PENUMBRA
The F.E. McWilliam Gallery and Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council are delighted to present Penumbra, an exhibition of contemporary painting by eight artists: Sinéad Aldridge, Hannah Casey-Brogan, Susan Connolly, Sarah Dwyer, Fiona Finnegan, Alison Pilkington, Yasmine Robinson and Louise Wallace. Co-curated by Dr Riann Coulter, F.E. McWilliam Gallery and Dr Louise Wallace, Associate Lecturer in Painting at Ulster University, Penumbra brings together artists who are connected by their gender, their associations with the island of Ireland and their commitment to testing the limits of painting.

As Dr Cherie Driver has pointed out in her essay in this publication, Penumbra can be understood in relation to a number of historical and contemporary exhibitions of Irish female artists, including most recently, Elliptical Affinities: Irish Women Artists and the Politics of the Body 1984 to the Present, at our cross-border partner, Highlanes Gallery, Drogheda. Like its predecessors, Penumbra seeks to address the historical under-representation of women artists in museums and galleries and to shine a light on the wealth of talented contemporary female painters from Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The historical tendency for women artists to be overshadowed is particularly surprising in Ireland where pioneering female painters including Mainie Jellett, Evie Hone, Mary Swanzy and Norah McGuinness, were at the forefront of the avant-garde who introduced international modernism to Irish audiences. Today, despite the majority of art students being female, women artists are still under-represented in both the collections and exhibition schedules of many museums and galleries.

Although the artists in Penumbra are united by their gender, their dedication to painting in its broadest sense and their varied connections to Ireland are also significant points of connection. Whether they live here, or elsewhere, each artist and their work has been shaped by their individual relationships to place, to Ireland and to Irishness. Ultimately, these artists share a commitment to exploring and expanding the definitions of painting and to engaging in the struggle to create work that is unique, relevant and meaningful. As Louise Wallace has written:

The space of painting is difficult to occupy. The ground will pitch and shift suddenly in the studio. There is a continual fixing then unfixing of compass positions. The artists in this exhibition acknowledge painting’s potential to describe terrain beyond the recognised world. We are mapping the slipping points — the flow between known and unknowable.
PENUMBRA: PAINTING MATERIALISING IN THE ALMOST-SHADOW

Dr Cherie Driver / Ulster University

The exhibition Penumbra can be understood in relational distance to a matrix of exhibitions of works by contemporary female artists from across the island of Ireland.1 These exhibitions have sought to address the invisibility of such work. Penumbra presents us with a range of material practices that are reimagining and transgressing the terrain of what defines Ireland and broadly Irish cultural identity. This hinges upon a resurgence in concerns for the making and materiality of paint as itself the very site of meaning. All of the paintings I encountered in preparation for the writing of this essay have in their materiality delighted and greatly affected me. The contemplation of the work and the writing of this essay reverberates with the overarching proposition of the title of the exhibition itself, the astronomical term penumbra. Penumbra comes from the Latin paene ‘almost’ and umbra ‘shadow’ meaning a shaded spot or the outer part of a conical darkness cast behind a celestial object by a light source. Looking out across the penumbra, my critical lens in this essay is informed by debates on the expanded field of painting, feminist theory, psychoanalytical aesthetics and cultural and historical discourses. Through this lens traditional art historical discourses could imaginatively be thought of as large opaque celestial objects that cast a shadow into space, rendering practices that are present invisible and illegible. The works in this exhibition bring into the frame that which was always hauntingly present, located in the half-light across the penumbra. This is a vast terrain so I navigate my viewing point from a number of theoretical satellites or positions that can help locate the works not necessarily in direct contact with each other but holding a proximity in resonance and relation. A glorious constellation.

A painting is indescribable. In its material life form it encapsulates rhythmic, tacit, intuitive, spontaneous, reckless and labored making. It breathes and it performs. Painting in its materiality permeates and cuts across visual language, making it more than just a sign.2 Rosemary Betterton has argued that we can understand painting as alive and relational yet encountered in times and at places. We can think of painting not as a solo ‘object’ but “an intersubjective process”.3

All of the work in this exhibition is a visceral material encounter. There are brush strokes, marks, scratches, blocks of colour, semi-transparent layers, appendages, incisions and incorporated readymades. Some works push beyond traditional definitions of painting. The work of Susan Connolly and Yasmine Robinson foregrounds this terrain. Both practices are committed to the materiality of paint on the canvas. However, through folding in considerations of site specificity (Connolly) and the readymade (Robinson), both are an expanded conceptualisation of painting. Within the debates on the revival in painting, the first satellite here is an essay by Isabelle Graw ‘The Value of Liveliness’.4

Graw theorises that painting as a trace of an activity evokes a subjectivity (within its own narratives and debates) that suggests agency. This is not a quasi-subject she argues but instead an indexical sign pointing to an absent author who is yet present through the surface. This specific indexicality for Graw gives it an “inner connection” to its value-form.5 In the expanded field of painting we can no longer see painting as located on the canvas alone, not threatening its status as medium but as Graw states, ‘revitalising’ and breathing new life into it.

Susan Connolly’s work embodies two of these revitalising strategies. For Connolly the medium of paint is her primary source.6 In ‘over+over&over’ she uses only 3 colours; Cyan, Magenta, Lemon, to paint surfaces with an overall motif before she explores the potential of the medium to literally make its own image. Over time she has developed a method of applying paint to surfaces before removing it using a cutting (skinning) process. These works operate as paintings, both in the medium specificity and in the acts and traces of the artist’s ghost as present. By expanding the intended purpose (to make an image) Connolly asks the viewer ‘to trust the object (a disembodied paint skin) before them to remain as a painting’.
Yasmine Robinson’s work is evocative of urban landscapes where she is drawn to certain changing dynamics of space as subject and a “familiar rectangular, vacant (almost decaying) aesthetic.” Robinson states “[w]hat I find compelling about these particular sites is that they can be endlessly expanded. The walls, the streets and sky act as a ‘complete space’ offering different compositional alternatives to the graffiti and ‘street art’ that usually occupy them.” The work is nostalgic, invoking the tradition of landscape yet revitalising that tradition with its incorporation of readymade elements. There is a sensitivity to the revolution in modern infrastructure and virtual technology so invasive in the urban landscape. Robinson is both “rethinking space within painting, or painting as a space” altering the definitions of painting by folding in the “social living labor” of the incorporating materials and/or objects. Her use of spray paint removes her mark from the surface of the painting, thereby dematerializing the painter’s trace itself.

The work of Connolly and Robinson align with Graw’s description of “an expanded notion of painting that captures its specificity.” Through these revitalising strategies, Graw would say “[t]he painting seems to have painted itself. Agency shifts from the artist to the painting.”

The works of Fiona Finnegan, Alison Pilkington and Sarah Dwyer also resonate within this field. The traces of materiality and activity evoke for the viewer a subjectivity within the painting suggesting a presence and an agency. This is a psychic terrain; a sense of work onto the female body and the cradle of security, the home.

Sarah Dwyer’s work emerges from a struggle as she pushes and pulls the material to propose a new equilibrium of relations, reconfiguring what is present and what is absent against the finality of loss while testing the borderspace between us and the absent-presence of the painter traced through the material and gestural marks in the work. This encounter is deeply affecting.

The half-light quality of Fiona Finnegan’s paintings lures the viewer through spaces of thin luminous washes of colour painted over textured ground. These have been repeatedly sanded with punctuating glitches and bubbles that combine to radiate back to us the light that illuminates it. The work explores the ‘monono-my, mysticism and the mysteries surrounding life and death.’ In Finnegan’s paintings we see cloaked figures — possibly witching or ceremonial figures, not of this time, moving collectively towards an unknown assembly for an unknown purpose. The destination in each painting is unfamiliar and unsettling whether it is the figures or as we lurk into the canvas at a void, gap or threshold. Cast in dark half-light, this is a space of the sacred and the ritual where liminal gaps invoke mystical, magical passageways to unknown spaces and destinations. The imaginary and illusionary are invested in the borderspace of the painting, underscored by the rich materiality of the paint.

Alison Pilkington’s paintings are situated between abstraction and figuration; simple half-formed shapes which are open to metaphorical and anthropomimetic interpretation. Pilkington explains that they ‘explore how familiar yet comic images have the potential to disturb, disorientate or to be uncanny.’ The drawing is very playful, and we find ourselves skipping through narratives as we encounter the work and the interconnected words, projecting onto them stories from our own subjective and psychic significations. One can’t but help project meaning onto the recurring shape and figure. Is this a benign, centaur like creature found in dark environments, or cocooned in a globular bubble as if linked in narrative to another nearby? References to paintings from different periods of art history recur and there are references to classical portraiture, landscape painting and the sublime.

Sarah Dwyer’s work emerges from a struggle as she pushes and pulls the material to propose a new equilibrium of relations, reconfiguring what is present and what is absent against the finality of loss while testing the borderspace between us and the absent-presence of the painter traced through the material and gestural marks in the work. This encounter is deeply affecting.

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Catherine Nash concurs with this when she describes the formation of “national identity in the postcolonial nation and the presence of the female subaltern” which she traces as the tension between the map and the body. The cottage as depicted in the landscape paintings of Paul Henry became a phantom ideal of traditional rural life. Irish womanliness and motherhood, ultimately fixing cultural and social values and gender roles. Nash reconsidered ‘place’ and proposes that repitition of malignant binaries underpinning “masculinist and colonial discourses” can be avoided without essentialist biologically determined concepts and colonial notions of the native as natural identification. Nash argues that the remapping of identity in postcolonial Ireland and the excavation of lost meanings associated with a place name has also recovered “a lost relationship to a place” and recovered by atmosphere, a prevailing weather system, or encroaching wilderness.

Sinéad Aldridge’s paintings lay out shallow muted surfaces on a background of linen stretched on board. The paint is thinly applied in watercolour like transparencies; shapes form into blocked shades, hushed so intently that brush marks are untraceable. This sensitivity in the paint draws you closer to the surface which can be seen as a stage upon which actions and the execution of marks become manifest. Circumventing the work are the echoes of peripheral concerns – world affairs, the collective anxiety which we share, her selected reading and domestic tasks. These all play their part and cannot be separated from the work.

Material process, personal and local narrative and a connection to place are central roots in the paintings of Louise Wallace. An unease envelops these scenes including a 1970’s black bungalow shrouded in deep shadow by overbearing conifer hedging; a pond that once powered a linen mill, an unfenced ‘half-moon lake’ lamented in virtual communities. Material processes of women artists in, of and from the island of Ireland. The encounter with the work is an encounter with the material time with each draws you further to consider its subjectivity and its agency. There are common resonances amongst these works where light and shadow shift across terrains. There is tension in sheeted views; atmospheric systems press-down heavy on spaces below. Crescent forms or moons beam out, and although the prevailing mood is heavy, ruminating and uncertain, something revitalizing has been recovered.

This essay has endeavored to write a line through the matrix of the works in Penumbra to identify one constellation. As the viewer unfolds their own visual and sensory engagement they will draw other personal constellations. Penumbra increases the visibility of the painterly practice of women artists in, of and from the island of Ireland. The encounter with the work is an encounter with the material time with each draws you further to consider its subjectivity and its agency. There are common resonances amongst these works where light and shadow shift across terrains. There is tension in sheeted views; atmospheric systems press-down heavy on spaces below. Crescent forms or moons beam out, and although the prevailing mood is heavy, ruminating and uncertain, something revitalizing has been recovered.
Sinéad Aldridge
Head Strong
2018, Oil on linen on board, 30 x 25cm
Sinéad Aldridge
In The Philosopher's Garden
2018, Oil on linen on board, 30 x 25cm
Hannah Casey-Brogan
The Third Shift
2018—2020, Oil on aluminium, 15 x 20cm
Hannah Casey-Brogan
The Third Shift
2018—2020, Oil on aluminium, 15 x 20cm
Susan Connolly

over+over&over
2019—2020, Site specific painting intervention, CYM process paint, canvas, steel and wooden supports, 200 x 180 x 150cm, 120 x 150cm, 30 x 40cm, various wall sizes
Susan Connolly

*over+over+over*

2019—2020. Site specific painting intervention. CYM process paint, canvas, steel and wooden supports. 200 x 180 x 150cm, 120 x 150cm, 30 x 40cm, various wall sizes
Sarah Dwyer
Ligonier
2019, Charcoal, pastel, and watercolor on somerset paper, 55.9 x 38.1 cm
Sarah Dwyer
Owlpen Field
2019, Oil on linen, 132 x 101cm
Fiona Finnegan
Take Me Somewhere Nice
2018, Oil on wood, 64 x 56 cm
Alison Pilkington
Little Hollow So Bright
2019, Oil on canvas, 30 x 25cm
Alison Pilkington

A Little Hollow

2019, Oil on canvas, 50 x 40cm
Yasmine Robinson
Fydel
2018, Multimedia painting on canvas, 230 x 150cm
Louise Wallace
False Spring
2019, Oil on canvas, 40 x 30cm
Louise Wallace
The Fetch Length
2019, Oil on canvas, 44 x 38cm

Selected group exhibitions include: Take Place, Institut für Alles Mögliche, Berlin (2019); Art Spring, Berlin (2019); Beep, Wales Painting Biennale (2018, 2016); Die Sprache ist das Haus in dem wir leben Kunstverein Malkasten, Düsseldorf (2012); Pirate Capital Public Gesture, The Lab, Dublin (2010); Accrochage Gonèze, Italy (2010); Occasion, Fenderesky Gallery, Belfast (2009); Out Of Context, Contemporary Irish Painting, Archeus Gallery, London (2004); Irish Contemporary Art, Galleri Weinburger, Copenhagen (1999).


Hannah Casey-Brogan is a painter from Belfast, where she continues to live and work. She holds a First-Class Honours degree in Fine Art (2007) in addition to two Masters degrees in Embroidery (2009) and Painting (2015, with distinction) from The University of Ulster, Belfast School of Art.

Recent exhibitions include the solo show Shortest Path, The Ulster University Art Gallery (2018) and LOTS, Platform Arts (2016). Recent group shows including Artist in Residence Show, Fusettsu Gallery (2015); Out of the Ordinary; The Naughton Gallery (2014); Notes and Volcanoes, Catalyst Arts (2009). She has also shown internationally in Berlin, Paris, New York, Reyjavik, and Kofu City, Japan, with shows including Occasional Gale, SIM House (2011); 707EMS, tt gallery (2013).

Casey-Brogan has received awards from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and The British Council to travel on artist residencies including SIM and NES (Iceland), AIR-Y (Japan), and The Curfew Tower, (Northern Ireland). Casey-Brogan received The Alice Berger Hammerschlag Award (2014) and was nominated for New Sensations 2014 at the Saatchi Gallery, London.
ALISON PILKINGTON

Alison Pilkington is a painter originally from Sligo who currently lives and works in Dublin. She completed a practice led PhD in painting at National College of Art and Design, Dublin (2015).


In 2012 Pilkington was awarded a British Institution Award for painting at the Royal Academy Summer Show London. She has been selected for the Mermite Painting Prize, London (2012, 2016). She was 3rd prizewinner at the Artslant International Jurors Award (2013). Pilkington was shortlisted for the Kurt Beers 100 Painters of Tomorrow publication (2013).

YASMIN ROBINSON

Yasmine Robinson is originally from Derry, Co. Londonderry and currently lives and works in London. She received a First Class Honours degree in Fine Art, Ulster University, Belfast (2017). She was awarded a Distinction in her Masters of Fine Art, Chelsea College of Art, London (2018).


Robinson has been the recipient of awards including Tiffany & Co. Outset Studio Makers Prize (2018) and RDS Visual Arts Award 2017. In 2017 she was awarded the Frank Bowling Scholarship to support her studies at Chelsea College of Art.

LOUISE WALLACE

Louise Wallace is a Belfast painter who continues to live and work in the city. She received a First Class honours degree in Fine Art from Belfast School of Art (2002) and went on to complete her PhD there (2006) having been awarded the Vice Chancellor’s Research Studentship.


FIONA FINNEGAN

Fiona Finnegan is a painter originally from Newry; who graduated with an MFA with distinction from Ulster University (2009) and is currently living and working in Belfast. She received a BA Hons in Music and Visual Practice (2001) at the University of Brighton.

Recent solo exhibitions include: The Frog Descovred The Sun at the University of Ulster Gallery, Belfast (2017) and at Domobaal, London (2018). Group shows include: Waking the Witch, a touring exhibition supported by Arts Council England (2018/2019); Creekside Open at APT Gallery London (2017, selected by Jordan Baseman) and the Creekside Open 2017, selected by Alison Wilding); The Surreal in Irish Art, P.E. Mc William Gallery, Banbridge and The Highlanes Gallery, Drogheda (2011). Finnegan was selected for The Threadneedle Prize Exhibition, Malt Galleries, London (2010). Her paintings are included in the public collections of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the University of Ulster, Belfast.

SUSAN CONNOLLY

Susan Connolly is an artist originally from Kildare and now based between Belfast and Waterford. She is a graduate of Limerick School of Art and Design, she holds an MFA from the University of Ulster, a first class honours MA from ACW at NCAAD, Dublin and her PhD from Ulster University for which she was awarded the VC Scholarship.


Connolly has received awards including Culture Ireland Funding (2019); Arts Funding, Kildare County Council (2019); The Golden Foundation, New York (2017); WARP artist residency, Belgium (2010); Arts Council of Ireland, Travel and Training Award (2009); DCR Guesthouse Residency, Den Haag, Holland (2009).

SARAH DWYER

Sarah Dwyer is from Cork and currently lives and works in London. She has a Master’s in Painting from the Royal College of Art, London (2004). She also has a Masters in Fine Art from Staffordshire University (2001). She previously studied Environmental Economics at York University & The University of Illinois and worked in research in this field in Paris for the European Society of Ecological Economics.


Dwyer was a shortlisted artist for the John Moore’s Painting Prize (2016) and the Celeste Art Prize (2006). She has received awards including the Daines Foundation Travel Award (2007) The Sheldon Bergh Award, Royal College of Art (2004) and the Basil Alkazzi Travel Award to New York, Royal College of Art (2004). Dwyer has undertaken several artist residencies including printmaking at the University of Ulster, University of Hertfordshire and more recently a Body and Place residency at Otwim Manor House in the UK. She has also curated several exhibitions in the UK over the past 10 years. She has works in private and public collections in Europe, the USA & Japan.

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LIST OF WORKS

Sinéad Aldridge
In The Philosopher’s Garden
2018, Oil on linen on board, 30 x 25cm

Head Stone
2018, Oil on linen on board, 30 x 25cm

Dark Forest
2018, Oil on linen on board, 40 x 50cm

Sermon to Stones
2018, Oil on linen on board, 25 x 30cm

Small Landscape With Figure
2019, Oil on linen on board, 30 x 25cm

Hannah Casey-Brogan
The Third Shift
2019—2020, Oil on aluminium, 15 x 20cm each

Susan Connolly
over+over&over
2019—2020, Site specific painting intervention, CYM process paint, canvas, steel and wooden supports, 200 x 180 x 150cm, 120 x 150cm, 30 x 40cm, various wall sizes

Sarah Dwyer
Rime
2019, Oil and charcoal on linen, 132 x 101cm

Owlpen Field
2019, Oil on linen, 132 x 101cm

Long Sole Sound
2017, Oil on linen, 186 x 132cm

Lipiner
2019, Charcoal, pastel, and watercolor on somerset paper, 55.9 x 38.1cm

Sew Rib
2020, Charcoal, pastel, and watercolor on somerset paper, 55.9 x 38.1cm

Oddments
2020, Charcoal, pastel, and watercolor on somerset paper, 55.9 x 38.1cm

Fiona Finnegane
Deep Inside The Amethyst Mine
2019, Oil on wood, 150 x 100cm

Avalon
2019, Oil on wood, 50 x 40cm

How Vacantly You Gaze At Me
2019, Oil on wood, 80 x 58cm

Take Me Somewhere Nice
2018, Oil on wood, 64 x 50cm

Alison Pilkington
A Little Hollow
2019, Oil on canvas, 50 x 40cm

Little Hollow So Bright
2019, Oil on canvas, 30 x 25cm

Monument
2012, Oil on canvas, 150 x 120cm

Diagram Painting
2018, Oil on canvas, 180 x 200cm

Yasmine Robinson
Fabi
2018, Multimedia painting on canvas, 230 x 150cm

HKS
2019, Multimedia painting and embroidery on moquette, 20 x 20cm

I Will Never Own a Pot Plant
2019, Oil, soft pastel, batik and embroidery on canvas, 40 x 45cm

Louise Wallace
Glengoland Crescent
2019, Oil on canvas, pine wood, acrylic paint, 76 x 112cm

False Spring
2019, Oil on canvas, 40 x 30cm

The Fetch Length
2019, Oil on canvas, 44 x 38cm

Pond Life
2019, Oil on canvas, found wood, pine wood, acrylic paint, 44 x 38cm

Pond (After) Life
2020, Oil on canvas, found wood, pine wood, acrylic paint, 44 x 38cm

The curators would like to thank:

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Yasmine Robinson
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