

DRAWING ON THE BODY

Bernie Masterson



Quotation:

*Nobody see a flower - really - it
is so small it takes time - we
haven't time - and to see takes
time, like to have a friend
takes time.*

Georgia O'Keefe

Drawing on the Body: A New Series of Work

by
Bernie Masterson

The artist Bernie Masterson is synonymous with landscape and exploration of the natural environment. Her latest collection of paintings still relates to mapping, but the subject in question addresses physical geography of a very different nature. The theme of the new work emerged serendipitously from her role as a carer for her mother, Jeannie Masterson.

Jeannie was a remarkable woman by any standards, a practicing midwife before her marriage, she loved life and lived it to the full, but as she advanced into her ninety year it became clear that she would not go on forever. Although she was a person who freely accepted life's trials, she found the age-bound limitations of the human body hard to endure. It was a comment she made about her scars, veins and tissue-type skin that prompted her artist-daughter to interpret these areas on paper, generating a process that was to gain its own momentum.

The first set of 16 oil drawings record a variety of aspects of the aging human body: the palm, the knuckles, the feet, sagging breasts, a series of age marks, a protruding stitched scar in the shoulder – it sounds depressing but the results are beautiful. The initial drawings were executed in black and white and the artist decided to confine the work to the tonal range within this limited field.

This collection of work is characterised by the standardization of scale, as each image is painted on a wooden panel measuring 35.5 cm square. The wood was then primed with gesso to achieve a white ground as a base for the oils. This group of oil drawings initially reads as abstract organic matter, with the odd exception of a recognisable body-part. This is due to the fact that the artist has enlarged her subject matter to the point where the human eye has difficulty in interpreting the topic as she culled the outline to present only the surface contour. The images do not occupy the entire space of the square panel but are confined to neat rectangular segments reminiscent of a laboratory slide.

Each painting addresses a different area of the human body and, if the viewer was not privy to the title of the subject, one would be inclined to regard the collection simply as enlarged organic studies of objects in the natural environment. Closer examination reveals that the willowy black lines etched into the white surface of one panel are in fact the character lines on Jeannie's forehead. Another image, that is similar to a pair of notched bamboo shoots, is revealed to be a detailed study of her knuckles, while the veined structure reminiscent of Kathy Prendergast's Leaf Drawing is actually an enlarged detail of the palm of Jeannie's hand.

Bernie explained that her mother had very soft hands, but hands that were always busy. Her mother and father were very active outside the home but within the family there was great emphasis on craftwork and creativity. Both her parents were Bee-keepers and the family enjoyed the benefits of fresh honey and home-made face cream. Her father harvested reeds from the Shannon and her mother wove them into baskets and place mats. Jeannie stayed up late into the night, patch-working, sewing, lace-making, tatting, and toy-making. This was the legacy she gave to her children, a legacy that is recorded on the lines on the palm of her hand.

Stitching was something Jeannie did in her professional life too, but there were also stitches on her own body. One of the paintings depicts an old wound, an uneven scar, the result of a rather crude medical intervention. This became an object of fascination for Jeannie who liked to comment on this old injury from a childhood bicycle accident. Once again Bernie has recorded the uneven skin surface gathered and dented, to create a monochrome pattern. This is the opposite to the vivid lacerations one sees on TV detective series' that focus on pathological evidence, as the artist neatly records the lines and puckers of the skin, reminiscent perhaps of the bark of a tree.

Likewise, Bernie documented a series of small circular marks on the skin, indentations that occurred as a result of the ageing process. These marks take on a new meaning when transferred into paint, in fact the randomness of the dark spots viewed against a lighter background bear a startling resemblance to a set of stars twinkling in the night sky.

The aging process is an unavoidable part of any life-cycle but Jeannie bravely accepted her aging body regarding it as merely part of the journey from womb to tomb. She was unusual among her generation in that she freely allowed her daughter to draw some of the more intimate parts of her anatomy. Two of the works show sections of the breast area – with the crazed lines around the nipple – these make the viewer aware of the person behind the images, as does the drawing of her damaged left foot, a painting reminiscent of Frida Kahlo.

When Jeannie died peacefully in 2007 her daughter Bernie found a huge gap in her life. The death of the second parent is always devastating as it signals the end of childhood and forces the bereaved to reassess their own position within the adult world. Bernie felt that the series of works she had based on her mother's final years was incomplete so – having previously gained Jeannie's permission - she applied to the hospital for Mrs Masterson's x-rays and began to develop the second part of this project.

Continuing to paint in black and white the artist strove to explore the inner woman – from a mechanical and metaphorical view point. Once again the hermeneutic aspect of the work challenges the viewer as the x-rays revealed the structure beneath the skin: the framework of the body, the skull, the back-bone, the knee joint and the pelvis. This time Bernie took cognisance of the photographic nature of the images and inverted the colour scheme working from black to white rather than the other way around. The overall effect is that of a doctor displaying x-ray images against a light-box with the bevelled edges of the photographic film echoing their original reference. All 12 images are in negative format and the artist has sought to contextualize them in terms of the personality of the sitter so she included two or three small photograph negatives of significant people and events in Jeannie's life and placed them in the white margins of each panel.

The scale of the work tells its own story as the principal subject-matter remains Jeannie, while the smaller photo's recall landmarks in her life. The dense black filmic images suggest a detached photographic recording of fact which contrasts with the intimate narrative of the earlier pieces. They combine to express the physical evidence of a vibrant life, depicting the person within.

It is fitting that this series is created in black and white as the artistic term for this combination is grisaille or tonal ground, which is also known as 'dead colour'. Most people in their nineties would have had many of the important moments of their lives recorded in monochrome, as chromatic film only became widely available in Ireland in the 1970s. The colour white is also significant in our culture; females wear white for many of their rites of passage such as christening, first communion, debs and marriage, while the colour black was generally reserved for mourning and widowhood. The use of medical equipment is unusual as an artistic tool, but it is not unheard of as in 1966 the artist Brian O'Doherty used an electrocardiogram to create his kinetic portrait of the Surrealist, Marcel Duchamp.

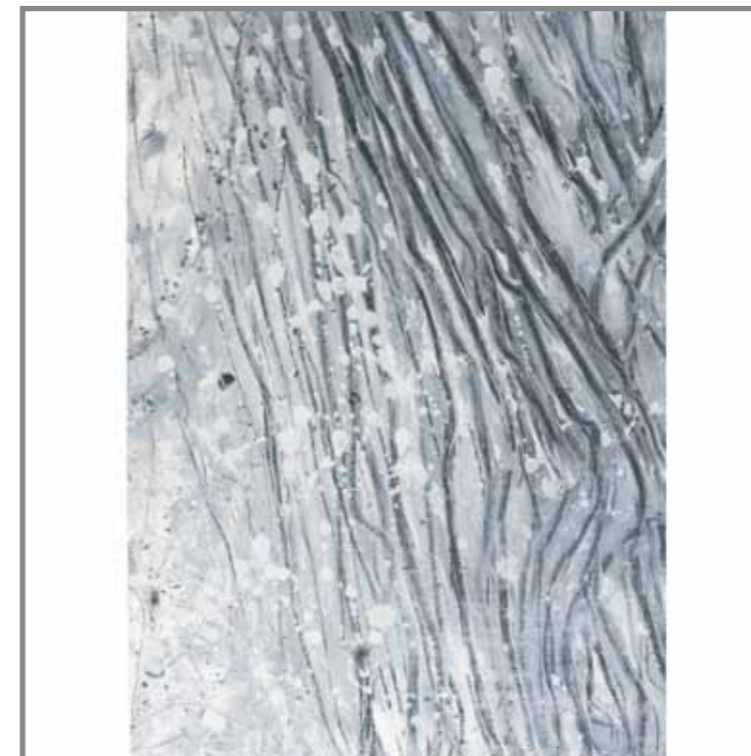
Artists have traditionally made cathartic pieces relating to mourning and loss, for example Francis Bacon painted several sets of triptychs on the subject of his suicidal friend, George Dyer, and yet, this group of paintings departs in a significant way from that genre. The unique aspect of these works is that this series is the product of a collaborative effort between mother and daughter. However, it is important to say that while this powerful collection acts as memento mori, it also signals the continuum of Bernie's artistic relationship with her mother, as she regularly painted Jeannie's portrait.

During the four years that the painter was engaged in the creation of this body of work, she successfully developed a two step approach. The initial collection of oil drawings deals primarily with the surface of the skin and its evolution over the years. The second part of the series melded the structural elements of Jeannie's medical record with the memories evoked by photographic media. The combined effect of the collection forms a narrative that gives visual expression to Jeannie Masterson's inner life, becoming effectively a biography in paint.

Maebh O'Regan, Ph.D. in Visual Culture

*All works on board 35.5 cm squared,
pages 12 - 22 graphite & oil drawings,
pages 23 - 31 oil paintings, & mixed media.*

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Layer I



Threshold



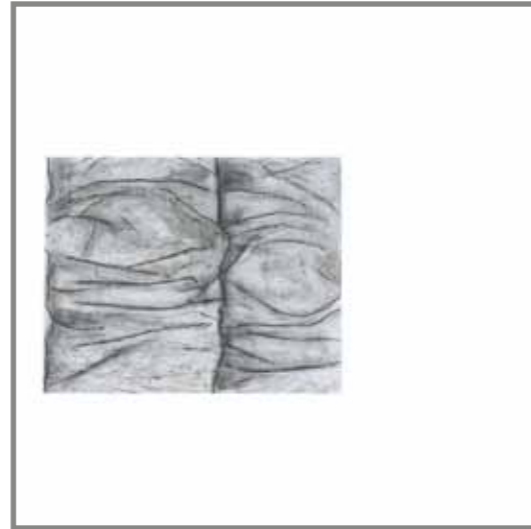
Fissure III



Crevasse



Layer II



Contour



Esker



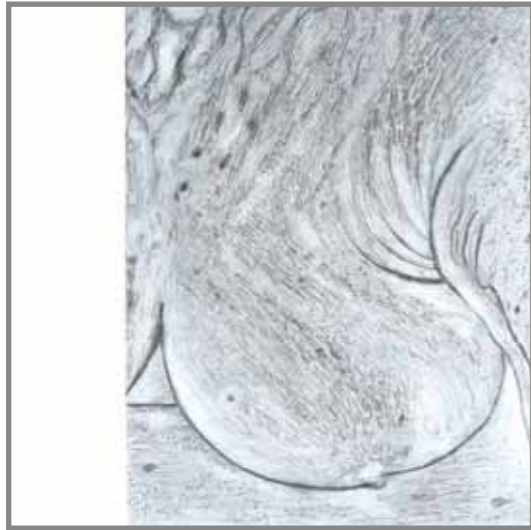
Gossamer



Fissure I



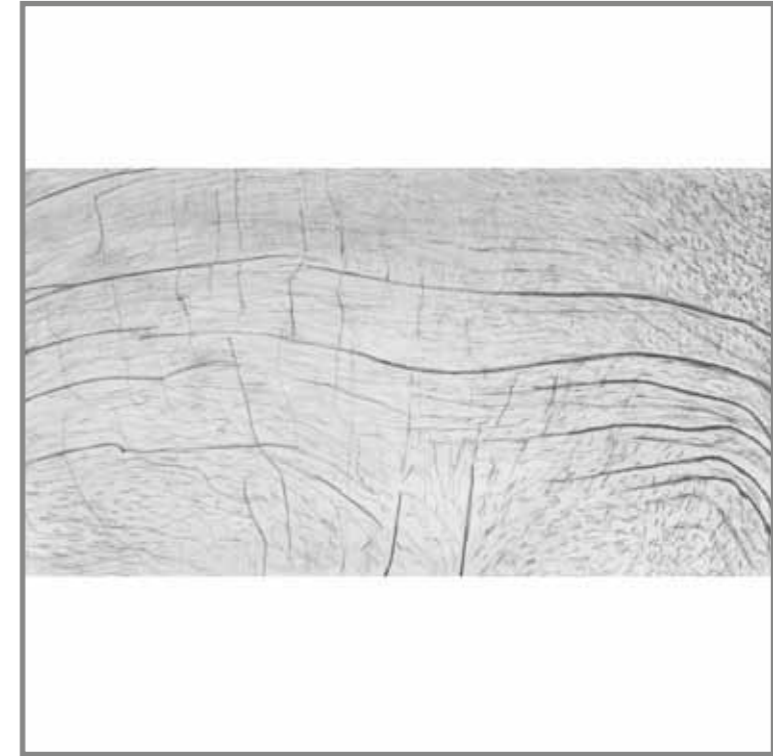
Fissure II



Diffusion I



Diffusion II



Cirque



Membrane



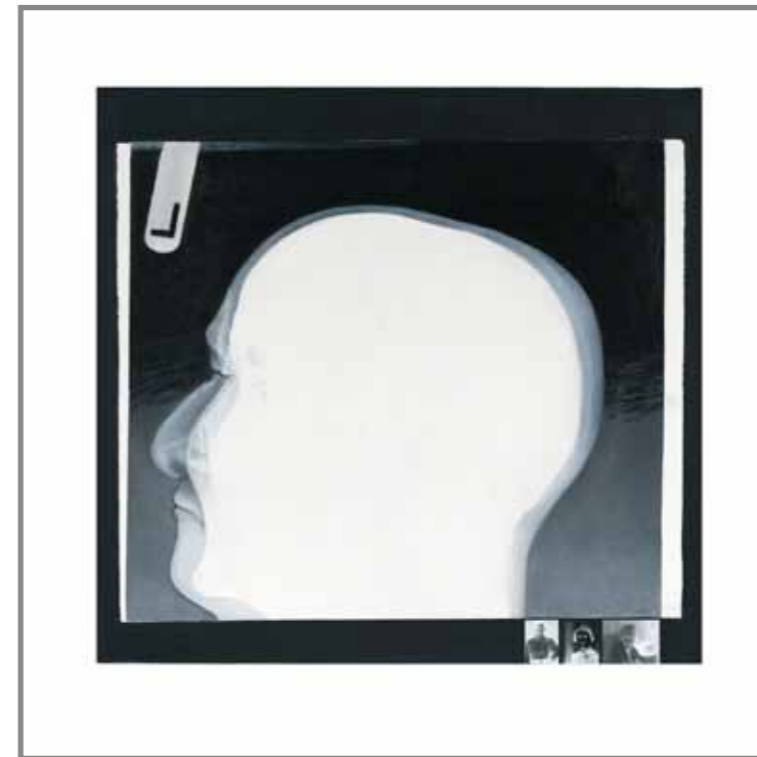
Layer III



Universe



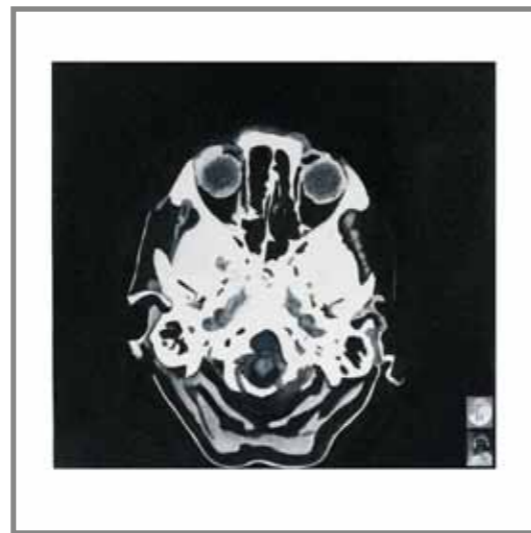
In Parallel VI



Albedo II



Albedo I



Albedo III



In Parallel V



Inversion I



Inversion II



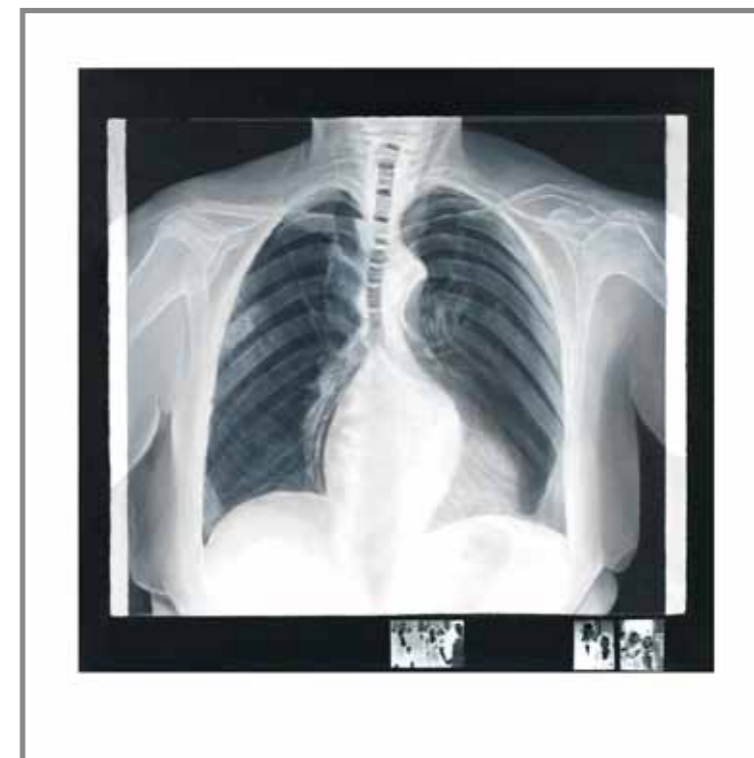
In Parallel II



In Parallel III



In Parallel IV



In Parallel I



Inversion III

Biographical Details and Selected Exhibitions

Bernie Masterson was born in Ballymoney, Co. Antrim in 1958.
She lives and works in Dublin.

Art Education

1981 – 1982 Limerick School of Art and Design, PTA

1975 – 1979 Limerick School of Art and Design

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2009** *Invited Artist, Xmas Exhibition Custom House Gallery Westport.*
Invited Artist, Xmas Group Show Cavehill Gallery, Belfast
Invited Artist, Xmas “1 Ft Square” Visual Arts Exhibition Higher Bridges Gallery, Enniskillen
Selected Artist, Anna Cheyne Visual Art Award 2009 Exhibition, Lisburn Island Arts Centre, N. Ireland
Selected Artist, Westport Arts Festival, Westport Co Mayo, Ireland
Invited Artist “Hunt the Postcard at the Hunt” Museum, Limerick
Selected Artist, Dunamaise Open, Portlaoise, Ireland
126’s “How Do You Know” show, Blankspace, Gallery, Oakland, California, USA
Royal Hibernain Academy Annual Exhibition Dublin
Devenish Gallery Enniskillen Co. Fermanagh Ireland
- 2008** *Selected Artist, Enniskillen Visual Arts*
Royal Hibernian Academy Annual Exhibition Dublin
127th Royal Ulster Academy Annual Exhibition, Titanic Quarter, Belfast, Northern Ireland
Selected Artist, Enniskillen Visual Arts Open

- 2007** *Fenton Gallery, Christmas Exhibition, Cork
Hallward Christmas Show, Merrion Square Dublin
Hallward Summer Show, Merrion Square Dublin*
- 2006** *“Hunt the Postcard”, Hunt Museum, Limerick
Invited Artist, Hallward Summer Show
Utopia Fair, Eigse Carlow Arts Festival
“Vivid Visions” selected artists from the Fingal County Council
Collection*
- 2005** *Invited Artist, Cavehill Gallery, Belfast
“The Collection” 10 Ormond Quay Dublin, Mill Cove Gallery
Iontas National Small Works Exhibition, Ireland
“Visuals”, the British Embassy Merrion Road Dublin
Eigse Carlow Arts Festival - Invited Artist
Mill Cove Gallery Season Opening Castletownbere Co Cork
Invited Artist, “Dialogues with Form”, Canvanacor Gallery
Lifford, Co Donegal*
- 2004** *Invited Artist Cavehill Gallery Belfast
Hallward and Mill Cove Galleries Joint Exhibition
The 123rd Royal Ulster Academy Annual Exhibition Ulster Museum
Belfast
The 174th RHA Annual Exhibition Dublin
Boyle Arts Festival Co. Roscommon
The Summer Show the Hallward Gallery Dublin
“Currents” Art of the State Touring Exhibition Ireland*
- 2003** *Wexford Opera Festival
The Moulin Gallery Denmark Street, Limerick*

- 2003 (cont.)** *The 173rd RHA Annual Exhibition Dublin
Iontas, National Small Works Exhibition, Sligo
Invited Artist Radharc Draíocht Dublin
Four Painters, Invited Artist, Gallery One, Kilkenny
Eigse Carlow Arts Festival, Carlow
The Fenton Gallery Cork
Hallward Christmas Exhibition, Dublin
Christmas Exhibition the Dyehouse Gallery, Waterford
The Moulin Gallery Denmark Street, Limerick
The 173rd RHA Annual Exhibition Dublin
Iontas, National Small Works Exhibition, Sligo
Invited Artist Radharc Draíocht Dublin
Four Painters, Invited Artist, Gallery One, Kilkenny
Eigse Carlow Arts Festival, Carlow
The Fenton Gallery Cork
Hallward Christmas Exhibition, Dublin
Christmas Exhibition the Dyehouse Gallery, Waterford*
- 2002** *Christmas Exhibition Riverview Gallery Enniskillen
Invited Artists Christmas Exhibition Hallward Gallery Dublin*
- 2001** *Christmas Exhibition, Hallward Gallery Dublin -
Summer Show Hallward Gallery Dublin*
- 2000** *Hallward Christmas Exhibition Dublin
Eigse Carlow Arts Festival Carlow
The Winter Show Dyehouse Gallery Waterford
(Invited Artist) Microsoft September Exhibition
Aer Rianta Gateway to Art, Dublin Airport
Hallward Gallery Summer Exhibition Dublin*

- 1999** *Aer Rianta Gateway to Art Dublin Airport
Hallward Gallery Summer Exhibition Dublin*
- 1998** *Set Pieces the Hallward Gallery Dublin
The Oireachtais Art Exhibition,(Invited Artist)
The Hunt Museum Limerick
Omagh Art Auction National Concert Hall Dublin
Microsoft Exhibition Dublin
Iontas National Small Works Ireland
Boyle Arts Festival, Boyle Co. Roscommon
The Blackcombe Gallery Cork*
- 1997** *Green Thoughts the Hallward Gallery Dublin
Aer Rianta Gateway to Art Dublin Airport
Invited Artists the Hallward Gallery Summer Exhibition Dublin*
- 1996** *The Oireachtais Art Exhibition
The Dillon Gallery Barnes London England
SIPTU Inaugural Exhibition Ireland
Aer Rianta Gateway to Art Dublin Airport -Iontas National Small Works Ireland*
- 1995** *Old Library Gallery, Cardiff Wales
The Portobello Open Exhibition Tabernacle Gallery London
England - Women's Art Festival
The 165th Royal Hibernian Academy Annual Exhibition Dublin
Monaghan Open Exhibition, Co. Mayo
The Second International Female Artist's Art Biennial Stockholm
Sweden
Iontas National Small Works Exhibition, Ireland
International Watercolour Exhibition Treg'Aquarelle Tregastel
France*

- 1995 (cont.)** *International Crossroads Symposium, Roscommon
Fe-mail Art Expo, Old Library Gallery Cardiff Wales
Boyle Arts Festival Boyle, Co. Roscommon
Art '95, New York International Art Exhibition New York, USA
Aer Rianta Gateway to Art, Dublin Airport*
- 1994** *United Arts Club, Ireland
International Watercolour Exhibition Treg'Aquarelle Tregastel,
France
High Season Hallward Gallery Dublin
Ireland Cork Arts Festival- Ireland
Claremorris Open Exhibition
Boyle Arts Festival Co Roscommon
Ashling Exhibition- Patheon Gallery Dublin*
- 1993** *Monaghan Open Exhibition, Ireland
Hallward Gallery Dublin*
- 1992** *Riverrun Gallery, Dublin*
- Solo Exhibitions**
- 2010** *Drawing on the Body*
- 2005** *Landscape & Memory, Clothworthy Museum, Co.Antrim*
- 2004** *Landscape & Memory, Draíocht, Dublin*

- 2003** *An Engagement with Nature 1, Hallward Gallery, Dublin*
- 2002** *An Odyssey, Kerry/Queensland Works, The Hunt Museum Gallery, Limerick*
- 2001** *Dun Aimhirgin Gallery, Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands – Two Painters, Rachel Kierans & Bernie Masterson – Dublin*
- 1997** *A River of Images, The Dyehouse Gallery, Waterford*
- 1997** *A River of Images, The Dolmen Gallery, Limerick*
- 1996** *New Paintings, The Hallward Gallery, Dublin*
- 1994** *Moods of a Landscape, The Dolmen Gallery, Limerick*

Awards and Residencies

- 2009** *Awarded Custom House Studio Residency, Co Westport*
- 2008** *Awarded a residency by the Heinrich Boll Association*
- 2007** *Artist in Prison Scheme, HOPE, Farranferris College, Cork*
- 2006** *The Cill Rialaig Project, Ballinskelligs, Co Kerry*
- 2002** *Nominated by the Hunt Museum for the AIB Award*

- 2001** *The Cill Rialaig Project, Ballinskelligs, Co Kerry*
- 2000** *The Tryone Guthrie Center, Annaghmakerrig*
- 1997** *Arts Council of Ireland Artflight Award*
- 1996** *The Tryone Guthrie Center, Annaghmakerrig*
- 1996** *The Oireachtais, Douglas Hyde Gold Medal Award for Painting*
- 1995** *The Cill Rialaig Project, Ballinskelligs, Co Kerry*

Bibliography

- 2009** *“New forms, solid values” by Aidan Dunne, The Irish Times, Saturday May 30th, Arts Review*
- 2008** *Not in Alphabetical Order Fingal Public Art Collection Volume One*
- 2005** *Circa on-line review by Brian Lynch*
- 2005** *“Landscape and Memory” by Sara Keating, In Dublin, Issue 38*
- 2005** *Review by Brian Lynch, editor of Tony O Malley, Cira on-line, January the 28th*
- 2004** *‘Landscape & Memory’ catalogue essay by*

Marianne O Kane
Art of the State Catalogue

- 2003** *'Object lessons', by Aidan Dunne, The Irish Times, September 10th, Arts Review*
- 2003** *'Magnetic quality of images', by John Fitzgerald. The Kilkenny People, July 11th*
- 2003** *'Celebrating the beauty of Irish landscape', The Echo, February 2nd*
- 1996** *'The missing heart in group art, Taispeantas Ealaine an Oireachtais, Guinness Hop Store', by Brian Fallon. The Irish Times, September 19th, Arts Review*
- 1996** *Art exhibition winners named, The Irish Times Section: September 12th*
- 1996** *Art of the State Catalogue*
- 1996** *Aer Rianta Exhibition, Arts Show Radio Programme*
- 1995** *International Crossroads Symposium interview with Mike Murphy, (RTÉ Radio 1) August*
- 1995** *'Gateway to Art', by Brian Fallon. The Irish Times, February 15th. Arts Review*
- 1994** *'Right mix of many styles', Brian Fallon visits two major group exhibitions. The Irish Times, August 3rd, Section; Arts, Pg 12*

Corporate Collections

Smith, Kline and Beecham
New Market Partnership
Office of Public Works / Government Buildings
Fitzgerald Insurance
Dept of Telecommunication & Regulation
Tyrone Productions
Limerick County Council
Norkom Technology
Microsoft Ireland
Harcourt Development
Brian Hogan Architects
Stewarts Hospital, Palmerstown, Dublin
Department of Finance and Personnel, N. Ireland Civil Service
Fingal Council County
No 10, Ormond Quay, Dublin
Axa Insurance
Allied Irish Bank
Garda Headquarters

Private collections in Ireland and Abroad

Associated member of the New Art Studio, Mary Street, Dublin
Educational Service to Prisons
Member of the Visual Artist Ireland