

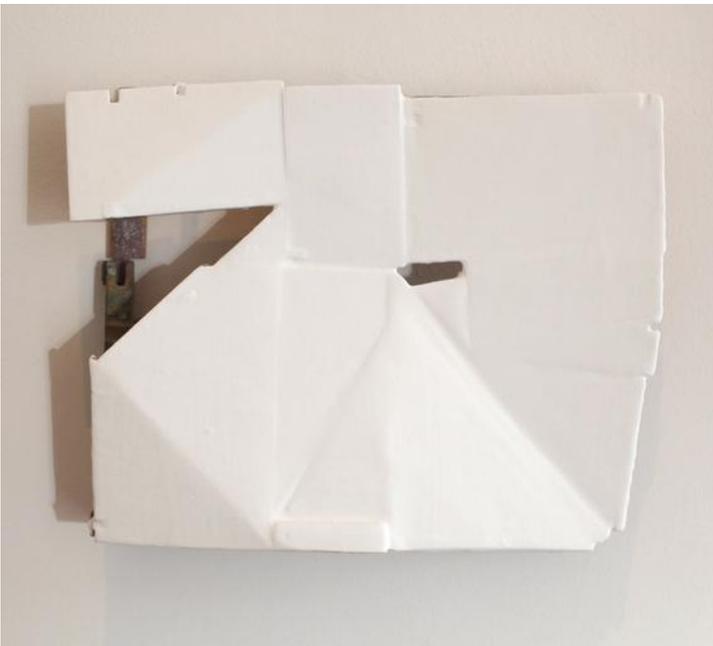
# Huffington Post

## Arts & Culture

### Helen O'Leary at The Irish Art Center

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By William Eckhardt Kohler



A Measure for Happiness/Armour White, 2013-2014, 17 x 20 x 4 inches  
Oil and egg emulsion, wood

Helen O'Leary's show, up at the Irish Art Center on 51st St through Jan. 5th, is titled *The Geometry of Dirt*. It is comprised of works that straddle painting and sculpture. Grounded in an ethos of work, sweat and hard fought emotional truth, they convey, at the same time, spiritual and aesthetic transcendence. O'Leary, who grew up in rural Ireland, County Wexford, begins with her boots planted in that soil as she conceives the work from a narrative consciousness of her story growing up in that place. They also contain the physical history of her artistic practice.

"My new work delves into my own history as a painter, rooting in the ruins and failures of my own studio for both subject matter and raw material. I have disassembled the wooden structures of previous paintings -- the stretchers, panels, and frames -- and have cut them back to rudimentary hand-built slabs of wood, glued and patched together, their history of being stapled, splashed with bits of paint, and stapled again to linen clearly evident."



The Measure for Happiness/Refusal, 2013, 11 x 14 x 3 inches  
Wood, paint, metal, bole, clay

From the point of view of narrative, the process of destruction and construction in these pieces, reads like a pilgrim's journey, in which the disparate pieces of Self were not all available to be put back together. Holes and punctures in the support read like wounds, as if a bite had been taken out of something once immaculate. Like evidence of life's travails, gaps remain in the fabric of Being, reminding us of what got left behind and lost along the way. The works are at once harrowingly emotional and glow with a soft spiritual light, reminding us that transformation is hard won and requires a journey through the shadow lands.



The Geometry of Doubt, 2014, 14 x 14 inches  
Oil and egg emulsion, wood

One paradox of these pieces is how they land as fractured, minimalist icons, but also suggest ravaged and folded pieces of cardboard. They are at once ragged, solid and radiant. The way light rakes across the monochrome folds of their shallow relief implies an illusory space, but also reads like an opaque plaster cast of a window. The holes and punctures in the support create literal openings/windows, shifting the objects from paintings to sculpture, especially when the support strata are left visible. Some of the pieces are comprised entirely of the strata and become an absence of painting, like a Mondrian grid, stripped of all idealization, with open space instead of blocks of color. The intellectual theory, demateriality and transcendence insisted upon by her

minimalist artistic antecedents is rejected in favor of something experiential and earth-bound, like Robert Ryman without the purity.



Things to Take With You, 2013, 9 x 14 inches  
Egg and oil on cardboard and wood

Many of the pieces on display have been grouped in clusters and relate like actors on a stage. One grouping of four combines into skewed quadrants on the wall; *Geometry of Gray*, is a flat matte gray piece like an unfolded and open box, simple, quiet and unassuming; *The Story of Yellow* is painted a glossy yellow over a not-quite rectangle and has a dog-eared corner peeling away from the barely exposed armature, radiant yet broken; *The Geometry of Doubt* reads as a full glory sunset red, glazed messily over yellow in emphatic, vertical streaks, a mask for the filthy wood construct visible around its edges; *Things to Take With You* has a wildly painted white paste over the canvas-scrap glued across its panel-pieces, creating either a raw window opening onto an opaque and decrepit wall or a blast of hazy white light. The alternating ecstatic and raw forms highlight the emotional source of these works riding the ups and downs of the emotional life. Born of work and sweat they reflect something broken and yet loved and lovely.



Geometry of Dirt installation shot

"Helen O'Leary: The Geometry of Dirt," Irish Arts Center, midtown, New York, NY. October 14 through January 5, 2014. All images used by permission of the artist. Helen O'Leary is represented in New York by Lesley Heller Gallery