



**Margaret Corcoran:
A Further Enquiry, Love & Independence**

Margaret Corcoran: A Further Enquiry, Love & Independence

Highlanes Gallery 25 July – 29 August 2020

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Welcome

AOIFE RUANE

We are delighted to present Margaret Corcoran's work for the first time at the gallery, and having known Margaret for many years, and been an admirer of her work, it is a special privilege. The exhibition opens just as Ireland (and the world) tentatively reopens after three months lockdown, as we learn to live within a pandemic (Covid19), which has shocked our way of life and understanding of freedom and connection. While the exhibition's realisation in exhibition form was threatened, it did not stop Margaret's commitment to make new work, within a difficult, distracting and provocative time, this spring and early summer, and what she has produced in this new body of work - vivid, intense and compelling.

This exhibition, *A Further Enquiry, Love & Independence* continues a series of national tours initiated by Highlanes Gallery by artists Mary A. Kelly, Theresa Nanigian, Janet Mullarney and

Abigail O'Brien, and solo exhibitions of work by Graham Crowley, Rita Duffy, Sarah Browne, Diana Copperwhite, Richard Gorman, Anthony Haughey, Jackie Nickerson, and Paul Seawright.

We believe in the value of investing time and connection in artists' practice, and the opportunity to avail of the generous Arts Council Touring and Dissemination Award, enabling us a powerful point at which we can support artists in realising new and ambitious exhibitions, inviting new critical writing and reflection on their practice, and with committed partners to work with to share, exhibit, and engage new audiences.

Catherine Bowe, Curator, Visual Arts Programme of Wexford Arts Centre, and John McHugh, Custom House Studios & Gallery, and the responsive team at Highlanes Gallery have worked together with Margaret Corcoran to help realise and present this ambitious new exhibition of the artist's practice.

“
I am in this room from which I can sometimes look out at dusk and see them (the coyotes) warily moving through the barren winter trees. And I am, I suppose, doing what they're doing, making myself possible for those that come after me. I am a mystery to them until they tire of it and move on. But the truth, the first truth probably, is that we are all connected, watching one another, even the trees.
 ”

Arthur Millar

A sincere thanks to writers, Dr Yvonne Scott, Zaena Sheehan, Sean Rainbird and Sean Hoy for their time, observation and musing on aspects of Margaret's practice and its trajectory, this new work, which sits within a larger oeuvre of her practice. We are grateful to Kevin Kavanagh and the gallery team at Kevin Kavanagh Gallery for their support of Margaret, her work and career.

This striking catalogue was skillfully designed by Neil Gordon and Ismael Kepp of 256, who also design key elements across the Irish tour, and with stunning images by Ros Kavanagh. Sincere thanks, as ever, go to the team at Highlanes Gallery for their commitment and ambition, especially to co-producer, Stephen Hodgins, together with Sé Kelly, Simon Colfer, Bertie Hetherington, and the enthusiastic and engaging invigilator team who are always keen to connect and share information and insight. Highlanes Gallery Board must be acknowledged for their steadfast support of artists' practice

through their strategic care of the on-going work of the gallery.

Congratulations to Margaret for her steely ambition and unwavering commitment to produce what is an inspiring body of work, within such challenging conditions, physical and psychological, in the early stages of the Coronavirus pandemic in Ireland.

We are truly delighted to reopen the gallery with this accomplished and significant exhibition by one of our most ambitious artists.■

Aoife Ruane, Director, Highlanes Gallery



TITLE A Landscape, c.1770
ARTIST Thomas Roberts
YEAR 1748-1777
MEDIUM Oil on canvas
DIMENSIONS 112x153 cm
OWNER/LENDER National Gallery of Ireland Collection Photo © National Gallery of Ireland
NGI.4052

Foreword

SEAN RAINBIRD

Three bodies of work link the selection for this exhibition. Their subjects are mapped across three continents and two decades of Corcoran's career. Edmund Burke's 'Enquiry...', his treatise on the sublime, embracing sensations of vaulting exultation with inchoate terror, accompany and frame the long artistic journey taken by Corcoran through these works.

Without herself having visited the country, the artist draws upon a magazine as source material for a series of works about Bhutan. The country's mountainous remoteness, restrictive tourism and lack of transport links to surrounding countries have acted as a shield from regional and global pressures, including exploitation and colonisation. It is the source of its mystery to outsiders. The supply of hydro-electric power to India is its largest export. Far better known, and sometimes regarded as an eccentricity, since the 1970s Bhutan has compiled an index of happiness as a way of measuring social contentment. The validity of this metric has latterly been acknowledged by discontented consumer economies of the western world. Post-pandemic, it might gain further weight, indicating the benefits of creativity and contemplation to human insight and equilibrium.

The artist based another series of recent works on photographs taken in Rwanda by a friend. They allude to what emerged after a long history of colonisation and conflict. In the aftermath of chaos, terror and genocide, a community is piecing itself back together through building cooperatives and encouraging rural development. The politics of not one but two colonial powers, Germany in the 1880s and Belgium after 1916, preceded conflicts between the two dominant ethnic groups from the late 1950s onwards. History is rarely linear, and often filled with a human-generated terror which resists resolution until all other means are exhausted. Strong government, since the Hutu-Tutsi civil war that ended in 1994, has resulted in economic recovery, but also suppression of opposition parties.

Most proximate is the closest of the ripples in the concentric emotional and geographical expansion of works shown in *A Further Enquiry*. Two daughters of the artist, many years apart, act as subjects and vessels of Corcoran's relationship to art, specifically that held by her own national collection. The double-edged sword is its embedding in Ireland's long history, particularly within the complexities linked to colonisation by the British. Art has always been an expression of wealth and power, a product of social and

political standing translated at its peak into cultural brilliance and longevity. The tradition of the Grand Tour was beloved of many – Joseph Leeson, whose collection formed the basis of the Milltown Gift, but also the many British aristocrats who managed their families' estates in Ireland. Their works, too, enriched the national collection over time, however exploitative these owners were towards their tenants.

The Gallery, though, building upon the ambitions and aspirations of artists in Ireland since the early nineteenth century, eschewed London's designation of its significance as one that merited 'casts and copies'. Its streak of independence and good fortune speaks of a different ambition, amply demonstrated by the fine works now on its walls. In Corcoran's earlier 'Enquiry' paintings, Irish landscapes of the Romantic period close to the spirit of Burke are the focus, on display in the Milltown galleries with their then green walls, their wooden doorframes carved in Sienna and assembled on site by craftsman from that city.

Corcoran's recent return to paint the galleries with her daughter mediating between us and the works depicted, has a more consciously feminine focus: of the woman reading a letter in a painting by Metsu, or the glorious courtly visitation of the Queen of Sheba captured on a grand scale by Lavinia Fontana, one of three pre-eminent woman painters of the Renaissance. These are the histories and narratives filtered through the youthful female gaze. Like the young people photographed by the Swiss photographer Beat Streuli in the streets of Berne or London, this age group is in the process of becoming: of finding and consolidating its identity. As young people, they are not yet fully formed, but enfold life's new experiences into their personal insights and aspirations.

For the artist, visits to the Gallery early in her career shaped her own vision of what art can be and what art she wished to make. From the complexities of the past and the shadows of suffering, to the possibilities of contentment, artists have long created narratives that take

us beyond the moment, or place, we inhabit. Referring to Burke's treatise on the sublime, its, and her, spectrum of sensation between underlying fear and heightened feeling, opens our eyes to the nuanced interpretations of imagery she has selected from around the world. Corcoran, with this exhibition, offers us greater understanding of ourselves through contemplation of the tension we perceive between quiet contentment and disquieting unease.

Sean Rainbird is a British art historian and has been Director of the National Gallery of Ireland since 2012. Rainbird was Curator, later Senior Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Tate Gallery in London, following which he held the post of Director of the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart. During his time as Director of the National Gallery of Ireland, Rainbird has proudly overseen the refurbishment of the Gallery's historic Dargan and Milltown Wings which re-opened to the public in June 2017, and resumed a temporary exhibition programme, including shows on Leonardo da Vinci, Caravaggio and Vermeer.