

## Hennessy Art Fund 2018: Helen O'Leary on 'disassembling painting'

Updated / Tuesday, 29 May 2018 17:00



Artist Helen O'Leary at IMMA

**In 2016 Hennessy Ireland formed a partnership with IMMA to help fund the purchase of important works by Irish and Irish based artists - to date, the [Hennessy Art Fund](#) has enabled IMMA to acquire 12 new works by 12 major artists (6 male, 6 female) not previously represented in the National Collection.**

**One of this year's artists, Helen O'Leary, writes for *Culture* about her practice and her efforts to create paintings that 'exist between the cracked notes of definition'.**

I was born on a small farm in Wexford 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 (including my father's early death) that left the family bankrupt.

I learned feminism and patriarchy first hand while keeping the farm afloat with my mother and 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.

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I draw heavily from the tradition and structure of Sean Nos, a form of cultural and personal lament usually sung by an aging singular voice. I want painting to exist between the cracked notes of definition.



Helen O'Leary, *The Problem with Adjectives* (2015-17)

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.



Helen O'Leary, *Refusal* (2010-14)

In *Refusal* (2010-14), 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 chiseling 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.

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In *The Shelf life of Facts* (2015), I re-visited the un-equal that was raged upon us as children, and I am considering our consequent small defenses against evil as a metaphor of resistance that may still prove useful to the life I live now. I'm looking at defense 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 the North.

In my recent piece *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 a 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.

**Hennessy Art Fund for IMMA Collection 2018 can be seen at IMMA until September 16 - more details [here](#).**

"Hennessy Art Fund 2018: Helen O'Leary on 'dissembling painting'." *RTE*, 29 May, 2018. [online]