

# EILEEN GRAY

**truth, love, myth, magic, legend**

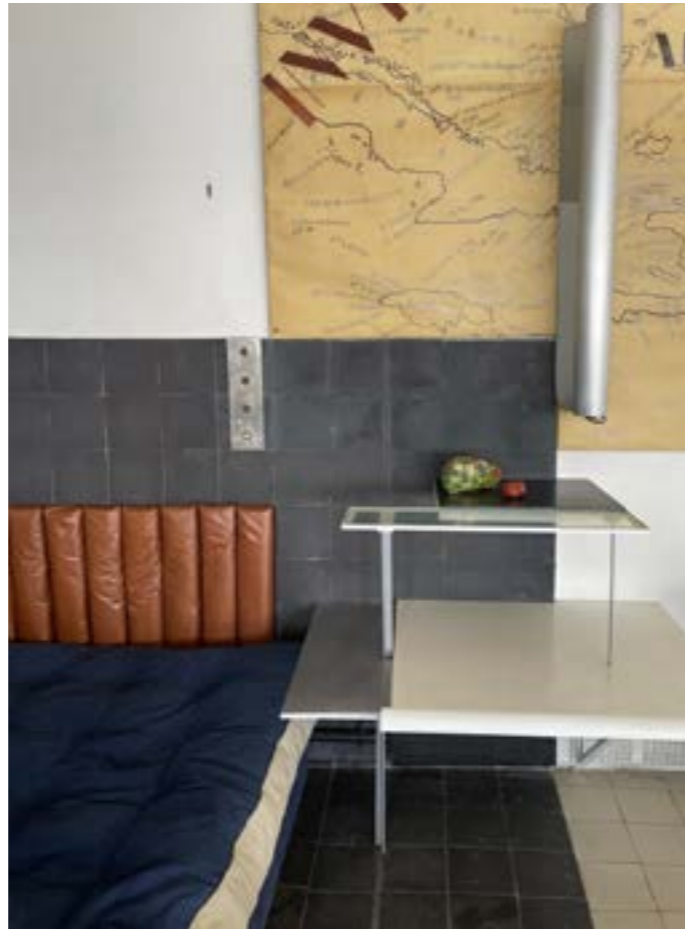
essay by Richard Malone

## A SEANCE OVER SCONES AND SODA BREAD

June 2021 will see the re-opening of Eileen Gray's E.1027 villa, after seven years of renovation by Cap Moderne to take the house back to its 1929 state. The house is widely considered a modern masterpiece, yet has a complicated history. Gray's work has gone through stages of being overlooked, almost forgotten - the house itself has fallen into several states of disrepair before renovations took place. Le Corbusier, a contemporary of Gray, was said to be envious of the space she built, and painted infamous murals there after Gray left, which she referred to - quite rightly - as vandalism. In 2020, I was asked to contribute, somehow, to the house's reopening. Through several conversations and a year of this hideous pandemic, and with support from the brilliant Cathy Giangrande, we decided to curate a show that celebrates Gray's incredible legacy. This is not a showcase of work which looks like Gray's. What Gray's work left behind is something far more nuanced than the many contemporary imitations. The show's title, "Making and Momentum" speaks deliberately of process and time, something ever-changing and always moving. The show is a celebration of the spirit of self-directed making, which places equal importance on artisans, makers and artists. "Making and Momentum" centers the very real creative energy that drives so much of our human spirits, allowing us to create worlds and languages. It is an incredible honour to be tasked with such an undertaking, especially in conversation with a person whose work I so admire.

The title of this essay represents the cornerstones by which I came to understand and experience the work of the artist, architect and designer Eileen Gray. They are everything and nothing. Within the framework of my understanding, appreciation and admiration is a rejection of the academic; or "referenced" responses to art and design making. The very act of making, and the idea of radically working against a zeitgeist, is for me, an act of love. A love of the self and an utter trust in the creative spirit that many of us believe to be guiding us, one that has been particularly relied upon in current times. This is magic that allows - and makes real space for - creation, which in turn finds truth in the real, existing object that is left behind.

For me, a true piece of work finds itself within a larger language. One that is created, written and shared. This artistic language can be experienced and observed; learned even, by many, but is only truly spoken; *invented* by one.



Hand woven blanket woven by Mourne Textiles, appliqued by Richard Malone installed in lower bedroom of Villa E.1027

Painted stones by Nelline Malone, installed at Villa E-1027

## MYTH AND LEGEND

Growing up in rural Wexford, the legend and work of Eileen Gray existed in a kind of ether, another world. Gray's work came into my life through storytelling... folklore, even. It appeared both mythical and magical. Daringly original, radically created and lovingly executed. Her objects were explained as functional, yet were entirely different from all of the things I associated with 'function'. The work had, and has, a presence to it that speaks to the human condition, of the human body, which I believe transcends the more recent academic study of her work - as well as the placing of her work within the construct of 'time'.

To write about her work in an academic sense would, I think, be to take away from my initial understanding of her practice. For excellent, broad understandings of Gray's work, we can read the exceptional essays and collected works of Dr. Jennifer Goff, Curator of Furniture, Musical Instruments and the Eileen Gray collection, National Museum of Ireland. Note the recent book -Eileen Gray, Her Work and Her World, Irish Academic Press Ltd, 2014) My relationship with Gray's work comes from someplace else.

It is interesting to refer to her work, or even her person, as 'Irish'. When we place something or someone within a specific cultural context, it is always curious to note what part of that culture we are referencing, or what "Irishness" we refer to - in one that is a complex history both associated with an ancient world and progressive modernism. The Republic of Ireland was established in 1916 - so, relatively recently. Gray emulates an energy that I associate with ancient Ireland, when self-definition and new cultural norms were yet to be established. Long before British colonisation and the spread of Christianity. The nuanced and ever-changing surface of Ireland is an interesting place for Gray's legend to live, and within personal histories and conversation we have ideas of invention and myth.

Gray, for example, was a part of a protestant Anglo-Irish family that lived in a large and stately home in Wexford; yet my experience of her work through storytelling allowed me to imagine our similarities. It is a meeting of two worlds that co-exist in one place; a place that is endlessly reimagining the modern.

There are ancient Irish beliefs in a *ceantair* (our world) and an altar (an 'other' world) - two worlds that are separate, yet co-exist, and that some people, witches for example, can move between. Many of the ideas of ancient Ireland share beliefs that do not accommodate our current understanding of the world. Much of the wording, or word structures share meaning and form with ancient Sanskrit. Included in this the idea

of creativity as a distinctly female energy - the Bó Báinne, a mythical cow who grazes eternally serves as our 'mother earth', and Prithvi, mother earth in Sanskrit, appeared in cow form and was milked by Prithu, an incarnation of Vishna. Gray's work finds itself truthfully existing in the *ceantair* through form and function, yet her self-directed creation, her language, has always felt to me like something from the altar. A kind of persistence to self-investment, or a belief in that which has not yet been created... When I experienced her work and her legend, it is a distinctly creative female energy that I have learned to associate it with.

I never understood the language of modernism, the sophistication and excellence allegedly present, sometimes, in its neat forms and refined design. Even now, to apply the word 'modern' to a set, expired time-frame seems somehow incorrect. I find that often, defining artists and designers within these simplified and limiting frameworks, serves as a reduction of practice. It leads to a homogenisation of culture. It allows trends to surface and to persist, often creating barriers to nuance. To define Gray's work as simply modern, speaks to our current world that reduces radical form, ambitious design, and hard fucking graft to something that makes a brilliant designer fit computably within a cis, straight male-dominated peer group. One that now understands good design through the eyes of capitalism, and often replaces criticism or critical evaluation with "likes", the very action of which is reductive, and when applied to an understanding of Gray's work, is impossible. This is why the more ancient, and the more imagined, the better.

Gray's work spoke to me from the moment that I first encountered it. Initially, this was over tea or soda bread and scones through oral descriptions, legend or *béaloides* - ideas and imagined worlds that included the human form, perspectives of bodies, of imagination, of language. Hearing of a person, both rural Irish and female, who wholly formulated and created a language for herself - without highfalutin explanation - was an invitation for me to make freely. It wasn't until much later in my life that I understood the importance and relevance of education in the art and design world, from women and men who did not have the opportunity.

For people who grow up without the privilege of education, like my grandmother - exposure to art, confidence to speak, an understanding of cultural discourse - experiencing the real human emotions that go in to creating and even inventing... how do you find a way in? When we look at work that appears now so tasteful, so radical and so beautiful, the academic response can often be isolating. Building walls

around work for those who do not have the capacity to understand it through a deeply un-radical, and often inhuman lens.

As a young person whose comprehension was, and is still, far outside of this world of good and bad taste- which is often a construct in protecting ideas of class, privilege and wealth and serves as isolating those who are born without, how I could understand or find a common ground with work which exists in another world is baffling. The 'way in' was through storytelling - myth, magic, humanity, and inevitably imagination. The act of making, finding truth, really being one's self - these actions are acts of love that come with risk and self-acceptance. This is legend. Asserting one's own presence as something fluid, undefinable, persisting to create a personal language that is instantly recognisable yet often hidden from view is true bravery. To go against a grain, or to imagine yourself outside of your physical world is a dream that often begins with a tinge of impossibility, which, of course, is the stuff that great stories are built on.

These traits radiate from the work of Eileen Gray, and - funnily enough - I have the same response to the work of my late grandmother, who always told me of this radical, queer Irish woman who went on to dominate the design world. My grandmother, Nellie, relished the fact that Gray was female, that she created opportunity for herself, that her design language was for nobody else. Every piece seems like a creation of something completely new, genuine and informed by this complete acceptance of the self. I expect that Nellie saw much of herself in Gray - or at least allowed herself to imagine the synchronicity, however different the circumstance.

What my grandmother left out in these conversations was the issue of class. Gray was born into an extremely wealthy protestant family. Her own wealth, no doubt, is what accommodated her way in. From staying at the family home in South Kensington while attending the Slade, to having an apartment in Paris, to having the means to travel. All of these no doubt allowed Gray to observe the world of good design, of 'taste'. To study drawing, to study lacquerwork were certainly all radical accomplishments for a woman at the time, yet impossible for a woman without means. Gray's environment, undoubtedly, allowed her to be radical, yet it was her spirit that created the conditions to flourish. This is not a criticism - merely an observation of circumstance, and one that is often overlooked. More often than not, it is still consistently those with access to and absorption to "good taste" and "good art" that tend to be the ones with the confidence to break tradition.

When I later came to understand this, I also understood the reason for my grandmother leaving this background out. The transient, imagined world created through folklore and storytelling allows a person to dream - and this applies to fiction as much as reality. When discussing this legacy of Gray with me as a child, the omission of her wealthy and educated background no doubt allowed me to think this was possible for myself. The experience of her education was not discussed, but Nellie's omission of it was, in itself, an act of love. We are not an educated family in the traditional sense, but instead made up of craftspeople, apprentices, carpenters, decorators, shop workers, factory floor workers - people who are more often than not referred to as 'low-skilled'. My grandmother herself left school before she was 10, and neither of my parents had a third level education, or even 'A-Levels'. Including an education in her story would have rendered it unrealistic for me. So within the act of storytelling we have a type of editing that allows someone to feel a part of a story that can feel as imagined as any fairytale.

In my life, it has consistently been women who are clever enough, protective enough and creative enough to establish imagined spaces that allow queer, sensitive young people - me in this case - the utter privilege to dream. This again feels akin with that ancient, specifically female creativity that itself creates nature, the Bó Báinne. It is this female energy I identify most with when making myself. To create, I believe is an act of kindness - it is nurturing, protective and undoubtedly magical. Also note that I mean female as an opposing energy to male, not as a defined gender.

We often neglect to mention how life-changing these simple representations can be, and the many different nuances that this can appear as. The importance of storytelling, however fictional, in allowing young people to see themselves occupy a space that feels wholly impossible and unlikely. How much hope can come from the existence of another person from where you live in imagining yourself existing alongside them, or into who's atmosphere you hope to appear; to one day converse. Often national identities serve to reduce cultures or practices that are specific to place, for example, I am Irish, within this definition, I am from Wexford, and within this, I am from Ardcarvan. All have specific connotations and traditions that can disappear under the term "Irish".

Seeing and imagining someone from the same place, especially a rural, un-cosmopolitan place, a place that I only learned, or rather experienced, on arrival in England was distinctly working class, allowed me to think that something else, something 'altar,' was an

option for me. Imagining how a "future you" might find a voice to create something truthful or pure is an optimistic, manifesting and radical act. I am not sure I would have the confidence to tell a young person that anything can be done, much as my grandmother and mother had done without proof or experience of such. These storytelling women are risk-takers, protectors and have endlessly defied definition in their own right.

It would be impossible for me to speak about Gray without referencing the real way her work and life was communicated to me.

*A one of a kind, hand made rug designed by Richard Malone and made by Ceadogán Rugs. A handwoven wall hanging by Mourne Textiles, designed and appliqued by Richard Malone on display in E-1027*



## MATERIALITY

The work of Eileen Gray, from her iconic buildings to her embracing of furniture design, to use of light and block colour to hand-woven Donegal rugs and thickly painted gouche studies – exists within a world of contrasts. Beautiful linen and chrome, tufted rugs and lacquered room dividers. Gray was ambitious with her own diversity, known for her embracing of craft, and for an acceptance that no line was to be drawn between fine art and craft.

Our present way of living enables an acceptance of speed that inevitably eliminates the human touch. Think of the knowledge we have for the names of commonly found Swedish furniture. Individual cultures, voices and experiences should be cherished. The accepted understanding of the whole IKEA catalogue speaks to how much we allow ourselves to be swayed. Objects are important.

We accept, in many ways, a life that is built for us – it's very fabrics, surfaces, textures are mass produced, taken so far from the human hand that initially made them to render them alien. We are taking away the dialogue that exists between the maker, and the person who experiences the made object – there is a human, hidden exchange between the last smooth of a maker's hand over a wooden surface and the next human skin to touch it.

Consider the love and labour in creating a hand woven blanket, the incredible skill seen in Mourne textiles that has been passed down through generations. A lamb is reared by human hands to become a sheep, the sheep is sheered. Yarn is spun and rendered ready for dye. The very dye is carefully curated, mixed and created. The ingredients come from years of unwritten knowledge, human connection to place, exploration, knowing – recipes for colour often created in female spaces. It is not simply information. It is knowledge. Culture, art and creation exist in its preservation. As does love. The final stage is an expert weaver, stringing spun yarn ready to be woven through warp and weft to create a pattern, the skeleton of which has been in existence for hundreds, if not thousands of years. Consider the hands that have created it, nourished it, designed it. The eyes and the human spirit that exist in every sleight of hand that goes into creating.

Once the threads are cut, this blanket exists as a memory of place and of people. A certain energy undoubtedly exists within it. This blanket then goes on to decorate your home; it disappears into your

world. So comfortably that you find yourself wrapping yourself in it, relying on its touch for comfort, it's fabrication for warmth. This is a human exchange that cannot be replicated through mass making. An exchange of energies and knowledge into the truth of *being*, it's function both physical and metaphysically. In objects, we do not need some silent object-thing that is only as human as its packaging, only as considered as its factory's automation, its quality check, its ignorance of humanity. We have the opportunity to welcome a human energy into our lives with the things that live around us, a sort of love story that grows with us, communicating cross-generationally and instilling a culture and a place within us that knows us, that becomes us. It is ever present in the abstract hand-tufted rugs by Ceadogán, spanning vast stretches of knowledge and skill. Both are specific to different places in Ireland, and both undoubtedly protect connections to our lived pasts. Imagine how much can be learned from these processes, the lives that are lived and experienced by the feet walking over its surface.

For me, an example of this imbued energy is 'Tiddles'. Tiddles is a cross stitched cat my brother and I made with my grandmother when I was five. My friends will know it as the first thing you see when you come into my home, and previously it lived on Nellie's kitchen wall, carefully observing the makings that continued to be created on that kitchen table. This energy exists also in the linen table square embroidered by my grandmother, which she would take out for tea. Originally this particular piece came from Curracloe house, where Nellie worked as a maid and housekeeper when her husband was a farm hand for a protestant family. I never met my Grandfather, he passed away very young, leaving Nellie to rear seven children alone. When I look at these cornerstone embroideries I imagine them creating a relief between her present (at that time) and her altar. I imagine the texture of it throughout my life, see the lilac, blue and green coloured flowers explode in front of me. A floral embroidery that existed in the background of my life, a reminder of both place, situation and craft. Years later, when making a shirt as a gift for my boyfriend, I remember spending hours embroidering bluebells and ducks onto its front. Both are specific to memory and place, to Ardcavan, where I'm from. The skill was learned and observed in my grandmother's kitchen, it's absorption seeped into my being, it communicates who I am, where I'm from and within that holds human histories, knowledge and love. It is a gift that communicates who you are to someone you love, literally giving them a piece of yourself.

In contrast, the aluminum, steel, concrete and plaster that I see in E.1027 are personal reminders of my years working on building sites with my Dad, or at least this materiality triggers a different kind of personal memory. Surrounded by a very different, "masculine" energy. Within this I understand the fabrics of two different, performed worlds – a constructed male world and a created female one. I can still smell and taste the dust, the scent of masonry paint or varnish takes me immediately back to the numerous sites around Wexford where we worked. What I mean to say with "male" and "female" ideas of materiality, is that they are often performed, and we forever retain the right to remove them completely.

Without applying academic explanation to Gray's works and many masterpieces, it shows how art can be understood by anyone – through the context of their own being. The reality of a present can inform how you understand the world, and inevitably how one goes on to create.

Gray's work and legacy remove the gender associations we have with certain materials. They meld together to birth something that will not slide easily into definition.

If gender was real, if there was truth in it – we would not need certain cuts of cloth or standards of beauty to define or by which to judge each other. The act of endorsing these existing stereotypes often gives them power. Gray outwardly rejected these, not through a public facing image of herself in say, a "suit" but by virtue of her own creation. The very tactility of the work and spaces she created allows for this nuance.



*Ceramic vessels by Sara Flynn installed in lower ground bedroom, with Le Corbusier mural in the background*

*Story 2020, by Laura Gannon installed in the lower ground bedroom at villa E-1027*

## TRUTH

Within Gray's work, for me, there is great truth - real realities by which I look at things now, how I interpret objects, how I create and define a space, or react to an objects animation. Coupled with this is the experience of the story, the imagined place. Gray's work, to me, existed in another world - a ghostly legend that I couldn't quite believe existed. There are numerous texts and cultures that believe creativity is a type of magic, and at the very least a blessing. We often hear descriptions about the "place" one goes to when making, it is as real as it is imagined. What we come back from this place with is often a surprise. The English language, and even the Hiberno-irish that is spoken in Ireland now, often eradicate wording and understandings by trying too hard to be accessible or modern. An example I love is the word *Caithnín*, which I recently rediscovered in the excellent *32 Words for Field* by Manchán Magan - "It means a speck of dust, a husk of corn, a snowflake, a subatomic particle and a miniscule smidge of butter, or anything tiny that gets into the eye and irritates it. But, most evocatively of all, it also means the goosebumps you feel in moments when you contemplate how everything is interrelated and how tiny we are in relation to the whole, like that feeling when you realise, or, maybe, remember, that we are all one - all unified"

The spread of Christianity throughout indigenous places is one example in relatively recent history.

With the introduction, and by introduction I mean introduction by force, of Christianity in Ireland, we saw the loss of local language, local craft and local tradition for something that could be created and sold. An extraction of labour that supported the British colonisers and erased "Irish" traditions. In a further layer of erasure, the colonisation was, of course, led by British men, and assisted by local Irish men with their ambitions set on a better, wealthier life, as well as staying alive. A neo-religious capital structure was enforced. As well as the loss of land and physical space, an erasure took place within the Irish language, or in the more commonly spoken hiberno-irish. While this new, colonised Ireland was being created by men, for men, many words for female lead spaces and female specific words were lost - from genitalia, menstruation, sexuality and health to words relating to resources, craft, weave, dye, food recipes etc. Power was asserted by those who could extract in order to create wealth and governance. Locally-specific culture and education was in-turn erased. It is this (extremely brief) history that makes Gray's work all the more radical. When a new, enforced education system eradicates old ways, the means of making and

the dialogues in craft based spaces, are often what sustains their existence. The very object contains a lived truth, history.

Designed objects are those around which we live our lives, sometimes so functional they disappear into the rituals of our everyday. Through what I observe as a capitalist ideal, design often takes on the concept of seduction, without ever giving way to that free, creative existence. The same seduction can be found in art direction, advertising, styling, production, retouching and editing - none of which allow for the trust of art making. Instead the created/imagined object is fed through several filters, allowing for a homogenised 'production' wherein the object is "for sale". To be for sale, is not to exist, to be for sale is to exist with the intention of seducing the consumer, that they need the object. It is not the same as a natural conversation or an artistic object's mere existence, as this transaction involves both force and influence, and it is certainly not the same as a tunnel vision, artistic creation or language.

Gray is different. Her understanding of humankind is different, her spirit is different. The nature of her existence is radical, always refusing to promote herself, rarely speaking, yet constantly making and constantly delivering. The language she invented has crossed every discipline, from weaving and rug making to painting, furniture and architecture. It is pure strength and defiance. For me, she is a rare figure whose work expels something other than the aesthetic, it is an inspired confidence. The very fact that her work exists, beyond all trend and any coded definition, is an invitation to make, to create, and within that is an invitation to be.

What Gray's work says to me is something of humanity and sincerity, within that is both permanence and transience. It is a sort of totemic personage that exists around her objects. A dedication to form, development and possibility that speaks to the core of the human condition. It's ever present in the ambitious work in our show, from the abstract and delicate forms of Sarah Flynn, whose vessels invoke both an urge to touch and a fear of touching, a delicate balance that can only be created when the human hand is present. You could easily get lost in her endless forms and shapes, perfectly balanced and unique from every angle, rendered in intense, bold glazes. It is again seen in the rich physicality and permanence of the sculptures of Niamh O'Malley, utilising metal, concrete, stone and glass to create work that is at once weighted and impossibly light, delicate, inviting, fragile. Abstract, yet somehow familiar in its humanity. The same ambitious surrender to material is glaring from the work of Laura Gannon, richly worked

upon linen, endlessly layered to create seas of reflection, colour, shadow and animation. There is a depth and animation to each piece that invites conversation, each piece being spirited, imbued with a certain human quality. All of these works represent activation, they feel real, truthful, intentional and permanent. Each maker has a distinctive language, from which a conversation about the core of making is born.

The human hand is evident in the rich tufting seen in the works from Ceadogán, including a unique archive piece lent from the Mainie Jellett estate, an abstract painter who was a protege of Eileen Gray. Here we see a cross century conversation appearing, the true lineage of Gray's legacy of intention and workmanship. Decades of histories and developments exist too in the fabric of Mourne textiles, teachings and tradition relevant to both land and migration - the unique collaboration between weaver, designer, dyer, spinner and maker. Languages and skill overlap, histories intertwine and a new space is made. Here is an assertion that craft and making is part of our present, not our history - it lives in us and it creates the worlds around us. It speaks to the thing that vests both modernity and the ancient in modern Irish work.

I would never say that my own work could be compared to Gray. It is the equivalent of a drop in the ocean, but there is an acknowledgment of spirit that I believe exists, an ether conversation. It is not direct inspiration or image that is taken, but this impossible to define ideal of making. The idea of birthing a language, not the language itself.

I think again, and often, of Nellie telling me about Eileen. Of this cross-century conversation, a sort of seance over soda bread and scones. The work Nellie made - the scribbles on the back of cereal boxes, the painting of birds on her shed, the stacking and gluing of seashells to create figurines for sale to tourists, the mending of people's clothes, the embroidered small animals and painted stones, are too loving acts of defiance, but by different means. It is radical to create and show work to an audience with which there is no understanding to judge. I watched from my window, often, Nellie painting stones or sketching until the early hours of the morning. And this act has no less refinement or dedication than that of Gray. My understanding of good work and creative spirit would never exist without both of these bodies of work, and the tales told in between. Both of these people gave great gifts of inspiration, creating worlds that others could hope to one day absorb and in turn, orchestrate their own.

Here is the thing that the show aims to channel. This dedication and love of work, the equal acceptance of

craft in direct relation with art, eliminating the lines that separate the two and giving equal importance and agency to both maker and artist. Our rigid structures and definitions, which more often than not exist to serve sales, need changing, to understand a different world can create a groundwork by which to change our own. The more we sell define, the more opportunity we give to commercially interested parties to extract.

We desperately need to take a step back, to appreciate these acts of creativity. To embrace and sustain craftspeople, artisans and artists. New and important understandings can be found in the birth of ideas, in visits to this 'altar', and absolutely anyone can reach it.

In my mind it is human beings like Gray, like Nellie, like every artist in this show, who silently create different futures, unique spaces for real creativity and love to flourish. We owe it to them to listen; we owe these makers a conversation.

It is incorrect to say that we should never meet our heroes. The work that is left behind by those we admire is the beginning of real dialogue and real learning. Our world can facilitate a more nuanced way of 'meeting', and imagined dialogues are often as important as real ones.

The work of Gray, and so too, the makers in this show, represent the same love and legacy. This act of making is a great, ambitious and inspiring thing, which no doubt creates a certain momentum with our future, and our past. Making and Momentum, I sincerely hope, serves as an open invitation for others to experience the truth and generosity found in the creative spirit.

*Making and Momentum: In conversation with Eileen Gray opens in Roquebrune, France this June, to coincide with the completed renovation of Eileen Gray's iconic E.1027 Villa. The exhibition will travel to Irelands National Gallery, before a closing show in Wexford, the birthplace of both Eileen Gray and Richard Malone. The exhibition is curated by Richard Malone, and celebrates the legacy of modernism in Ireland, and the influence of modern Irish making worldwide. The exhibition features some of Irelands most prominent and daring makers - Ceadogán, Laura Gannon, Mainie Jellett, Mourne Textiles, Niamh O'Malley, Richard Malone and Sara Flynn.*