





# Caoimhghin Ó Fraithile

## Ritualizing Place

BY JONATHAN GOODMAN

Opposite: *Fifteen Degrees South*, 2009. Wood, reed, cloth, water, and fire, dimensions variable. View of work installed in Niigata, Japan. Above: *Fifteen Degrees South*, 2009. View of Butoh dance performance.

The Irish artist Caoimhghin Ó Fraithile (Quee-veen O Fra-ha-la) makes sculptures and drawings all over the globe—in Asia, Europe, and America. A reticent, monk-like personality, he maintains his peripatetic lifestyle by taking on residencies in different parts of the world. Despite his wanderings and the temporary nature and sometime remote locations of his large-scale work, a geographically diverse group of critics is bringing his wooden structures and exquisite drawings to the attention of the international art world. A strong will and sharp formal intelligence inform his wood, bamboo, and stone structures. Often highlighted by fire and moored on bodies of water, these ritualized sculptures exist essentially as pagan memorials. The drawings, done on unique sheets of handmade paper, look like ancient maps of places now beyond our reach.



Left: *Fifteen Degrees South* (detail), 2009. Right: *Goo Shin (Renew Self)*, 2003. Wood, bamboo, and cloth, dimensions variable. View of work installed in Hualien, Taiwan.

Ó Fraithile lives on the Dingle peninsula in southwest Ireland, but he travels extensively; currently, he is spending considerable amounts of time in New York and in northern Japan, where his most recent architectural work has won the support of the small town of Fukui. Ó Fraithile possesses an unusual degree of technical skill, but his projects often require help from the local communities where they are built. In a sense, his sculptural works partake of the social consciousness that Joseph Beuys considered a sculptural phenomenon. Ó Fraithile sees the social harmony needed to complete his larger projects as a metaphor for supporting art in general. His invitations to other artists to participate in his environments—for example, the Butoh dancer who performed on the walkway and in the large construction *Fifteen Degrees South* (2009) in Fukui, Niigata City—look to collaboration as a way of investing in the artistic currency of the community. In more than a few ways, Ó Fraithile is a consummate artist of his time, looking back to an ancient past of ceremonial efficacy and a more recent past of post-modernist art while forging new cooperative forms and methods.

Ó Fraithile's international path speaks to the wandering presence of many contemporary artists. Interactions with local com-

munities deepen his connection with his work and its place in the world. For example, Ó Fraithile ensures that local residents of An Daingean (the Irish name for Dingle) attended the initiation of his construction there by having a priest bless the event and talk about the history and people of the place. When the sculpture was outlined by fire, its local context became clear: it remembered those who had died at sea. As a result, the elegy for the dead took on a specific, as opposed to a generic, meaning. In addition to particularizing the context for his work, Ó Fraithile contemporizes his methods. Generally speaking, he uses the simplest of materials: inexpensive wood, simple colored cloth, thatching. His three-dimensional work tends toward the ephemeral, which magically becomes ritualized through staged actions. Ó Fraithile's communal events and ad hoc buildings possess a remarkable poetry in which the efforts of unknown assistants and laborers make a visible contribution—even after a project has been fulfilled and disassembled. Interestingly, the existential precariousness of his installations underscores a particularly agrarian, cross-cultural notion of the frailty and delicate beauty of nature's continuous change.



Above: *Tochar (Causeway)*, 2005. Wood, cloth, fire, and water, dimensions variable. View of work installed in Dingle, Ireland. Below: *Spirit Houses*, 2003. Wood and candles, dimensions variable. View of work installed in the Giants Inlet, Bradon Creek, Ireland.





Above: *Spirit House EV + A*, 2003. Wood, rope, and cloth, dimensions variable. View of work installed in Limerick, Ireland. Right: *The Cloud that Cries*, 2006. Wood, reed, rice straw, water, cloth, and fire, dimensions variable. View of work installed at the Echigo Tsumari Art Triennial, Niigata, Japan.

It may well be that our sense of beauty, no matter the culture, depends on our inability to stop the decay that transforms nature. *Rag Tower* (2004, Taipei), one of Ó Fraithile's more interesting early works, was constructed next to a multi-storied building and rose to nearly the same height. Most of the construction consisted of bamboo supports, and the tower's crown was made up of dangling strips of cloth, layered over each other to create a striking visual effect. Additional lines of cloth cascaded from the top of the tower and descended through its interior. In contrast to the sturdy brown stone of the adjacent building, *Rag Tower* looked improvised and even a bit vulnerable in its frailty. Yet those same qualities, representing the antithesis of the built world and its desire for permanence, enacted a remarkably subtle poetry essentially rooted in architecture.

One of Ó Fraithile's most lyrical pieces is *Tig Donal Rua* (*Red Donal's House*, 2007), located at Mt. Brenden, some 10 miles from his home. The deserted house, really a small stone cottage, was occupied until the mid-

19th century. With the help of local residents, Ó Fraithile cleaned it and set it right. He added an open wooden roof, tied cloth strips to the underside, and thatched it with rushes, which enhanced the quiet beauty of the tiny home. During the renovation, Ó Fraithile and fellow workers found the hearthstone; it is said that the last family to live in the small space included some 16 children. The project reached completion when community members trekked across the bog to a nighttime event lit by fires and candles. With no electricity in the valley and people speaking Gaelic, the gathering took on the aura of an ancient wake.

Drawing on his rural upbringing, Ó Fraithile celebrates places that emphasize the presence of nature. His visionary network of scaffolding and walkways in *Fifteen Degrees South* is set in a pond created by the residents of Fukui. Part of the structure is permanent, making a lasting contribution to the welfare of the village. Ó Fraithile is an artist of genuine and hopeful achievement; he resurrects sites and gives them life within the context of their surroundings. As such, he is both architect and archaeologist as well as artist. He looks back to the past but also ahead to the future, where it is hoped that at least his longer lasting projects will maintain their lyrical effectiveness. Like the tiny sailing ships in his drawings, he is on the move, his sights set on a visionary realism.

*Jonathan Goodman is a writer living in New York.*



Above: *The Cloud that Cries*, 2006. Wood, reed, rice straw, water, cloth, and fire, dimensions variable. View of work installed at the Echigo Tsumari Art Triennial, Niigata, Japan. Below: *Fasú (unoccupied)*, 2002. Wood, reed, hay, and cloth, dimensions variable. View of work installed in Dallas.

