

## Podcast Transcript: Artists' Voices: Life in a Pandemic

Mairead O'hEocha in conversation from her studio in Dublin.

### **Donal Maguire 0:01**

Artists Voices': Life in a Pandemic is a new series of oral histories from the ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art at the National Gallery of Ireland. These oral histories were recorded as a series of conversations with artists to document their experiences during the global Covid-19 pandemic. This series is produced with the kind support of the ESB sponsor of the ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art.

This episode of Artists' Voices: Life and a Pandemic features artist Mairead O'hEocha in conversation from her home in Dublin City on Friday 22nd of May 2020.

Born in Dublin, Mairead O' hEocha lives and works in Dublin City Centre. She is a painter who works primarily in oil, while also producing a small number of works in watercolor, and more recently ink on paper. She practices a conceptual approach to painting, focusing on sets of seemingly unremarkable and disparate cultural sources that allow her to explore form, colour, gesture, and composition in her paintings, while reflecting on deeper aspects of human nature.

Her most recent series focuses on the exhibits or stuffed animals at Dublin's Natural History Museum. These paintings speak to our interests in humans' relationship to other species, and the wider history, politics and ethics of representation and display of non human species. Her painting *Orangutan, Natural History Museum* was acquired by the National Gallery of Ireland in 2020.

Mairead generously agreed to talk about her life and work as an artist during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Donal Maguire 1:45**

Hello, Mairead. We spoke a few years ago when you were working on a series of flower paintings. And I was interested by your description of your painting process at that time and the exploration of your subject as a learning experience - it was painting as learning, you said.

Over the last year, you've been completing a new series of works focusing on the exhibits or the stuffed animals, at Dublin's Natural History Museum, a place known for its Victorian interior and antique display cabinets as much as for the animals best specimens and its collection. Could you describe what drew you to this site as a source

for subject matter for your new paintings, and this process of personal learning that you once described?

### **Mairead O'hEocha 2:28**

Okay, well, the Dead Zoo is a really popular subject for artists. And I actually live near the museum. So I used to pass it and think how much I'd like to work there if I could find a way. So the space itself, visually it's very compelling. But it's also, optically, it's like an assault. The subject, it's just really quite complex. I mean, there's the crazy theatre of life and death, there's the grand folly of the colonial trophy cabinets, the space itself, the jungle of wild animals. So, I just set about going in there and making pencil drawings on the spot for a few months, and then I go to the studio and I'd make sketches.

So, generally, what I'll do is while I have some kind of intention, allow unconscious input to surface. So actually, the ... the work was conducted over a long period, possibly over maybe more than two, two and a half years. So I see about animals and, you know, in the story of art, they take central position, you know, if you consider cave paintings. I was thinking about how I can make this relevant in terms of my own approach. So you're right in that I'm interested in looking at painting as a method of learning. And I see painting as quite the prismatic exercise in that it refracts so many things. It refracts, as well as a subject, the history of painting itself. And this is all done through the making of the painting.

So when I was making these works, I was looking at people like Delacroix, and I was also thinking about how the principle of camouflage, if you study it is that the silhouette of an animal is concealed by the track of the markings. And when I was approaching the paintings, I was thinking about this. And in a way there's a correlation between the concept and painting a figure-ground relationship.

So all of these things, I suppose, came in and out of this particular body of work, but I was also thinking about, I suppose the disconnect we have, the material disconnect we have and the kind of sliding windows sensation. We're always at one removed in terms of how we experience, you know, the animal kingdom. So yeah, I mean, for me painting is like an opportunity to re-scramble the codes of historic painting into a contemporary register. First way, you know, I'm interested in how we represent nature. And really, I think it reveals more about us our fantasies and fears, and it does advise nature or the animal kingdom.

### **Donal Maguire 5:34**

And what was your experience of working in the museum environment? Looking and observing, sketching, while being surrounded by these specimens of living creatures?

### **Mairead O'hEocha 5:47**

Yeah, I mean, it's a cemetery, isn't it? It's a cemetery of fur and skeletons. And in reading around the subject, I was struck by the coining of a phrase of 'oderama', that there's a

smell. So it's like a different sensory system to the visual. But it's very calming. And it's yeah, a library, and a cemetery at the same time.

### **Donal Maguire 6:19**

The paintings you made of these displays include a variety of animals, including bats, monkeys, apes, and mountain goat, different birds. How did you select your specific subjects? Why did certain animals draw your attention?

### **Mairead O'hEocha 6:36**

It was at a trade-off, really. I mean all the animals. There's no animal that exists that isn't interesting. So I guess the animals that made it through in terms of the exhibition are those that lent themselves to the ideas that were being played out in the studio. And so that would include the lighting and the complex lighting systems within that space brought certain technical challenges, but also lent themselves to this idea of camouflage and animals receding, and reappearing in space.

### **Donal Maguire 7:17**

I'm interested in this relationship you're suggesting between camouflage and the animal's evolutionary relationship, and adaptation to its environment to the process of painting in a formal sense. It could be seen as a relationship between form that is also echoed perhaps in the process of taxidermy and the preparation of the animal for a display in the museum. Is that something that a relationship that you could talk a little bit more about?

### **Mairead O'hEocha 7:50**

Yeah, I mean, it goes back to this idea of how we represent nature. And it's really always represented in our own eyes and our own understanding of the world. But the design of the exhibits follows the requirements of space, but they also are quite carefully composed. And there's a very specific art, of course, to creating these exhibits.

One that's, well, what's ... what's remarkable is, the larger animals, they would have been sculpted initially in clay, armatures would have been set up and trained sculptors would have designed the forms, and quite accurately represented the animals, which is quite an undertaking. Casts will be taken. And so the challenge to make the animals seem lifelike is considerable. And in so many cases, they seem to have managed it.

### **Donal Maguire 9:00**

Could you describe how your interests and learning in the museum space are then transferred to the studio space, and that different environment to the production of paintings?

### **Mairead O'hEocha 9:13**

So I would return to the studio and would sketch up color studies. And there's no kind of grand plan. And as I've said, I really allow enough space for failure and experimentation to happen. And so the direction that the work takes is really quite

organic. But not without considering the conceptual intention of what the work could be. So there's yeah - I mean, it's really not rocket science. It's probably the oldest way that artists have made paintings that make sketches. They allowed the paintings to evolve. It's not such an interesting conversation in a way there's, there's something kind of opaque about it.

### **Donal Maguire 10:11**

Your studio is in Dublin City Centre. Could you describe what is involved in a regular day for you in the studio and the process of making art?

### **Mairead O'hEocha 10:22**

Well, yeah, I mean, the working day is arrive between nine or ten, and work right through to the evening. And it's quite an immersive type of way of producing work. I mean, the painter has to put in the hours, it's extremely labour-intensive, and connection with the development of the work has to be kept going. To make a break, it's just impossible to get back into it.

So I think, yeah, for me, it's really important, yeah, to go in every day. And to just nudge things along, sometimes things go very fast, something times they go very slowly. So you have to keep a company. So I would have several works on the go at the same time. And I've also have lots of dead ends and side roads, which I quite enjoy. I find the studio is his best for making work. And I find other time and spaces to do reading.

### **Donal Maguire 11:31**

Our relationship as humans to our environment, and other animals has perhaps a particular resonance with people at the moment due to our heightened awareness of the COVID-19 virus, which of course emerged from another species originally. While you started this work before COVID-19, I expect it will be difficult to look at these paintings now. And not think about the wider issues relating to our current relationship with other life forms with which we share this planet and how we engage with them.

### **Mairead O'hEocha 12:06**

Um, well, yeah, it's funny how so many artworks have suddenly taken on significances in the current situation. Well, yeah, I have a lot of about it. I mean, clearly, we've been at a critical tipping point for some time now. And I just hope that this horrible reality will give us a chance to press pause in the frenzied race to destroy the planet.

But Extinction Rebellion were staging protests just outside the museum over the last maybe year and a half. And I was conscious of that. But I think there's a coincidence in terms of the timing of this, for me, I would make record wasn't very pointed in terms of a political statement. That isn't the type of approach I take, you know. I wouldn't foreground a particular message. So I don't know how to answer it. I mean, obviously, it seems relevant.

I suppose I'd hope that I don't believe the work's that didactic in that there are multiple, maybe, ways of engaging with the work and the artist makes the work but really what

people do with that work in terms of how they respond to it, and hopefully it's quite expansive.

### **Donal Maguire 13:46**

Today is 26th of May 2020 and we are currently all living with strict social distancing measures and travel restrictions as a means to controlling the virus. How has this new way of living that we found ourselves in affected your ability to work as an artist or how are you making work?

### **Mairead O'hEocha 14:09**

Well, I've crushed up my to do list so I just don't feel the need to carry on making work regardless, I need to really take step back and think about what the whole situation means, how it's gonna play out and, I don't know, I suppose how I might want to continue making work. So I haven't been going into the studio very much. I've been taking time out I've been reading and just come to terms with everything really. I will go into the studio very soon. Well, I have started again, it keeps me company and I think there's something necessary about me going into the studio, regardless of what I make you know, it may all end up in the bin. But I don't have any set ideas between shows I have lots of discarded or semi finished work that I'll pick up and consider. But I don't have any set agenda. I have no plan. I have no plan. I have no plan.

### **Donal Maguire 15:28**

Is there anything that has surprised you about how we've dealt with or responded to the situation that we found ourselves in relating to the the pandemic, and either its global impact, or its impact on a local level?

### **Mairead O'hEocha 15:46**

If I didn't know it already, I'm completely dependent on technology, which is ironic, because I took up painting because I couldn't stand sitting in front of a computer, there's far too much screen time. But I find myself completely reliant on my phone. And it's not even a third limb now, it's like an internal organ. And then there's Instagram, which I would never have got around to joining. I'm such a late adopter. There is, yeah, there's there's an acknowledgement of how central technology is to my living. So I don't know what to do about that. I think it's too late to do anything about that.

What I am surprised about is when I think and look at how the EU was so poorly coordinated in alerting and planning and managing the situation. I think one of the main reasons we would have joined the EU was to, I suppose, secure some kind of solidarity between the states in managing, you know, with a serious emergency, and that didn't seem to play out initially at all. So that really surprised me, maybe it shouldn't have. The lack of solidarity with, for instance, Italy now. And there seems to be a refusal to neutralize the debt. So I think they've come closer to an agreement there. So all of that maybe shouldn't have surprised me. But it really did, it shocked me.

So, on a positive note, I think whatever you say about the politics of Leo Varadkar, I think, as a medic, he understood how the spread of the virus was going to play out. And he early on just didn't need explaining. He just took quite, I think, decisive action, if you consider the very confused policies, the lack of coherence in places like America and the UK, so that was good. And the COVID payment, I think that was swiftly implemented. And okay, maybe everybody didn't get it. But I do think there was quite a genuine attempt to stop people falling over a cliff financially. So those kinds of things.

### **Donal Maguire 18:25**

If I could ask one final question. It's obviously a very difficult and traumatic and uncertain time for many people at the moment, but, where do you personally find or see hope for the future? And both in terms of where we might be, and also what we might take with us from this experience, or that you have learned from this experience?

### **Mairead O'hEocha 18:50**

Well, I live in the city and the city's transformed. I mean, it's so much more pleasant, the traffic's gone, the daily grind and the tyranny of purpose seems to have faded. Remarkable to see the amount of people that have taken up running and cycling and jogging. I don't know, I was thinking maybe, maybe this is what Dublin was like in the 1930s. Obviously, there aren't many horses around, we could improve that with few more horses.

Yeah, well, we've all been pushed back into the corners of our lives. And that's a strange experience. But really, realistically, I wouldn't hold my breath. I just think there's a mortifying lack of responsibility for the damage we're doing to the planet. So I think I've hoped for a new world order. But we are running out at a time and I'd really hope we could figure out some more responsible ways for society to continue. And if we can't save ourselves, maybe could we save animals at least?

### **Donal Maguire 20:15**

This conversation with artists Mairead h'Eocha from her home in Dublin, was recorded on the 22nd of May 2020 through video call with Donal Maguire, Curator of the ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art at the National Gallery of Ireland.