

COLUMN

# Joanne Laws

## 2016: The Proximity of History

**WE** work exceptionally hard in the arts. Whether working day in, day out in studios, travelling the length and breadth of the country, grant-chasing, freelancing or maintaining real jobs at the fringes of day jobs, we move mountains every day. While critical reflection is inbuilt in what we do, how often do we actually pause to reflect on our progress or marvel at our achievements? As the final Visual Artists’ News Sheet of the year, this issue is positioned to consider recent developments across our sector, while assessing some of the challenges that remain.

2016 has been a momentous year. What might the *Reeling in the Years* montage of 2016 look like? Which prevailing narratives will be retrieved from archives in years to come? In a year defined by global terror and the migrant crisis, Europe’s borders – once softened under free trade agreements – suddenly seemed to stand to attention. Amidst the uncertainties of Brexit, we watched imperial nationalism shrivel in front of our eyes, fold inwards and splinter. Meanwhile, at the periphery of Fortress Europe, Ireland marked the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising, a pivotal moment in the founding of a fully independent Irish Republic.

Despite reservations that remembering histories shared with Northern Ireland might prove contentious, or that audiences nationwide might become jaded by seemingly endless renditions of pageantry and memorials, the commemorations so far have largely been well received. As outlined by Helen Carey in her column, the visual arts have taken centre-stage in marking the ongoing decade of centenaries (2012 – 2022). With one eye on future archival trajectories, this issue considers a number of artists’ projects that mediated important ground on modern day notions of equality, resistance and citizenship.

The 1916 centenary saw additional funding being allocated towards a range of international projects, some of which are profiled in this issue by Andrew Duggan, James, L. Hayes and Caoimhghin Ó Fráithile. In addition, a number of major state-funded commissions, such as ‘In the Shadow of the State’ and ‘Stormy Petrel/ Guaideal’, have comprised performance-driven or event-based spectacles, suitably emphasising physical and temporal experiences over permanent structures. Importantly, projects of this nature have served to reaffirm the vital role of narrative and ‘witness-writing’ in preserving these ephemeral live encounters.

A burgeoning awareness of the importance of archives has also emerged as a defining feature of these commemorative landscapes, heavily informed by oral histories, material objects and other primary sources. It therefore seems incongruous, in this year of reflection, that ‘heritage’ should have to fight for representation in cabinet portfolios, that museums should be so underfunded or that libraries should be closing – a situation akin to the state eating itself, one word at a time.

A number of key developments this year have been punctuated and infused with an awareness of the past, as if some time-shrinking device had been unleashed, heightening our relationship with the historic and drawing it ever closer. Just as commemorations of the 1913 Dublin Lockout brought the disenfranchised workers of last century into conversations about modern labour practices, so the martyred rebels of the Rising cast a watchful eye over proceedings. ‘Beware of the Risen People’ – taken from Patrick Pearse’s poem *The Rebel* – offered a galvanising slogan for last year’s countrywide anti-water charge protests. ‘Was it for this?’ has also frequently been used, both as a rallying cry and a benchmark to assess contentious developments, from Olympic tickets and Apple taxes, to NAMA dealings and vulture funds, as though Yeats’s critique of the self-serving politics of 1913 could not be more relevant for modern Ireland.

The proximity of history was nowhere more poignantly felt than in national synchronised readings of the 1916 Proclamation – an iconic and visionary manifesto for sovereignty and equality. Addressing the suffrage and allegiance of “every Irish man and Irish woman”, it is easy to overlook how radical the Proclamation actually was. Against a backdrop of the Republic’s abysmal history regarding the treatment of women, a wave of women’s campaigns and feminist projects have galvanised this year, building on the momentum generated by 2015’s Waking the Feminists, as discussed by Aislinn O’Donnell in her column. Under the unifying theme ‘Rise and Repeal’, tens of thousands took part in the fifth annual march for choice in September, providing commentary on the “failure of the Republic to fulfil the promise of equality made in 1916”.

For the complacent, developments this year felt like a full-blown feminist ambush; however for those who have campaigned invisibly for decades, they felt like hard-won validations of their efforts. The contribution of artists’ activism in augmenting wider resistance by generating dialogue and visual awareness (via murals, posters, banners and badges) is a subject that warrants further scrutiny.

This issue also features a column by Jo Mangan of the National Campaign for the Arts (NCFA), outlining the vital role of the arts in Irish society. In response to Budget 2017, the NCFA stated that, while the arts sector was congratulated for its contribution to commemorations, there was “insufficient conviction within government” to maintain levels of investment that would reflect Ireland’s “world-class creative sector” and value it as the our “most obvious natural resource”.

# Roundup

## CHEEK BY JOWL



Naomi Sex, ‘Cheek by Jowl’

‘Cheek By Jowl’ was a touring performance written and directed by visual artist Naomi Sex and featuring Damien Devaney and Darina Gallagher. It was performed at Crawford Gallery, Cork, on 16 Sept, moving to IMMA, Dublin and Limerick City Gallery of Art. The work comprised “a series of layered, highly descriptive vignettes,” the press release noted. “Its title sets a claustrophobic scene for a single ubiquitous character, You/One, to navigate an abstract, non-place”.

crawfordgallery.ie

## ENNISKILLEN VISUAL ARTS OPEN



Promotional image for Enniskillen Visual Arts Open

The 2016 Enniskillen Visual Arts Open ran at Higher Bridges Gallery, the Clinton Centre, Enniskillen, Fermanagh (16 Sept – 15 Oct). The work was exhibited in the gallery and throughout Enniskillen town centre during the Fermanagh Arts Festival. The participating artists were Andy Parsons, Brian Kielt, Carolin Koss, Des Cullen, Ellie Niblock, Emma Zukovic, Fionn Wilson, Floating World Collective, Gavin Porter, Kevin Gillett, Kiera O’Toole, Mairead Macormack, Mary A. Fitzgerald, Mary Furlong, Nicholas May, Noah Rose, Pawel Kleszczewski and Kasia Zimnoch, Phyl Guerin, Rachel Leary, Ruth Gonsalves Moore, Simon Carman, Stephen Gunning, Tansey Cowley, Trina Hobson and Wendy Ferguson. Fermanagh and Omagh District Council invited Outland Arts to curate the 2016 Visual Arts Open in association with the Arts Office. The curators were Helen Sharp, Anna Macleod and Diane Henshaw.

flive.org.uk, fermanaghomagh.com

## CLAIMING SPACE



‘Claiming Space’ image (detail)

Red Bird Youth Collective, a youth arts group based in Galway, presented ‘Claiming Space’ at Riverbank Arts Centre, Newbridge, Kildare, 29 Aug – 1 Oct 2016. The exhibition showcased Red Bird’s collaborative methodology, both with each other and with professional artists and architects. Over the years Red Bird has worked with artists such as Louise Manifold, Ruby Wallis and Dominic Thorpe, and with architects Bláithín Quinn and Dominic Stevens. Although created by different members and different professionals, all the artworks in this exhibition were rooted, the press release noted “in exploring and challenging the world from a young person’s point of view whilst claiming artistic and public space for young people”. The tour was facilitated by Galway Arts Centre and supported by the Arts Council.

theredbirdcollective.com

## GLAS JOURNAL

Silvia Loeffler’s exhibition ‘Glas Journal’ ran at the National Maritime Museum of Ireland, Dun Laoghaire Harbour, from 10 to 25 Sept. Loeffler’s work comprised two books made through collaborations with people who live, work and feel associated with different locations in Dún Laoghaire Harbour, from RNLI volunteers to employees of the Quay Fish Shop.

## ANOTHER REALITY



Nuala O’Sullivan, *But it might rain*; oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm; Laois Arthouse

Nuala O’Sullivan’s exhibition ‘Another Reality’, which ran at Laois Arthouse (8 – 30 Sept), demonstrated the artist’s interest in the culture and aesthetic of the 1950s period. The press release described how O’Sullivan’s paintings explore “the friction between outward appearance and hidden restriction”. These works reference family Super 8 films and photographs from the 1950s and 1960s, many of which were collected by the artist over several years. For O’Sullivan, “history remains a presence in our lives and our personal histories continue to resonate in the stories we construct about ourselves and our society today”.

## GHOSTS OF OTHER STORIES

From 10 Sept to 27 Nov, The Model, Sligo will partner with the British Council on an exhibition drawn from the



Image from ‘Ghosts of Other Stories’

British Council Collection to mark the 1916 Rising. The press release states: “Art collections by their very nature rarely convey a definitive narrative of the development of artistic practice ... Each collection is a babble of riotous voices telling of the myriad concerns and questions at the heart of every individual artwork. ‘Ghosts of Other Stories’ explores works within the British Council Collection where threads of lost stories or forgotten histories flash momentarily into the light”.

The exhibition features works by Tomma Abts, Ed Atkins, BANK Arts Collective, Tacita Dean, Ryan Gander, Graham Gussin, Merlin James, Steve McQueen, Rosalind Nashashibi, Mike Nelson, Susan Philipsz, Wolfgang Tillmans, Phoebe Unwin, Rachel Whiteread and Cerith Wyn Evans.

themodel.ie

## COISCEIM AN PHIARSAIGH



Bernie Joyce, work from ‘Coisceim An Phiarasigh’

Bernie Joyce’s exhibition ‘Coisceim An Phiarasigh’ comprised a series of paintings based on Patrick Pearse’s short stories, which were written in his summer house Teach an Phiarasigh, Ros Muc, in which the artist lives. They were shown at Féile Phobail Béal Feirste, from 31 Jul to 10 Aug. The first nine paintings were based on the characters in Pearse’s stories, while the second group of works depict the route taken by the character Nora in the story *Na Bóithre*. The last paintings show the boundary stones with Ros Muc village names that are mentioned in Pearse’s writings. Joyce also produced a book to accompany the exhibition.

## TO FOLLOW THE WATER



Image for ‘Follow the Water’