

Desire and Persistence

JOANNE LAWS INTERVIEWS THREE ARTISTS AT VARIOUS STAGES OF THEIR CAREERS ABOUT MAINTAINING A PAINTING PRACTICE IN IRELAND.



Jane Rainey, *Wanderer*, 2016, oil on canvas, 150 x 120cm; image courtesy of the artist



Ciarán Murphy, *Standby (Model)*, 2013, oil on linen, 35 x 40 cm; courtesy of the artist and Grimm Gallery



Robert Armstrong, *Summit*, 2016, oil on linen, 60x50cm; courtesy of the artist

Joanne Laws: Can you say something about your formal training as a painter? On reflection, what was the most important thing you learned in art college?

Jane Rainey: I completed a degree in Fine Art at Ulster University, Belfast, in 2014. I was then awarded a scholarship for postgraduate study at NCAD and graduated with an MA in Fine Art in 2016. The most important thing I learned at art college was the necessity of experimentation within your practice. During my time at university, I developed technical skills such as drawing and colour-mixing through the guidance of tutors and fellow students, as well as self-directed study. Through the discipline of learning these skills, I was able to take this knowledge and push the boundaries of the painting medium. This type of experimentation is something that takes time. The six years in art college gave me the space to really experiment and to try out different things. In this way, I began to develop my own painting language, based on what I wanted to say and how I was going to say it.

Ciarán Murphy: Early in my visual arts education, I was introduced to Josef Albers's book *Interaction of Color*, which I continue to find really inspiring. I love the way it had a very rigorous, almost scientific approach to the study of colour without disregarding the more subjective and expressive features of colour perception. There's something about the instability of vision that I find fascinating: how our eyes can never be trusted; how by looking at images they, in turn, look back you; and how the act of visual perception involves elusive, pre-coded responses. Later, when undertaking an MA in Visual Arts Practice at IADT, I was encouraged to read theory, philosophy and literature which benefited my practice a lot, because it helped me to find kinships in different forms of artistic enquiry. Being encouraged to analyse and talk about my work was also helpful – it gave me more confidence regarding the relevance and worth of my enquiries.

Robert Armstrong: In 1969, I was 17 and Apollo 11 landed on the moon just weeks before I arrived at the National College of Art. I was excited about the future. However, at the time, the college was run by the Department of Education and staffed mostly by conservative members of the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA). They believed in strict academic training as the only basis for art education and insisted on long periods of study in the 'life' room, drawing from antique plaster casts. Conscious of the spirit of Paris 1968, students were already protesting about a regime that was so sceptical of Modernism. We rejected this kind of formal training and instead discovered a different sort of agency through agitation, sit-ins, strikes and lobbying politicians. After sackings, expulsions (me, twice!) and closure, the Government instituted the *NCAD Act* of 1971, which gave independence to the college and brought about major structural changes and reform.

JL: Do you think that there are enough supports and opportunities currently available for painters in Ireland?

JR: I think that there are a lot of opportunities across Ireland for artists, which includes painters. I feel that there are a lot of people wanting to nurture local talent by providing different awards, exhibitions and grants. In my own experience, I cannot thank certain people and organisations enough for providing me with so many great opportunities and supports, especially so soon after leaving college. You really don't need to look far to see people doing all sorts of exciting things for the arts in Ireland.

CM: I'm not so keen on the tendency for painters to be grouped as a separate species in relation to other artists, either as a kind of 'special status' medium or as some kind of anachronistic refuge. I see artists using paint as being similar to artists working in other mediums, and, like them, they need the space and time to develop their work, if it is to be of a high standard. Although it's important to acknowledge the support that does exist in terms of funding grants and so on, it couldn't be described as adequate. I think there needs to be more recognition of the time and resources it takes to develop an art practice – it's not something that can simply be knocked out over a weekend or between multiple other jobs. The other aspect that really needs to be addressed is the adequate provision of suitable and affordable artists' workspaces. I believe the Creative Spaces Collective is doing important work in campaigning on this issue.

RA: The current strength of Irish painting is the best-kept secret in Irish art. However, in my view, the official support from institutions is pitiful. "Being an artist now," declared Joseph Kosuth in 1969, "means to question the nature of art. If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art . . . If you make paintings you are already accepting (not questioning) the nature of art." This blinkered philosophy appears to have been embraced by many institutions and curators, particularly in Ireland, who fail to comprehend the interesting positions being adopted by Irish painters right now. The last painter to represent Ireland with a solo presentation of paintings at the Venice Biennale was Patrick Scott in 1960. Other countries seem to have no such reticence about painting. For example, over the last 20 years, Great Britain has featured conventional painting shows at Venice by Gary Hume and Chris Ofili; the US has been represented by Robert Colescott, Ed Ruscha and Mark Bradford; Belgium has shown Luc Tuymans (twice); Wales has presented the paintings of Merlin James and so on.

JL: What advice would you give to emerging graduates about maintaining a lifelong painting practice?

JR: My advice would be to apply for as many opportunities as possible, with the aim of getting your work out there and seen, even in the early stages of your career. Another thing would be to stay committed once leaving college. It is comparatively easy to make art in a college environment, but once you leave, you might have less time. My advice would be to just commit yourself to making it work. If that means

working around a busy schedule and going to the studio at unusual hours, then that is just something you have to do. I would also advise getting involved in a studio group with likeminded people. When you leave art college, you suddenly don't have the critical support of your peers and tutors, so being in a studio group where your peers can comment or advise you is necessary – it helps you get out of your own head.

CM: Given that I'm what could be described as 'mid-career' artist, I hope I'm not fully qualified to answer this one yet! I stumbled across this John Cage quote some time ago: "When you start working, everybody is in your studio – the past, your friends, enemies, the art world, and above all, your own ideas – all are there. But as you continue painting, they start leaving, one by one, and you are left completely alone. Then, if you are lucky, even you leave." Perhaps this is more a description of a process, rather than advice as such, but it's an idea I like to keep in mind when I work. There's something about the ability to surprise oneself and that slippage between the intentions at the start and the outcomes that keeps me engaged with my work. I guess it also describes a kind of trust in both following a process and allowing for chance or unexpected happenings.

RA: Desire, hard work, persistence and luck are essential in order to sustain a practice. Intense personal focus and engagement is necessary, and a healthy skepticism of fashion and trends is advisable. It is important to be distinctive – nobody wants to be a Luc Tuymans lookalike! Support of peer networks must be harnessed and maintained after college in a group studio context. It is important to seek out critical opinions of peers. Visibility is key to a successful career. Instagram is becoming important in this regard and reaches beyond this small island. Without opportunities to exhibit, it is very difficult to transition from being a student to being a practicing artist. Young artists must create their own opportunities because commercial galleries are slow to take on unproven artists. Worldwide, now is a good time for painting. Be ambitious! It is only a matter of time before Irish painting gets its due reward.

Jane Rainey is a painter based in Belfast. Since graduation, she has exhibited extensively throughout Ireland and has recently exhibited further afield, in Italy and the US.

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Ciarán Murphy is an artist who lives and works in Callan, Kilkenny. He is represented by Grimm Gallery, Amsterdam.

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Robert Armstrong is a founding member of Temple Bar Gallery and Studios and head of Painting at the National College of Art & Design. He is represented by the Kevin Kavanagh gallery, Dublin.

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