



# FINDING FORM

Selected works from the  
Kildare County Council  
Municipal Art Collection

21<sup>st</sup> April - 27<sup>th</sup> May 2023

McKenna Gallery, Riverbank Arts  
Centre, Newbridge, Co. Kildare.



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## FOREWORD

Grain, yeast and water. Combined, kneaded and stretched. These ingredients when mixed together and left to rest undergo a metamorphosis. In baking, the loaf finds its form.

Meaning is given to material through human action and interpretation. In the creation of an artwork is the ability to suspend time and solidify an idea, through play with line and form. A momentary experience can be transformed into something monumental. These artworks spanning the 50-year life of the Kildare Municipal Art Collection are placed together to create a dialogue that speaks of a body that is in the process of becoming and so, is not easily defined. The works chosen resonate with a feeling of flux, of taking form through a dynamic of time, matter and space.

The act of carving an everyday object in stone transforms it into something that demands attention and contemplation. The sheer weight of a granite sculpture makes it significant to handle and care for. Works in this municipal collection have been selected over a number of decades, they have been cared for and placed and left to rest, and will be placed again. Their weight will continue to be carried in order to create a space for meaning to be found and made by future generations, and through carrying this weight we hope that our steps will leave an impression on the world.

**Paula Barrett**, curator of 'Finding Form'

Assistant Arts Officer for Kildare County Council

Visual Artist, B.A. & M.A. National College of Art and Design

April 2023

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## FINDING FORM IN A FLUID THING, by Cristín Leach

In October 2019, Kildare County Council Arts Officer Lucina Russell gave a community arts group of thirteen local participants a task: to select an artwork for purchase for the Municipal Art Collection (MAC). The group's first choice was an oil painting made that year by Emma Stroude, whose solo show at The Kildare Gallery in Carton House they had just visited with their facilitator, the artist Vera McEvoy. It was called *The Red Flag*. The second was another painting by Stroude, *So Settle the Night* (2019). Both works made it into the collection.

The gesture was a significant one, not least because a municipal art collection is a body of work held by and for the people, although its contents are not often or always chosen by members of the public. Many of the works in the MAC date from the 1970s when Kildare County Council collected what was then new art by artists including Robert Ballagh under the Arts Council Joint Purchase Scheme, but it is a collection that has continued and continues to grow.

From a series of 'Colour Run' paintings begun in 2019, *The Red Flag* is now part of a new exhibition chosen by the newest member of Kildare County Council Arts Service, curator Paula Barrett. Barrett's selection of fifteen works from the MAC displayed at the Riverbank Arts Centre, includes painting, sculpture and works on paper by twelve artists. It's a neat mini snapshot of a much broader collection that invites audiences to look at ways in which a public collection shifts and holds as it changes and grows. The title of the show, 'Finding Form', is an acknowledgement that all of this work is and should be an ever-agile, active task. The collection seeks, in the hands of its curators, to reflect back to its diverse audiences ideas around place, identity, taste, and what art can tell us about ourselves at any moment in time.

Stroud's painting, *The Red Flag* is the most colourful work in a mostly monochrome show. It depicts a scene in which figures including children move through yellow and pink smoke, on what looks like a local sports pitch, as gable ends, mountains and streetlamps are captured against a grey sky. There are arms about to flail, legs about to move, and one kid holds a small red flag. It's a painting about the ordinary extraordinary to be found in everyday life. But *The Red Flag* also invites reflection on ways in which meaning and context can be lost over time if not recorded, preserved, and reflected on.

A colour run is an untimed fun-run in which participants start off wearing white and end up doused in bright colours by the end, usually organised as a charity fundraiser, and borrowing from traditions associated with the Hindu festival of Holi. *The Red Flag* is a painting about a community event, but there is more. Visually, there are echoes of conflict - flares, teargas, fire - in the colours, and implied in the title too, a warning. In 2023, it sparks secondary thoughts

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of the place of children in a world facing climate crisis. It reflects on ideas about suburban places made temporarily wild, the meaning of community, the place of joy, silliness, fun, the humans stepping outside comfort zones and breaking societal norms, but in an organised, permitted way.

Hanging disparate works together in a new show makes new connections too. In the small space of the McKenna Gallery, the subliminal concerns of The Red Flag speak to Shane Hynan's large photographic print, *Aftermath of Bog Fire* (2020), with its silhouetted burnt black ground cover and smoke still rising to shroud the remaining tall thin trees reaching towards a blue-clearing sky. From Hynan's photograph and Stroude's painting we can reflect on the concerns in Kildare-based Seán Cotter's *Winter Flight* drawing in charcoal and ink on handmade paper. Cotter shows us a swirl of birds in a vortex-style loop, forming a stilled pattern that appears as though it is just about to move and take flight again. John Behan's *Flight of Doves* (1970s), a bronze sculpture on a polished marble base, forms a wonderful visual companion.

This is perpetual movement, a moment in time, captured just as it becomes and is about to change again, and it's a really good metaphor for the show, and the wider collection. When Barrett describes the process of selecting the works for 'Finding Form' she speaks of a "feeling of flux". It's the same ebb and flow that is and must be at the heart of a municipal collection, the idea of a path being charted through time, through preservation, curation and display of works of art.

The notion of flux might imply a struggle, but the easy connections that emerge between these works, some separated by decades, indicates more a feeling of welcome agility, of conscious awareness and response to art as it changes, and to changing audiences too. For the custodians asked to form, grow and shape a municipal collection this question of responsive curiosity, not only a willingness to accept but to seek and embrace flux, flow, new findings, in art and in the collection is essential, and it is an ever-evolving action.

A municipal art collection is a repository that forms a record. It offers an endorsement of an artist's practice through addition to the officially preserved canon, but it also seeks over time to tell the story of those for whom it is held. *Reflections at Yeomanstown* (1977) by James Nolan (1929-2015) is a painted scene firmly rooted in a physical experience of being in nature in a particular local place, at a particular moment in time. Niamh O'Malley's *Big Wheel* video projection aligns with a two and a half metre wide painting to produce a kind of real-time double image, a present moment now crossed with memory. A bird flies by as a fairground

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wheel turns, silhouetted against the sky. It's a recorded image, but also a temporary captured illusion. It is live, and yet not live, capturing something of both then and now.

'Finding Form' embraces the simplicity of Rebecca Peart's line-drawing prints and the mystery and history of Dominic Turner's Fireworks, Easter Monday, 1916 V1 and V2 (2016). It asks us to sit with Isabel Nolan's Silence Filled the Room (2008), a text work that reads at times like a headstone carving in pencil and watercolour on paper as the letters SILENCEFILLS run into each other and run out of space on the page, jostling to fit. Gillian Lawler challenges ideas about fixed physical place, taking viewers into a disjointed imaginary dream-space with her abstracted landscape painting Untitled 1 (2009), while John Minihan's Untitled black and white photograph of women in winter coats examining piles of shoes at an outdoor market lands us right back home again. Everywhere in this show we see then seeping into now.

How might a collection already spanning decades move forward through the next fifty, one hundred years, and beyond? It is through conscious re-imagining and opening up of the ever-expanding possibilities for new connections within and beyond it. The main image in the promotional material for 'Finding Form' is one of a solid, immutable shape, a kind of brick laid down as foundation for what comes next. It's Derek Fitzsimons' Bread, a 38cm granite loaf, coming to us with intimations of petrification and preservation, speaking to the human essentials of nourishment, but also again to our ideas of identity, place and tradition, asking us what it is we chose to remember, record, and carry with us. It's a useful start for this moment of finding form, one artwork on which to begin to build the story of the current selection from a collection that is always becoming, never fixed, never finished, filled with memories of then, made in the now, and captured to be part of what's next.

**Cristín Leach is an Irish writer, art critic, and broadcaster whose critically acclaimed memoir *Negative Space* was published by Merrion Press in 2022. Her art criticism has appeared in *The Sunday Times* since 2003. She is a regular contributor to RTÉ TV and radio and also writes for *Irish Arts Review* and *RTE.ie Culture*. She presented the four-part radio documentary series *Ireland Portrayed* for RTÉ Lyric FM in 2020 and co-presented the *New York Radio Festivals* award-winning short series *Through the Canvas* for RTÉ Lyric FM in 2018. Her short fiction and personal essays have been published in *Winter Papers* and broadcast on RTÉ Radio 1 as part of *Keywords*. Her second book, *From Ten till Dusk – A Portrait of the Royal Hibernian Academy in Twelve Stories*, will be published by the RHA in 2023 to coincide with the Academy's 200th anniversary.**

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## **NIAMH O'MALLEY - Big Wheel**

2008

Video projection aligned with a large painting; oil on primed aluminium 250 x 140cm. The projection is looped and silent; it fades to white every 5min 15sec to reveal the painting.



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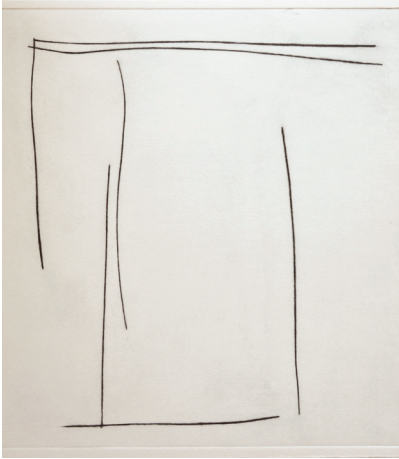
**JAMES NOLAN** - Reflections at Yeomanstown

**1977**

Oil on canvas. 45 X 60cm



# FINDING FORM



## REBECCA PEART - Buddha Lines

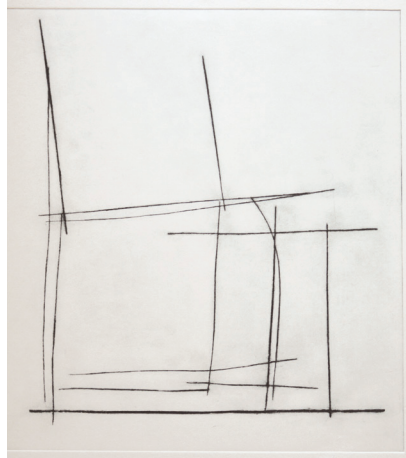
2005

Copper Plate Etching

35 x 25cm

Edition 10/20

From set of 27 prints 'Where Siva Meets Medb', by artists from the Leinster Printmaking Studio.



## REBECCA PEART - Hindu Temple Chair

2005

Copper Plate Etching

35 x 25cm

Edition 10/20

From set of 27 prints 'Where Siva Meets Medb', by artists from the Leinster Printmaking Studio.



**JOHN BEHAN - Flight of Doves**

1977

Bronze on a polished marble base

67cm tall

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**SHANE HYNAN** – Aftermath of Bog Fire

2020

Fine art giclée photographic print

64 x 80cm

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**SEÁN COTTER** - Winter Flight (detail)

2008

Charcoal and ink on Japanese handmade paper

96 x 76cm

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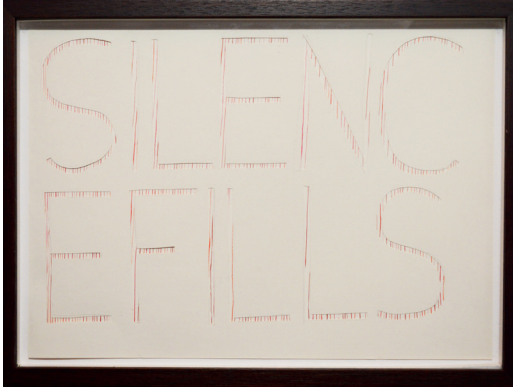
**JOHN MINIHAN** –Looking for Bargains, Market Day, Emily Square

1965

40cm x 50cm

From a series of 27 black and white photographs, originals from the book *Shadows From The Pale, Portraits of an Irish Town*, published by Secker and Warburg, London, dedicated to the people of Athy.





**ISABEL NOLAN - Silence filled the room**

**2008**

Pencil and watercolour on paper

30 x 42cm



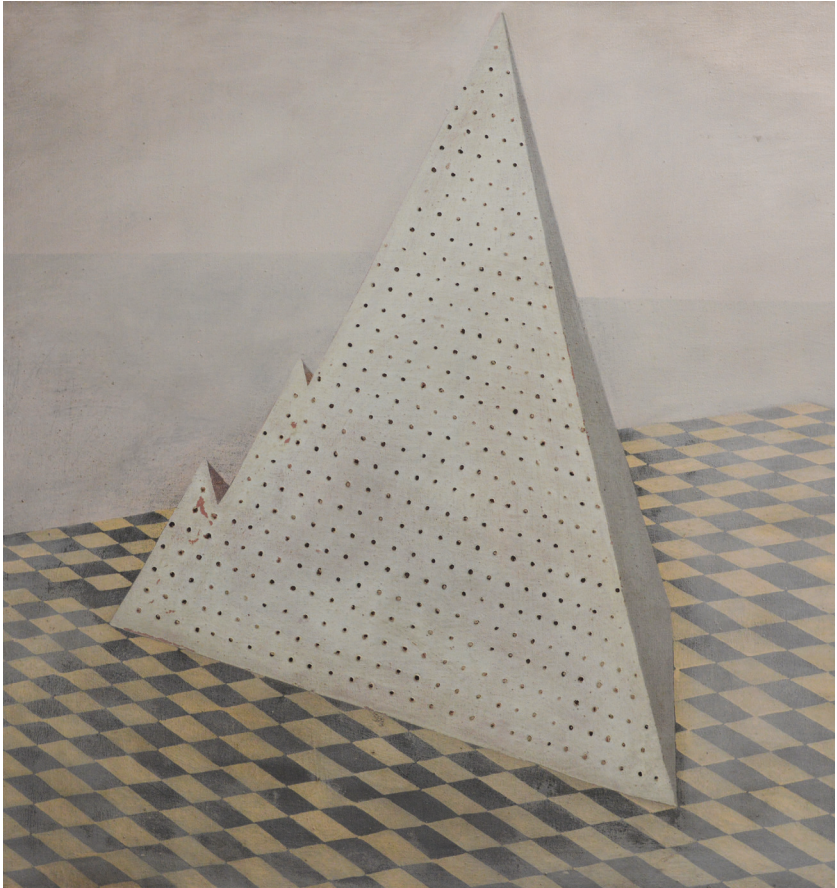
**ISABEL NOLAN - Festina Lente**

**2008**

Watercolour and pencil on paper

25.5cm x 34.5cm

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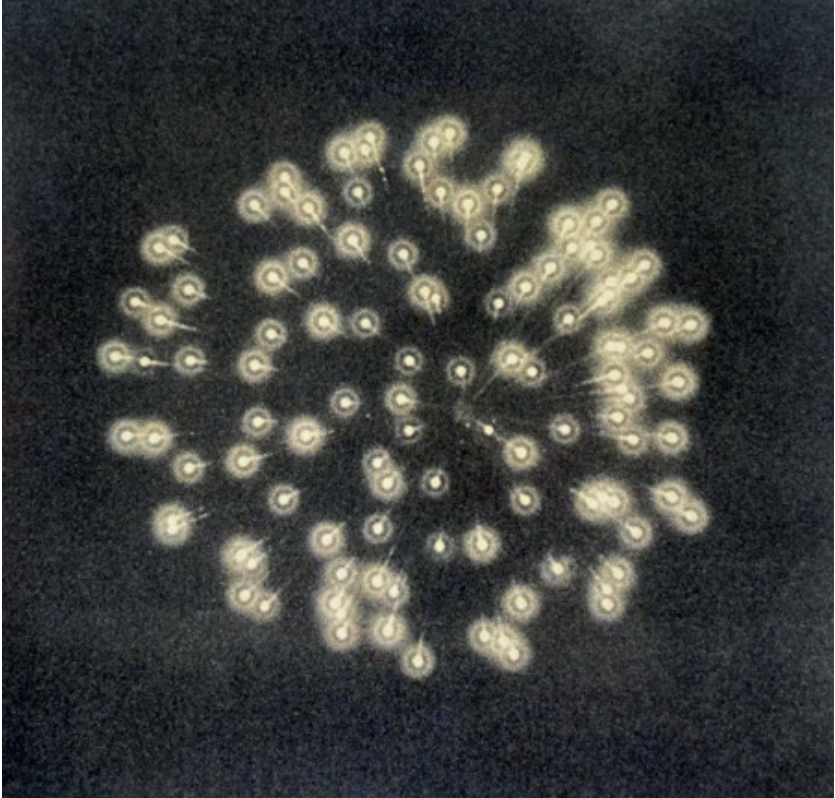
**GILLIAN LAWLER** - Untitled 1

2009

Oil on canvas

73 x 75cm





**DOMINIC TURNER** - Fireworks, Easter Monday, 1916, V2

2016

Toned Cyanotype

38 x 38cm

Print 48 of a set of 60 from Little Stories Little Prints, a 1916 Commemorative project by the Leinster Printmaking Studio.

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**EMMA STROUDE - The Red Flag**

2019

Oil on canvas

50 x 50cm

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## ASSOCIATED EVENTS

RIVERBANK ARTS CENTRE, NEWBRIDGE.

### **Panel Discussion, Thursday 11th May at 7pm**

This panel will discuss what it means for artists to be part of a municipal collection and what the responsibilities a local authority has regarding purchasing art, display and interpretation of works. The panel will be chaired by Cristín Leach, Writer, Broadcaster, Art Critic and includes artists whose work features in the collection, Seán Cotter, Emma Stroude and Sarah Browne alongside Arts Officer for Kildare County Council, Lucina Russell.

### **Workshop Thursday 25th May, 7- 8:30pm**

Artist Vera McEvoy will be hosting an evening of investigation and creative play inspired by the exhibition. Vera will lead participants in creating tactile forms with clay, fabric, sticks and mixed media, reflecting on how meaning is given to materials through human interaction. This workshop is aimed at adults with a sense of curiosity, and a desire to play with forms and structure.

## ABOUT THE COLLECTION

Kildare County Council Municipal Art Collection was established through the County Architect's office of the local authority in the 1970's, led by County Architect Niall Meagher. At this time the Arts Council Joint Purchase Scheme was an incentive for local authorities to purchase contemporary artworks from emerging artists of the day. Kildare County Council made use of the scheme to purchase works by Evie Hone, Patrick Pye, Patrick Collins, Charles Brady, Seán Mc Sweeney, Robert Ballagh and Norah Mc Guinness. The collection has vastly developed since that time and includes digital artworks and works selected by members of the local community. The collection is now managed by Kildare County Council's Arts Service and has grown to encompass over 200 works.



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## Thanks

Sincere thanks to the wonderful staff at Riverbank Arts Centre, Kildare Arts Service team and our colleagues in Kildare County Council, especially the Library Service for their support in the organisation of this exhibition.



Comhairle Contae Chill Dara  
Kildare County Council

