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MAGAZINE

## Helen O'Leary

Helen O' Leary was born in County Wexford, Ireland received her BFA and MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (B.F.A., 1987, M.F.A., 1989). She has been honored with a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, two Pollock-Krasner awards (1989, 1996) the Joan Mitchell Award for painting and sculpture ((2000); Skowhegan School of painting and sculpture, several grants from the Arts Council of Ireland; residencies at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Monaghan, Ireland, and the Fundacion Valparaiso in Almeria, Spain; the Culturel Irlandaise fellowship, Golden Artist Residency, Mac Dowell fellowship and most recently Yaddo Fellowship.

She has participated in exhibitions internationally, including at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, NY, The MAC Belfast, National Gallery of Art in Limerick, Ireland; the Glasgow Museum of Art in Scotland; Lesley Heller Gallery, NY, the Galerie le Petit Port in Leiden, The Netherlands; the Contemporary Arts Centre in Sydney, Australia; The Zolla/Lieberman Gallery in Chicago;; the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne, Australia;; the Kerlin Gallery in Dublin, Fenderesky Gallery.

She currently lives in Jersey City NJ and Leitrim, Ireland.

All photos by Eva O'Leary.



Helen at work in her studio.



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## Interview with Helen O'Leary

Questions by Emily Burns

**Hi Helen! Can you tell us a bit about your background and how you became interested in being an artist?**

I was born on a small farm in Ireland in the early sixties. My father built boats and worked the land, as his people had done before him. My first ten years of childhood went from the archaic to the modern in a series of events that left the family bankrupt. My father's early death and my mother's sickness and hospitalization left the remaining young female family vulnerable to the marauding patriarchal violence's and trespasses of a small village.

I learned feminism and patriarchy first hand while keeping the farm afloat with my sisters as a child. The complexity and cruelty of the unreliable support structures and unreliable truths of that childhood haunt my practice, but they also supplied a ready armature for the language of painting.

**Was there ever a point in time where you thought you might pursue a different path?**

No, I always knew I loved painting, and farming. The studio is now my few acres of arable land.

**You live in State College, PA, Jersey City, NY and Leitrim, Ireland. On top of that, you stay very busy attending residencies all over the world. How do the different locations and frequent travel affect your studio time? How do you relate to this state of flux both in life and in your practice as an artist?**

My home is a foreign country. I have always felt like an outsider, even as child on the farm in Wexford. My sisters and I used to laugh and say that we needed a different passport to travel down our lane. I grew up no stranger to temporality, our farm was blown away in the only tornado on record in that part of Ireland, and a couple of years later the main thatch house was burnt down in a lightning storm. One day you have a home and a family, the next day you don't.

**What interests you most about residencies? How do they affect your practice?**

Being rootless has been a survival strategy for me; I love the fresh ground and fresh start of a residency. I also love being around poets, writers, composers, architects, journalists, film makers, it gives me a round sound feel for the world and all the possibilities we have to feel in the fullest way possible. I pick up clothes at the nearest thrift store and carry on. My studio is my home, wherever that may be. I have the house in Ireland which is my emotional home, I visit it each summer, and imagine living there, as long as I own that house, every other situation, good or bad, is temporary.

**What is your current studio space like? Can you describe your ideal studio space? What makes or breaks the environment for you?**

I have three studios, which sounds excessive, especially in the next sentence when I talk about the future tense of an ideal studio. The barn in PA is probably the closest thing to perfect, I live upstairs, the walls are made of books, there is a bath in the middle of it all, just in case. I have all the tools I need, and it is well ventilated. I sleep eat and work in the same place. That to me is the ideal studio. I also have a small studio in Hoboken, it's ok, but it is temporary while we build the studio in Jersey City. The third studio is in Ireland, a small cow house converted into a modest studio. I do very different work in each studio, I think in pieces and fragment, so these different spaces influence different parts of my work.

**As a Professor of Art, what are some of the most crucial ideas you hope to impart to your students?**

I feel very lucky to teach and I truly am challenged by it. I want the students to know that they can place their creativity right in the center of their lives and form a rich life around it.

I want them to be critical thinkers, to understand history and lyricism/beauty that will give them the tools to re-think everything. I remember a professor saying to a younger me in Dublin that my family had now extended to include Joyce, Beckett, Yeats and anyone I wanted as a relative. It gave me great strength to think like that as a young artist. I want young artists to know they can expand their family into history and that it's ok to be different, that it is not ok to be told that you are inferior because you don't 'match up' to the expectations of the system. I try to imagine what the world looks like from their younger age, and I am forced to see the world from multiple perspectives.

**You have been a professor for many years—how does teaching intertwine with being a working artist?**

Yes, very much so. I love the collective nature of a class, and I'm exhilarated by the courage of my young painters.

**When did you begin working in the way you do now? What came together to catalyze the trajectory of this current body of work?**

In the late nineties I started to disassemble painting, wanting to blow it apart and then re-settle it into a language that I could access. I was interested in the notion of support and the veneer of stability, and

the inter-changeability and whims of both. I was thinking of epic-history paintings that I had seen as a child in the 'big houses' of the upper classes, and wanted to pick the history I knew apart and re-pin it back together to allow for transparency. The work bears the marks of its own making: the painting, turned inside out, comes to its own shape, blanks in a history that I was trying to piece together and to imagine in relation to my own small experience of the world.

*The shape of disappointment* (2007) was made while the Irish and world economy collapsed and I negotiated the failure of my marriage. A frame brings attention to things, supports things, but for me the shifting frame, or an excess of framing seemed more appropriate. My frames are warped, re-worked, re-joined: each construction has an excess of external supports. I wanted the painting to wear the frame as prosthesis, to show within it the violence and control of its making, and to be supported by as many frames as the room could bear.

In *Refusal* (2010), I was thinking about defeat and its opposite, seeing the dissembled emptied frame as a marker, somewhere in between losing and gaining.

I knit with wood, building and bending the painting out of the ruin of its own making. Each piece is cobbled together from the chiselling of earlier attempts. I think of the constructed forms as the upholstery and bulge of body shields, blank places for new memory. The backs of these pieces show the construction and the front is cushioned with layers of linen, marble dust, and a thin layer of egg tempera. I want painting that could be its own support, like a ship that can weave itself into its own skeleton, and it can re-digest itself. I construct the tables and the supports in the same way that I make the 'paintings'. I'm using old painting techniques like fresco and silverpoint to coat supports, shelves, and shunts.

In *The Shelf life of Facts* (2015), I'm re-visited the un-equal that was raged upon us as children, and considering our consequent small defences against evil as a metaphor of resistance that may still prove useful to the life I live now. I'm looking at defence systems from the ancient to the now; from the scattered stones that Neolithic people littered around Fort Angus on the Aran Islands in 3500 BC to stop the advances of their enemies, to the metal lids of trash cans that the women of Belfast protested the treatment of their loved ones in the H Block prisons during the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland].

In recent "*home is a foreign country-safe house*" I'm looking at supports that can collapse into themselves and am building my own tables, rooms and museum as a part of the piece. I'm building a painting I can live in, which in turn can house other artists and their work.

**You work with many methods and materials that hearken back to traditional and often-forgotten techniques—processes that are often nuanced and time-consuming, but with gorgeous results. You often employ handmade rabbit skin glue gesso, homemade paints with ground pigments, and more. What draws you to these methods and materials despite the implicit rigor and precision required for the processes to be successful?**

I love materials; it's language at its rawest for me. My father built things, a windmill that provided our electricity, inventions that made farm labor easier, boats, and knitted lobster pots from saplings. Our house was lime over mud, every object in our house and on our farm held the story of our family. I love that color comes to us in small ground bits of stone. Recipes found in old translations have always fascinated me; I hoard them and try them out. They seem like love letters from the past. I also like to find people who are 'good' at things and have a passion for their craft. It's a different sort of ego than you find in the art world. Each year I like to learn something new, a craft, a tool, and a language. This year I have enrolled in a basket-weaving course in Galway, as I am thinking of painting as container and it seems like a logical thing to learn.

**Do you identify as a painter?**

Yes, I am a painter, I think in terms of paint, color, history, and its limitations. I love them all.

**What is forefront on your mind at the moment?**

Life, and Art and the where it intersects is very much on my mind right now. I'm thinking a lot about Sean Nos, (translation: *in the old style*) lament, right now, fortitude, and armor. I have gone from wanting paintings to stand up by themselves to paintings that can collapse and withdraw at will and paintings that can offer shelter. I'm listening to the music of the composer Donnacha Dennehy, Iarla O' Leonard, and Martin Hayes and thinking about what happens between the cracked small notes in music.

Fortitude is on my mind right now, fortitude, vulnerability and hospitality. I am building a DIY museum, gallery, and studio, home with Dan Harris from found objects on craigslist. It's been an overwhelming project where we collect unwanted stuff and have built it into a structure in Jersey City. This give and take with strangers has been a catharsis during such ungenerous times. We want it to be a painting where we can live, and it will also be a museum of sorts. It will open at the same time as my show at Lesley Heller Workspace in the LES '*home is a foreign country-safe house*' this spring. In the past I have worked with other artists, writers, poets, working with other people has always been an odd sidecar to my practice.

I've been very lucky, painting has always been the center of my life and I've met extraordinary people along the way. Painting is both my passport and nationality. Painting has surprised me, comforted me, and with it I've seldom been lonely or afraid. The older I get, the less afraid I am to say anything, my work has more exposed bones lately, I feel a bit windswept by the political situation in the country where I sometimes live.

The work is three dimensional, but I see that as painting that can stand up by itself, painting that has its own scaffolds, frames and supports...architecture, I don't see them as anything other than painting.

**I know you have been influenced a great deal by writing and poetry. What works have been most influential and how does language find its way into your work and thought process?**

I think of writers while I work, of editing, of paring back. I also think of worn our language or deadened ideas and how language can be renewed or resuscitated. My work has been described as the unwritable novel, which sits well with me. Patrick Kavanagh was an early influence, later writers like Seamus Heaney, Elizabeth Bishop, Vona Grooke, Louis Gluck and Ciaran Carson. I came to the US because of my love affair with Southern writing and story telling. I think in terms of words, rhyme and chapters. I'm dyslexic, writing is difficult for me, each word I have to muscle backwards, but I'm drawn to it. Maybe my dyslexia is the reason I am drawn to difficulty, of bending hard things, of knitting wood, it sums up for me the difficulty we have of expressing the inexpressible.

**Where do you source materials for making your work? Is their significant to their provenance?**

The studio work is made from wood. Some is bought new, some I re-purpose. I sometimes shred things I no longer need, the last thing being a bed that held the wrong sort of memories, it was made of beautiful wood and I cut it up into tiny pieces. I build and un-build, each piece holds the history of its making. The DIY museum is another story. Chance has always played a part in all of my work, and craigslist certainly is a great place for random acts and people. We answered endless ads, and collected a dictionary of unwanted things that we piled up in a warehouse in Jersey. We pieced it together with the same care that I use in my work. I want tenderness in work and it is very much in the 'museum. I learned how to plaster, which is very much like the chalk ground which I use in the standing and wall pieces. I used a lot of the techniques that I use in studio work in the house. I met the most extraordinary people while collecting the objects,

**What is a typical studio day like for you?**

There is no typical day, when I work I like to have no appointments or disruptions. I turn off my phone and listen to Lyric Fm, John Kelly and mystery train gets me through the day. After dinner I go back to look at the days work and usually unravel part of the days building. I only use color in the morning, or in daylight, I generally build or sand at night. Right now I'm working with Fresco, which is holds light in a beautiful way.

**Have there been any epiphanies for you that dramatically affected your outlook or process?**

Epiphanies yes. In my forties I started looking back at my mother, and how we kept the farm after the disappearance of our support structures. I started reading a lot about postcolonial trauma, shame, patriarchy, and I met a couple of poets who changed my life. I saw the personal as the political, and started seeing through the charade of equality and power systems in place everywhere. I turned inward to memoir, psychotherapy and had the benefit of having a couple of extraordinary pivotal feminist scholars as close friends. I watched my daughter Eva negotiate a sexist world and could see my own childhood more clearly while trying to help her navigate a power hungry corporate patriarchal small town in mid America. I could see myself more clearly through her lens; we grew up together as artists.

**What artists have you looked at the most over the years? Who are you looking at now?**

Morandi, Breughal and Giacometti.

I'm reading and listening these days, music and poetry. I met a poet called Joanna Klink at Yaddo, I love her work. Vona Groake is also a big influence on me as a painter. Since the election I find myself going to the MET a lot and getting lost in the artifacts from different courtiers. Egypt and Africa are my go to places. Flea markets and the MET, I love both.

**Do you have any other news, shows, residencies or projects coming up?**

I have a show *Home is a foreign country* opening at Lesley Heller Workspace April 13th, coinciding with the opening of 'safe house' in Jersey City. I have a show at the Bangor Museum of Art, Bangor, Maine opening in May and a show with my dear friend Janet Mullarney opening in the Taylor gallery, Dublin in September. Residencies, no, I've banned myself from applying, but, always, I dream of moving back home.

**Anything else that you would like to share?**

Community, people, and the things they make, sing, and do is enough. The rest, in the words of Raymond Carver, is pure gravy.

**Thanks so much for sharing your work and talking with us!**

To find out more about Helen and her work, check out her [website](#).