

Podcast Transcript:

Imagining France. Artist Colonies: Exchange of ideas and practices, with Una Sealy, RHA, and Mick O'Dea, PRHA

Introduction 0:03

Welcome to *Imagining France*. A series of podcasts bringing you into the world of the National Gallery's summer exhibition [*Roderic O'Conor and the Moderns: Between Paris and Pont Aven*](#) [18 July – 29 October 2018].

For this episode, Roderic O'Conor Artist-in-Residence Una Sealy speaks with Mick O'Dea, president of the RHA, about the exchange of ideas and practices that artist colonies engender.

Una Sealy 0:46

My name is Una Sealy, and I'm a painter. And I am artist-in-residence for a month during the run of the exhibition at the National Gallery called *Roderic O'Conor and the Moderns from Paris to Pont Aven*.

So what I'm doing is I'm basically I have a magnificent studio, the Millennium Wing Studio, and basically I'm doing my own work, but I'm referencing and responding to the exhibition, which is just across the way from me from my studio. And I'm really just seeing where it brings me and I'm just finding it a fascinating exercise.

Roderic O'Conor was somebody that I would have been pretty influenced by as a younger artist. I was ... I did a lot of work with sort of dark outlines and a lot of separation of colour. And, although my work has changed a lot over the years since then, I feel that it's quite liberating to be able to go back and challenge that, sort of, my early influences and to re-engage with them again, and it's produced some work that sort of surprised me in some ways, and I'm finding it a very interesting process.

And Mick, you're sitting here ... with Mick O'Dea who has just driven up from Mayo to chat to me here today. And he's going to tell us, tell me, something about him.

Mick O'Dea 2:10

Hi Una, lovely to be here. North Mayo, Erris, as they call it, fantastic part of the country. Coincidentally, one of the reasons that I am there is as a consequence of attending an artists' colony of sorts, but more a residency that was founded in Ballycastle, County Mayo, 25 years ago.

I, and a number of other artists, were introduced to the coastline of North Mayo as a consequence of that, and one thing has led to another and I ended up buying a cottage there in the company of my good friend and neighbour, Pat Harris, the painter, who also has a cottage there.

Like you, I'm a painter, and current president of the Royal Hibernian Academy, and member of the Board of Governors of the National Gallery of Ireland here, and fascinated to see how this conversation that we will embark on will go and where it will leave us.

Una Sealy 3:15

Yeah, because what we're going to be talking about today is the idea of the artists' colony as such, and whether that is something that is still relevant to artists, how we kind of think or how it's affected the work in the exhibition. And what is the current manifestation of the artists' colony?

I would say, you know, from a current point of view, I'd say the artists' colony has become really more the artist's residency, which gives artists the opportunity to travel to different parts of the world and work in communities of artists.

Now Mick, you've been, you've attended a lot of ... or spent time in a lot of artist's residencies over the years, as far as I know, haven't you?

Mick O'Dea 4:04

Well, I wouldn't go as far as to say a lot of, but certainly a number.

I think the reason why I qualify my reply is that I remember being on one artist's residency, actually was in Annaghmakerrig in County Monaghan in 2000. No, when was it? It was 1991 or 1992. And I met a writer, an American writer there. And her work seemed to be all about the dynamics between various artists who spend their lives going to various artists' colonies. So, I mean, she was going from one residency to another, and it was fuelling her work. And I kind of found that a little bit, to my mind, incestuous. So I've always been careful, consequently, about maybe saying that I've been to a lot. I've been to quite a number, but not a lot.

Una Sealy 5:00

Yeah. So do you think maybe that somebody like that who makes a kind of career out of going from colony to colony, or to residency to residency, that the residencies start almost dictating what they're doing as an artist rather than their trajectory of their own personal career?

Mick O'Dea 5:19

Inevitably, it will. And I suppose it's a way of life for some people, you know, that they have been. I'm not qualified to say to what extent, but that it's certainly a trajectory within the work patterns, and shall we say practices of various artists? Yeah.

Una Sealy 5:38

Yeah. So interestingly, so in the exhibition here, *the Roderic O'Conor and the Moderns*, I think it was probably different because this would have been ... the whole exhibition is ... all the works were made there basically, over about a decade in the in the late 1890s. And there would have been up to 100 artists living in this small town in Brittany. And there was literally like easels everywhere on the streets. They were staying in a couple of the hotels and lodging there.

And they were, I mean, everyone's having a great time, because they're getting their like their lunch, breakfast, you know, breakfast, lunch, or dinner, packed lunch made for them. Dinner in the evening, you know, tons and tons of like cider. I mean, it sounds like any artists dream.

But they were all influenced by each other. And they were all, like, competing with each other. And we're sort of - do you think, as far as I can see, that doesn't really - is there any modern equivalent of that in residencies or does everybody just go and just totally do their own thing? And they don't interact like that? Would you say in your experience?

Mick O'Dea 6:47

It depends on the chemistry; I guess it depends on the dynamic.

And that was an early manifestation of an artists' colony. And I guess they really came about because of trains. And the recent Industrial Revolution apparently, one of the early manifestations of it was in the newly opened forest, Royal Forests in Fontainebleau, which you probably know about. And the fact that the train service to Fontainebleau brought tourists in large numbers, much to the annoyance of some artists who'd already discovered it and had made the long and difficult passage by coach to it. But once the trains arrived, it opened up phenomenally. And there's to the extent that it was overrun with painters.

And of course, I guess, that coincided with the manufacturing of oil paints and putting them into tubes. I think the first tubes made an appearance in the 1820s. And so suddenly, you didn't need your apprentice, you didn't need pigs bladders to hold your pigment and grind your pigment every morning. And so yeah, and there's even cartoons in prison newspapers from the 1830s and 1840s of artists with easel traffic jams.

Una Sealy 8:16

Sounds like the RHA life drawing session of a Thursday.

Mick O'Dea 8:19

But, you know - and Brittany then of course, became quite exotic, when the region still had very distinct personalities in terms of costume, habits, foods, phenomenal amounts of things. That must have been very exotic. Yeah, go to Brittany.

And I think if you're pioneering something, and it sounds like that was being pioneered, that it must have been very exciting.

Una Sealy 8:46

Yeah. And I think as you say, because near the train going to Fontainebleau, and there was a town, a colony, and other artists called near that I call a Grez-sur-Loing. Yeah. And some of the earlier paintings in the exhibition are from there. So an early Roderic O'Connor of the bridge at Grez-sur-Loing.

And but, as you say, you know, he for one, I think, felt that he wanted to go and see what was happening in Brittany, it was more remote. And going there when it was almost medieval looking with the costumes and some of the religious habits and then their traditional way of life was very untouched.

And, but, I think that that was really when O'Connor himself made a big leap from the impressionist work he was doing in Fontainebleau south of Paris. To when he got very experimental when he came in touch with the legacy of Gauguin which was in Pont Aven.

Mick O'Dea 9:57

That Post-Impressionist school certainly had a profound effect on him. And I mean, one of the things that I get from looking at the work down at the exhibition, along with the work of his contemporaries is the vividness of the colour. It's really escaped naturalism, it's gone into a whole other chromatic range. And even when O'Connor does return almost to an academic type of figuration, a bit like the late Renoir, the colour is very, very vivid. I mean, the colour is just at a pitch that you would never find in Irish painting, for instance. That's what makes it so exciting.

Una Sealy 10:41

Yeah. And I think the, I suppose, part of the ability of somebody like O'Connor, you know, he spent the best part of a decade in an artist colony of Pont Aven.

Mick O'Dea 10:52

Did he spend that long?

Una Sealy 10:53

Yeah. So I mean, some many artists just would come for the summer. And then they'll go back to Paris. But he basically spent the best part of that amount of time there.

Mick O'Dea 11:03

I didn't realise that.

Una Sealy 11:04

Yeah. And, but, the fact is, he was a man of independent means, and that he could afford to do that.

Mick O'Dea 11:12

I don't think he was an exception, in that sense.

Una Sealy 11:16

Yeah, I think people would have had to have had.

But I think what he ... as well is he didn't have to depend on selling any of his work. So I think - which gave him in particular huge freedom to bring that experimental work to even more of an extreme than some of the others like the sort of that's the stripe effect, you know, dividing up, the colours particularly on the shadow side of objects into parallel stripes of complementary colours.

He, you know, in the exhibition that's here, now, he has brought that to the most, kind of, extreme degree, even more so than Van Gogh did. And although O'Connor had never met Van Gogh, he had, there was evidence that he would have seen news of Van Gogh's work which Van Gogh was making in the south of France, the other colony down in Arles in the South of France. But there was work traveling between the colonies of the south of France and the colonies of Brittany, Pont Aven and Concarneau, that people were seeing each other's work.

But O'Connor was - I mean, in that exhibition, there's at one point when he's at peak stripe. You know, it's absolutely extreme. But, funnily enough, then he obviously influenced the Swiss artist Cuno Amiet, who was very good friends with O'Connor, but then they seem to have stepped back from that a bit.

So I think things were happening very, very quick - changes in style were happening really quickly. Because it was such a hotbed.

I'm just wondering if, does anything like that happen anymore? Like, do you feel as a painter that figurative painters, like us, do we influence each other? In our, you know, in the way that we would meet up on residencies and, you know, group exhibitions, and that is, do you think the same kind of effect is happening?

Mick O'Dea 13:24

I do yeah, I mean, I think we, you, I, our contemporaries and colleagues, particularly in and around the RHA, influence each other considerably. Yeah. That we seem to have the same ambitions for the work. And there is a lot of interplay.

As you know, we did organise drawing sessions every Thursday, in the RHA, before the RHA School started. And the idea behind that was to have a venue where artists would come out of their studios, draw, because we had a shared passion for drawing that there was a wide umbrella, which included a lot of artists.

And there was a whole social aspect around that. So that it was not just the drawing that occurred - and it was hard work during the day - but that shared sense of accomplishment that occurred afterwards, along with good drinks and foods. And that - I did feel that that gave a great camaraderie. But, like everything, it's got a period of time and then people move on, or they have been nurtured or fed and they do, like, I guess it's almost like the 1960s in Carnaby Street and everything has its time and vortex and

then disparate breakup of the phenomenon and people go about doing their own things.

But, yeah, there is huge amount. There has been a huge amount of interaction and influence and people influencing each other still.

Una Sealy 14:59

Yeah. Actually, that's really, that was a kind of a little microcosm of nearly an artists' colony, wasn't it, when the sort of the ad hoc life-drawing sessions started that was in 2003 at the RHA. So that was 15 years ago. And a group of like minded people came together. And there was, it probably would have been the first time since many of us had left art college, really, that we had that kind of interaction and that consistency.

And we really became a kind of a working group and, springing out of that, then there was various trips organised away where the group would go off and paint together for a week in various places around the country.

And, then building out of that, then, it is all became formalised, and then became literally what developed into the RHA School, which has now opened up to a much, much larger contingent, and but, it just came from that organic start, but that momentum. And it's amazing how cyclical things are like that, aren't they?

Mick O'Dea 16:19

I'm sure that there are microcosms of that spread throughout the country – whether you be in Limerick, Cork, Galway, or various parts of Dublin – where there are kind of parallel universes where people who are visual artists, not just painters, feel a vitality and a coming together that allows them to really, in depth, investigate and look at their own work and get a great appreciation of each other.

And I suppose that is one of the things that artists' colonies will attract. Then, of course, I suppose there are those that will go there that are disruptive, that are not into the work – that like the idea, but are not willing to put in the footwork. So, I mean, to control that without becoming just like society in general, and have to introduce rules for behaviour and stuff. That's when things start to change.

And when maybe that organic spontaneity that brings people together starts to break down a bit and becomes just like everywhere else and you will get the disaffected somehow or other that are not being let in and you get those that – you just get the usual human dynamics, and that's why I'm so impressed with the fact that O'Connor spent 10 years there, like working so intensely.

Una Sealy 17:53

Yeah. And, yes, because it could have got like the traffic jam of easels in there in Grez or Fontainebleau. Yes.

But it's interesting that you say that it was as a result of going to the artist's residency the Ballinglen Arts Foundation in Ballycastle in north Mayo that actually introduced you

to that area, and you ended up setting up a house and studio there. And you're not the only one. Because other artists have done that as well. And now a museum of art is being built in that small north Mayo town. And that's all come out of a small artist residency stroke. And there is now nearly becoming a colony in some ways.

Mick O'Dea 18:41

Well, you know, we have witnessed ourselves as a consequence of being associated with the RHA, that the annual exhibition always has a large component of landscape – being Ireland, inevitably that will be the case.

However, what is really interesting from the point of view of the people who are looking at the work as it enters, and then the work that is shown on the wall of the exhibition, is the amount that is coming from north Mayo, as a consequence of that residency. And as a consequence of the coming together of artists to that place, which compared to Connemara, West Cork, Kerry, for instance, is virtually untouched by tourism. And, hence, you don't have that infrastructure where you can get your olives, good wine and maybe a nice Prosecco whilst you wait for your name to be called for a nice hake, which has just been done in the local restaurant. It's not going to happen there. And so it's very affordable. It's off the scale a little bit and it's quite amazing. And it has, that the Ballinglen Arts Foundation in Ballycastle has opened me up to an awful lot of artists.

Una Sealy 20:04

Yeah. I don't think our lads from Pont Aven would have liked that because they always had their nice dinner cooked every night and there cider served to them.

Mick O'Dea 20:12

Well you would need that, but I suppose I had no refrigerators back then, you know, the deep freeze wasn't in operation, and of course just the convenience of the automobile.

Una Sealy 20:22

Exactly. But at least in Pont Aven the apples were literally falling off the trees. So the cider was plentiful.

Mick O'Dea 20:27

What must that have been like, can you imagine?

Trodding in with your boots in the autumn, excited by the leaves falling, the colour of everything. Maybe getting cooler in the evening, having to beat a retreat back to the tavern because it's getting dark. Unburdening yourself from the easel and trying to get the easel with the painting back without it falling. You'll probably have a great collection of insects on it anyway. Because plein air painting, you're going to just get all that.

But to come back and hear a fire. And people in convivial conversation. Go up to your room. And if you were lucky you had a good landlord or landlady who was glad to see you back and give you a good wholesome dinner. And with the cider then you could, in depth, get stuck into the conversation and move to whatever table or indeed bar/

restaurant, tavern, that you wanted to go to meet someone, someone else had come into town or someone that left with people coming and going all the time.

In fact, there's quite a number of paintings of people who are sick in their beds, painted by artists as they're recovering, which is, I suppose, really, it's always good to have a model stay still for a while.

Una Sealy 22:01

It's a pity life is not like that for artists anymore, isn't it?

I noticed that, particularly the Pont Aven colony, there aren't any women artists in this exhibition. The only mention of women is they're the models in their Breton head dresses, or they're, you know, they're knitting or sewing or, you know, they're basically peasants who work, or there's a lot of mention of, as you say the aforementioned landladies. Who were quite motherly to these artists, that looked after them very well and sometimes accepted works of art in lieu of, like, bar bills.

Mick O'Dea 22:43

Which I'm sure they didn't think a great deal of.

Una Sealy 22:46

Yeah. And no, I don't think. And one of the hostelries was actually suing Gauguin for a 300-franc outstanding debt. So I think Gauguin's last season in Pont Aven was not a happy one, because I think he was in bed with a broken ankle after getting into a brawl in nearby Concarneau, which is another colony.

Mick O'Dea 23:14

Concarneau was great place. Leech loved going to Concarneau, but that's another day's work. Yeah.

Una Sealy 23:19

So he has a broken ankle, owing landlady 300. She was suing him. And I think he's just said, Oh Jesus, I'm out of here. And he headed back to Tahiti after that.

Mick O'Dea 23:29

Therefore, you know, leaving the reputation of artists everywhere in tatters. That we don't want another one of you crowd down, you know, to get money up front, please. Yeah. And no, we won't take painting in lieu.

Una Sealy 23:43

No, he's ruined it for all of us, really, hasn't he?

Mick O'Dea 23:44

He has, really, but look- the trees never really looked like the kind of tree that the landlord or landlady would be used to if Gauguin produced it – too much color altogether.

Una Sealy 23:54

Exactly.

So, but, Gauguin was the kind of the he was a, sort of, the leader of the Pont Aven gang. And he was, although he had gone in the earlier days of Pont Aven, but he, his legacy lived on for artists for, like, many years after that. And that he was, sort of, the theories of Gauguin who said you must, you know - he also said, if you see blue, you must paint blue, you see green, you must paint green, which was, you know, look how bright it is. You paint it like that.

And he also said that you must be able to paint from your imagination as well. You can't be a slave to what's in front of you. We're probably all slaves to what's in front of us, aren't we?

Mick O'Dea 24:47

Yes, we are.

Una Sealy 24:48

Well, maybe you're not because you actually do a lot of work, or you have done a lot of work, out of your imagination.

Mick O'Dea 24:53

No, I think both of us share that problem of being merely mimetic, as maybe people who wouldn't be too well disposed towards that kind of work might phrase it. But I, you know, it's wide open.

But, he left a legendary legacy, as well, by going off to the South Seas. So the stories about him must have been legion, and, you know, the fact that he had gone off there and gone to this exotic paradise so people thought - and when you read the life story of the misery that he went through - the French people, the colonists, were disgusted by him because he'd gone native, and the natives wouldn't really accept it because he was French. And the fact that he was still looking for money and waiting every time the boat came from France, looking to see if something had arrived for him. And between gonorrhoea and then pain in his foot, which never seem to go.

He made a lot of sacrifices, for us, for artists, for art, for painting. But then again, this particular passage of conversation started by talking about the women, that doesn't seem to be a lot of. And his wife certainly must have made an awful lot of sacrifices, because she had married somebody who had a good job in the bank, and suddenly, she was rearing kids by herself.

Una Sealy 26:09

That's right. Yeah, exactly.

So although the life of an artist sounds like just, you know, heaven to have been in a place like Pont Aven, doesn't it, and to a colony like that, but the fact is, that the only

reason that these men could do that, probably, is that, if they had wives, the wives were at home. And, you know -

Mick O'Dea 26:39

They wouldn't have had legacies as well, I mean, I guess a lot of the artists would have been financially, had some sort of money coming to them.

The other thing is that it would have been class, I mean, it was upper middle – it was an upper middle class, or an aristocracy, the aristocracy activity, so that in the 20th century, particularly after the Second World War, the class thing dissipated quite a bit, particularly in Britain. And I guess, also in the United States with the GI Bill, which allowed a lot of Americans to come to Europe, who had fought in the military, during the Second World War, and a lot of British working class men and women to become more involved in the arts, and that had a knock on effect, so that we were looking back at the 19th century, early 20th century, you're looking at practitioners who have a certain amount of privilege that education, they obviously took enormous risks, because within their class, they would have been expected to conform to one of the professions that would have been clearly laid out for them.

And to break that convention would have been huge, in some cases, a huge sacrifice and a major disappointment, so that relative to their circumstances, they were taking enormous risks. I, in this day and age, it's far more, the arts are far more democratic, even though that now again, is in question when you look at the profile of maybe art colleges today, like the National College of Art and Design. And I think that in the 70s when I attended the college, that it was far more representative of the various sections, the strata of society. I don't think that it is, to the same extent today, but then I'm open to correction.

Una Sealy 28:33

Yeah, that's interesting. Yeah. And I suppose the art colleges in themselves actually are microcosms of artists' colony. I mean, that's really, once you know, when you're at art college, that's the time when, you know, ideas are being exchanged, peak influencing is going on.

And, you know, you really see that among cohorts of people going through art college, at, you know, suppose you and I would have gone to art college in the late 70s. graduating in around 1980. And I think there is a sort of a certain, I see a certain seam running through many of our colleagues from that period of training that sort of stays with you, doesn't it? Throughout your career, even though there are so many changes that happen along the way.

But I think that that that kind of core, I suppose - just the initial training and I suppose that you and I would have started art college when we were 17 or 18 years old when you're also at peak kind of sponge absorption as well. And where you're soaking everything up, and it's everything's being taken in quite a profound way.

Mick O'Dea 29:50

Everything is up for grabs now. Everything is changing. And it's interesting the way the social media has been a catalyst for the revival of all skills with a new twist.

Una Sealy 30:08

I know - who would have thought it? I mean it's kind of an unforeseen, but it's happening because of the because of the internet.

Mick O'Dea 30:15

Technical virtuosity is scary. I guess – and I'm conscious of saying, "I guess", I'm watching too many American sitcoms – I gather because of being able to just take a snap on the iPad and the image is arrested. I'm not quite sure how I feel about those paintings anymore, I'm really getting turned off of hyper realism. This is a subjective response. I really find it's not doing anything for me now.

Una Sealy 30:58

Especially because the only time you always see is on your phone, right? Isn't it? Yeah, that's what you see the hyperrealism.

Mick O'Dea 31:04

It seems so soulless.

Una Sealy 31:06

And you only ever see it as a photograph. You're looking for - you want the brushstrokes to come back now.

Mick O'Dea 31:12

I'm looking at the way they've been painted because I was even looking at one yesterday, you know, and the way it's so schematic, you know, you get the ground painted in, then you get, the kind of, brown sketched in obviously from photograph. Then you get one – I was watching one – I'd been painting with a little brush back, and then the nose would be done and I'm thinking, Okay, I, you know, the jury is out.

Una Sealy 31:40

You're just jealous.

Mick O'Dea 31:41

I'm just jealous. [laughing]

Una Sealy 31:43

You wish you had those little brushes? Instead of those worn out hog hairs.

Mick O'Dea 32:45

Is there an Irish equivalent? I suppose after the War of Independence in the new State – Connemara, Charles Lamb – Connemara was the draw, wasn't it? Keating. Like in

Brittany they we're looking for an authentic way of life and authenticity that it was felt had been lost in bourgeois centers.

Una Sealy 33:10

Yeah, there was definitely a movement to the west.

Mick O'Dea 33:11

Yeah, movement to the west. Keating, Lamb, MacGonigal? Paul Henry, Grace Henry, even the American painter Henri.

Una Sealy 33:25

Oh, yeah. Robert Henri.

Mick O'Dea 33:27

Yeah, he came from New York, one the Ashcan school, and he spent time in Achill, like Paul Henry. I'd be curious to know if they actually had much to do with each other.

But, of course, I think Paul Henry's main period was just up until the early 1920s. I mean, it was a short, intense period spent in Achill. But back to Belfast after that, but Achill never left him. And he must have come down a fair bit.

And again, railways, there was a railway line to Achill – I think closed around '38 or sometime around then– but the local railways access that. So, coming from Belfast to Achill was no great hardship. If you were to use the brilliant rail network that was still in the country at the time.

Una Sealy 34:12

Yeah. And then there'd be people like, you know, slightly more recent artists like Barbara Warren and Margaret Irwin West, who would have gravitated towards Connemara, from having – Barbara Warren certainly, she studied with Charles Lamb there. And that led her on to a lifetime of basically responding to the Connemara landscape in her work.

But when you talk about the trains and Belfast, that kind of brings us on to the Inishlacken Project, which is an artist's residency that both you and I have spent time on– you in particular. I think you have probably, every year for 17 years, with one or two exceptions. So that is a residency that is, basically, it's an homage to the artist Gerard Dillon and a couple of his contemporaries who spent some time there in the 50s, when the island was still populated.

Inishlacken is an island off Roundstone – for people who are listening. And there is an artist from Belfast called Rosie McGurrin, who lives in Roundstone, who has started this artist residency that she's run now for many years. And she invites up to about 20 artists to spend a week on the island every midsummer. Artists and she – it's great – there's quite a good, although people are from different disciplines. And they're very much doing their own thing. There is quite a lot of, you know, there was quite a lot of

kind of collaboration between people, because sometimes there's painters like us, and then there's performance artists there. And then, you know, sometimes the performance artists would ask the painters to make something for them to use in their performance.

There's also writers, there's musicians. And so, you know, in a way, although it's only a week, because it's been running for so many years, it's almost has become - and there's been a couple of exhibitions have grown out of that. Notably, one in Syracuse, New York, selection of work from that residency, that was visited by quite a lot of American descendants, whose ancestors had been evacuated off Inishlacken - Inishlacken never got the rural electrification and people basically had to leave. And that's created new kind of new connections. And some of those American-Irish descendants have come back and we've met them on the island and it's just been very - I found it all very positive.

Mick O'Dea 36:49

Yeah, no, it's - George Campbell particularly was the other artist, Gerard, they were ... Well, Dillon in particular, I guess, brought modernism to Irish representational work.

And at the same time, his other source was early Irish art, but particularly carvings that you get, for instance, on the cross of Cong. And it's fascinating to see how he will use the panels of stone carving that tell stories, and the high crosses, and kind of replicate that by looking at the small field structure that you find on Inishlacken - little rectangles - and have them populated with little donkeys or whatever, which is what was there, it is not a romantic notion. But it was the reality of what was there, and make these paintings, which are very exciting, and are different within the Irish context.

Within the Irish context, the academic context maybe of naturalism, by MacGonigal, or the RHA tradition, Dillon seems to be a bridge from a new - the living art bridge. But as you say, Rosie McGurrian, the artist from Belfast, has reopened that Belfast, Roundstone, Inishlacken access. And I've been really privileged to be part of that.

And one of the essential things, or one of the things that makes it really good, is for a painter like you or I, the idea of painting the landscape, painting the sea, then jumping into the sea, and then jump coming out of the sea painting, eating, jumping into the sea again. So it's a bit like full immersion - not are only you getting to be immersed in the painting, the elements that you're, that constitute the painting, the what the painting is representing. Yeah, you're immersing yourself in that as well. So it's kind of a total experience.

And it's a wonderful - people were looking for authenticity back in the 19th century, maybe early 20th century. I'm not quite sure what we're looking for now. I think it's valuing what we have, this pristine, almost pristine landscape - except for plastic, which is the biggest threat to our planet and to Ireland - but this almost pristine landscape. And just to celebrate that, and to know that you're damn lucky.

Una Sealy 39:02

Just putting in the context of my residency here as the artist-in-residence in the National Gallery for this exhibition about Pont Aven. I kind of arrived in here, really, in a lot of ways, not knowing what I was going to do. So I just thought the best way to approach it was just to take one picture and use the exact same pose, the same composition, the same lighting and the same media for – but take a contemporary model. So, instead of a young Breton girl, it's a young girl that I know and I got her to pose for me. And I worked in pastels – which is not my normal medium at all – and just by doing that and working in a way that I don't work, that then led me onto other ways of engagement with the exhibition.

So, in a way, although I am working 100 years after the people in the exhibition, in a way I feel that I am part of that artists' colony, kind of, that crosses a gap of about 100 years. Because I have had such an engagement with it. I visit the exhibition every day, sometimes just to look at one piece of work that I'm referencing in my work.

And I'd be reading up about all the artists who were there, and reading all the anecdotes, reading around the exhibition and in a way, in a funny kind of way, I think my work will have changed a little bit over the month of engaging with artists who were working 100 years ago. And I think that, what has been – although I was terrified of coming in with no plan, really – I think it's been very good because I've just ... it's almost like I'm at the colony. I don't know what's going to happen, and it just all happens through the work.

Mick O'Dea 42:14

It's fascinating. I think it's been a brilliant idea to get you here in residency in the National Gallery in the first place. I think you're the perfect artist for it. And the way that you have immersed yourself in the subject, the proximity of the paintings in this exhibition to you. The fact that you have a wonderful studio, huge, but, as you realise yourself, it doesn't take long to fill it up. The bigger the studio the smaller it'll look in a couple of months' time. But, the fact that, somehow, it's invaded you – the exhibition, the north of France, Brittany – has somehow got into your bloodstream. You're probably dreaming about it.

Una Sealy 42:59

I am.

Mick O'Dea 42:59

And it's having a profound, like, a century apart. It's amazing.

Una Sealy 43:10

Yeah. And it's also because those people working in Pont Aven had time and space to do whatever they wanted to do. I have time and space now here, because – and I'm getting, you know, people to come and sit for me and not commissioned portraits or anything like that. So there is absolutely no agenda other than mine. And I've warned people.

Mick O'Dea 43:31

It's sensory, completely sensory.

Una Sealy 43:33

Yeah, so I've, so basically, I've warned people that, you know, I'm not going to make a pretty picture of you, because I'm going to be putting in red and green stripes on the shadow side of your face. And I'm going to be – and so my volunteers are ... just know that this is going to be happening. So they're not going to sort of look at the picture at the end and go, I hate that.

Mick O'Dea 43:50

Maybe parallels can be drawn with traditional music.

You know, the fact is, you're using the same materials as the artists whose work is in this exhibition, or have used, so you're within a tradition. And a tradition is ever growing and communicating with each other. And the organic nature of traditional musicians coming from families, visiting musicians coming and influencing them, some wandering piper back in the 1920s coming from County Leitrim staying up in some house in Clare for a couple of months, because there's a, there's a hospitable family. People coming from far and wide to hear them, that then influencing the next generation and so on and so forth, that the thread can be found. And some of our best and finest exponents of the fiddle, of the pipes, accordion, button accordion, concertina, whatever, harp – they are a part of a lineage that they can trace, that they have been told about, somebody who's influenced somebody, you know.

And, in the same way, I think I'm drawing a parallel with the way you're living out your work right now in the Gallery as a consequence of just engaging so much with the living work that's on the wall, and I suppose that's what it is, painting is living. It's alive, it's communicating. It doesn't cease to emit. And you're obviously very sensitive to what is being emitted to the extent that it has really got in on you. And it's going to change, it's going to change the way you're working. And I'm going to say, Well -

Una Sealy 44:29

People are going to say, "What happened to Sealy? What happened to her? She was fine before she went into the National Gallery and now look what she's doing."

Mick O'Dea 45:41

Oh, she was brought off to somewhere really hot for a few months, and it's had a profound effect on her. [laughing]

Una Sealy 45:47

Oh, yeah. The other thing I'm doing which I, as you know, I'm killed telling people not to do is, like any students of mine, my big bugbears are not to use paint straight out of the tube and to mix the paint on the palette, not on the canvas. Both of which rules have been thrown out the window, because these lads down in the exhibition, sometimes the

tube is just squeezed onto the canvas, and clearly, the paint is rarely mixed in advance. There's, you know, there's one brushstroke which contains, you know, little strips of, you know, pink, green, blue in one brushstroke whereas - so for me -

Mick O'Dea 46:29

You've gone to the dogs.

Una Sealy 46:30

I have gone to the dark side, I've thrown out my whole rulebook.

Mick O'Dea 46:35

Because Irish painting, a bit like British painting, would have been characterised as tonal painting. And I remember Cullen telling me when he was a student in the College of Art, starting to use very bright colours, and MacGonigal, the professor of painting, said to him, "This is a tonal college". I guess, that comes right through in all kinds of painting, whether you look at Patrick Collins, or anyone else. It doesn't matter what is representational, or are abstract, or semi abstract. I mean, there are exceptions, obviously. William Crozier is quite an exception.

Una Sealy 47:21

Now me, because I have a tube of cadmium green. I've had it for 20 years. I don't use any greens out of a tube because -

Mick O'Dea 47:30

It would have cost you a fortune cadmium green, would it?

Una Sealy 47:32

Yeah. Fortune. So, but, I've been, I've never, I never use it. I don't ever, you know, I don't use ready-made greens except for veridian in colour mixes sometimes.

But this time, I've got the cadmium green, and I've put it straight onto painting. And it's like, you know, you feel - and then put a pink straight out of the tube right beside it. And you're getting these, you know, shimmering light effects that I have never even gone near.

Mick O'Dea 48:01

You're entering new territory.

Una Sealy 48:03

I'm entering new territory. I haven't done anything like that since I was a first year in art college. And then, until it got drummed out of me.

Mick O'Dea 48:08

Well, hopefully we'll put it into it as quickly as possible. [laughing]

Una Sealy 48:15

Thank you for coming along and talking to me on my residency here, Mick; it's been really interesting.

Mick O'Dea 48:20

Thank you. And it's been a pleasure.

Outro 48:35

You've been listening to *Imagining France. Roderic O'Connor and the Moderns: Between Paris and Pont Aven*, with audio engineering by Mark Cantan, music composition by Michael Fleming, and produced by Brina Casey.