

Podcast Transcript

New Perspectives: Episode 3, Richard Gorman 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 as part of 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 Richard Gorman, about his life and work. Richard Gorman is a Milan-based painter, whose work is part of collections nationally and internationally. He has exhibited all over the world, and cites frequent visits to Japan as influential on his work and use of materials. His 2005 woodblock print, Big Red was acquired by the Gallery in 2020.

Donal Maguire

Okay, hi, Richard. And thank you for joining us from your studio in Dublin. I thought we'd begin with a question really about your about your work and the style of painting that you make. For people who may be both familiar and unfamiliar with your with your paintings, they're very recognisable, they're in their use of a very highly deliberate use of abstraction and flat colour. And I suppose most people who know your work will know it for its use of simple shapes, and a minimal selection of colours. And I'm thinking of the work that's on exhibition in the National Gallery at the moment, which has a very simple arrangement of maybe three shapes, two red shapes, it's called the painting is called Big Red, I believe. And it's, and it's in a very distinct abstract style. I thought maybe to begin, you could tell us a little bit about how this your approach to abstraction evolved over the years. And, and where it stems from, I guess?

Richard Gorman

Well, in fact, the work you speak of is a woodblock print, it's not a painting.

Donal Maguire

Sure, yeah.

Richard Gorman

Right. It's just a different a different aesthetic, different approach. But my my, the thrust of my work is, is painting. And printing is an occasional behaviour, which is also a group behaviour, because I would work with technicians. And also I make paper in Japan in a paper workshop there. And the same thing applies, I am working with people, which is a nice relief as well, because it's necessary to work on one's own to make something happen, which is individual, and be it the right direction or the wrong direction, you've got to follow something. And what I tend to do is to develop work, because it's kind of internally developed, it's not looking at other people's work so much that paintings that I'm influenced by are Bellini and Velazquez and the greats from from the past, and mostly looking at art, contemporary art doesn't concern me very much, I'm sort of rather selfish and opinionated person.

Donal Maguire

I was going to say so that's interesting that you look at older art, historic art that how do you see a relationship then between a very modern abstract style and more traditional figurative painting, perhaps?

Richard Gorman

Well, it's really, everything is abstract. I mean, however somebody perceives the world and then reproduces that perception in the work that they're making, is an abstraction of what was really there, in a way you could look at it as a way of literature. A painting is, is a work in paint. It doesn't suggest whether it's abstract, or it's figurative. It just is a painting. I'm a painter that paints. you could say that in a way, a painting is of something.

Donal Maguire

This idea, I suppose, of how a painting maybe relates to its source, even

Richard Gorman

Painting at the time, the time that I mentioned, was largely commissioned by the church. The subject matter was, it was a given. And the negotiation was about how much of expensive colours would be used and how much time it would take and it would be in a workshop situation. And people will be trying to get as close to a photographic image as possible without knowing not having encountered photography. So you see these breakthroughs like David Hockney speaks about and the secret knowledge, where lenses were almost certainly used to project onto the camera obscura projecting onto because almost certainly, the patrons would have encountered the lens makers because they're in the same group of artisans so to speak. So anyway, painting is painting is interesting, because it's very, it's a very separate thing. Paint is a liquid substance which is applied to surface. Now, what it comes to represent is a different thing. But what it what it all is, the same thing as in art history is you put paint on with a brush or with a roller or with your fingers or what. But paint has got a front and a back. So that when you begin a painting, you put some paint down and you're not, I don't consider too much what's happening at the beginning. Because I can't think a painting, I have to make a painting. And through the

painting the thoughts and judgments and adjustments, make themselves clear to me. And you get into a kind of a dialogue with the painting, where it can sneer at you, and say Oh, you're trying that, again, we won't have that. And so it's very peculiar behaviour, but so the back of the painting cancels the previous decision you paint over. The last decision is the front of the painting, the front of the paint itself. So when you look at a painting, what you're looking at is paint. Now, when you look at a photograph, you're not asked to think about the surface, even if it's beautiful silver gelatin or something, you're you're being led to the message through the medium, but in paint, the paint is the medium is the message much more so. It's also got great immediacy because if I make something which is carved or or welded or or video or something I'm How should I say?

Donal Maguire

Well, I think what you're saying maybe is the the, the meaning in your work is contained in the material process and the material itself.

Richard Gorman

Exactly right. That's what I want to get at. So I started to make something and how I start to know what to paint is I take the last - I paint, it has ended up historically that I paint in groups of about 10 or 12 things. And then I sort of regroup with thinking and photography and... and that that leaves you with a question when you go to start again you actually to stop anything, but it divides into these periods of work. So you end up not knowing what to do because I'm not a painter of things. It's not a picture. That's another thought a picture in a way is a like a simile in English language is a picture of suggests is our something else whereas a painting is can be of itself. It exists because there are certain number of procedures I go through, and then stopped going through, and it's the evidence of what you did. When I was in the studio in Milan some years ago. Initially if you leave the door of the latch people will just march right in without knocking and the portenaio, the guy who's the concierge-type person came in with a with a Turkish Baker and asked me "I see what it is but what does it signify?" and this was the question asked in a normal voice and not the usual. Not the usual to say usual. But often people are kind of very suspicious of paintings, which don't represent something else. So anyway, I said to him "This painting, it is what I spend my time doing. and nothing else". So that's, I think, quite a good answer. Because it's a kind of record of an activity. The fact that it doesn't, is not a representation of something else, which is a bit like a simile in English, you know, saying is, is more like a metaphor, in a way because it can be of itself, which, which then draw a person into their own conclusions. But at the beginning, I thought it was necessary to have a narrative. The picture must tell a story that is, even if the painting was abstract, like de Kooning or something, there had to be a story. And this meant that I would spend a lot of time putting in the story and then taking it out in a gestural abstract expressionist type of activity. But eventually, I found that unhelpful, because I would be lepping around like a dervish listening to us Johann Sebastian Bach or something flying around the place. And that was very good when it was good. But it was very bad when it was bad. And it also ended up in something which looked like a roll of barbed wire, or a bush, there's a lot of lines, criss-crossing, that kind of thing. Far from eliciting an emotion from the person who viewed that, it had the feeling that you were closing them off from entering, from this bush-like kind of splashing, then you're you get into the business of the beautiful splashes and holding the

beautiful splashes. And that whole sort of frothy painter in us, which is, can be very dangerous, because you just end up making what they call distress. I think in furniture.

Donal Maguire

I think you mentioned there that part of if the painting, in a sense is a record, or an activity, that part of that activity, or that process happens internally as well. There's an internal process of whether it's decisions or I don't know, emotions, or something, there's something internal that's happening within in you that is part of that process as well.

Richard Gorman

That exactly right. But it's not, it's not conscious. I have nothing to say to anybody that makes any sense, least of all to me, and no, there is no message. I remember for example, Behan came back from America or Canada or something like that. And some interviewers said, What's the message in your work? And he said, well, I can't use the word what he exactly said, "I'm not an effin' pigeon. There's no message". That is remains true. Why should I have any idea that's any more clever or any more satisfying as a result?

Donal Maguire

Yeah,

Richard Gorman

all I do is, this is sort of a solving of problems that didn't exist until you began the painting. And so you make up kind of rules for yourself, because they've got to be rules to be allow you to begin to have something to tangle with either, whether it's abstraction, or whether it's figurative is the same thing as just paint. So you end up making some tiny judgments. And then if it goes really well, time just sort of disappears. You live in a sort of peculiar zone where the decisions which are just like, Oh, it's too dark, it's too light, it's too cold, it's too warm, it's too thick, it's too thin. And you're just dealing with that kind of thing, one after another. And somewhere along the line, you either nearly achieved something and then it goes away, there isn't enough in it. Or you destroy it, you go too far. And you have I think you also a painter is - to stay relevant, I think you always have to take the risk of going too far, of not being satisfied and not copying yourself, finding a solution? Because there are - the it does, of course happen, I mean that there are certain... within these sort of 12 works. There's this clump of works I would be be making, you do end up making similar marks or similar design tricks, kind of

Donal Maguire

and I know you have a particular interest in Japan and Japanese culture and you've spent some time in Japan, would you say that some of these things that you're talking about the focus on

smaller decisions or the or the absence of a maybe a strong ego or message there in your work that that has some connection with your interests in Japanese?

Richard Gorman

Yes, it a word. I mean, I think what happens, we get interested in things that are already interest us, if you know what I mean, you get, you recognise things, which somehow are part of your personality, without quite realising it. And you're quite right. So it says Tanizaki, a writer called Tanizaki, who wrote In praise of shadows, which is a fascinating book about what he envisaged this should be aeroplanes with tatami instead of seats. It's quite mad. You're, you're quite right, egoism and individualism are not really considered as admirable in Japan. carpentry and

Donal Maguire

craft,

Richard Gorman

craft, that's the word, a difficult word like that. Craft is so is so respected because the carpenter respects so much the materials he's working with is nothing is done without thought. And that is something which doesn't happen here at all, and art is supposed to be elevated beyond that. But I don't see that difference, those differences really in design and in craft and painting, because I have nothing to say. Samuel Beckett says he had nothing to say but necessity of saying it or something.

Donal Maguire

And can I ask you what, what brought you to Japan first, what was it that appealed to you or that you decided to make your first trip there

Richard Gorman

A girl, of course. A friend called Mika, and I spent a long time living with Mika. So that was what got me interested. And then a gallery there, a guy called Janigisawa was given a paint a small work on paper that I made for the family of Mika for thanking them to visit. It was brought to them and I've made many, many shows with him since. So that gave me a practical reason for going. And it's a small gallery, but a good, is quite a good gallery. And he's been involved in Ireland quite a lot, because I brought him here with various group shows, and I get sort of involved in the soup of the whole thing.

Donal Maguire

And you use Japanese materials. I know Japanese paper something that you made a lot of use of.

Richard Gorman

Well, this is an extraordinary this, this has happened just by accident, not connected through Mika. But I was in the courtyard of my studio in Milan, and the Japanese guy just happened to pass by and I invited him in and we're chatting. And he is a photographer, called Toshi Kasama. And he had just come from a village in western Japan, in the mountains that made only paper that was what their basic work was. And he said this place was amazing. And I must go there. And we did, as paper is kind of, traditionally in Japan was a thing that farmers did in the winter. It's very labour intensive, very tough, although the paper... the most curious ambiguity with paper because the paper that I use is called washi, called kozo, which is the plant, Echizen is the place, washi is the type of paper generic and it's extremely strong, you really are hard pushed to tear it. It's got very long fibres, wood fibres. And you make it like making omelettes, delicate and soft and very easy to ruin when making it. And yet it's quite strong. And the other the result again, is in that sense, I work with groups of people, sometimes making very large works, three metres square, huge things. I've been going there for 30 years. And it's just fascinating. Because you come across that same old story mind you is machismo, you know, the woman workers and the men workers and the men are always lifting things that are far too heavy for them and hurting themselves. And sort of they sort of almost like a ceremony at the end of the day, when the paper is made, one after the other wet paper, the thick paper, and they bring it to a press to squeeze all the water out of it overnight. And they all they kind of run with it, it's amazingly dangerous, it's a silly thing to do. But as part of the thing every, every evening, and it's kind of fascinating. And I would get so tired, I would be saying to myself, because I wouldn't be making my own, I make small sheets of paper 70 by 80 centimetres, and then I paint on them later. And then we developed that into using pre-dyed paper. And I would ask them to prepare certain colours. And then we would, i've had fascinating years, making these huge paper pieces and making shows of them.

Donal Maguire

And the work I suppose we're skipping between your different use your different use of media, art media, but there is quite a distinction maybe between your print work and your painting work. Am I correct to say that you approach them quite differently. They're both two different strands of your practice, or is there a closer relationship between them?

Richard Gorman

No, very much, there is both is both true is a different approach, because you're going to be working with people. So you want to have some kind of idea what you're going to do, because they're going to ask you, what do we do now and you say, Well, I have to think for a while, and they say what this is gonna cost you. So you want to be smart. And I have a kind of ethic of that kind of thing, I guess this is a Protestant ethic, of getting value for things. So I want to work well with everybody, and then be limited and yet not limited by the medium. Because it's a different, you have to approach it in a different way, but prints are very interesting, because first of all it's back to front it's mirror. So you have to take that into account. Then you proof in black, and then you think in colour. And then the other thing is in a painting is like a life lived. Because you you

make decisions which you can only do one thing, this or that. And you keep going forward. With a print you can do many things, you can say, oh, let me make a blue one, a green one and a yellow one. And we'll do that and that one, and then you hang them up and you all walk to the other end of the room and look have a look at it and a discussion. And they're saying I think we should follow those two leads, then you work again and have another chat. So first of all, you want to go in with a strongish idea to know and then be willing to be absolutely not dogmatic in keeping to that as something is suggested. You can't assume the artist is right. When you work with a group of people they know much more than you do. That's why you're working with them. So if you're not going to listen to them, that's a bit silly.

Donal Maguire

So the print is, going back to that idea of your work being a product of an activity, the print is the product of a very collaborative activity.

Richard Gorman

That would be right. Not as always have to be, there are people who print only, but it's a rather, how do you say, internalising kind of way of working because you can be very slow. Also, I like to work fast. So I found certain ways of working well through James O'Nolan, who unfortunately got killed off his bicycle was somebody who had a genius for knowing what form of print would suit what type of artist and how they might... And he came up with this version of Japanese woodblock print, where we got, where we use lumps, just plywood, and rough plywood which suited us, not really smooth. So you got a certain amount of texture in this in the surface and that worked really well. Just finished another group of doing that with the Graphic Studio for for a client.

Donal Maguire

And the work in the National Gallery collection, Big Red, is an example of this

Richard Gorman

That's right, it was just normal sheets of very thick plywood,

Donal Maguire

but you can see the beautiful grain of the ply or something like that being appearing in the

Richard Gorman

That's right. And it's, it deals with a thing that's interesting that I touched we touched on earlier. And that is this the quality of surface. When you paint, there's this danger of making the

beautiful tachiste kind of mark and, and holding on to that corner of the painting and trying to represent, bounce it off or some other way around that. It's not our painting works. You know, a painting. Painting's interesting, because you get one look at a painting. And it either grabs, takes hold of the imagination of the person looking or takes their interest in some way. But it has to work all over. Whereas a poem, a film, a play, lots of things are time based. And there can be good parts. But painting can't have good parts.

Donal Maguire

Yeah, I guess a painting you can consider the whole thing at once.

Richard Gorman

Yes.

Donal Maguire

Perhaps Richard, could you tell us about your practice at the moment, and maybe what you're working on at the moment, maybe even what a normal day in the studio is like for you these days?

Richard Gorman

Well, for the last, since I began doing this is when I was thirty. I've always lived in the studio, at least, it's a different thing, to paint in a house than to sleep in a studio. Because I'm sort of totally immersed, I get in the middle of the night, I can get up and have a look. Maybe maybe even be so brave as to go and spoil something that was not too bad. Until you reconsidered it at night. So what I'm doing now is painting and printing basically and some paper making all of those things are still rolling on. I have Parkinson's, which changes things. I don't say it helps things. But it changes things in a way that's very interesting. You know, we don't see with our eyes we see with our brains. Because our eyes are only the lenses to project an upside down image on the back of your eyeball. Not then that's re-jigged, so that we don't have to discover everything every day new. So the chair isn't something which is seen for the first time every day, it will be so tiring that you'd never get further than your breakfast, I'd say. So, these assumptions made by your brain are altered. As far as I can work out in, my case, because I think Parkinson's is sort of each person is different. I can't easily determine what's near and which is far. So the old Father Ted and the cow. It's really, I can't see if there's a little cow near me, and very often things that are in groups together, objects sort of meld into some new object which I can't see. I can't see that that's Wait a minute. It isn't. It's this is person or it's... This happens quite quite often. And there seem to be people around the place. I'm not going mad now. But it's just a coat thrown over the back of a chair will suddenly suggest a person, it's not that I see a person.

Donal Maguire

Yeah.

Richard Gorman

I don't want to get committed after this interview.

Donal Maguire

But your brain, I think what you're saying is that your, the process that's happening in your brain is different maybe than what most people experience?

Richard Gorman

I think so. So I think this is this is positive. I read that there's other instances of something similar. It's just you're picking up on something else. You're just misunderstanding. It's a bit like Japan actually. Japan is fascinating, because each time you go to Japan, you realise that you had misunderstood something that you'd finally thought you had understood the last time.

Donal Maguire

Okay,

Richard Gorman

Every single time, everything. So in the end you stop trying to understand, because it doesn't get you anywhere. So you relax and look, and don't don't seek to understand

Donal Maguire

Is this the I suppose the thinking that you're doing about seeing and how you experience the world at the moment? Is that informing your new work?

Richard Gorman

Well, I think it's changing it Yes, it's changing it, and it's changing it, I think, that's for you to ask somebody else that really in a way, because I'm part of that confusion myself,

Donal Maguire

Has your practice been affected in any way over the last year by the pandemic, and life during this, during COVID?

Richard Gorman

Not so much, because really what a painter does is spend a lot of time on his or her own, kind of smearing paint around the place and trying to make sense of the paintings. And it's just, it's just the same really.

Donal Maguire

Is there anything that surprised you about how the world has the direction that things have taken or how we've arrived in this situation or where we're going from it?

Richard Gorman

I couldn't have a thought so big.

Donal Maguire

So we the National Gallery of Ireland and acquired work through Stoney Road Press, the Big Red print, and I was I suppose I was curious about your, your interest you you mentioned your interest in historical art, which the National Gallery of course has a an important collection of art historical paintings that have you is your having your work in the national collection, is that of any significance personally to you? Or is it is the instant is the collection itself a collection that you're interested in? Is it a place you have spent time over the years or have been influenced by at all?

Richard Gorman

Yes, I mean, it's really, it's the feeling of two things, obviously proud to be chosen. I'd prefer it if they got a painting, mind you. But it's what I do if you know what I mean, the the print is a good print, I'm not denying the print, and we enjoyed making it.

Donal Maguire

Well, since you're still making new work, maybe that opportunity is still there.

Richard Gorman

I hope so, I have to keep keep living. As regards historical thing, I think what's fascinating, process is the thing that fascinates me in everything, not not the expression of ideas, but the process, the finding of something within the process. And that's exemplified in the print and, and the materials I use in painting. There wouldn't have been tube oil paint, paintings in the early

Renaissance were mostly not not were not oil paint, they were egg base. So, I've lost the thread there.

Donal Maguire

You were, you were talking about process and...

Richard Gorman

Oh Yes. So if Leonardo da Vinci walked into my studio, he would recognise the basic means of what I'm doing, you know? I'm not saying we we'd be exactly colleagues, but he was he was dealing with exactly the same things as I am. The fact that I'm not making The virgin, St. Anne and the infant Jesus, he would have the same kinds of interest in materials, The Last Supper was made, was falling to bits in his lifetime because he had chosen to use, what's the word, new means of of making and it didn't hold together really.

Donal Maguire

There's an interest and an experimentation there as well I suppose it what you're...

Richard Gorman

I stopped that. I stopped the experimentation because people didn't enjoy watching their paintings land on the floor in little pieces as as tempera or something dried too quickly, or I didn't get it quite right the mixtures I decided to let paint manufacturers get on with their job and I'd get on with smearing it, and not be making it up.

Donal Maguire

To put you on the spot, if you were to see or work alongside, to be hung alongside any historical artists who would you most like to kind of to see it on the wall beside have a conversation with speak in a gallery?

Richard Gorman

Goodness, I don't think I could answer that. I could only say Piero della Francesca I think is... but then that's sort of an obvious thing to say isn't it? Piero.

Donal Maguire

Yeah.

Richard Gorman

You take something like that real oddball one, the Madonna Del Parto with a pregnant Virgin. There you go. There's almost Irish, isn't it?

Donal Maguire

Yeah. And is it the narrative there or the...

Richard Gorman

It's the quiet. The quiet, I think.

Donal Maguire

Is that something that you aim for in your own paintings? Would you say? Quietness?

Richard Gorman

I once described somebody else's work as having a soft austerity. And I think I'd like to be in that sort of zone of not being not hectoring, although these new paintings that I'm making now look like they're made by a 12 year old. So I don't know what that says to all my bleating on about the theory of this and that.

Donal Maguire

I suppose it's strange times for everyone isn't it?

Richard Gorman

It is. Maybe we all get closer to understanding what's important, but I doubt it. History is just, there it goes.

Donal Maguire

Well, thank you, Richard. I think that might be a nice way of finishing our conversation. And it's been a real delight to speak to you today from your studio. And thank you for sharing so much of your your thoughts about your practice and your work and your life at the moment and where you see it going. Best of luck with the with the new work and any forthcoming exhibitions, and hopefully, we'll be seeing seen lots of Richard Gormans in galleries in the future.

Richard Gorman

Thank you. It's flattering that you asked me and as somebody said, "Anybody who tells you flattery doesn't work has never been flattered".

Donal Maguire

[laughs] Thank you.