

Podcast Transcript

New Perspectives: Episode 2, Diana Copperwhite in conversation with Donal Maguire

Introduction: Caomhán Mac Con Iomaire

This series of podcasts looks at new acquisitions by living artists in the national collection. We explore the motivation behind the work, how it came to be in the Gallery, and what it means for an artist to have their work in the national collection. In this episode, Donal Maguire, curator of the ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art at the Gallery, speaks to the painter Diana Copperwhite about her life and work. Diana Copperwhite is an artist that focuses mostly on abstract art. Her paintings explore colours, gesture and representation, creating harmonious work, which could be described as psychedelic. Diana's painting *Shapeshifter* was acquired by the Gallery in 2019.

Donal Maguire

Hi, Diana, we are delighted at the National Gallery of Ireland to have acquired relatively recently one of your paintings, and that you are now represented in the Gallery's permanent collection. The work entitled *Shapeshifter* is a large oil painting from 2017 and can be seen in all its glory in the Gallery's current exhibition, *New Perspectives*. For me, *Shapeshifter* is a brilliant example, in so many ways of where you are in your practice in recent years, your areas of focus in terms of both aesthetics and subject matter. I think the painting also suggests something of where it has come from. And, in terms of your development of your practice, where you might be going as well in the future. But for anyone who is less familiar with this particular painting, and your practice in general, could you begin by describing *Shapeshifter* to us, and perhaps then we could talk about how it relates to your practice in general, and its development over the years?

Diana Copperwhite

Well, *Shapeshifter* is one of the larger paintings that that I've been making over the last maybe six years, I think I've shifted to a much more substantial scale. And it's about six foot by eight foot, I think, in dimensions. It's basically a painting that evolved from photographs and drawings and images that I took from my childhood home, it was the last day I think, the house was being sold. And I, I kind of created this kind of notebook and kind of, you know, document basically, to kind of remember the place by which I often do, I often take photographs and collect images, and they can be personal, or they can be completely impersonal. And sometimes I find no way into an image, it doesn't mean anything. And then all of a sudden, other times it does. So I returned to these images a couple of years later. And I started to make paintings from them and more drawings. And that sort of formed the basis or the framework for *Shapeshifter*, basically. So my work, I kind of always enter it through looking at what I would consider to be reality, but then, you know, having sort of like a, kind of a take on what that might actually mean. So that I'm,

I'm kind of thinking about the memory of something and how I perceive something, the sensation of the memory or the sensation of the space, and all of those things kind of kind of fall into place in terms of the painting language, and the painting language is very much about, you know, kind of creating layers. And there's a lot of addition and subtraction.

Donal Maguire

To the viewer, it looks like an abstract painting. There's elements of abstraction, strong abstraction in it.

Diana Copperwhite

I suppose. You see, when it comes to abstraction, I'm often asked that question and and for me, I always enter through, through my own work through looking at the world around me, and that, for all intents and purposes, I suppose it's this kind of distillation or conflation, actually of a couple of different images that probably create the doorway into what could be perceived to be abstraction. Like for for instance, for Shapeshifter, I would have had the images from my childhood home I would have had photographs I would have had drawings, I would probably have had also ideas around sound and memory and I think sound and the phonic world plays a lot, you know, it's quite important in terms of how I how I paint as well in that all of a sudden, I create one, one sort of sense of a reality for me in terms of a structure, and then the colour tends to be influenced a lot by music, and the colour bars within the painting are almost like chords, and they sort of anchor the painting in a completely different way. It's like a different kind of reality colliding on top of the spatial. So the paintings always have, there's always a sense of space in them, even if it's a very abstract space, but there's always a sense that I hope there is that you can somehow enter them in some ways, but it's a kind of an unknown space in the end. And the the colour bars, you know, they're like windows, screens, portals. I mean, initially, they were linked to actual digital screens, televisions, phones, and another way of how we perceive the world, but I suppose they became totally abstract in that I broke them down into their just, you know, into into the basic colour bar range. And it's different every time because I think of them as like chords or sequences that are different every time and they don't follow any scientific logic or anything, you know, even though I'm also interested in science and physics, and optics. So, it's all coming from there.

Donal Maguire

So there's an element of abstraction that comes from lots of different interests, in music, or science or optics, and all these kind of things. But then there's also a strong element of what what you're saying, of representation in the painting as well, you're, you're drawing on either memory, or photographs, there are actual real world kind of objects and things and pictures that you're drawing on for your, for your work.

Diana Copperwhite

Yeah, there are and it's kind of, like, for me, I feel like when I, when I look at images, or when I look around me, and I take things from, you know, looking around me all the time, I'm also thinking of things I can't see, you know, the world of radio waves, signals, atoms, molecules, all that kind of stuff. And I suppose I'm kind of, almost in a way I use the framework of what I perceive, you know, I was always very interested in the fact that when you look at something, there's a time delay between when you can, when you see it, and when you process it. And I'm also interested in the unseen worlds and somehow giving structure and materiality to that invisible world. So that's probably where a lot of the, the kind of the, the activity and the structure of the painting comes from.

Donal Maguire

And having known your work over the years, I've seen it, is it fair to say that it's moved progressively towards less, I don't want to say less structure, but less representation. In your earlier paintings, there was a, there was more, there was a stronger kind of representation of objects and things and faces and people. While that's still there, there's, it's much more abstracted, I suppose at this point.

Diana Copperwhite

There is an element, I mean, I think even for my own sake, I've broken my work down into different kind of sections, you know, and the, the the faces and the references to people and figuration is still very much there. And you know, I'm very interested in human experience, and you know, our place in the world and trying to find a way to kind of represent that without it being, I don't know how to put this, like, I'm trying to find my own way of, of actually representing that, and very interested again, when it comes back to chemistry and molecules, and even things like robotics, and all these things that are happening, you know, to kind of humanity in a way and trying to find a way of dealing with that in, in painting, as well, or, you know, some semblance of that kind of breakdown, almost, you know, it's all part of my painting language. So, people are still very much there. And even in the abstract compositions, they're very much spaces, I think still, you know.

Donal Maguire

Yeah, because I suppose interiors and people and these kind of motifs of our, our visual devices or motifs that you have been that have occurred in your work, I think, over the years, and they're there, but they're more hidden, or they're less, less obvious, maybe than, than in earlier work.

Diana Copperwhite

Well, maybe they've become the less obvious because they have become more of a motif, you know, whereas before, they were always, you know, a particular space that I was trying to abstract from, but was now I have this sense of, when I use visual, you know, information that I that I have these motifs, and that the motifs eventually are going to take over and be stronger

than any than any kind of reference to an image that I might have used as a starting point. So I suppose I'm, I kind of have more of a sense of ownership, maybe for myself over the motifs.

Donal Maguire

So you're developing your own, the elements of your own language in a sense, of a visual language.

Diana Copperwhite

Yeah, yeah, I think so. Yeah. Yeah. I suppose you know, I always thought of, you know, like, when I look at things, I always see the abstract in everything anyway. I look at the, I always look at edges. And I always look at contours. And I always look at how light falls or how one thing joins to another. And when I look at at, you know, figuration, that's what I'm looking at, even when I when I look at things in, you know, other paintings, I'm always looking at that. And I'm always looking at the autonomous brush mark as well, regardless of what it's describing.

Donal Maguire

Yeah. And while there's a sense of the entire canvas, I suppose being used and the composition, developing in all sorts of parts of the painting. There are areas of focus as well. And for me, one of the strong focal points of the painting is the I think you referred to it as the colour bar motif. And could you tell us how this particular motif developed or what it might mean to you?

Diana Copperwhite

Well, I think it came from a painting from around 2008 called Parallel Universe. And I suppose I was trying to find a way of, of dealing with, you know, using the the kind of using an image of a room and then also having this other reality present within the room, which was the TV screen. And I was more interested in the TV screen when it didn't work, than when it did work, and that kind of also kind of idea about, you know, things breaking down, miscommunication, mistakes, how things grow out of the wrong information and become a reality and all that kind of stuff. So, I think it started there. And initially, you know, the colour bars I was I was looking at the prism and how light disperses through the prism. And, you know, you see it everywhere, on oil slicks, and, you know, rainbows wherever and reflections, and then I was, I was thinking about colour, and I'm fascinated by colour anyway, I think colour is the cornerstone of what I do. And I'm always looking for a reason to really work with it, you know, and for me, that seemed like a perfect vehicle, and the the colour bars and the combinations are infinite, you know, for me, that was the moment where that kind of came into focus, and then it became a thing itself, as opposed to it being just about the screen. So that's the starting point of the work.

Donal Maguire

The work, it's a, it's a painting in oil, but you also work in, you've worked a little bit in watercolour, but you also, you work in different genre as well, if I think you work in portraiture, and or you at least you have paintings, sorry, maybe portraiture isn't the right word, but you have paintings that you refer to as portraits. And you work in different scales as well, this is a particularly large painting. So while it's very, it's very good example of a particular type of work that you make your work, does vary, as well. And I was wondering, could you talk about the different aspects of your practice and how they relate to each other how the works, that you call- referred to as portraits, or relate to these more abstract pictures?

Diana Copperwhite

Well, I suppose I, you know, I always like, like, for instance, when I have when I have a show, and I always make work as a body as well, you know, because I think I need the paintings to talk to each other. And also, I paint, you know, the fluidity, and the flow is better, when I kind of go from one painter to the other. So I often work on about five or six paintings at the same time. And the small paintings are a way for me to completely empty out sometimes and to relax and calm down, because they can become more simple. And I also think of, you know, when I put a body of work together, it's almost like a piece of prose or something, and the small paintings become like commas, or exclamation marks or punctuation or something. And the large paintings feel like they feel like almost like, like rooms that you can, you know, these these abstract rooms, where you can move information around and rearrange things. And I like them, you know, the business, as well, I mean, you know, for me, that's kind of, like, that's part of it. So, you know, there's, there's like, sort of, sometimes there's, they're moving, as you're looking at them, they're almost on the point of collapse, and there's a sense of metamorphosis going on. And that's kind of important in terms of, of how I paint, so they're a very different experience, and the smaller paintings, whether they're completely small, abstract paintings, or whether they're portraits, or sometimes I call them anti-portraits, because kind of separates for me, you know, them from having to be within the traditional genre. So I gave them that title as a way of dealing with that, and, but they let the bigger paintings breathe. And also, I think, you know, if I'm just making the one type of work all the time, sometimes it collapses under its own weight, and it doesn't flow or something, you know, the fluidity disappears. Because, because it's because there's too much pressure on it, you know, and so it's this, I also have to let them dry. So this constant stopping and starting and engaging and re engaging and that's that kind of helps with that, you know.

Donal Maguire

The medium of oil is I suppose that what you're speaking about there in a very interesting way, that it's, it's something that you remain very true to in a sense, well, I suppose it can be tempting to start mixing in other materials or collage has become very popular over the last decades and have you ever been tempted to move that direction? Or what is your love of this particular medium? Or what is it that you're exploring through the particular medium of oil painting?

Diana Copperwhite

I think it's the fact that you know, it's like this primaevial thing, you know, this, this, this material that it's like has such a long history and, and it's, it's when you mix it on the on the palette and you you know, there's so much to do anyway in mixing colour and colour mixing colours are fascinating. You could spend all day mixing greys and slightly shifting the tone in the grey. So there's so much to do there that when it comes to making the painting, you know, I don't feel any need to, to do anything, not not to do anything else. But like collage I would think of as a separate genre again, it would be like when I make a watercolour, I make a drawing, I would think of it as a separate thing. And I do actually, sometimes with my source material, I make collages out of them just to help myself shift them away from, you know, from their original source, but within the painting I there, I think I'm just a bit of a purist, I love that I love the brush mark, and I love the simplicity of a pure brush mark, and what it does and how it sits, and, you know, so I don't feel the need to, you know, collage anything onto it or disrupt in that way. I think the the medium itself is kind of has so much that I don't feel the need to, to put anything else in there.

Donal Maguire

I was really interested in what you spoke a little bit about there, this idea of how a body of work that you're creating relates to each other in, it was almost like you were describing a piece of text or different elements of a language or texts and how they might relate to each other. But then, and then how that works on the wall as well in the space. And I'm always interested by I suppose it's a very, it's more modern or contemporary way for artists to work in series, or in terms of body of work, a lot of the paintings in the National Gallery would have been created for a commission or for a particular purpose, or particular context. Whereas artists today, a lot of people like yourself work in the context of a particular series of work. And what is it when you take a painting out of that series and place it in the context of somewhere like the National Gallery, and you talked about how painting, might your work, the conversation between different works? What types of conversations do you think it has? or what potential is there for that, to have conversations with, with historic works in it in the context of the National Gallery?

Diana Copperwhite

I suppose you see there, there are always other works, but it talks to as well, you know, I suppose, you know, I mean, it's in a room with amazing, you know, paintings that I'm really delighted to be in the same company as and there is a conversation, I suppose, around maybe modernism that I kind of am really interested in, you know, still, you know, in the 21st century, and, and historically, as well, you know, there there's links to all sorts of things. So...

Donal Maguire

I suppose in terms of modernism, in large, abstract painting, it's there is a kind of a, quite a male dominated history there as well, of, of large abstract painting, which is the area that you're working in.

Diana Copperwhite

Yeah, yeah. But I think in recent years there, there has been an opening up, you know, and if look at, like, I'm really, you know, when I look people like Joan Michell, you know, and she's become a lot more significant, even though she always was, but she's become much more to the forefront. And, you know, even you know, Lee Krasner, and, you know, there's, there's a lot of female painters out there now. Even historically, they're historical You know, when, even for me looking back, I mean, there's, they're very modest in size, but looking at Mainie Jellett, I would always come to the National Gallery, when I was a very young student, or even before when I was a kid, and I would, would always notice those paintings, because, you know, there was such such a type of work. And then also, I've come across this, which seemed very unfamiliar, and a little bit of a conundrum initially, but I was always drawn to them, like, I always remembered them, and they gradually, you know, got into my head, and I started to understand them. And I was always drawn to things where the forms break down anyway, you know.

Donal Maguire

You're reminding me how important it is for the places like the Gallery and museums to, to how they tell the story and who they include in those stories is, is very important.

Diana Copperwhite

Yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

Donal Maguire

If I could put you on the spot and ask you, if you have the choice of your work to hang beside any painting, or artists from across history, to have that conversation you're talking about with? Who would you like to see your work hang beside?

Diana Copperwhite

Um, oh, there's, there's so many because I was I was thinking earlier about about just art historical references, you know, and I'm trying to think, I mean, I love the I love the, the dresses in Velazquez's Infantas paintings, you know, it's almost like the painting is about the dress. And to me, I always thought they were they, to me, I remember standing in front of them in the Prado thinking they were like, they were abstraction, you know, from a Baroque perspective. And, um, you know, and always, I suppose, as well, you know, there there there are like, like Rembrandt, de Kooning. I mean, there's so many, you know. Gil Mitchell, definitely!

Donal Maguire

Yeah. I was hoping maybe you could tell us about if we could talk a little bit about your practice what what a normal day in the studio is, if there's such a thing, when you get up in the morning, go to the studio. What does Diana Copperwhite do?

Diana Copperwhite

Well, I go to the studio, since lockdown, in the morning, a lot, and I sit there and look at what I've been doing. And I sort of take a lot - I do, like it's funny I, when I paint, I'm quite, I'm quite engaged with the painting, and I'm very physical and they stay with it, but then I stop, and I spent a lot of time looking then. And in the mornings, I tend to look, sometimes I do paint in the mornings, but I tend to paint more at night, I go back then in a different light. And I tend to, I think it's because it's dark outside, it's a, I've a strange relationship to light, I think and activity in general. And when it's completely dark outside, I just feel like I can completely focus and the paintings seem to come alive, more like they are their own entity more for some reason. And I am, I spend a lot of time mixing colour and thinking about colour and responding like to what I did the day before or a couple of days before if I've had to let it dry quite substantially. And looking at that, and, and it's almost like trying to pick out a starting point, to re engage with the painting. And I never, I mean, I never know exactly what I'm going to do, you know, when I re engage, and sometimes I completely obliterate. And that happens a lot until I can find a way back in again. And so it's, it's a process of sitting there looking at the work for a long time. And then it's a process of mixing colours and trying to mix in a lot of mid-tones and a lot of greys and a lot of off-white, and then a lot of different colours and trying to trying to decide on almost like what tone to start back with, you know. So the paintings go up and down all the time in terms of a tonal register, which creates a lot of tension, I think in you know, in that the dark follows the light, the light follows the dark, and it goes back and forth. And that's kind of what I do all day! I listen to music as well.

Donal Maguire

That's what I was going to ask you that, I suppose because the world of the studio is such a hidden I suppose to most many people they see, they see what comes out of it. People imagine that you work on paintings, but what else do you - what else informs your practice, or what else do you do to kind of when you're not actually working on a finished piece?

Diana Copperwhite

I probably read a little bit as well. And like, I I'm still reading Murakami, that was a book and I stopped and I liked the short sentences I like this certain types of prose I respond to. Sometimes I draw as well. And I look for things I look for information as well. And I kind of go through a lot of my old sketchbooks as well, looking back at things and it's a combination of things, you know, but I do do a lot of sitting there looking at what I've done though, and trying to figure out... and listening. Listening is very important for me as well.

Donal Maguire

What music do you listen to in the studio?

Diana Copperwhite

Okay, well, um, lots of different things. Like at the moment, I'm learning to play the cello. I'm listening to a lot of cello music, but I my music jumps from classical to to contemporary, it just jumps all over the place. And it's some something I notice as well. Even when I go for a walk in between painting, I sometimes need to do that. It's like there's such different structures that maybe I'm listening for some way back into the painting or something. I'm trying to think. Like, let me think what was I listening to? Apart from the cello music, I listen to a lot of retro stuff as well. So, I think I was listening to My Bloody Valentine recently and lots of lots of different things and just sometimes minimalist classical music as well. I love I love Philip Glass and Steve Reich and Max Richter level I love Max Richter's sleep cycle. I love all that stuff.

Donal Maguire

Maybe I'll bring my headphones with me next time I look at one of your paintings and play some cello or...

Diana Copperwhite

I am always listening. And you know, I can't even remember sometimes what I was listening to, because it jumps around so much. But it's definitely it's definitely something that's very important to me.

Donal Maguire

I do moments of progress, do they come in, kind of, I suppose what might be called like eureka moments, or are they, or is it a very slow process that things happen over time, and come in smaller moments?

Diana Copperwhite

It's kind of like it's like a when something changes. It's like actually a very awkward moment. It's like you feel like at a loss and something feels necessary but uncomfortable. And you do something that you don't fully recognise and it's not very comfortable actually. It's much easier to be yourself. You know, because you're sure maybe something works and, and a lot of the time change comes in, yeah, the awkwardness and sometimes it's very kind of clunky and awkwardly made and then you start to realise something has happened and you try and try and record it. I actually, I take an awful lot of photographs of my own work on my phone. And even when I'm in the studio, I look at what's in front of me, and I look at it on the phone, and I look at them through screens as well to try and see... that's almost sometimes to get more distance. But yeah, change is, is tricky, it's difficult. And yeah uncomfortable actually, it's sometimes sometimes...

Donal Maguire

The way you describe it, it sounds like there's a an element of risk to it, that you're you have to make a decision to go with something or to continue on the path that you're used to.

Diana Copperwhite

I think, well, I think there's a lot of risk in terms in that way of painting anyway, that you might be under pressure to have work made for something and you're, you look at it and you just go that's completely dead. It doesn't do anything, it seems repetitive, it just, and you risk completely obliterating it with the knowledge that you know how to go back in and, and pull something back out of it. And it's always a bit like that, but when you make when you make a more substantial change, it's very, it's quite, it's very risky, it's like a bit like falling off the cliff. Not that I've ever fallen off a cliff!

Donal Maguire

I suppose in some ways over the last year, maybe it's been great to have a practice that has been that is sustainable for you that you're able to go to the studio and continue to make work and, and develop it regardless of all the all the things that have been the difficulties and challenges of the last year, that have you has the pandemic itself and life during the pandemic, has it impacted in any way on your art practice, or have you been able to continue?

Diana Copperwhite

I've been able to continue and I've been very lucky in that and and I suppose what I, you know, I gone for very long walks, you know, in the park and down by the Dodder river, which I never did before, because I never had time, and I think that was kind of it was actually okay, you know, it was like my head was able to empty out actually, the buisness in my head was able to empty out a lot. And I was able to continue in my studio. More, more at kind of, not gonna say at a slower pace, but yeah, the less frantic pace maybe for lots of reasons. So I mean, it hasn't been bad at all actually! You know, I still, you know, Zoom, obviously, there's a lot of Zooming and stuff. And you know, I have missed being able to go to galleries and see things in real life or travel and go to see things.

Donal Maguire

What are you looking forward to getting back to most?

Diana Copperwhite

I'm, I'm looking forward to apart from being able to go to galleries, actually being able to go places, again, being able to travel a little bit and see people.

Donal Maguire

So Shapeshifter is now in the collection of the National Gallery of Ireland. And I was wondering for personally, I suppose for yourself, what does it mean to be in the collection of the National Gallery? Is it an important thing for a living artist, or personally for someone like yourself?

Diana Copperwhite

Oh yeah, it's very important. And it's a great honour to be included in a collection like that. And it's not just the vast amount of really significant, you know, historical, you know, European art, but also in terms of Irish heritage and stuff to be a part of that conversation, you know, on going forward is really you know, it's very, very important. I think for me.

Donal Maguire

I'm just thinking is there's so many times you see works from the national collection appear in even school publications and things like that, and it's very important to suppose for young people, the next generation coming through to be exposed to works by contemporary artists and that whole world of art making the National Gallery, the National Gallery can connect people with with art in that way that can perhaps be a little bit more difficult to do in the in other parts, the other elements of the contemporary art world, but the National Gallery has access to some of those audiences. Can I ask you? What's next for Diana Copperwhite? Where do you have a is there, will we see you continue on the same on a similar kind of aesthetic path? Or have you, is there anything going on in the studio now that particularly interests you that you could give us some insights into?

Diana Copperwhite

Well, I'm making, I'm making a new body of work, but I'm always painting it's kind of like something I feel the need to stay engaged with all the time. So it's, it's evolving.

Donal Maguire

Where will we see new work by Donna Copperwhite?

Diana Copperwhite

I'm going to have another show in New York, I think in October of this year. And I think also there's some other stuff there's some other projects but because of COVID I'm not sure yet, exactly when things are happening, but there's definitely other projects as well.

Donal Maguire

Yeah. And you, you're an artist who has had success both nationally and internationally as well, you sell paintings outside of Ireland, but you also have maintained a close links to the art world in Ireland and art education as well. You work as a teacher. Could you tell us a little bit about your, what you enjoy about that type of that part of your work?

Diana Copperwhite

I think yeah, I mean, I teach I teach a day a week in NCAD. And I think it's, you know, students, like, you know, they're really, they're really interesting. And it's really, it's really kind of, I think, important to sort of stay in touch with new ideas and their perception of the world and their perception of painting culture and language and to have those kind of conversations, you know, so they're, yeah, they're a source of inspiration, I think a lot of the time. I get a lot out of the passion.

Donal Maguire

And do you do you see a future, a strong future for painting in Ireland, painting in oils?

Diana Copperwhite

Um, I think so. I mean, there's all you know, people always talk about the death of painting, and it seems to keep coming back from the dead. I think I think it's because it's such a, it's such an intrinsically human thing to make a mark, you know, and think as well, like, the more technology we have, and the more removed we become, the more the human touch and, you know, the fragility of human touch, which is what painting kind of shows, I think, you know, the more important it is, so I think it's always I think it'll always be there.

Donal Maguire

Listen, Diana, thanks hugely for taking part in this interview. It's been really fascinating to listen to you speak about your work and your interests and being so generous in providing us with so much of your thoughts on everything from your, from your work to the world today, in general. Thank you very much.

Diana Copperwhite

Thank you very much.