

# ARUSHA

## GALLERY

### **Fiona Finnegan – November Eve**

Matt Price

In her 1887 anthology *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms and Superstitions of Ireland*, Lady Jane Wilde (1821–96) – an Irish poet, nationalist and mother of Oscar – using her nom de plume of Speranza, asserted that ‘on November Eve it is believed firmly that the dead really leave their graves and have power to appear amongst the living’.<sup>1</sup> She continues by offering an account of an unsuspecting young farm girl unable to escape apparitions of a man she knew to have been murdered (and, more importantly, she knew by whom he was murdered), followed by anecdotes of malevolent fairies adversely affecting the fortunes of good honest people. In an earlier section of the publication, entitled ‘Legends of the Dead in the Western Islands’, the story ‘November Eve’ advises that on All Hallows’ Eve ‘mortal people should keep at home [...] for the souls of the dead have power over all things on that one night of the year; and they hold a festival with the fairies, and drink red wine from the fairy cups, and dance to fairy music till the moon goes down’.<sup>2</sup> Our protagonist, a fisherman by the name of Hugh King, unwittingly catches sight of the fairies on November Eve while out late fishing and is duly punished, though lives to tell the tale...

The practice of Belfast-based painter Fiona Finnegan is infused with, if not preoccupied by, myths and legends, including many related to pagan and pre-Christian Ireland. Some of Wilde’s stories mix Christian elements with local folklore, showing how newer religious beliefs can often intermingle with, as well as usurp and replace, earlier dominant and popular ideologies. In the body of work created for Finnegan’s exhibition *November Eve* at Arusha’s Edinburgh gallery in autumn 2023 (opening, aptly enough, on 31 October), each painting features the presence of a young woman, whether in whole or in part, arms and hands playing regular starring roles. Almost without exception, these women appear like giant ghostly figures, seeming to tower over the landscapes they inhabit like elemental goddesses, evoking female deities from Irish mythology such as Morrígan, goddess of war and fate (who is sometimes known as the ‘phantom queen’), Macha, who is associated with protection of the land and its fertility, and Áine, goddess of the sun, summer and wealth.<sup>3</sup>

In *The Golden Hour* (all works 2023), a girl or young woman, her face turned away to reveal her dark hair tied in a bun, sits naked and calm with her knees raised and her left arm gently draped around her shins, filling an empty but golden sky. Her body, which is the same colour as the sky, rests on the ground where the horizon must be, though it is obscured from view by a silvery sliver of lake and autumnal trees and bushes that transition from rich, fiery orange to burnt umber before fading to black at the bottom of the linen canvas. Behind the trees, beneath the apex of her bent knees, a large, golden-yellow sun sets, casting its warm light on

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<sup>1</sup> Lady Wilde, ‘November Eve’ in *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms and Superstitions of Ireland*, 1887, as in The Project Gutenberg (eBook, 2020), p.110:

[https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/61436/pg61436-images.html#Page\\_110](https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/61436/pg61436-images.html#Page_110)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.78: [https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/61436/pg61436-images.html#Page\\_78](https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/61436/pg61436-images.html#Page_78)

<sup>3</sup> Finnegan grew up in Slieve Gullion on the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland, an area she describes as ‘steeped in history – tombs, myths, Finn MacCool and so on [...] people were very superstitious when I was growing up.’ All quotes from the artist are from an interview by this author, 6 October 2023.

this enchanting scene. It is a poetic homage to the natural world and to the natural beauty of the human body, the girl becoming a metaphor for the sunset itself.

The golden hour refers to the period just after sunrise and just before sunset when the sun is just above the horizon and the light appears warmer and softer. It is one of two types of 'magic hour', the other being right before sunrise and right after sunset when the sun is just below the horizon and the light takes on a bluer appearance, between the black of the night and the blue sky of the day. Finnegan, who closely follows the weather, the seasons and solstices,<sup>4</sup> duly presents us also with *The Blue Hour* – another scene of a seated female nude with her back to us, this time with her legs bent to one side. Her translucent body becomes interchangeable with the misty landscape peppered with trees, some in clusters, others standing alone. Reminiscent of the Italian Renaissance landscapes of Leonardo da Vinci or Piero della Francesca, Finnegan's gently undulating, contoured fields are punctuated by asymmetrical trunks and branches as the wispy bluish landscape recedes in rhythmic swathes into the distance. The bright round disc in the sky must presumably be the moon if this is the blue hour, taking over from, or about to hand over to, the sun, though the absence of the iconic craters makes us wonder if this might be the sun behind some dense, hazy fog, or perhaps something stranger (the line 'would you have a wondrous sight / the midday sun, at midnight' from 'Willow's Song' in *The Wicker Man* (1973) springs to mind).<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the sun and the moon are central motifs in Finnegan's oeuvre, inseparable from both landscape and the female body. 'I'm obsessed by the moon – I'm in love with it,' says Finnegan. 'It's that first stop between us and the entire universe.' The relationship between the moon and women's bodies is also of interest to the artist,<sup>6</sup> the connection between the lunar and menstrual cycles a much-debated topic on which recent research has proposed that 'both moonlight and the moon's gravity influence menstruation'.<sup>7</sup> In *Amethyst*, Finnegan depicts a young woman curled up against a purple-black sky, her head resting face-down on her knees. Her curved pale back dominates the painting, echoing the curvature of the small but intensely bright moon that is nestled between her thigh and the horizon beneath her. Perhaps she is bent double with cramps from her period or maybe she is just trying to keep warm in the cold night air. The moon can sometimes look so cold and lonely. The image might evoke thoughts of Diana the moon goddess, though the painting's title leads us to Amethyste, a virgin, according to classical mythology, who was on her way to worship at the Temple of Diana when she enraged Bacchus by spurning his sexual advances. Calling out to Diana for help to protect her virginity, the goddess turned her to white quartz. Remorsefully, Bacchus poured wine over her, turning her the purple colour of amethyst. Finnegan's striking image speaks of a young woman and her relationship with, and ownership of, her

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<sup>4</sup> 'My markers of the year are the seasons and the equinoxes. November Eve is like the pagan Christmas for me. [...] At Christmas I really enjoy the solstice, and I like to have a meal and fire on the solstice.'

<sup>5</sup> This particular song accompanied a scene in which the young actress and model Britt Ekland, playing the role of a pagan villager, swayed and danced naked in her bedroom, teasing and tormenting the dashing Christian policeman, played by Edward Woodward, who had come to the remote island village to solve the case of a missing child. Finnegan's paintings, it could be argued, seem almost entirely free of the male gaze and male sexual desire.

<sup>6</sup> 'I feel very strongly connected to the moon in that way; I feel like it has always affected my moods in particular. [...] Coming up to the full moon I feel like things often get stuck, and instead of fighting that, I just wait until the full moon comes, and then it passes.'

<sup>7</sup> Asher Jones, 'Menstrual Cycles Intermittently Sync with Moon Cycles: Study', in *The Scientist*, 5 February 2021.

<https://www.the-scientist.com/news-opinion/menstrual-cycles-intermittently-sync-with-moon-cycles-study-6842>

own body, against a backdrop of the Earth, the moon and the rest of the universe, reminding us that we are all born of the stars and live by them. ‘We were really lucky,’ comments Finnegan, ‘we could see the Milky Way when we were growing up, there was so little light pollution where we lived.’

A number of works in the exhibition suggest supernatural forces at play, a pair of women’s hands appearing to conduct lightning in *The Saint of Sound and Vision*, for example, or to orchestrate a lunar eclipse in *Dark Side of the Moon*.<sup>8</sup> The elegant arms in *Moonbow*, one hand raised above, like a ballerina, softly dropping the hazy psychedelic moon below, the other facing palm-up as if having just gently tossed the moon into the air. A sizeable flock of birds in a V-formation simultaneously seems to be controlled by these hands, as if under some kind of lunar spell or incantation. A moonbow is such a rare optical occurrence it must appear magical to many who witness one for the first time, not knowing what it is.<sup>9</sup> Finnegan’s palette here is gorgeously nauseating, sickly and seductive – perhaps we have consumed some potion that has affected our senses, or heard the alluring song of the sirens.

If there had been any doubt up until now, the painting *The Ghost has no Home* makes it clear that paranormal phenomena are integral to Finnegan’s thinking. The image presents a nocturnal urban or suburban skyline of chimney-stacks, rooftops and treetops silhouetted against a charcoal *ombré* night sky with a shooting star hurtling prominently through it.<sup>10</sup> The implication being, perhaps, that this meteoroid, which has arrived on Earth from space, is synonymous with a visit from the spirit world, both being otherworldly entities. On the left-hand side of the painting in the foreground is a ghostly hand, drawing back a spectral curtain as if to watch the shooting star. The ghost, it should be pointed out, is standing right next to us. The title of this work suggests that ghosts (or at least this particular one) are entities that have not found their rightful homes and are wandering somewhere between their old lives and the afterlife, the real world and the spirit world. Finnegan’s paintings invite consideration of the idea that between the land and the skies, between life and death, something else might exist – another realm that we, or at least most of us, don’t see or understand. ‘I’m always pondering things like the multiverse, different worlds, and other worlds existing within our own,’ says Finnegan. ‘Are there other forces at play, having fun with us?’

Finnegan is clearly also interested in how humans throughout history have tried to engage with the spirit world and the supernatural powers often associated with it. The painting *The Circle Game* depicts four naked women in a ring holding hands. Their lilting postures give

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<sup>8</sup> Music lovers may already have spotted that many of Finnegan’s works have titles inspired by song titles and lyrics – David Bowie and Pink Floyd cases in point here. The painting *The Saint of Sound and Vision* is reminiscent of images and footage of virtuoso Clara Rockmore performing the Theremin, an early electronic instrument invented by Russian engineer and inventor Leon Theremin in the early 1920s that involves the performer moving their hands and arms to control musical pitch, volume and modulation of an electromagnetic field – no contact is made with the instrument itself. See, for example, Andrey Smirnov, *Sound in Z: Experiments in Sound and Electronic Music in Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Russia*, London: Koenig Books and Sound and Music, 2013, chapter 2.

<sup>9</sup> The Met Office website informs that: ‘A moonbow (sometimes known as a lunar rainbow) is an optical phenomenon caused when the light from the moon is refracted through water droplets in the air. The amount of light available even from the brightest full moon is far less than that produced by the sun so moonbows are incredibly faint and very rarely seen. The fact that not enough light is produced to excite the cone colour receptors in the human eye also compounds the difficulty we have in seeing moonbows.’  
<https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/learn-about/weather/optical-effects>

<sup>10</sup> ‘I live in a Victorian house and most of our cities are Victorian. You can very easily imagine the Victorians being there because we’re living their lives.’

the impression that they are dancing, the face of one woman appearing to smile, indicating that they are having fun. The word 'game' in the title implies that this is an innocent, playful activity, akin to dancing round the maypole or other folk traditions. But there is a sense that there might well be something darker at work in this night-time revelry – apart from the darkness itself – not least due to the flock of black, silhouetted birds that fly around them; the women don't seem phased in the slightest, as if the birds are not really there. Added to this, an inexplicable low-lying cloud of bright light illuminates the darkness, obscuring completely our view of the woman facing us. These elements combine to make us think of rituals, sorcery and witchcraft, bringing to mind scenes from Malcolm Leigh's 1970 documentary *Legend of the Witches*, focusing on West London's fashionable and high-profile witch community at the height of the sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll revolution.<sup>11</sup> It could be argued, therefore, that there is a sense of sexual liberation, especially of female emancipation, in a work such as this, as well as an underlying fascination with the occult.<sup>12</sup>

Finnegan's paintings are intoxicating – the combination of translucent layers of imagery depicting emotive, dramatic and picturesque landscapes mixed with striking anatomical postures creates iconic dreamscapes revolving around the sun and the moon, the day and the night, the Earth and the heavens. Both profoundly human and strangely haunting, these ethereal paintings are rendered with a care and precision that almost eradicates the hand of the artist, the brushmarks virtually invisible to the naked eye.<sup>13</sup> The rich, complex moods and atmospheres she creates through her imagery, colour palettes and techniques vary from the playful and pensive to the highly psychologically and emotionally charged, the quietly introspective to the hallucinogenic. Blending her experiences of, and interest in, the Irish landscape and its history and mythology with universal myths of pre-Christian and pagan cultures, Finnegan has created a body of work, and indeed a practice, that is as visually and aesthetically stimulating as it critically engaging, as alluring as it is curious. Let's see what those spirits make of it on November Eve, should you dare to come out...

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<sup>11</sup> <https://player.bfi.org.uk/rentals/film/watch-legend-of-the-witches-1970-online>

See also an interview with Maxine Sanders 'the Witch Queen of Notting Hill':

<https://www.thelastbohemians.co.uk/maxine>

<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, Finnegan explains that quite a lot of the source imagery for the women she uses in her paintings comes from Victoriana, a period that is often associated with ideas of female emancipation, empowerment and the struggle for the right to vote. 'I love the seventies and I love the Victorian era, so my paintings are often a mix of the two.'

<sup>13</sup> The artist usually works with just three brushes, including a fan brush, which, in addition to a lot of sanding back between glazes, creates this effect of a smooth, seamless surface of paint on the textured linen. 'I don't want to have too much of a hand-made quality to my paintings; there are very few gestural marks in them. I like the idea of removing the hand from the work, of them not being made by a human, looking otherworldly, like apparitions.'