a blue sky appears warming up my face as I read the forecast for tomorrow. Storm conditions are due, up to 70 mph winds. I look forward to it. My work is coming along well.

July 2

I paint a large painting as the boat rolls and the paint moves back and forward. The weather changes for the worse. I go up to the bridge to record and witness the storm. Walls of ink black waves crash and roll the ship. Then the captain gets a mayday call to rescue a sinking yacht. Up on the bridge with lights off we turn in to the oncoming waves. The ship creaks and groans. Bins spill and computers fall onto the ground. Silence except for the radio calls to and from a helicopter and lifeboat. At three in the morning the storm still rages. I go down to the mess room, as furniture moves and pans clatter and clank in the galley. I try to sleep in the cabin but cannot as the boat rolls continuously and loose stuff falls, and then the screwed down stereo flies across the room.

July 5

I write down the weather. Forecast for the week ahead is Payne's Grey all the way with zinc white. Time turns fast as we go back and forth mapping the ocean floor. I would like to lie on grass. Mood changes up and down. Rhythm is found in moving things – like waves in motion in the ocean. Dusk deepens around the boat as a ship silently passes by all lit up as if by red and yellow lanterns. Later on one of the crew tells me it was the Calamity Jane the world's largest pipe layer. Meet with the scientists in the dry lab (where all the scientists operate the technology that creates the maps) and ideas for my work change direction.

July 7

We arrive at Killybegs for two hours to take on board a Russian scientist. Walking on non-moving land feels strange. Feel dizzy and unnerved. Crew go off to the pub. Hear the news of the London bombs.

July 9

Geologists take box core samples from the seabed. Scientists seem to seek logical and measured understanding of the world. They find it hard to accept the abstract as truth. All the visual charts and maps overawe me. In the evening, off to sleep in the relaxing rolling bunk. Every night I have specific lucid dreams.

July 10

Mist rises and falls, but never clears. Silvery purple sea. I take some photos and film some footage. It is important to systematically piece things together, to see how well certain practices can co-exist. Getting crow's nest fever. An unfathomable mist surrounds us.

July 11

Bright blue day at last, crewmen paint and weld parts of the ship. I paint and watch as one of the seamen fishes from the deck. Mist again. Back to the wet lab, crew catch mackerel, which we eat two hours later for dinner glazed in honey.

July 12

I collect the discarded maps and charts showing backscatter from the multibeam. The data is beautiful. Art does not reproduce what we see. Rather, it makes us see. It is my desire to try and understand the essence behind the appearance of the sea, find out about the colours deep down below. Ultramarine – from beyond the sea.

July 14

A quick two hour stop in Killybegs, for crew changeover and three pints. Leaving we pass by the largest sea cliffs in Europe. At times I feel bored and then a sudden awareness of where I am. Sitting in the wet lab,

working on my blue desk with the open door to the sea, with light shining in as I paint in my logbook. Grace to be born and live as variously as possible.

July 17 – 18

Backscatter charts show the complexity of the ocean bed. An acoustic beam is sent down and is reflected back up to reveal the hard and soft rock areas. Painting from the backscatter charts. From the measured to the abstract. It interests me how a sound sent down to the ocean deep creates these beautiful tonal maps.

July 19 – 25

Crew and scientists look forward to land, families and loved ones. I make great progress in my work and begin to imagine what direction my work will go in when I get back on solid ground. The daily routine is over and the feeling of space and colour changes as the busy port awaits. Say goodbye to crew and scientists and set foot on grey stone with my bags, stories, paintings and footage.

It's been six months since my time at sea and I long to go back again. I got confirmation of a berth on a deep sea fishing survey in April, but unfortunately I cannot get time off work. Hopefully this summer I will be out again.

Alan Keane