Podcast transcript: Jack B. Yeats: Capturing the Essence of Memories. A conversation between Dr Brendan Rooney and Professor Ruth Byrne.

Introduction:

Welcome to the National Gallery of Ireland Podcast. Experiences from memory are central themes in Jack B. Yeats's work from the mid-1920s onwards. Through the prism of memory, banal scenes such as train journeys and fair days are transformed into sensual rich coloured spectacles. In this podcast, Dr Brendan Rooney, Head of the Curatorial Department at the National Gallery of Ireland, will speak to Ruth Byrne, professor of cognitive science at Trinity College Dublin. Brendan and Ruth will discuss Yeats's work and how he beautifully captured the essence of memory.

Brendan:

Ruth, thanks so much for joining us to give us some of your professional and scientific insights into Yeats, as we celebrate his work in an exhibition here at the National Gallery. You are a professor of cognitive science and I thought it might be a useful place to start to ask you to outline your particular area of expertise and research and tell us what cognitive science encompasses?

Ruth:

Thanks Brendan, and thanks for inviting me to talk about Yeats; it's a great honour. My work is in cognitive science, so what I'm interested in are experimental and computational investigations of the human mind, so I'm particularly interested in the psychology of human reasoning.

So, when people make inferences and try to figure out what choices to make or what to do next, they appear to mentally simulate alternative possibilities. And, what I'm interested in, then, is this relationship between how people reason and how they imagine alternatives and this nexus between reasoning and imagination turns out to be core to people being able to think clearly in various different kinds of situations.

Brendan:

The title of our exhibition is *Jack B .Yeats: Painting & Memory,* and as that title suggests the exhibition focuses on the role of memory, and I suppose the act of practice of remembering in the development of Jack B. Yeats's art.

We were also keen to identify a theme with which visitors to the exhibition could identify and to investigate using Yeats's work as a point of reference and the subject of

memory itself. This was the point of which we reached out to you, and the result was a wonderful essay from your particular perspective as a scientist in the publication accompanying the exhibition.

What I'd like to do, if that's ok with you, is draw some points from that essay which is full of fascinating observations and ask you to expand on them a little, because what you really did was approach the subject we had put before you from a totally different perspective to ours, and we found it extremely fruitful from our point of view.

So, I thought I might start with just one sequence or a few sentences at the beginning of your essay that sets the whole text up, in which you say 'The extraordinary creativity exhibited by groundbreaking artists lies at one end of a continuum and at the other end are the mundane sorts of creative thoughts you experience everyday'. And, I wondered are our daily activities – yours, mine, everyone else's – more closely related to the remarkable achievements of writers artists and composers than we think?

Ruth:

Yes, absolutely, I agree. I think even our ordinary very mundane everyday imagination has within it a little kernel of some of the magic that you see in these extraordinary acts of creative achievement from artists, composers and writers. I think they are the crucial ingredients that are shared between our everyday imagination and that more exotic imagination is the ability to be able to represent a situation in our minds. To be able to recall or to simulate or to imagine things that happened or may have happened or may not have happened and then to be able to manipulate that representation in our minds to be able to be simulated from different perspectives or different interpretations or imbue it with different kinds of emotions.

We all have this ability to imagine and to create these kinds of representations. We are all relying on these same kinds of cognitive processes and mechanisms to do that, but I think what artists and others add into that mix is is their passion to build up their expertise and their knowledge of their field and the devotion that they have to practicing to fine-tuning the skills that they have in their specific domain, and, of course, the opportunity to do that. So, they are able to elevate these processes to an exceptional level.

Brendan:

Fundamentally, is it a muscle we can all train? Or are some people predisposed towards tapping into that particular skill more than others?

Ruth:

It's certainly a set of cognitive processes that we all have access to and that we can all develop. It does depend on having that opportunity to develop it. Also, having the attraction, the desire to want to engage in that kind of activity.

So, in trying to figure out what talent is, psychologists have often come up with different ideas of why someone manages to be exceptional in a field and it seems to be partly related to this enormous allure that person feels for that domain that ensures that they will engage in that extraordinary amount of practice, and they will build up these huge levels of domain expertise that great creative individuals have built up about their domain.

Brendan:

That's really interesting. One of the practices that Yeats engaged in obsessively, or repeatedly, particularly in the early decades of his career was sketching. So, in the Gallery here, we have a collection of over 200 sketchbooks – and that is not by no means the entire collection – in which he was irresistibly drawn to doing it. But, I imagine, it was also a discipline.

You've mentioned in our conversations with you studies have been done into the sketchbooks of scientists who work in laboratories. I wonder if you could expand on that little. On what came of these studies and if you think that is applicable to artistic practice as well from what you have observed?

Ruth:

Yes, definitely. Psychologists have mined scientist's notebooks to try to see what the links are between their recordings of their observations and their daily activities and their subsequent creative discoveries. So part of what psychologists who study this have been interested in is whether these creative discoveries are occurring in kind of wild leaps and bounds or whether they're they're really quite systematic and planned and in particular whether scientists are pursuing alternative ideas or whether they are just trying to confirm one particular idea at a time.

So, for example with Alexander Graham Bell and his invention of the telephone, he left behind a very rich archive of notes and his ongoing ideas, his aims and what hypotheses he was testing. So, interestingly, he was pursuing this idea for an electromagnetic device and was having some success with it, but he was also at the same time pursuing an idea of a liquid device and having some success with that. So he was simultaneously testing these two alternative hypotheses.

There is a great commonality there between what scientists are doing and making creative discoveries and the kinds of notebooks they keep and what artists are doing when they're engaged in exceptional paintings and the sketchbooks that they also keep. Psychologist have also tried to mine some of those artist's sketchbooks. Again trying to address the bigger questions of is artistic creativity unpredictable maybe even chaotic or is it following those Eureka moments not come out of nowhere that they're coming out of a planned sequence of ideas that are sometimes a painstaking process of revision and tweaking and trial and error and so on.

So, in that one case that is with Picasso sketches for the painting *Guernica* where psychologists have done in trying to look at all the sketches he made was see was he elaborating a single key idea throughout or was he generating different ideas and culling them, some of them. In particular how that related to other paintings that he was engaged with at the time.

Yeats's sketchbooks as you say, are very extensive and it's a great rich repository there in the National Archive and I think it's fascinating that he sketched so much as a young boy and as a young man almost like a daily pictorial diary which is really interesting. Obviously, when he was working as a newspaper illustrator for sports he was able to really fine-tune those skills of sketching so that she was able to capture the immediacy and the emotion of sports events.

As you said to me when we were looking around the gallery and the exhibition together, his sketches are not really proprietary in the same way that Picasso's were for example. Instead you do get the impression that his sketchbooks turn out to be, if you like, a memory repository for him in his subsequent paintings

Brendan:

Exactly, that's how we've always read them. I suppose the danger when you see the net result, if you like the Eureka moment for artists, in Yeats's case is the painting itself and you tend to come to reverse engineer it so you see the sketches of being a necessary part of the process that culminates in the painting. Of course that's not necessarily the way he saw it at all.

One of the things that becomes so clear when you look at his work across his long life, we talked with you about this as well, is his inclination is return to particular subjects as if he is trying to get under the skin of these subjects and relearn them or re-experience them. Sometimes he was returning to characters in Rosses Point or the Sligo landscape or images of horses decades after he had first addressed them. Is that inclination to return to subjects indicative of a very human inclination to seek answers to unresolved issues or to re-examine. Do we all do that and we're not even aware of it?

Ruth:

Well, I think it's very interesting particularly from the point of you with the creative process that it's not uncommon for either scientists or artists or anybody engaged in a creative activity to return to the same idea again and again.

As you say in Yeats's sketches, we see things like say for example all the men who worked in Sligo at the quays and this may be related to his grandfather's shipping company say. But, then there this recurring image of the pilot who guided the ships into Sligo port and it's a very striking image. It appears again and again in his paintings. The solitary figure with the peak cap and beard and often on his own looking out to sea and that return to subjects, I think illustrates very well this idea of a creative insight isn't necessarily a single flash, that it's probing turning of an idea over and over and then

perhaps leaving it aside for a while for it to incubate, for you not to think about it and then revisiting it and restructuring your interpretation of it.

I think it's very intriguing to try to track the changes in the representation of some of those characters like the pilot over the years. So, he certainly conveys a solitary reflection through him, but in later paintings that is very explicitly associated with say loss in paintings with evocative titles like 'We Shall Not Meet Again' and so clearly it would seem in that he's trying to extract some core essence from those memories to distil what that memory signifies to him at different times in his life and certainly that's something that I think we all do.

We all revisit certain memories and try to extract their significance for us at this current moment as we have more experiences and more explanations and we reinterpret past memories.

Brendan:

It seems from our conversations with you that it's very clear that all sorts of things interfere with our memories as time passes. So, there's life experience, but there's also the reinterpretation that takes place as you grow older to reread. So the event or the memory –whether it's Rosses Point or London or New York or whatever experience it was – it changes over time and it gets more complicated if you like.

We are really fascinated by your observations about the fallibility of memory and I'm paraphrasing now and you'll have to forgive me, but I think distilling it down the fallibility can be broken into three. There's forgetting parts of an event which you end up getting the gist and relinquishing much of the detail, we all do that. Fundamentally misremembering things and then I suppose repeating that era overtime and then changing as I mentioned just a second ago, changing your interpretation of a remembered episode.

One thing that you'll often find scholars do when they address art or literature is they seek authenticity and accuracy in records and Yeats drew sometimes on experience in the moment, but more often than not it was retrospectively. Are we mistaken in trying to find accuracy in memory at all?

Ruth:

It's a great question, but I really don't think we are. I think that the important distinction is between truth in capturing the gist of something rather than accuracy in the literal detail of something and I think you're completely right that memory is hugely fallible on several different front s. So, we gather all the repeated episodes that we experience of something into some kind of memory schema, some knowledge structure that helps us. It's a great cognitive economy that we're able to organise information as it comes into us in these schema. But, it does mean that we forget the details of unique events unless there were exceptional.

The important thing is that our memory isn't a passive record of events as they occurred, it's a hugely reconstructive process and so we're relying on these memory schemes to help us to fill in the blanks, to encapsulate our expectations of what happened. As you said, memories change because our interpretations change because we reminisced with others for example or we've got more explanation and experiences to try to understand the past over time. So, even though we end up forgetting a lot and perhaps misremembering things and inserting things that are more related to expectations than to our experiences.

Nonetheless, one of the extraordinary achievements of human memory is that we do preserve the gist of the memory, and so even though we have forgotten the mundane aspects of it, the meaning of that memory to us seems to be retained very well and I think it's really marvellous that Yeats seemed to have a very robust and intuitive grasp of that. He was deliberately painting from memory and in one of the few assertions that we have from him and about what he was doing, he does say that that an artist painting from memory can't be trying to make an accurate model. That instead, what an artist is trying to do in his view in painting from memory is communicate the feeling. What the memory felt like to you. What the scene in your memory of it? What the emotion is and I think he does that extremely well.

Brendan:

Yeah, absolutely and you quote that in your essay as well. And for an artist who didn't or preferred not to talk about his work and didn't talk about it very much, he is remarkably erudite when he does. It's a wonderful quote. And of course exactly what you had drawn-out is manifest in his work as well because his work as time passes, the actual technique and the colour range become much more suggestive of feeling that they are of fact, which is something that repeats itself throughout his work, and by the end when things are becoming quite existential and abstracted his thought was, his palette was quite dark, quite brooding, quite intense, but in in earlier decades when perhaps his heart was lighter, it is more vigorous some more intense the more vibrant.

So, exactly what you're saying about his self awareness I suppose of understanding where memory sat in his process was very clear in work that he was producing. I think that comes across very strongly through the exhibition of course as we said many times, as we have been talking about the exhibition, this is 84 paintings of a body of work at 1200 so we're hoping that it's representative and that what we say is true of these or that it might be you know, credible and in observing about these are true of his corpus of work as a whole.

We've always been conscious of the personal and intimate nature of the subject that he addressed. You were one of the first people to delve a little deeper into the nature of those memories and say to us there are absences here though. And, there are absences that perhaps are not so usual. When people tend to reminisce about their childhood, they reminisce about domestic activity or childhood friends or interactions with individuals that were perhaps one to one or in small groups. They are curiously absent from these memories of his youth.

At the same time he also likes to place himself in crowds and someone who became quite private more than reclusive, I think it's fair to say in his later years he did enjoy the energy of crowds and we also wondered about the notion of public memory because it did seem to us that he was sensitive to that idea of events and episodes that had a communal residence if you like. But, if what we've been talking about so far is true about the fallibility and the personal nature of memory and all these factors that can interfere with it, can you talk about public memory credibly at all. Does it exist? Does public memory exist?

Ruth:

It’s a very good question. We are all drawn to share our memories with each other and we reminisce and we create narratives in not just our own personal life histories but also the histories of our groups and our communities and we keep memory repositories of photographs of letters or writings or paintings.

I guess an interesting question is the extent of which that public memory is also reconstructive in the same way that personal memory is. So, that public memory also isn't just a pasts of record, it's a reconstruction. And, it may well exhibit the same sort of frailties that we've been talking about as ordinary everyday personal memory displays in particular the shift and interpretation of the significance of particular events. So explanations over time Interrogation from different perspectives. All of those apply to public memory, just as much as they do to private memory.

I do think it's fascinating what you said earlier about what doesn't appear in Yeats’s paintings. He did say that every painting of his had some thought of Sligo in it and Sligo was certainly where he grew up, where he spent his childhood and so that fits in that often are memories over our autobiographical lifespan we do tend to focus a lot of memories from the ages maybe of about 10 to15 to about 20 to 25 or 30.That's when we can have a lot of new and distinctive things happen to us. It's not surprising that we recall a lot. Often memories from that time have a big impact on our beliefs and decisions that shaped our lives.

In one of his comments about remembering and what he was trying to do in his paintings, he said that an artist wanted to hold again a moment and pass that moment on to others. It is intriguing when you look at his paintings to wonder what moment was holding onto there and what moment is he trying to pass on to us. And as you say very few of them are these close personal memories. His sketchbooks in contrast have great domestic scenes in them so you'll see his dog hooligan, who's the spitting image of a dog I had when I was a kid and you'll see his wife and you'll see his kitchen table you can see all kinds of picnics with friends and everything like that. But in his oil paintings none of them seem to make it into that and instead what you do see are your public events. You see circuses and boxing rings and races and you also see ordinary people going about their everyday lives in open communal, shared spaces. They are the moments he is passing on to us. They are the ones that he wanted to capture hold for a moment and for us to see as well.

I mean, for me, some of his most iconic paintings are the ones of these wanderers in the open countryside and the you see these pairs of little ragged Beckett like characters travellers stretched out in fields under these vast skies and you can't help but wonder what is that moment, what is he trying to pass on to us there in that moment forever.

In his context you know he's from a generation where it must have seemed like the world was just constantly at war. You know he lived through WWI, through the Irish War of Independence the civil war here and then also World War II and there must be just like shocking uncertainties in the world then for him.

We've all just lived through a year and a half where it seemed like the entire world has been turned upside down and when you look at some of those paintings and you see these solitary travellers in these immense swirling landscapes and you can't help but feel that he has really captured something of the the huge turbulent uncertainty of the world and the tiny little alone individual in it. I think that it applies to our time, that moment that he's passed onto us as much as it must have applied to his time.

Brendan:

Absolutely, and it's so interesting to hear you put it so well Ruth, because what we do know about him was how engaged he was with feeling. Not in a theatrical way in a very personal way, but if you are sensitive to the way you're feeling but also to a prevailing atmosphere, those events that you talking about must impact on you hugely and in a week we came to think that Yeats engaged in a process of trying to place himself in the world and if that world is changing beneath your feet all the time and it does anyway as you get older.

One of the fascinating things about him from a biographical point of view and the point of view of being an experienced individual is he lived such a long life. Often, the artists who live much shorter lives are easier to study and write about but in his case you know you could see his mood and focus shift over time. And, of course that was both person in his intermediate circle, if you like, his controllable world. But then there was outside of that the world that was changing radically and in a very uncontrollable way.

I might bring you back to the point you made about the period in people's lives that tends to exercise a particular influence over their self-image retrospectively and I think what you call the reminiscence bump which is that period, the formative period. Is there any sense in thinking that perhaps people think they're real selves abides in their youthful selves and everything after that is just complicated and you know mediated and compromised?

Ruth:

Well, it’s certainly true from the point of view of the creative process again starting with the past is a very rich seam and we all engage in this mental time travel for we are able to catapult ourselves back into a past situation and not just think about what happened but imagine how things could have happened differently.

For example, we are able to project ourselves into the future and to imagine hypothetical possibilities there. I think it's interesting in Yeats's paintings particularly his later ones for example that children start to appear and we know he didn't have children and there's various interpretations of who these children might be or what they might symbolise.

But, as you've been saying, there are these discernible shifts in what Yeats was focusing on throughout his different periods of painting. In the early years of his oil paintings, he was very clear that he was painting from memory and he said things like that all the people in my paintings are people I've seen. Later as he got older, there is this shift to painting from imagination instead and about one of his later paintings he said they are just people who walked into my imagination so that transition from focusing on and actual memory to focusing on some imagined situation is very important in his work I think. It does encapsulate something about how we continue to derive some sense of who we are ourselves and what our lives have been about by mining our memories and almost marrying them with this imagination of how things could have turned out differently.

Brendan:

Yeah, it's interesting because your inclination certainly looking at the other later paintings that you talking about is to see them as entirely autobiographical, so you see a lone figure and think that must be his alter-ego or representation often. Then again, as you say, you have these children and off and side by sides and I find myself and suddenly doing the same thing, I kind of imagine myself at different points in life and of course he was doing it from the distance of his 70s and it's simply not clear-cut.

There was something very reflective and universal and democratic about the way he approached what he was doing. He seems never to engage in mawkish nostalgia. I was interested to ask you where you think the demarcation lines lie between memory and nostalgia and are they one and the same or is one version of the other or are they fundamentally different?

Ruth:

Well, it's one of the great achievements I think of the human mind is that we're able to have this tremendous interaction between cognition and emotion and so the cognitive processes that underlie our ability to remember and recall events to recollect different experiences or episodes somehow also manage to create emotions like nostalgia wistfulness or regret.

We really seem to have these pivotal memories that reel us back in over the years and not just to reminisce about the situation as it occurred, but we seem to be irresistibly drawn to replay certain events to think what if or if only and to create these alternatives to the reality of what actually happened where we are imagining a better outcomes in our minds or we're imagining how things could have turned out worse that we are exploring different consequences of just what would have happened at this specific

juncture. It's almost like our imaginations, our everyday imagination when we are thinking back over our past and reminiscing seem to get snagged on what psychologists call fault lines in our memory or imagination.

These are often things that we failed to do or opportunities that we lost or not been able to spend enough time with someone that you loved or you're not keeping up something that you really enjoyed like a sport or hobby or whatever. Those kinds of if only thoughts seem to give rise to these quite complex emotions like regret like nostalgia, where there's a comparison between how the situation turned out.

Your memory what actually happened and how it could have turned out differently and it's from that comparison that the emotion emerges. I think one of the things that Yeats achieves very well as this natural marriage not just between memory and imagination but between memory imagination and emotion and he really manages to convey the emotion of those kinds of situations.

Brendan:

It's so true. We really enjoyed walking around the exhibition, Donal and I with you some days ago. We were looking particularly at the last room which really focuses on the final years of his life when he's becoming particularly reflective and it's a curious combination of if you like desolation and resignation, but also triumph and the triumph of the spirit. In a really clear way he does what you are talking about in reimagining alternatives in his paintings.

There is one in particular called 'Leaving The Far Point' which he places himself with his beloved wife Cottie and his uncle who died many decades before. It's wonderful to see him use a painting, work of art , as an opportunity to reunite in a really powerful way and when in the exhibition we placed it immediately beside a painting in which Yeats does tell us that the lone figure is him. It's one of the few that he admitted was entirely autobiographical of him sitting in a park bench in the dark and these are side-by-side, very different reflections on loss and on death and then on the other side of the room there is this wonderful painting called 'Sleep Sound' of these two figures embedded in the landscape in which again he seems to take the opportunity to imagine an alternative where he and maybe it's not him but it could well be him and Cottie reunited in a landscape in natural harmonious surroundings. It's a really powerful picture.

I think there is a very physical manifestation to what you are talking about in Yeats's work of reimagining or imagining alternative outcomes or alternative existences or states I suppose.

One of the things, one of the other things that we talked about with you at some length is the remarkable proportionality of Yeats's work. He produced over half of his massive output of oil paintings in the last 15 years of his life and obviously it's a challenge to all those people who think that you become less creative as you get older and I wondered from your point of view what might that tells us about creativity and aging?

Ruth:

Well, certainly there is evidence that you know people it's not the case did you lose those abilities and he was so prolific and it is quite extraordinary to see so many paintings being produced by him that it's almost like they became like the diaries that he kept as a young boy. He seems to be producing at certain decades certain years and in the later decades of life he was producing perhaps a painting a week. These paintings that are are viewed as his best paintings. There is certainly lots of evidence that in different fields in different domains both in science and in the arts that people do continue to peak at different times and I think he's really great example of that.

Brendan:

I know that the romantic poets for instance have been written about a lot. Particularly at a time when communities were absolutely destroyed by consumption and the mortality rate was so high. I think Keats wrote the lines 'If I should die before my pen has gleaned my teaming brain' this idea about everything being accelerated because you know that the end is in sight. I always got the impression that this wasn't the case with Yeats. It was a general just outpouring of energy of creative energy that I don't think he was racing against time. I think it was just a genuine reflection on a lifetime of experience and it was just irresistible and just born of an instinctive creativity that you see played out in different ways and with incredible vigour for someone who was really quick and quite elderly by the end. He painted right up into his in his 80s, it's truly extraordinary.

Ruth:

It is really is, and he's sharing those particular moments with us right up to the very end so that there are, I guess, you know the power of some of those paintings I think is that he, you know, if you look one of his paintings of a child playing on their own beside quayside, what he seems to be doing is engaging you in sharing a memory that he has or imagines a situation that he has.

It resonates, makes you think about similar memories that you have or analogous memories that you have and then he's conveying a particular emotion about that memory and you're remembering or thinking about your emotions about that memory and some of the beauty I think of some of his paintings particularly the later ones is this sense that you develop a shared understanding of something very important and it's tremendous that he can convey that in paint.

Brendan:

It's so true. And we tried to use the exhibition is an opportunity to test those ideas. Those things we are inclined to believe about him and it's wonderful to be able to put on at large display of work to say we thought this about him, we thought that he had this universal sensitivity and is it true. And it absolutely is. It seems to be a wonderful combination of the intimate and personal but also the universal which is one of his great strengths.

There was a lovely phrase that you used in your essay. You talked about the tyranny of the specific and how he managed to avoid that and it despite the fact that he was returning to these things over and over again. Were there particular motifs you observed not just in the exhibition but in the other work that you done while you were writing for us that you found particularly revealing?

Ruth:

Well, certainly, psychologists who study how people create new instances of any category have used this term of the tyranny of the specific and the idea is that if you're trying to design a new chair or innovate in some new technology. If you are thinking about concrete examples of say existing chairs that limits your imagination where is if you're able to think in a more abstract or general way about it about say the function of a chair, it turns out that seems to help people unchain their imaginations and they can create more original instances as a result.

Certainly, Yeats seems to have done that and some of the paintings that he did and the best example to me is the Yeats horse which is such a distinctive animal and you and I both share a love of horses and your great horse exhibition in the book that you created on and all the paintings of horses is marvellous. The Yeats horse is recognisable and also really original so he seems to have achieved that by not focusing on the concrete specifics if you like, but their higher function.

You get in his paintings of horses, some in this exhibition and some in the National Gallery's collection and elsewhere, you get this energy and movement of horses. But, also he is so good at conveying the individuality of particular horses and he captures horses who are afraid or who are exhibiting affection or curiosity and they're all really quite unique and clearly they symbolise something very special to Yeats.

So, he would have been growing up in Sligo and living in the countryside in England, he would have encountered lots of different animals. Cows and sheep and pigs and so on, but it's really only horses that make it into his paintings and so it's almost as if they are conveying something quite important like freedom or enthusiasm or even kindness.

It seems to me that they, really more than anything else in his paintings, convey some of what he in an interview, the only interview that I've heard with them a live verbal interview, where he said that the only art was the art of living and I think that's really captured and some of these very vibrant horses where he has created them. You couldn't mistake a Yeats horse I think.

Brendan:

That’s totally true. We do have one painting cows in the collection and you have to enjoy that at another time. Just to return, before you finish up, to memory specifically another one of the observations you made which we thought was really fascinating was related to the fact his paintings particularly the later works we talked about, appear to reflect not just a remembered or imagined event but how it is remembered, how it is

imagined, faintly, tenuously. So technically, the painting seem to resemble memory they're almost like a physical manifestation of memories we thought that was very interesting. Are there ways, or basically do we do we remember in pictures?

Ruth:

That's a great question. The painting you were just referring to there while ago – 'Leaving The Far Point' – one of two men and a woman walking towards us which I know when she said maybe his wife and himself and an uncle. It may be imagined event rather than a memory. What's so striking about paintings like that is the individuals in it are almost indistinct, there are quite transparent and it looks like they're carved out of their countryside. You can see the countryside through them.

So, there is also this kind of transience to them that very poignant and it does seem to capture not just that this is a memory that he has, but also he is capturing how faint that memory might be, how fragile it might be and there's been lots of research psychologists have carried out whether we think in images and what role of imagery might be and that debate continues to rage but there's no doubt that our images are not like perceptions they're not anyway as detailed or as vivid or as rich, even the ones that feel vivid.

I think he was capturing something quite sad about memory that we can have these very important memories and yet we can barely see for example the face of a loved one in our minds and I think he captures that beautifully in the painting. I have to say that that painting in particular is one of my most favourite among many favourites of Yeats's paintings and it was a real pleasure to see it in person because you just don't get it as much in the reproductions on the page.

I think it's when you're standing in front of the painting itself , you just can't beat being able to see the paint on the canvas and where there is no paint as Donal was pointing out from when we were going around the exhibition. It is remarkable the way he uses various techniques, I think to be able to convey that fragility of memory to us.

Brendan:

Absolutely, and it's interesting isn't it that those figures almost become more spectral as he gets older. In the early years, in the 20s, they much more robust and I wondered because I closer to the time. Maybe not, it's all tied up with experience and technique and perception and your artistic goals as well. So it's a complicated business but really fascinating and he seems to be so engaged with the processes of exploring memories. He is so engaged, it's a very sophisticated conversation he is having with himself over long period of time.

Ruth, thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with me and for collaborating with us on and enriching the Yeats project. As I said at the beginning, you have written beautifully about Yeats work. It's a masterclass on how to write about art. So I would recommend your essay to anybody who is interested in learning more about the

cognitive process of memory but also in understanding little bit more about the way the Yeats approached his subjects. Thank you so much I really appreciate it hugely and as say I recommend that everybody reads your essay in the book accompanying the exhibition

Ruth:

Thank you very much Brendan, and it’s a wonderful exhibition and thank you for inviting me to collaborate on it. It's been a real joy.