

# Quietly Dispelling the Dark

## Introduction to the Exhibition by Colm Tóibín

This exhibition explores a hidden tradition in Irish art: a kind of dark abstraction. It includes work that uses sombre colours, muted textures and hidden perspectives. It contains paintings, sculptures, photographs and installations that guard their mysteries. The art here is formal and austere but also tentative and suggestive, not figurative in any obvious way, nor based on the tones and contours of landscape.

These works exude distance and depths; they eschew easy meaning or obvious interpretation.

The artists here have never worked as a group or a movement. Part of the power of the work arises from an aura of solitude, seriousness – an avoidance of easy ornament or splash, or obvious manifestation of personality.

This work is contemplative rather than declarative. It moves the eye inwards, allowing the surfaces to carry a highly-controlled and exacting weight. It is shadowy and delicate.

These artworks were acquired by the Arts Council one by one, usually from a gallery at a time when the work was on show. They are like snapshots of what was happening or deemed significant or seemed promising in Irish art at different points from the 1960s to the present day.

As the Collection has expanded over the years, the Arts Council never sought to fill in gaps or use retrospective knowledge or later taste to make it more in tune with changing fashion. Nothing from the Collection was ever sold or given away. No one tried to put artificial shape on the Collection or make it seem like a single, cohesive entity.

How do you make a small selection from art assembled in such a way? The Collection was made to privilege the idea of individual works of art. What theory would you use to connect the dots from these disparate works to make a line, to tell a single story?

About seven or eight years ago, I was browsing one day in the Graphic Studio Gallery behind the old Central Bank building in Temple Bar when I found two small lithographs by Michael Coleman. I knew the name of the artist, but I wasn't sure how much of his work I had seen. I was astonished by these two pieces, by the purity of what was achieved with one single dark colour and a subtle sense of undercolour. The central aura in both prints was still and stable but also had a shimmering edge. The work was abstract but the word 'abstract' seemed to miss the sheer force and single-mindedness of the work.

As I looked at images from the Arts Council Collection online and then went to look at works in the flesh that had struck me particularly, I began to find art that had the same dark mystery and rich interior life as those two prints by Michael Coleman, work that manages from what seems like limited means to be complete and stark, or even strange and exploratory, guarding itself from easy meaning.

I found an intense energy in one of the paintings by Michael Coleman in the Collection, *Blue Rose Blue*, from 1982. And I saw a much cooler sense of surface in Cecil King's *Traverse Series* from 1984 in the Collection. But still the same way of pulling the eye in, keeping its mystery, its strange vitality.

This exhibition at VISUAL shows work that is mainly non-figurative and reticent about the use of colour and gesture – there are no faces, no landscapes, no still lives, no swirling colours.

Although these artists were never a group, there is still some connection between them, a hidden power in their work, work that uses dark or spare or single colours in painting and even in photography and even in printing, and austerity in the making of line in sculpture.

Thus, individual work by Gerda Frömel and Sarah Iremonger and Julie Merriman are here put in dialogue with each other. Work by T.J. Maher could connect perhaps with a painting by Fergus Feehily, and a work by Anthony Carroll could be placed close to the single work by Brenda Kelliher.

Some of these artists were completely new to me and there was an excitement about the prospect of showing these paintings together in a new context.

Mary Farl Powers and Michael Warren and Marie Foley and Maud Cotter were artists whose work I knew and had for a long time admired. Now, I saw a context for them, not one in which they would permanently be viewed, but for a fleeting period in which this exhibition lasts.

I was comfortable with these works I've mentioned so far, or almost was. But there was other work in the Collection that was, for me, more challenging. This included pieces by Dennis McNulty, Áine Mac Giolla Bhríde and Paul O'Keefe, work that exuded a sense of deliberation and uncompromising energy. Gradually, however, these three artists appeared essential to the project for me. They carried the risks further. They showed what can still be done.

Towards the end of finding these works of art, I asked about the most recent artworks that the Arts Council had purchased.

Amongst the selection of works acquired in the last couple of years I was shown a photograph.

It is called ‘Quietly Dispelling the Dark’. It is a work from 2021 by Mary McIntyre. First, I loved the title and thought that it would serve us well as the title for the overall exhibition here. But mainly, I love the nuanced textures in the actual image itself, the contrast between fragility of the shadows and then the solid strength of the angles and lines.

McIntyre’s photograph could easily be a beginning, a door that opens into the Collection, or it could be a culmination. But like the rest of the work here, it stands alone, it comes to us on its own terms. It is not merely an account of an experience, it is, in itself, an experience.

That is the point of all the work in this show.

Colm Tóibín  
September 2024

**Colm Tóibín** is the author of eleven novels, including *The Master*, *Brooklyn*, *The Magician* and *Long Island*, and two collections of short stories and many works of non-fiction. He has been three times shortlisted for the Booker Prize. In 2021 he was awarded the David Cohen Prize for Literature. Tóibín was appointed the Laureate for Irish Fiction 2022–2024.

He will deliver the Laureate for Irish Fiction Annual Lecture 2024 in VISUAL on Sunday 3 November.

This text was written to accompany *Quietly Dispelling the Dark*, an exhibition of work from the Arts Council collection, selected by Colm Tóibín in his role as Laureate for Irish Fiction, at VISUAL, September 2024.



Laureate for Irish  
Fiction 2022–2024

**Michael Coleman** (b. Dublin, Ireland, 1951) is a self-taught artist working in Dublin. He has been described by the art critic Aidan Dunne ‘as an exceptionally rigorous painter of usually monochromatic abstracts, built up from layers of colour and often culminating in black’. Coleman established himself as a leading exponent of colour field painting in the 1970s.

Coleman had his first solo show at the Oliver Dowling Gallery in 1977. In 1979, he won the first prize for painting at EV+A and in 1980, he was awarded the same prize for a second time. Following these successes, he moved to Vienna where he lived for some years, returning to Ireland in 1989. He has presented solo exhibitions at the Jo Rain Gallery in 1997, the Green on Red Gallery in 1998 and 2000, the Cross Gallery, 2004, 2006 and 2012 and in Kevin Kavanagh in 2019.

**Maud Cotter** (b. Wexford, Ireland, 1954) is an artist working across sculpture and installation. She works with diverse materials including perspex, glass, latex, wax, steel and cardboard. Cotter is also the co-founder of the National Sculpture Factory in Cork and a member of Áosdana.

Cotter’s most recent exhibitions include *a consequence of* – at The Irish Arts Center, New York, 2022, and *what was never ours to keep* at MOCA, Jacksonville, Florida, 2022. Prior exhibitions include, *a consequence of – a dappled world*, at The Hugh Lane, Dublin, 2021; *The Twin*, Coventry Biennale of Contemporary Art, Coventry, UK, 2019; *a consequence of – a breather of air*, at The Dock, Carrick-on-Shannon, 2019; *backyard sculpture*, domobaal gallery, London, 2019; and *a consequence of – without stiling* at Limerick City Gallery of Art, 2018. She is represented in public and private collections in Ireland and abroad.

**Mary Farl Powers** (b. Minnesota, USA, 1948 and d. 1992) was an artist, working primarily in print, but also in cast paper and paper sculpture. She came to Ireland in 1951 where she studied Art at the Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art,

Design and Technology and later at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin.

The Irish Museum of Modern Art held a major retrospective of her work in 1995. Solo exhibitions have included Fenderesky Gallery, Belfast 1987; Taylor Galleries, Dublin 1987, 1984, 1981; Gordon Gallery, Derry, 1984; and Tom Caldwell Gallery, Belfast 1981. Group exhibitions include *PRINT '92*, Model Arts Centre, Sligo and the *Euroamericana de Grabado 3/92*, La Coruña, Spain (both posthumous, 1992). Her work can be seen in the public collections of the Office of Public Works OPW, Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) and The Arts Council / An Chomhairle Ealaíon.

**Fergus Feehily** (b. Dublin, Ireland, 1968) is an artist experimenting with painting and installation, making work with materials such as wallpaper, fabric and paint.

He studied at Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Saitama University, Tokyo and Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music. Feehily's solo exhibitions include *Half doors*, Lulu, Mexico, 2022; *La Maison de Rendez-vous*, Brussels, 2020; Galerie Christian Lethert, 2014; Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London, 2011; *Concentrations 54: Matt Connors and Fergus Feehily*, Dallas Museum of Art, 2011; Misako & Rosen, Tokyo 2010; and The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, 2009. Public collections include Dallas Museum of Art, the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA), Dublin, The Arts Council / An Chomhairle Ealaíon, and Limerick City Gallery.

**Marie Foley** (b. Cork, Ireland, 1959) is a sculptor and member of Aosdana. Her practice is inspired by the natural world. Her sculptures are composed of natural materials such as beech, sycamore, bog, holly and intricate landscaped forms made of porcelain, glass and stone.

She studied at Crawford College of Art and Design, Cork, Goldsmiths' College of Art, London and South Glamorgan

Institute of Education, Cardiff. Solo exhibitions include Fenderesky Gallery, Belfast, 2004; Fenton Gallery, Cork (2003); The Model, Sligo, 1997; and Limerick City Gallery of Art, 1988, 1989, 1995, 1997. Group shows include *Passing Through*, Glucksman Gallery, Cork, 2005-6; *Sligo Municipal Art Collection*, RHA Gallagher Gallery, Dublin, 2003; and *Acquisitions 1991-2000*, Butler Gallery, Kilkenny, 2002, Triskel, Cork, 2014 and Limerick City Gallery, 2002. She is represented in public and private collections across Ireland.

**Gerda Frömel** (b. Czechoslovakia, 1931 and d. 1975) studied sculpture at Arts Schools in Stuttgart, Darmstadt and Munich. Her practice began by using materials such as onyx, slate and alabaster for her intimate, small scale sculptures, but later she worked with aluminum, gold and bronze as the scale of her work grew. She moved to Ireland in 1956. A major retrospective of her work took place in IMMA in 2015. An exhibition of Fromels work was presented in Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane the year after her untimely death in 1975. She had a solo show at The Dawson Gallery 1970, 1964; and a joint show with Michael Scott at The Dawson Gallery 1967.

Her work can be seen in the public collections of the The Arts Council / An Chomhairle Ealaíon; Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane; and Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA), Dublin.

**Sarah Iremonger** (b. Dublin, Ireland, 1965) is a multi-disciplinary artist working across painting, site-specific multimedia, text and digital artwork.

She studied Fine Art at NCAD, Dublin, The Crawford College of Art and Design, Cork, and The Winchester School of Art, Southampton University.

Exhibitions include solo presentations at Gallery 817, UARTS, Philadelphia 2010; West Cork Arts Centre (2009); Triskel Arts Centre, Cork, 2002; Temple Bar Gallery in Dublin, 2002; and the Turku Art Museum in Finland, 2003. Group shows

Design and Technology and later at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin.

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Hibernian Academy, Dublin, 2015; The Helsinki Photography Biennial, The Finnish Museum of Photography, Helsinki, 2014; *Imagining Islands: Artists and Escape*, Courtauld Gallery, Courtauld Institute, London, 2013; *The Nature of Things: Artists from Northern Ireland*, Venice Biennale, 2005.

**Dennis McNulty** (b. Ballinasloe, Ireland, 1970) is an artist, musician, writer and engineer based in Dublin. His work is concerned with the ways in which knowledge is produced and informed by his background in electronic music, his training as a structural engineer and his studies in psychoacoustics (sound perception). He works across a variety of media on both sides of the computer screen to produce large-scale physical objects, media assemblages and live work.

Exhibitions include *Light and Language*, Lismore Castle Arts(2021); *Feeling of Knowing*, The Complex (2021); *The Narrow Gate of Here and Now*, IMMA (2021); *TTOPOLOGY* at Grazer Kunstverein and VISUAL (2018); *Homo Gestalt* at Bluecoat, Liverpool Biennial (2016); LIAF 2015: *Disappearing Acts*, Lofoten International Art Festival, Norway (2015); *PROTOTYPES*, LCGA, Limerick (2014); Performa 11, New York (2011) and the São Paulo Bienal (2008 and 2004).

**Julie Merriman** (b. Dublin, Ireland, 1963) considers the language of drawing and the conventions of drafting professions. Her work examines the history of mark making in the context of drawn, written and programmed language. Using present-day and historical data as research material, she investigates modes of inscription, replication and transmission.

She studied at Falmouth School of Art and Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art Design and Technology. Solo exhibitions include *Carriage Return*, DLR Lexicon Gallery, 2018; *Revisions*, Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, 2016. Group exhibitions include *Home: Being and Belonging in Contemporary Ireland*, The Glucksman, April, 2020; Dublin Art Book Fair, Temple Bar Gallery, 2019; and EVA International, 2018.

**Anthony O'Carroll** (b. Dublin, Ireland, 1942) studied at the National College of Art, Dublin; Academy of Fine Art in Helsinki; and Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Art, Stockholm.

Solo exhibitions of his work took place at the Hendriks Gallery, Dublin (1981, 1977, 1976, 1974, 1972); Skaninaviska Banken, Stockholm (1978); and Molesworth Gallery, Dublin (1966). He has participated in many major Irish group exhibitions including Oireachtas; Irish Exhibition of Living Art; and the RHA Annual exhibitions. Gaining recognition from the 1970s onwards, O'Carroll has received a number of awards and is represented in public collections including the Arts Council of Ireland; the Arts Council of Northern Ireland; the Swedish Arts Council; and the National Museum in Stockholm.

**Paul O'Keeffe** (b. Dublin, Ireland, 1957) is an artist working across sculpture and installation. He attended St. Martin's School of Art, London and NCAD in Dublin. He subsequently studied at UCLA through a Fulbright Travel Scholarship, where he received an MFA in 1981. A professor emeritus at Kent State University, O'Keeffe currently lives and works in Ohio. He has received several awards, including a 2021 Ohio Arts Council Individual Artist Excellence Award, which the Ohio Arts Council has given him on thirteen previous occasions. In 2017, he was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship. He has also received an Arts Midwest/National Endowment for the Arts Award, a Ford Foundation grant and awards from the Arts Council of Ireland.

Collections containing his work include The Arts Council / An Chomhairle Ealaíon; Bayer USA, Pittsburgh; Progressive Insurance, Cleveland; Kaiser Permanente, Cleveland and the Cleveland Public Library.

**Michael Warren** (b. Gorey, Wexford, Ireland, 1950) is a sculptor that produces site-specific public art. He studied at Bath Academy of Art, Trinity College Dublin and Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan. Solo exhibitions of Warren's work include Galerie Weiller, Paris (2015), LCGA (2014), *Predella*, Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin (2012); *Pica Pica*, St. Mary's Abbey, Dublin (2011); VISUAL, Carlow (2010); and Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin (2010).

His sculptures often seem to defy gravity and their strength lies in Warren's ability to combine autonomous elements that retain their own tension and rhythm. Warren's outdoor works are on public display worldwide. He was made a member of the Royal Hibernian Academy in 2008, and an honorary member of the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland in 2012.

# Quietly Dispelling the Dark

Colm Tóibín selects  
from the Arts Council  
Collection

Link Gallery

20 September 2024 – 19 January 2025

## Works List

### On short wall:

1. Mary McIntyre, *Quietly Dispelling the Dark*, 2021, colour giclée photographic print

### On long wall (map on reverse):

2. Michael Coleman, *Blue Rose Blue*, 1982, oil on canvas
3. Gerda Frömel, *Untitled III*, c. 1963, pencil on card
4. Julie Merriman, *Disruption Rowlandwerft IV*, 2010, carbon on canvas
5. Sarah Iremonger, *Blue Series (1)*, 1994, oil on canvas
6. TJ Maher, *In the Quiet No. 5*, 1989, mixed media on board
7. Fergus Feehily, *Scent*, 1996, oil on wood
8. Brenda Kelliher, *Shields*, 1980, mixed media
9. Anthony O'Carroll, *Portal*, 1985, oil on board
10. Mary Farl Powers, *Mung*, 1981, etching
11. Cecil King, *Untitled (Traverse Series)*, 1984, oil on canvas
12. Paul O'Keefe, *Hap*, 1981, steel

### On plinths:

13. Maud Cotter, *Strain*, 1994, copper, steel, glass
14. Michael Warren, *Pyramid 83*, steel, 1980
15. Marie Foley, *Tribute to Five Wounds*, 1985, ceramic

### On floor in window:

16. Áine Mac Giolla Bhríde, *unit f*, 2018, cast concrete, plywood, tile adhesive, emulsion paint

### In alcove by entrance:

17. Dennis McNulty, *The here and now/crystalline space*, 2008, acrylic, electronics, DVD

