

John Noel Smith

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Moving Lines

Hillsboro Fine Art
20th Century & Contemporary Art



Scent and Touch, oil on canvas, 1992, 200 x 180 cm

The great mystery of things

In the paintings of John Noel Smith, the eye follows the line, until the eye is distracted. The line both offers structure to the painting and is a sort of scaffolding that can be dismantled, as other things, such as texture and tone, depth and colour, take over. But the dismantling is itself often illusory as the system of lines he has made becomes oddly essential in the process of looking. The paintings are like buildings where signs of the construction remain as an integral part of the building's very presence, as an essential part of the effect it has, how it pulls the energy in towards itself.

The dynamic spirit of these paintings arises from the conflict between an architectural solidity and a more tentative set of traces and clues and signs; the work is nourished by the conflict between the hardness of a decision about a plane of colour and the softness of something much more mysterious and unspoken within the inner reaches of the painting.

John Noel Smith also plays with the idea of symmetry that offers comfort and certainty to the eye, and then makes a break in the symmetry. But even more important, he creates a sense of the symmetry as

pure surface mark, almost like punctuation in prose, or as distraction, while the real work goes on in the way the paint is textured, and its tonal variety, and the sense of depth and inner space that he handles with grades of subtlety and guile.

There are times when the eye moves between the lines, towards a space that has been confined or enclosed. This space seems, on first looking, to be mere surface space, mere background, while the snaking or straight lines offer the real foreground. But then, as the eye moves, this inner space can slowly become the real weather of the painting. The intense inner life of the work seems to come from there.

In this way, the canvases seem oddly haunted by the smaller marks, by the sense of erasure, by the idea that much was withheld, then added, then withheld again until that very process became thematic, memorable.

The images Smith makes are filled with what is tentative and must have been, at one time, uncertain, but have now been rendered into certainty. He knows when to leave a painting alone, and is also

alert to the need at times for a decision that is unriskey, solid. He often needs to make a section of the painting that is utterly sure of itself. Sometimes, when he does this, his choice of colour is beautiful, inspired, rich with the sheer pleasure of putting the paint there. The textured ease he can create with such facility has a comforting grace.

In his work, these heard melodies are sweet, but his unheard ones are sweeter. Smith is interested in exploration, at times excavation, as much as he is interested in giving the surface of a painting a sharp sense of what he already knows. He works then with what is peeling away and crumbling and unfinished and unstructured. He works with an inner pattern beneath the dominant pattern or outside its sway. It is like a sound that echoes, sounds again, becomes faint and then can be clearly, magisterially heard.

In visual terms, this is not the cloud of unknowing being cleared away as much as it is a space that is marked and spotted and dotted with fresh knowledge. While Smith, in his paintings, does not cease from exploration, his aim is not only to allow the very process of exploring to become apparent,

but to suggest that in finishing the work some endpoint has been reached. In this way, the gestures he makes as a painter are not all emotional and painterly and open-ended, they are also considered, structured. The paintings are destinations as well as journeys.

Smith is unusual as a painter in that, since he thinks with the swirl and immediacy and sensuousness of paint, he can actually afford to think. He can leave himself free to think if he needs to. The sense of the cerebral in his work is often tempered, however, by pure feeling, by instinct, but that in turn is tempered by mindfulness and restraint. In these paintings, the mind is at work as well as the eye and the hand. As Elizabeth Bishop has it in her poem 'At the Fishhouses', since Smith's knowledge is historical, then what he does is flowing, and flown.

The paintings deal with paint and pattern, but they are also deeply nourished by the world itself, by shapes in nature, by knots, by the shapes that appear when the structure of the world is closely, or microscopically, examined, by waves and particles. But the canvases are also nourished by the idea of connection and

disruption, by the clash or the intersection between the straight line and the line that curls, by colour that is easily named and shades within shades that are much harder to be sure about, that hit the nervous system uneasily.

Some of the marks also suggest human marks, such as the swirls and elaborate designs in early Irish illuminated manuscripts, such as early writing, such as patterns in stonework, such as signs that have been left in the landscape by culture as much as by nature. They also embody or dramatize human struggles or the conflict between tension and ease, between what is coiled and highly charged and what has been assented to.

Their impact, then, requires considerable engagement. On looking at a painting by John Noel Smith we have to connect with his pure trust in the medium of paint, in what it can do. And we have to be ready to be unsettled and unsure as clarity is played against complexity, as surface is played against depth, as line is played against trace and texture, as the thinking painter has to confront and give power to the great mystery of things, as his bravery as a painter confronts a deep, inner humility.

Colm Toibín



Rib Cage, oil on canvas, 1993, 220 x 320 cm



String Ogham, oil on canvas, 2015, 240 x 220 cm



Backward glances, forward motion

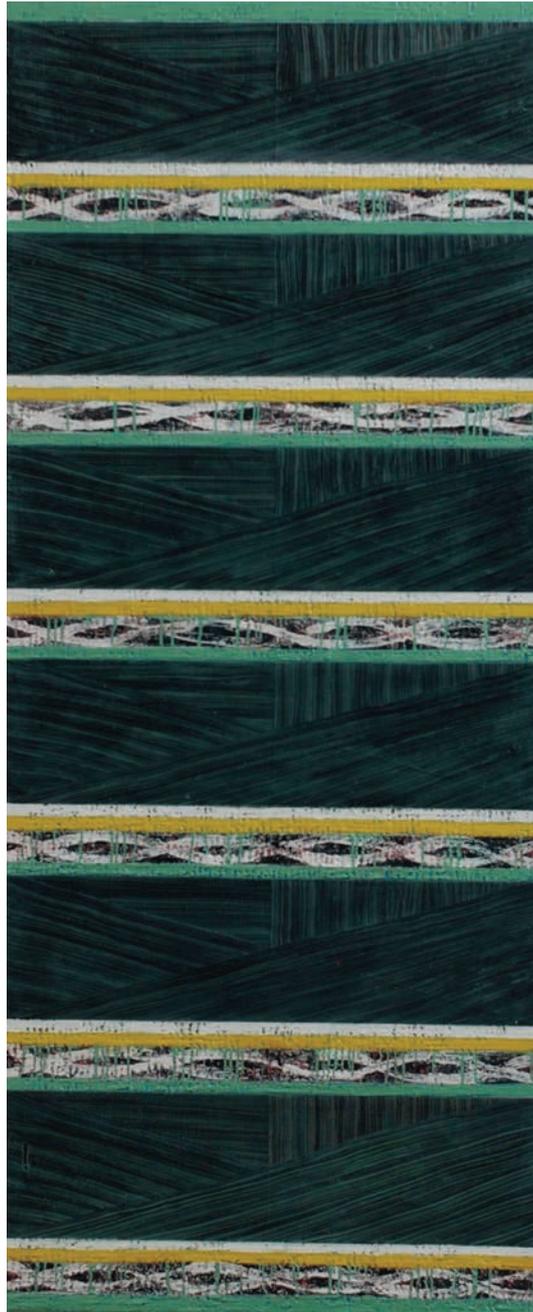
John Noel Smith's new body of work traces fresh paths across a familiar landscape. He has, in the past, described his work as "revealing rather than recording"¹ the world and, indeed, in these new paintings the artist reveals additional layers to his own work.

As with previous series, perhaps most especially his *Fold* works (2012), Smith's characteristic physical layering of paint can also be considered as metaphor for the advance each successive series embodies. It is thrilling to see, in his newest works, lingering after images of previous material, echoes or faint glimpses of the artist's distinctive vocabulary which have been revisited, reshaped, and then absorbed into the integrity of what is assuredly a reenergised series.

The boldness of Smith's repurposed *String Ogham* (2015) motif, for instance, remains a restless rather than static component in the new work, a boldness only broken by organic and unpredictable forms that snake and coil across the larger and mid-sized canvases. While the introduction of this sinuous element bears a passing relationship with Smith's *Knots* series (1997-99) – in which the eponymous

delicate forms were largely contained within blocked or chequered fields of colour – the gesture here is less restrained. Muscular, uncontained, and vigorous, these new forms appear to writhe against Smith's impasto bands of colour and texture, at once in opposition to and in harmony with the larger whole. Moreover, the mesmeric loosening and tightening of these energetic linear motifs act as a visual embodiment of the artist's own practice.

Those familiar with his earlier body of work will also note the mix of techniques Smith has perfected and simplified over time and which are strongly in evidence in these new works. The strong vertical of *Moving Lines* (180 x 75cm), for instance, contains echoes of his *Block Icons* (1977-79) and *United Field Paintings* (2001-07) in its use of his characteristic techniques. This aspect, however, has gained a new lightness, not only in its more fluid, transparent handling – which itself offers a contrast to the brighter, harder registers of line and helix motif – but also in its activation through light.



Moving Lines, oil on canvas, 2017, 180 x 75 cm

Smith's consistent modulation of form, colour, and texture offers the viewer of his work a visual immediacy which is particularly apparent in these latest works. Reflecting on his *Fold* paintings, the artist notes the "sculptural aspect"² to the interplay of colour and light and the manner in which this engages the viewer. This is also true of the current series, most dramatically in *Moving Lines*, where what could have potentially been monolithic is activated through rhythmic registers of linear colour, helical motifs, and subtle layered geometry.

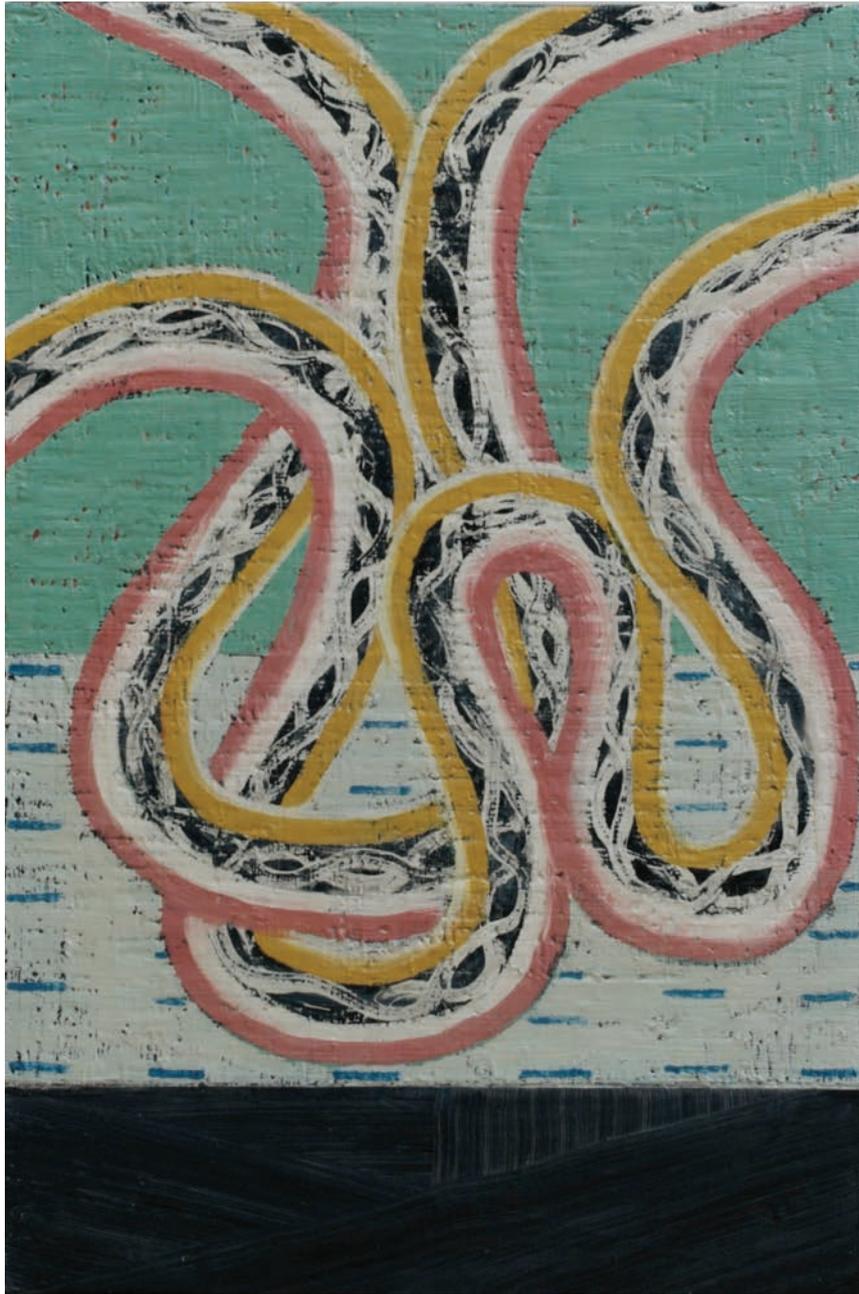
Just perceptible across these new paintings too is a doubling of traditional and contemporary aesthetic language, the helical and Ogham motifs suggesting or recalling forms of medieval interlace and alphabet as well as the patterns of genetic structures and sequences.

What Smith achieves with these works is a degree of unity that is to be commended and a level of self-awareness that is referential without being reverential. The larger pieces, in particular, advance his aesthetic into new territory which is at once confident and bold yet sensitive and unpredictable. There is sufficient familiarity here for these new works to exist in the company of their predecessors while their unexpectedness allows them to stand on their own terms. Though conscious of their own heritage, this new body of work is therefore not retrospective in any redundant way but is instead a remobilisation of a deeply personal idiom decisively breaking new ground.

Michael Waldron

¹ "Palimpsest – John Noel Smith" (2012), video

² Ibid.



Moving Lines, oil on canvas, 2017, 90 x 60 cm



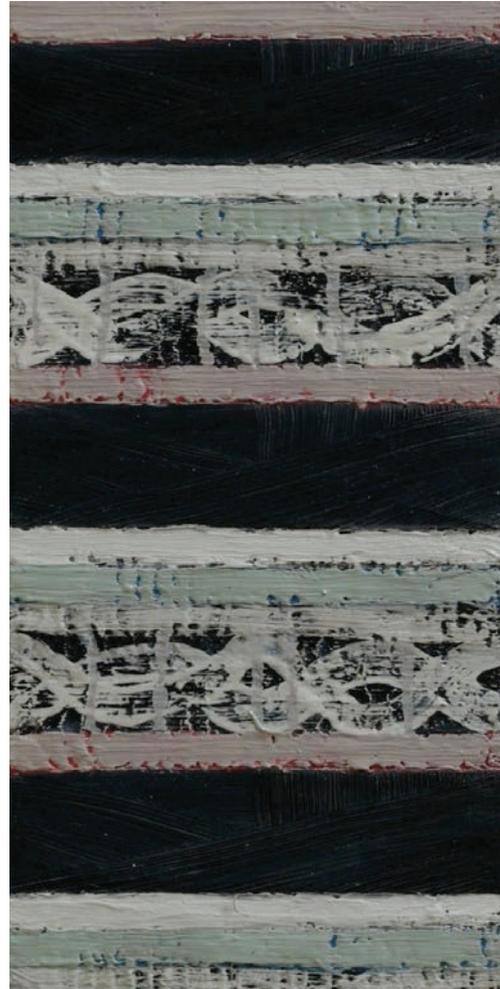
Strings, oil on canvas, 2015, 40 x 20 cm



Strings, oil on canvas, 2016, 40 x 20 cm



Strings, oil on canvas, 2016, 40 x 20 cm



Strings, oil on canvas, 2016, 40 x 20 cm



Ogham, oil on canvas, 1994, 30 x 40 cm



Ogham, oil on canvas, 1994, 30 x 40 cm



Snow Ogham, oil on canvas, 1999, 37 x 40 cm



Omphalos, oil on canvas, diptych, 1993, 180 x 320 cm





Pollen, oil on canvas, diptych, 1995, 290 x 180 cm



Knots UFP, oil on canvas, 2001, 180 x 90 cm



Black Painting - Red Lacerations, oil on board, 1994, 94 x 120 cm



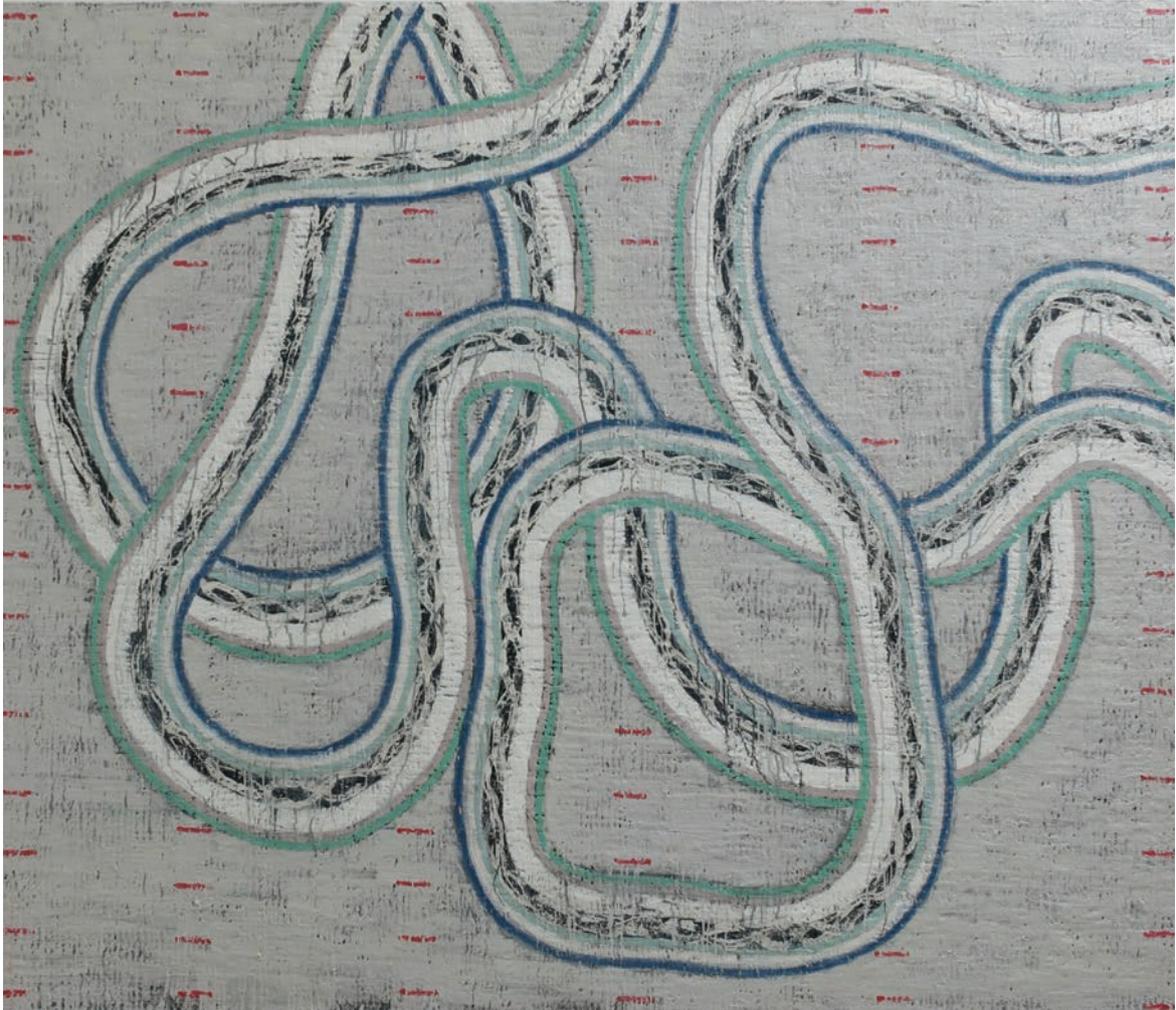
Black Strings, oil on canvas, 2014, 120 x 140 cm



Liliform UFP, oil on canvas, diptych, 2008, 110 x 120 cm



String Ogham, oil on canvas, 2013, 105 x 90 cm



Moving Lines I, oil on canvas, 2017, 200 x 240 cm

Looking at *Moving Lines I* An allegory of time

Bundled lines of colour wind their way across and beyond the canvas. Their intentional task is, on the one hand, to outline the contours of form and likewise to dissolve a previously generated configuration. These moving lines consequentially render form temporary and fluid.

In between the loops and bends lingers an all-over systematic cover of tactile, red horizontal strokes, which bestow the image with a grid-like structure. This lends stability to the motif and when seen in this function, the red strokes compare to a scaffolding or the strings of a loom, both providing a secure place for an anticipated action.

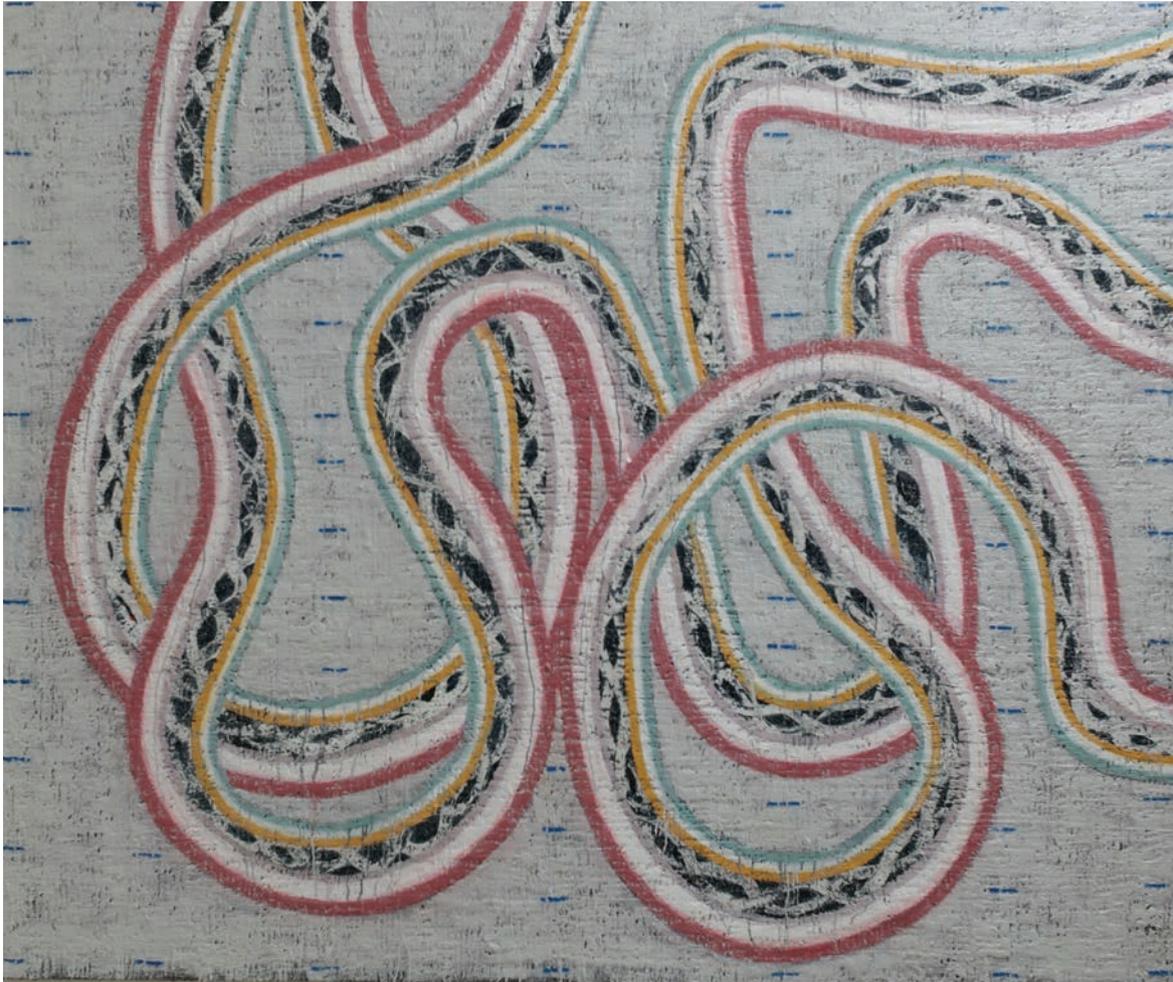
It is surprising, that all the compositional elements of the painting extend over the physical border of the canvas. While, in this way, the edges of the canvas are reinforced by default, the animated motif in contrast seduces the viewer to participate in the action; one feels the urge to mentally draw imaginative loops and twists. Movements which eventually will rejoin with the given template.

The spontaneity with which these muscular arabesques conjure up a visual statement is paramount. It invites us back to the spiritual place of their creation, into the studio, where fundamental questions about the temporality or impermanence of human existence operate. *Moving Lines* allows one to ponder about time, in the epic and metaphysical sense as well as in the pattern of actual personal engagement. The formal physical dimension, expressed by the raw energy the visible forms convey with their more or less round circles and scrolls, and through the applied colour scheme, reasserts the authority of the painter. A visible acceleration of the motif as well as a slowing down can be experienced in the way the lines perform, they are either tense and bulging or nearly lingering square. This magnifies the moment of painting, the drawing of lines and the applying of colour, and subsequently puts the painter, the one who commands the tools of the trade, in charge. He controls the speed with which we are confronted with ethical questions of the temporal to the infinite, of order and freedom, of boundaries constructed with porous openings, which invite the viewer to engage in this conversation.

This cultural openness, embracing myriad levels of interpretation dependant on each individual spectator and his or her experience, expectation and mood, is reined in by the coherent harmony the visual image exhibits. Independently acquired viewing habits or aesthetic preconceptions condense into a new direction of cognition when considering the given visual stimulants on their own terms, the clues left on the canvas by line and colour and texture.

When approaching non-objective art in such a narrative way, the complexities of the medium become apparent. The possibility to express multiple meanings with well established devices, namely pigment on a two-dimensional surface, picks up an important thread in Western cultural history. Classical references to time, like symbolic timepieces or decaying vegetables, are here replaced by a motif simulating rhythmical breath or the wriggling movements of DNA presented in captivating colour. An almost instinctive engagement is paired with a sophisticated understanding about the basic questions and their artistic treatment. The potential of these works reminds us of idiosyncratic and enigmatic works of the so-called poetic category in the Renaissance, the sensuous works of Giorgione or the romantic pastorals of Titian.

Monika Smith



Moving Lines II, oil on canvas, 2017, 200 x 240 cm

German Requiem I, oil on canvas, 2014/15, 230 x 290 cm



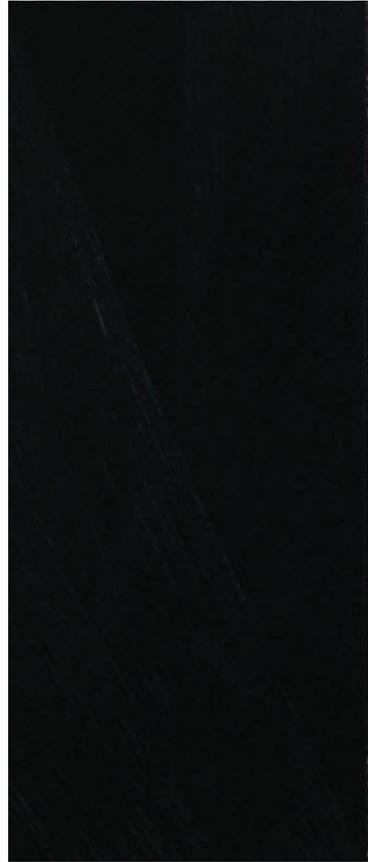
German Requiem II, oil on canvas, 2015, 230 x 290 cm



Strings, oil on canvas, 2013, 180 x 210 cm



Strings, oil on canvas, 2014, 210 x 180 cm



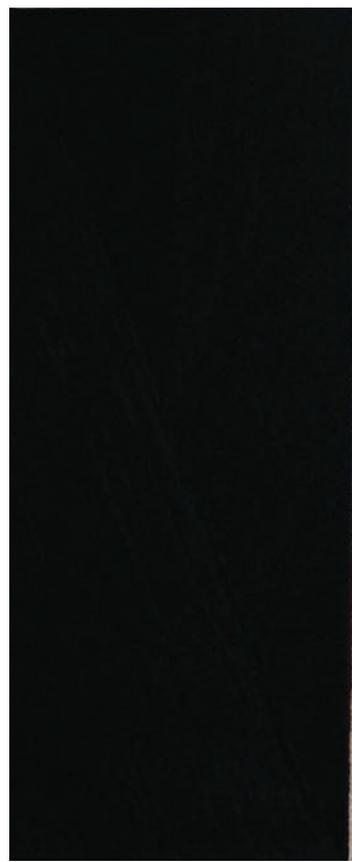
The Fold Linear, oil on canvas, triptych, 2012, 120 x 240 cm





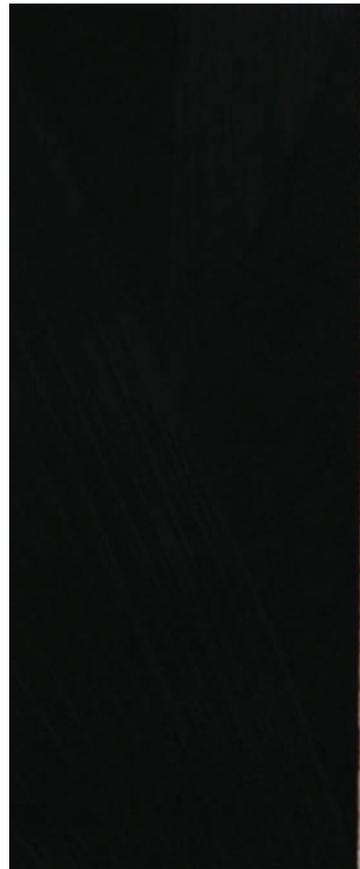
The Fold Cluster, oil on canvas, triptych, 2010, 180 x 360 cm





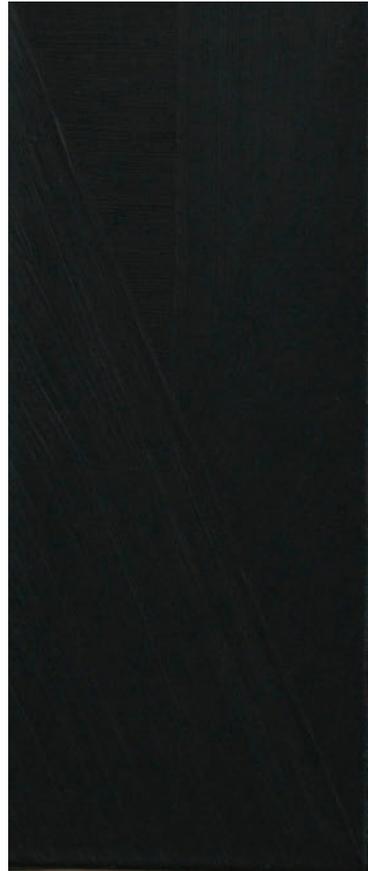
The Fold Linear, oil on canvas, triptych, 2011, 120 x 240 cm





Pandect II, oil on canvas, triptych, 2009, 120 x 240 cm





The Fold Triangular, oil on canvas, triptych, 2011, 60 x 120 cm





UFP, oil on canvas, diptych, 2008, 50 x 30 cm



Red Lacerations, oil on canvas, 1994, 40 x 30 cm



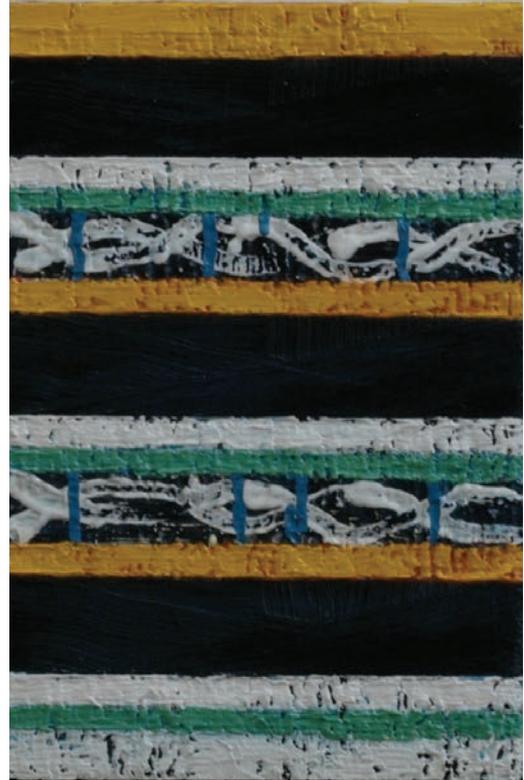
Moving Lines, oil on canvas, 2017, 30 x 20 cm



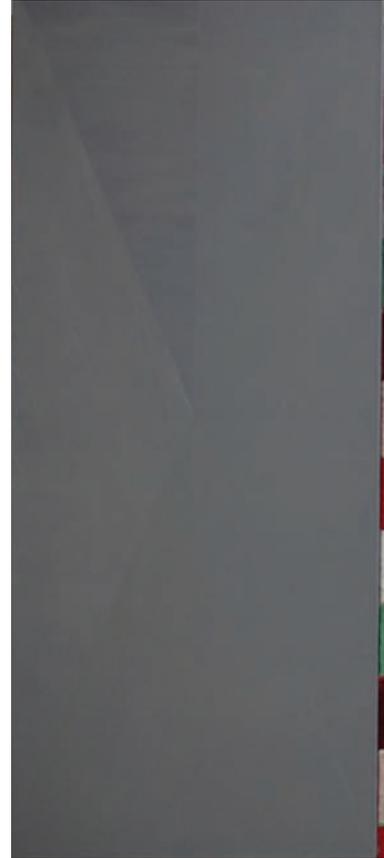
Moving Lines, oil on canvas, 2017, 30 x 20 cm



Moving Lines, oil on canvas, 2017, 30 x 20 cm



Moving Lines, oil on canvas, 2017, 30 x 20 cm

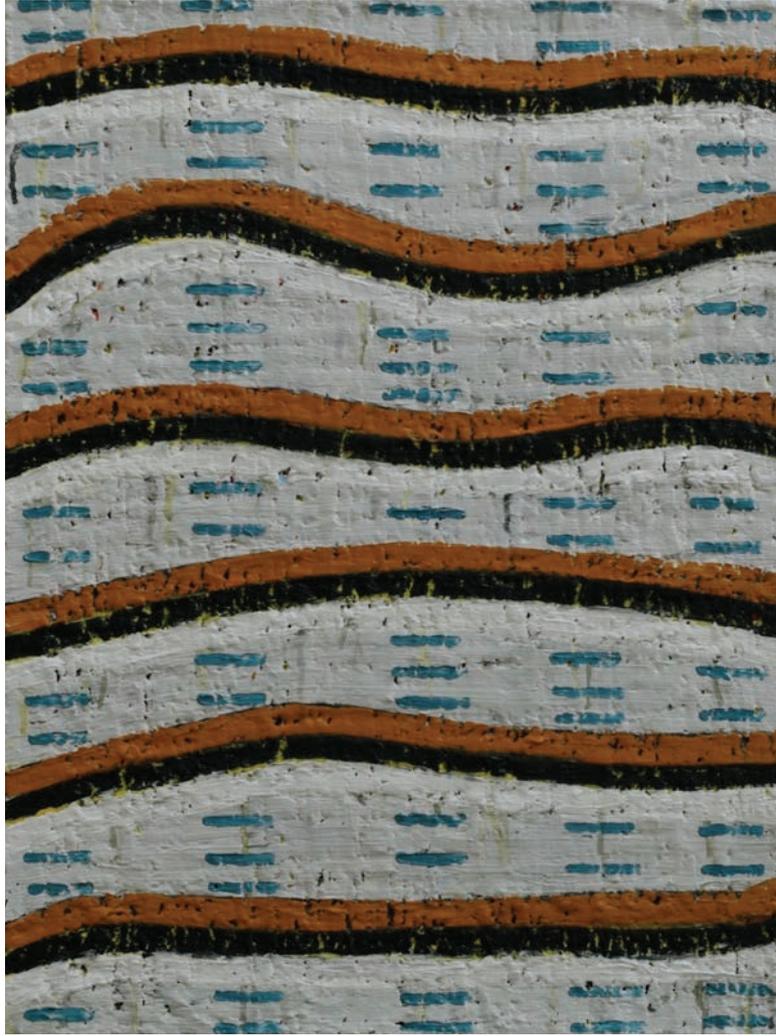


The Fold Triangular, oil on canvas, triptych, 2011, 180 x 360 cm

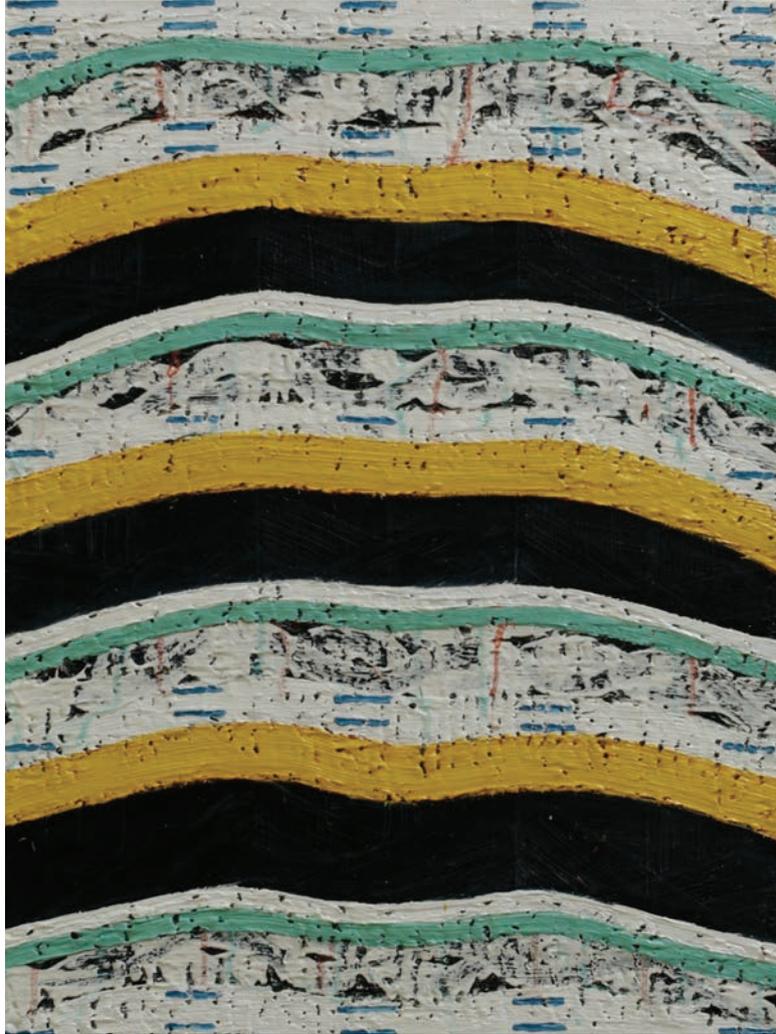


Palimpsest, oil on canvas, 1995, 240 x 300 cm

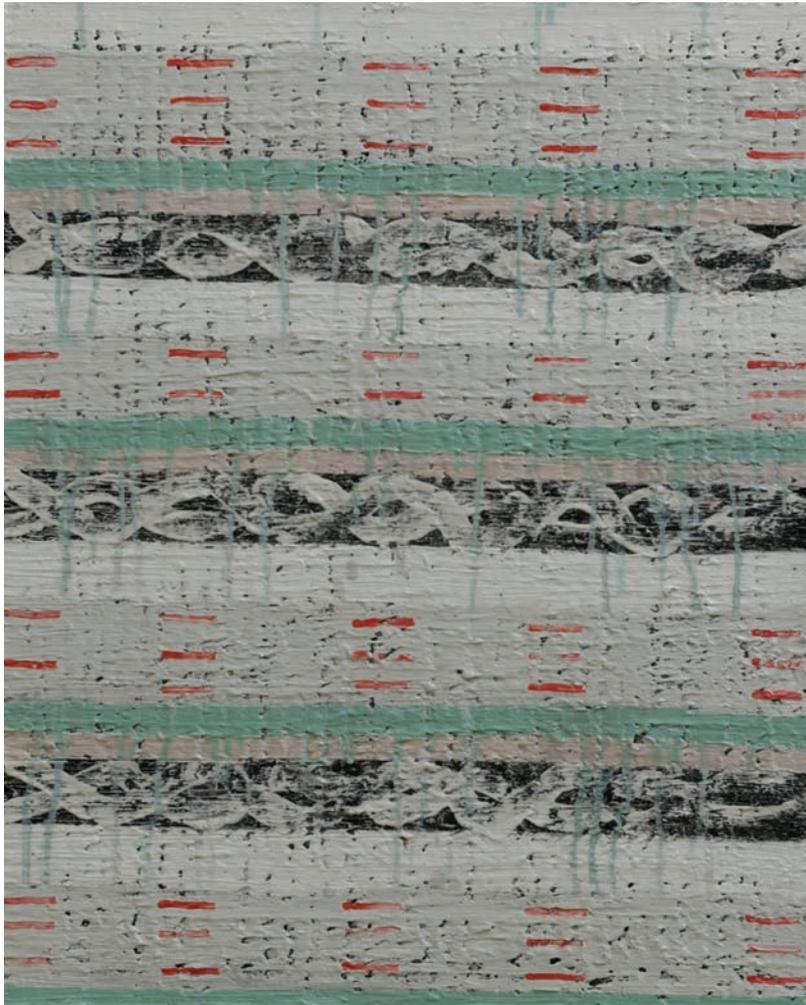




String Ogham, oil on canvas, 2013, 80 x 60 cm



String Ogham, oil on canvas, 2016, 80 x 60 cm

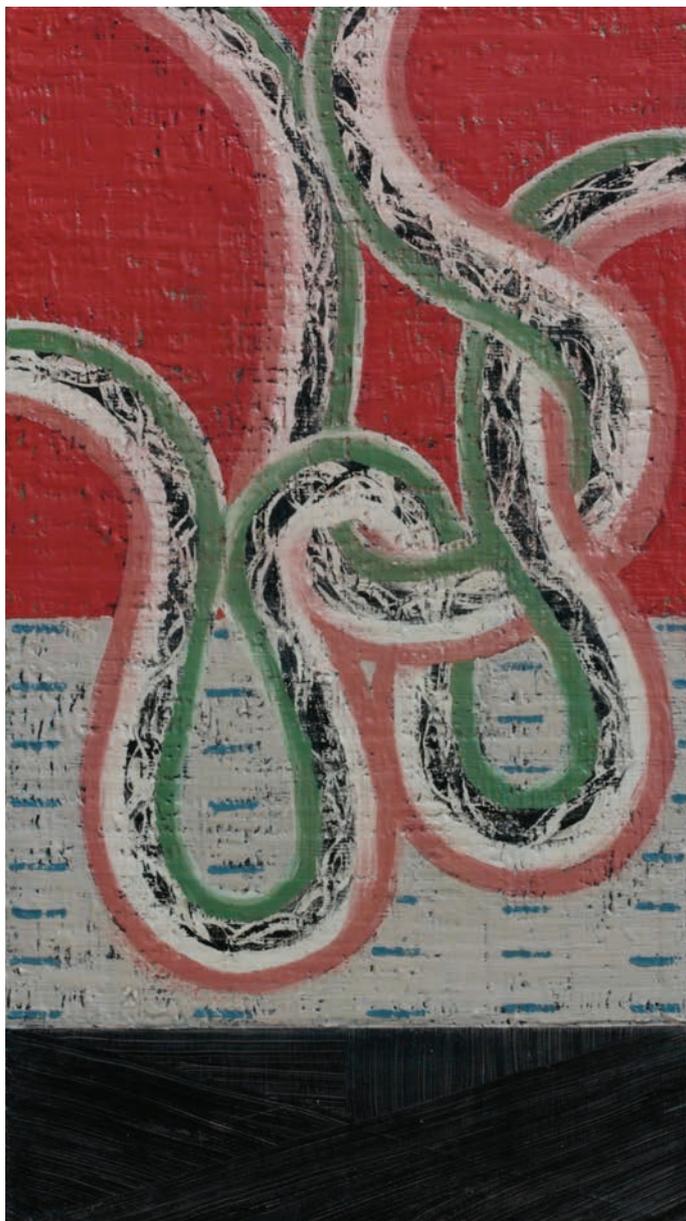


String Ogham, oil on canvas, 2014, 75 x 60 cm

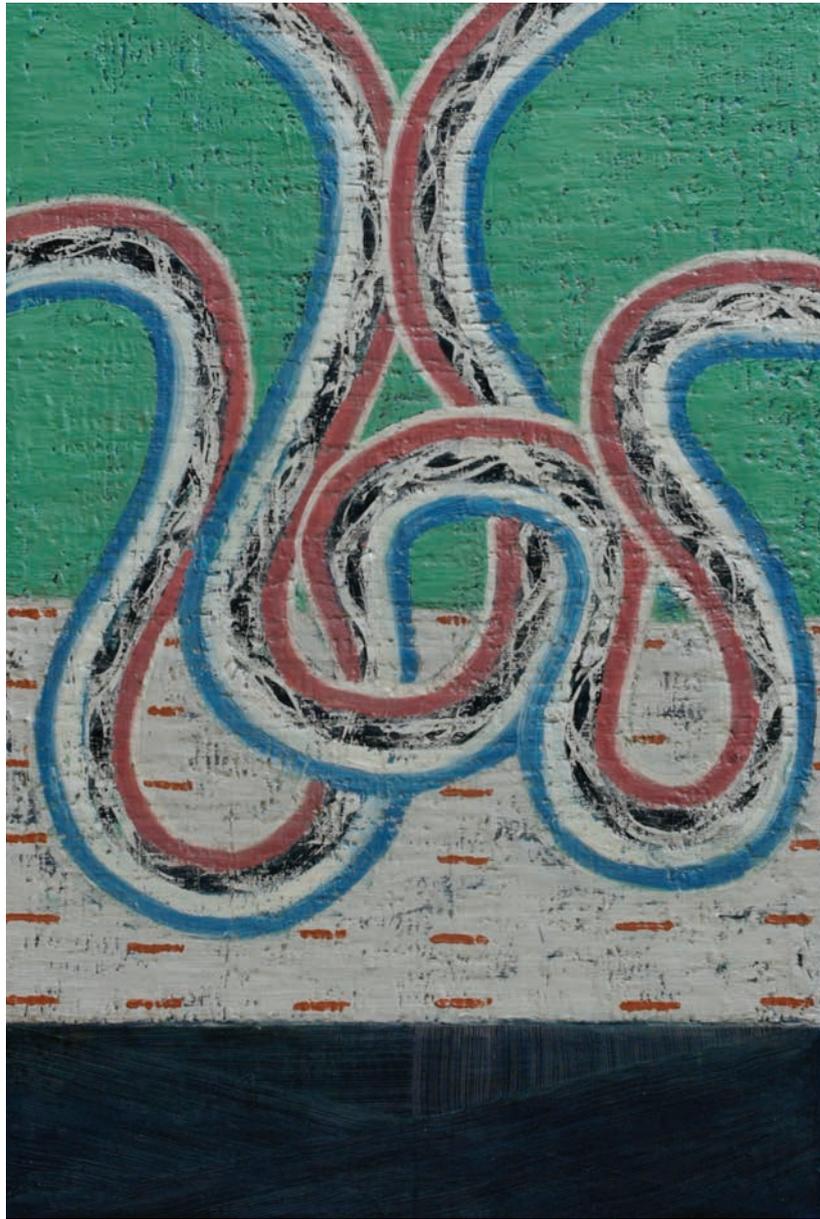


Moving Lines, oil on canvas, 2017, 90 x 60 cm

Moving Lines, oil on canvas, 2017, 90 x 50 cm

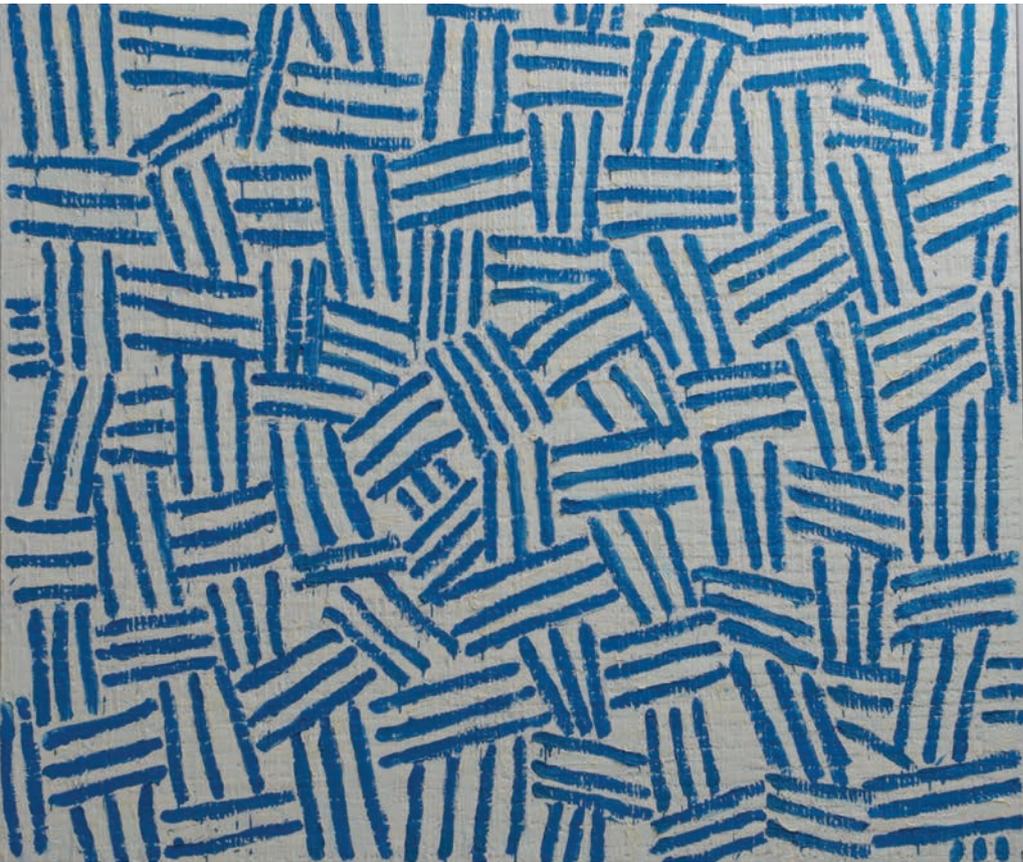


Moving Lines, oil on canvas, 2017, 90 x 60 cm

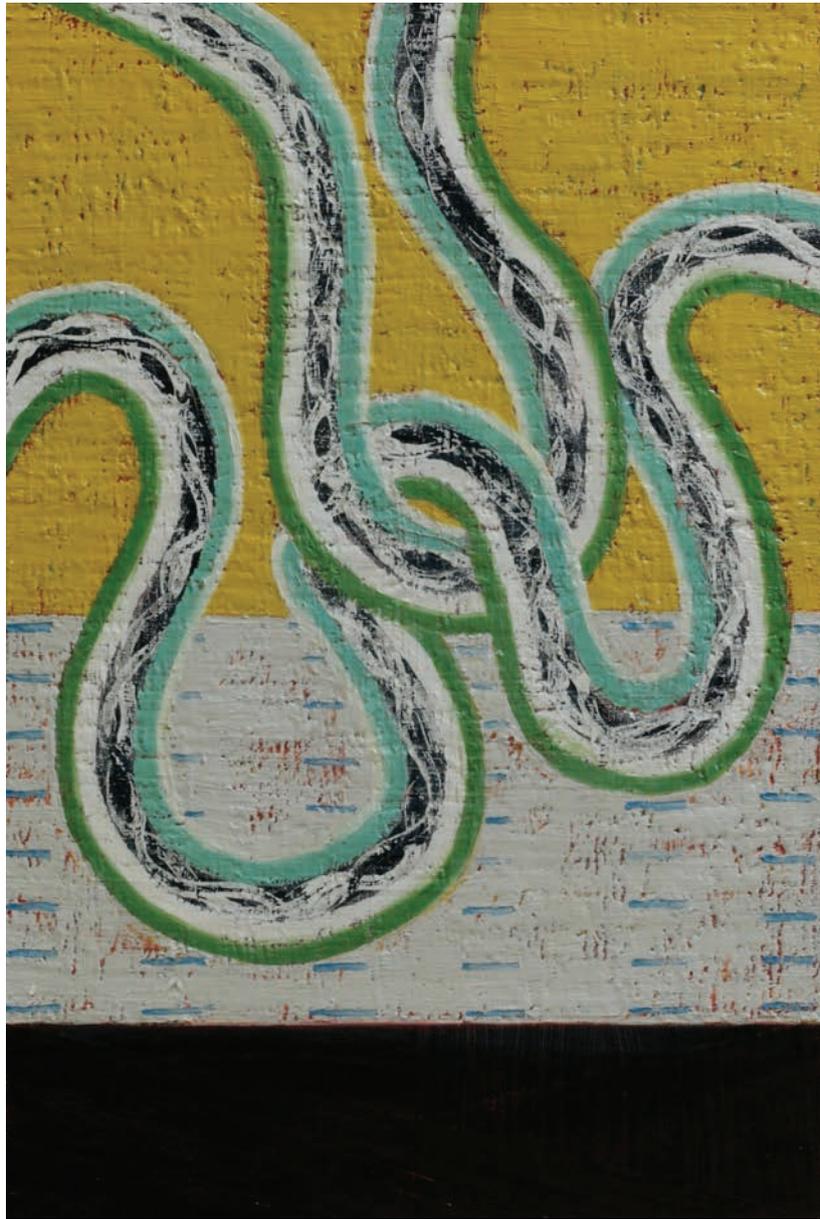




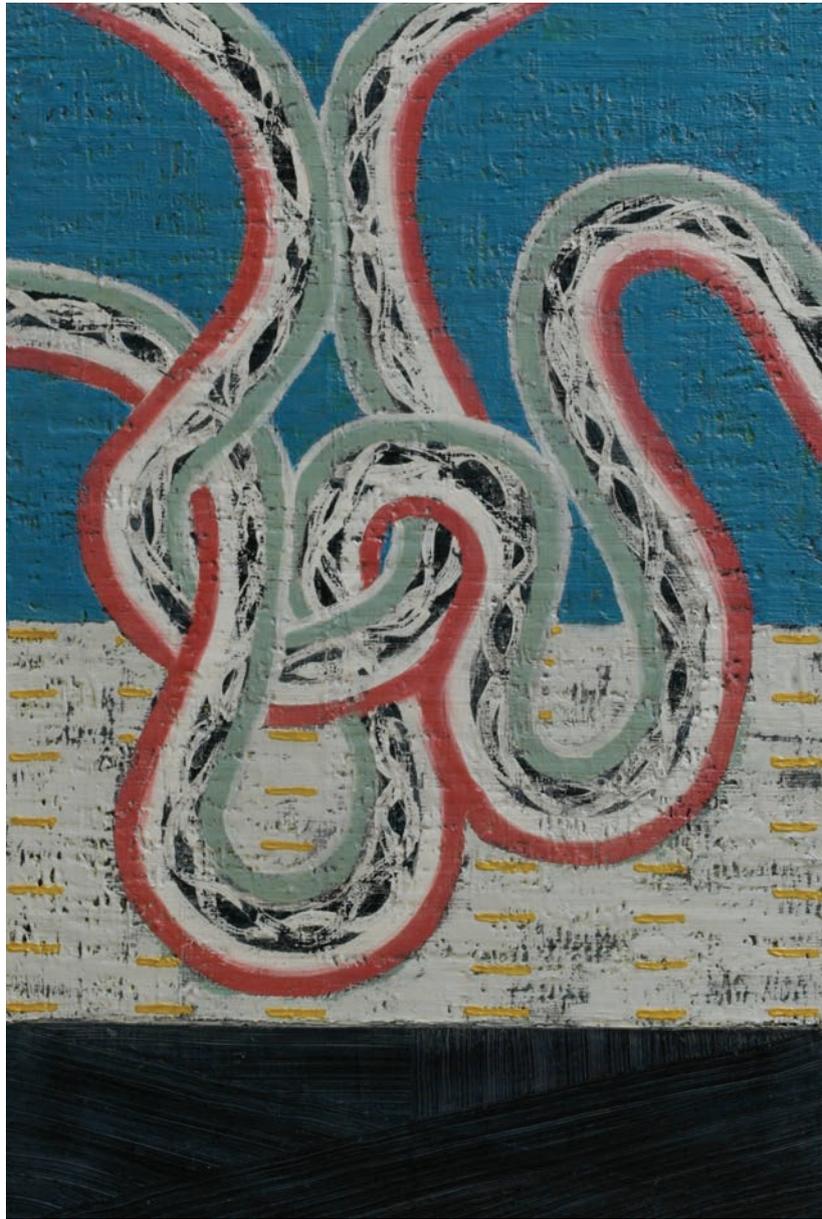
Pandect I, oil on canvas, triptych, 2009, 180 x 360 cm



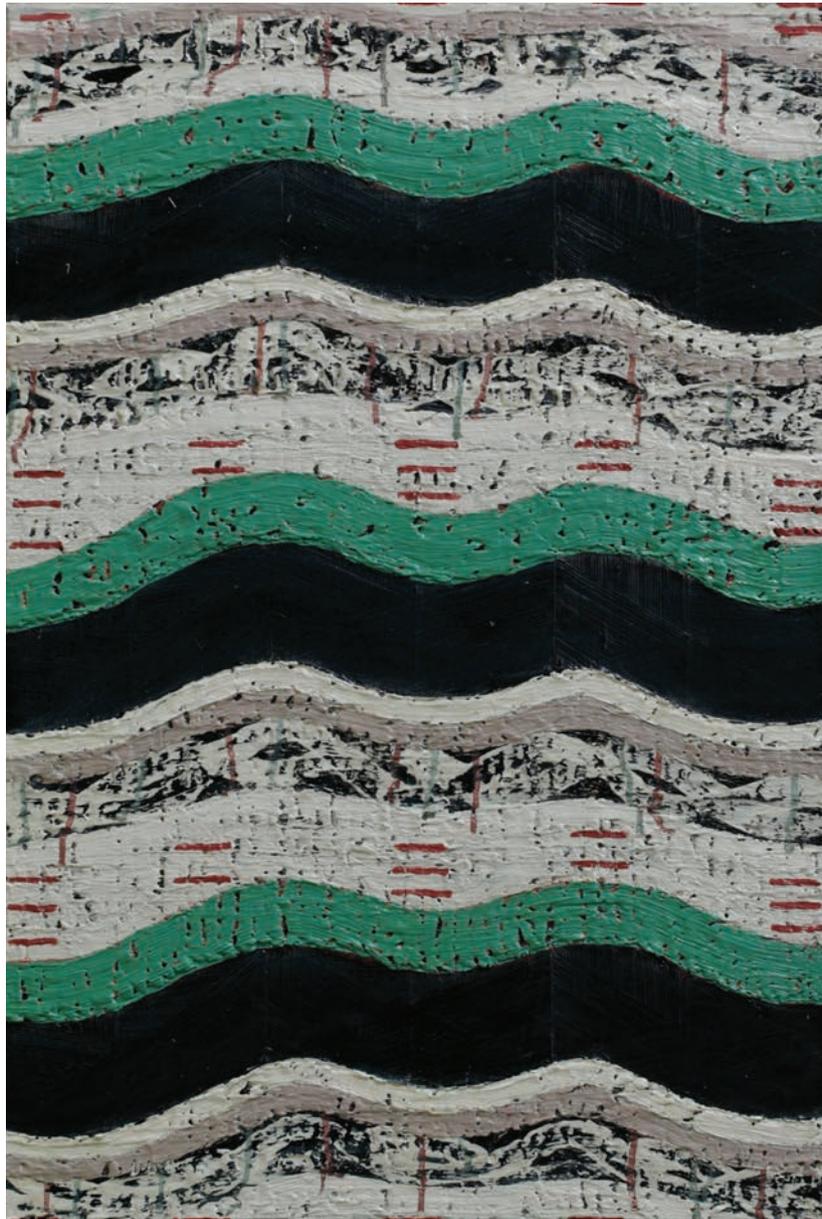
Moving Lines, oil on canvas, 2017, 90 x 60 cm



Moving Lines, oil on canvas, 2017, 90 x 60 cm



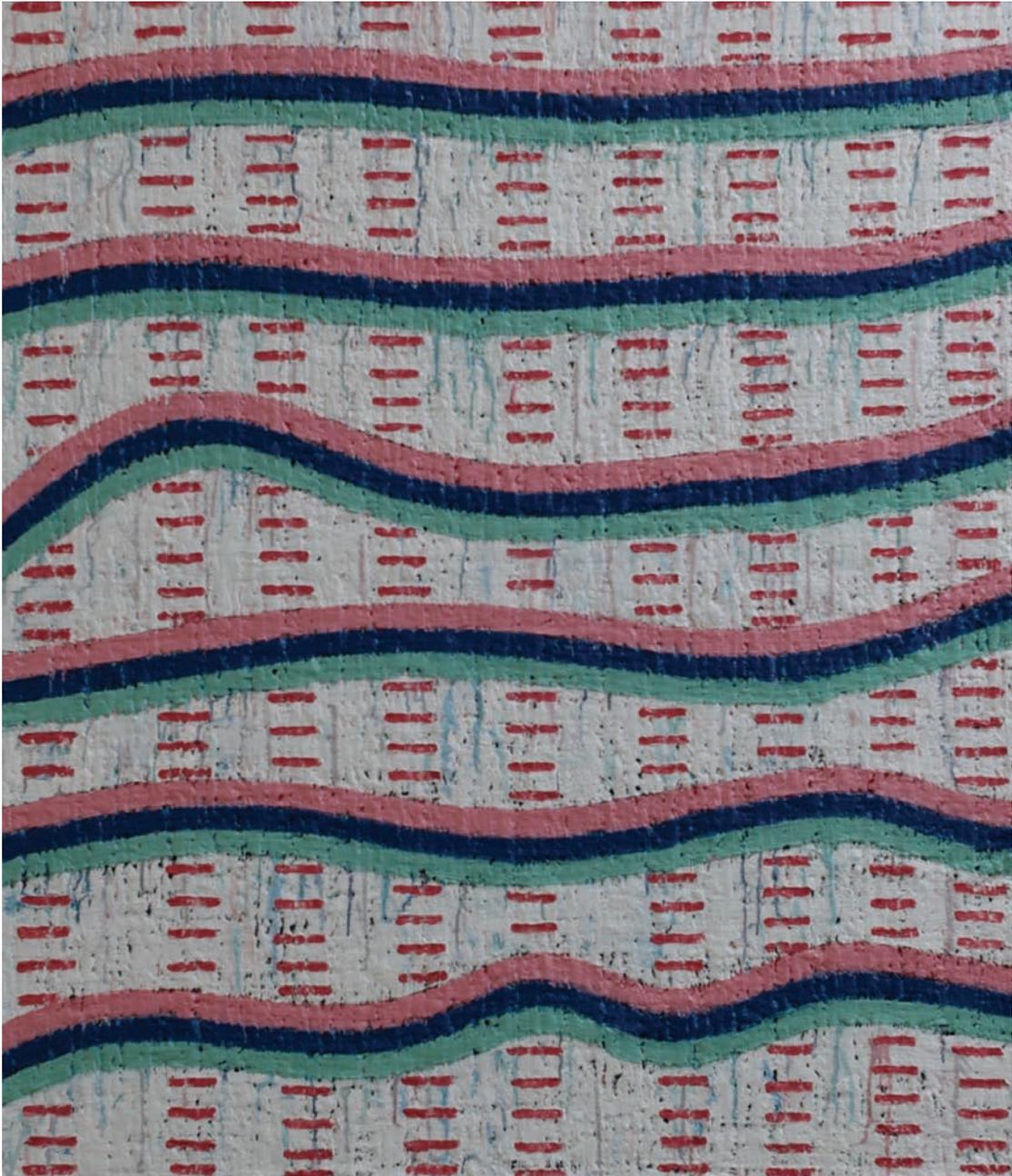
Strings, oil on canvas, 2015, 90 x 60 cm



Strings, oil on canvas, 2015, 90 x 60 cm

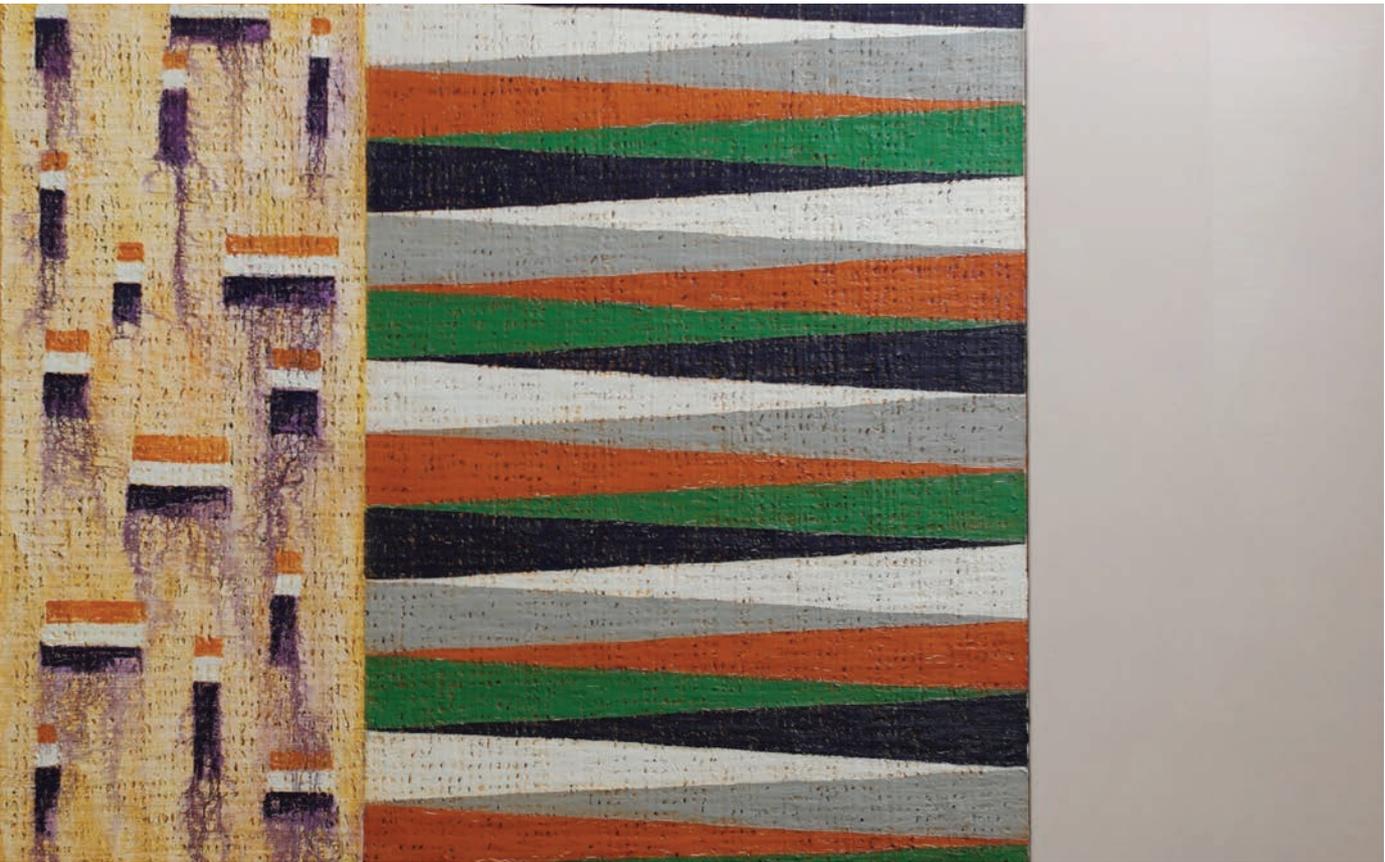


String Ogham, oil on canvas, 2013, 140 x 120 cm





The Fold Icon, oil on canvas, triptych, 2010, 180 x 360 cm



John Noel Smith

In conversation with

Brian McAvera

Describe your studio practice. What paints do you use?

Early morning, I have a rigorous practice in the studio and work every day. To start I do a perfunctory drawing, barely a drawing, because I draw on the canvas itself. If I print or draw or sculpt it's parallel to what I do on the canvas, not an aid. With the larger pieces I draw with a big stick. The works are built up of thin, non-exaggerated layers, built up over six months or so. I normally work on different canvases, but I generally work in series, ten, fifteen, twenty paintings elaborated over time. As for paints, I use Goya, Lucas, Schminke and Sennelier sometimes.

In my painting I build up a lattice work. Certain areas are a given. It's important to get it exactly right, as with the cruciform shapes in the present works. There is a continuous repainting and tuning, sometimes with quite light washes. There's always a previous painting but during the painting process things can change, the direction, the emphases. I loosen or I tighten. Sometimes you have to just leave it and move on. Fail better!

In 2002, after some 22 years in Berlin, now married and with children and presumably comfortable in the language and the culture, and having already established a reputation in Germany and Scandinavia, you returned to Ireland. There must have been many factors influencing that decision. What were they, and why back to Wexford?

I had come back to Ireland on a visit: it was my niece's twenty-first birthday. She looked fifteen! I thought: I wouldn't leave someone that age alone in Berlin. I felt we would have to move before our kids would reach that age. Monika and I had been discussing for some time the advantages and disadvantages of moving to Ireland. My wife had a successful career as a film editor. We decided to move before our daughter Aoife would enter the German school system. Our son Fintan was only two at the time. This coincided with my midterm retrospective at the RHA Gallagher Gallery in Dublin. My parents had passed away and I was feeling rather homesick. Perhaps I wanted to replicate something of my own childhood, to pass something on to the children. By chance we found a plot on the Wexford, Wicklow border near Carnew where Fintan still goes to school.



When you came back to Ireland in 2002 it was to a very different Ireland from the one you left in 1980. How did you perceive the differences, in both the society and the art; and in retrospect, is there anything you miss about Berlin?

Well, one of the things about Berlin is the late night bars and restaurants and the tremendous night life. For the last six years in Berlin I had young children, so life as all parents know suddenly changes! Coming back, yes, it was very different, but I'd been coming back on a regular basis. I spent five years building a house and studio and then rebuilding or replacing because of shoddy workmanship!

In Berlin you could go to certain bars and restaurants and you were sure to know people: artists, writers, musicians, actors and collectors. In Dublin it's different. I do miss that. I remember an occasion in the Paris Bar being introduced by a colleague to a translator. He asked me if I had been at the reading of the Irish writers and poets the other night.

“You should have seen it. At the reading they just laid in to each other. I couldn't believe it”. Then he said, “Later in the bar over a few drinks they behaved in the most amiable and friendly fashion”. He thought for a moment. “I think that if that had been a German reading, it would have been the other way around”! On the question of Irish society there is a short-termism; just look to our health system and politics by its very nature it falls into that category. We appear to be very good at tactics, less so on strategic planning. This excessive focus on short-term results has consequences for all our long-term interests. On the other hand there is a warmth here which you don't find elsewhere. It is something that only the returned exile truly appreciates.

In 2008, Anthony Caro had an exhibition at your gallery Hillsboro Fine Art in Dublin. In 2012, the London gallery Waterhouse & Dodd held an exhibition of your larger paintings alongside Anthony Caro's sculpture. How did the exhibition come about, and how did you view the implied comparison with Caro?

I loved it of course! Waterhouse & Dodd had at first offered me a solo exhibition but later felt that to pair my work with that of Anthony Caro's would expose my paintings to a larger British audience. Both of us treat our art as a metaphor for the phenomenological world. There's also the substance of his work, the manifestations, which appealed to me. They worked very well together; both sets of works dealt with triangular forms. The sculptural aspect in my paintings seemed to emphasise the connection.



Your 2013 show Tower Buttress and String Ogham, shifted the goalposts somewhat. Stylistically it was much looser, less rigidly organised, quite thickly impastoed with stripy curves offset by minim-like signs. The colours were brighter: garlic pink offset by blacks, blues and whites, or thick creamy pinks nudging pale magenta and greeny blues. Occasionally the paint had been allowed to bleed. You even produced stacked sculpture. What was happening?

In my painting there is a tendency towards a tightening and then a loosening. That's a natural progression. In these new works you have constructivist forms being wedded to a fluid informal undertaking; there are areas of very rigorous painting as well as a flowing looseness. The way I see it, there is a symbiotic coexistence of previous ideas with present concerns. The sculptural piece you refer to was called *Tower Buttress*. As in my paintings I wanted to sever matter from depiction. I reduced it to its basic elements, square, cube, line, placing it on a horizontal plane. I then reorientated it to the vertical. I felt the need for a grammar of simplicity.

John, you were born in the quiet seaside village of Malahide, Dublin in 1952. There was a sweet factory and a sweetshop, a library and a cinema (The Grand), a boatyard and a castle, and even a large model of Fossett's Circus on Malahide Green. What are your memories of growing up there? How formative were they and how important was the sea, visually as well as emotionally, in terms of its trace elements in your work in later life?

I grew up in Malahide during the 1950s and 1960s and my early memories are very pleasant. It was a small tight-knit community. The castle was still functioning and the land was farmed. I remember playing in the grounds and the demesne had woods all around it.

They formed a tree-lined entrance into Malahide. In summer when its full canopy was on display it was particularly beautiful. I enjoyed playing around the Back Strand where sailing regattas and speedboat trials were held along with waterskiing.

I actually lived there for my first two years while our house was being built. My father had an allotment. He was a keen gardener. I have memories of the sea flooding the roadside in winter: an impressive image for a two- or three-year-old boy.

There was no GAA and no soccer but there was cricket and tennis and swimming at the Low and High Rock. In those days you could see the steam engines crossing the embankment northwards across the estuary to Donabate and on to Belfast, travelling over the viaduct known locally as the Arches. Later, in the 1970s, I'd wander down to the beach and I could imagine where Nathaniel Hone painted Malahide Sands. He was the first captain of Malahide Golf Club and Lord Talbot its first President, the last to live in the castle. Guy Burgess and Anthony Blunt had been his tutors at Cambridge University in the 1950s. Incidentally, the Boswell Papers were found in Malahide Castle at the beginning of the last century.

The village had a sweet factory right beside Findlater's shop as I remember it. You could go in and ring a bell and someone from the factory floor would serve you.

There was still shipbuilding going on and there was a large coal depot. Then there was the Grand Hotel which we used as our personal playground, always in danger of being caught by the staff. The sea gave me a sense of vastness, the idea that over the horizon there was another horizon, whereas the Strand was contained. I had long periods of play in the woods on my own, and I suppose the enjoyment of being in my own imagination. I also liked to explore the castle and its grounds. There was an old abbey with its own Sheela na Gig. The sea was vast and open, the woods felt like a protective enclosure.

Your father's family was from Gorey in Wexford, an area where, many years later, you would return from self-imposed exile to live, and you went to secondary school – boarding school I think, at St. Peter's in Wexford. Were your parents still living in Malahide? Why the uprooting from Dublin and why boarding school? How positive or negative was the transition from a quiet, almost rural village to a boarding school in Wexford? Did you ever travel abroad in those days?

The original family was from outside Gorey where my great-grandfather had a farm. My grandfather was the stationmaster in Gorey from 1908 to 1915. My father worked at the British and Irish Steam Packet Company (later known as the B&I). This enabled us to holiday in Britain as both ships and trains were free of charge, including first-class for those employed in management. First, we went to Wales, the following year to Cornwall and thereafter till I was about sixteen to the Isle of Wight. London was my favourite part of these trips. I loved going on the underground and up and down the escalators. For me it was the journey, not the arrival at the holiday destination.

Rather than being rural, Malahide exuded a virtual air of sophistication and for such a small place had many memorable characters. It also produced its fair share of artists and musicians, writers and intellectuals. In the early days, the Belfast train would stop at Malahide station and you could be in what was then called Amiens Street in ten minutes.

The change to boarding school in Wexford was a shock. On arrival, there was a very impressive entrance. The church was designed by Pugin. I remember on my first day, all the priests were standing outside, perhaps after lunch, smoking.



When I piped up and asked if the school played soccer I got the very stern reply 'This is an all Gaelic sports school'. No one had told me: I had played cricket, not hurling. I asked my parents on many occasions why they sent me to St Peter's, but I never received a satisfactory reply. I came to the conclusion that I had asked too many questions and that farming me off to boarding school appeared to them to be a good option. The school was big on discipline but there were some good teachers. It produced some excellent writers, among them John Banville and Colm Toibín. It taught me the benefits of resilience!

After finishing the Leaving Certificate you worked as a clerk in a shipping office, and then worked in a bank at Ballsbridge. This seems to suggest a lack of interest in Academia, and either a none-too-strong interest in art, or else a determination on behalf of your parents to steer you into a 'proper' job. So were the jobs of use or interest, and just what were you doing at the time, artistically speaking?

I had planned to go to art school but my parents were totally against it, also against a university education. I got a job in a shipping company, then applied to the Royal Bank. I didn't get that job but was called back for an interview in a new bank that they were setting up, called AIB. I was part of the first cohort of twenty people to work for them as a new group. I worked in a branch in Drumcondra for two months, then at Head Office in Ballsbridge for eighteen months. I began to be disaffected. So, I started applying to art schools. I always drew. As a child I was encouraged by the larger family. The normal perception at the time was that you had to have money to back you up if you wanted to be an artist. My parents wanted a normal middle class occupation for me. That didn't suit.

Block Icon 1, 2, 3, encaustic on canvas, 1977-79, 88 x 88 cm

From 1971 or 1972 until 1976 you studied at Dun Laoghaire School of Art, then an alternative to NCAD, and also at that time in an early and critical phase in its development. When you fund yourself – as you did – you tend to be aware of the kind of teaching and facilities available to you: value-for-money! So which lecturers left their mark on you, so to speak, what kind of work were you doing, and whom did you know amongst the students?

It was a very positive experience, especially the Foundation year with Trevor Scott. The facilities were atrocious but in a way very empowering in that you had to imaginatively recreate everything. There was a great bunch of students in my class, it was a creative class, with very enthusiastic students and teachers influenced by Bauhaus principles. I had been accepted by NCAD but I decided against it. I was 18, going on 19, two years older than most. There were a lot of student protests at the time and I didn't want to engage in that. I was on a budget, paying for my own education. My mother even charged me board and rent, because she was so disappointed that I left a good job at the bank. I worked in a factory called Danfoss in Denmark a number of years in a row to finance myself.

You won the Alice Berger Hammerschlag award and in your own words made a reconnaissance trip to Berlin either in 1977 or 1978 (depending on which catalogue you read), and then won a DAAD scholarship to Berlin in 1980 where you ended up staying until 2002. Why Berlin and not, say, Paris? And was the urge to get out of Ireland connected to your lack of appreciation of Irish painting at the time?

The Hammerschlag, probably 1978, was the only scholarship open to artists on an all-Ireland basis issued by the Northern Ireland Arts Council. I also got an Arts Council grant. I went to Berlin for a month, visited the art school and was surprised at how retrograde some of it was. The English/Irish system was more open. In Germany you were attached to a professor. I did like Irish art but I found it difficult and stultifying here. I was able to get shows, for example I exhibited in The Project Arts Centre Dublin and also the Triskel in Cork. I wanted to experience firsthand the work processes of artists from countries other than Ireland or Britain. What I really wanted to do was a Masters, but this was not possible at the time in Ireland. I did think of Paris and Rome, went to the embassies, and none of them would tell me what I would get if I was successful in applying. In the German Embassy they could lay out clear figures for me and there was also a language course I could avail of. The intention was to go to New York after a year. I actually got the Beckmann scholarship to New York, had it deferred for a year, but then it was cancelled!

Berlin in the 1980s, still divided, was a hive of activity: Richter, Penck, Baselitz, Beuys, Lüpertz, Dahn, Kiefer for example, many of them appearing at the Royal Academy's 1982 A New Spirit in Painting and later in that decade in a number of shows at the Bluecoat in Liverpool. What was the transition like from Dublin to Berlin? How difficult was it? And did it make you re-evaluate your painting?

When I applied for the DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst) scholarship, part of the package was to partake in a language course in the Goethe Institute. After this I headed off to Berlin, where I attended the Universität der Künste Berlin and I became friends with my professor, Martin Engelman, a Dutch painter. This was during the reawakening of German art. It was an exciting period. German art was gaining recognition outside its borders, and Baselitz was showing at the Serpentine in London. *The New Spirit in Painting* would open at the Royal Academy.

I got to know a number of painters represented in that show. Berlin expanded my idea of painting. The more progressive German painters that I knew were also interested in American and English art. A lot of them used a kind of tempera and preferred to paint on jute rather than canvas. I found it very rewarding to be in Germany. There was a great buzz in those early days, lots of interesting exhibitions, and artists making strong careers for themselves elsewhere as well as in Berlin. Around this time I made friends with a Swedish artist Carl Magnus who was a guest professor at the UDK. Shortly before he left I gave him a present of a pastel and thought no more of it. Two months later I was

contacted by a Swedish dealer who suggested that we do a show. Carl had shown him my pastel. Eventually Lars Bohman of Galerie 16, as it was then called, saw my work and exhibited me in a solo show at Art Basel. We would work together for the next twelve years, exhibiting in Scandinavia. I travelled there on a regular basis taking a sleeper on the night train through the old DDR and onto a boat to Sweden. I thought of it as an Agatha Christie meets John le Carré experience!



When you were in Berlin you started showing regularly in Europe at the Clemens Gallery in Denmark, Galerie 16 in Stockholm as well as Volker Diehl in Berlin. Did these relationships leave any trace on your work or were they simply places to sell work?

I originally showed at Galerie Skulima. It was at the time a high-powered gallery in Berlin. Skulima had shown Gilbert and George in the 1970s and he was seen to be a progressive gallery owner. In 1989 there was a recession and Skulima decided to sell the gallery. It was bought by his junior partner Volker Diehl. Volker let you get on with your own work but Lars tried to influence you so much so that I felt the relationship resembled more of what one would expect between a boxer and his manager. I was the only abstract artist in his stable at that particular time. When we moved to Ireland things fizzled out. He had relocated to Thailand and started dealing in real estate. The other contacts were purely business.

'My paintings are concerned with primal experience – the animal kingdom, the world of bright colours, pungent smells, tactile sensations. They're an attempt to find an aesthetic based on instinct and passion, to make conscious subconscious desires and wishes'. You wrote that in 1985. Does it still stand?

I've moved on even if traces still remain! When I made that statement I had returned briefly to the figure. I decided to go through all of the genres: still life, interiors, landscape and so on. I had been looking at Rubens and Breughel, and I did a series on the Old Masters in oil pastel. At some stage I started re-examining my series of *Black Icon* paintings; that's where I had come a cropper. Originally I thought that I had solved the problem by breaking up the square, and by the reintroduction of colour. I was interested in the reflective qualities of light as it struck the successive folds of the cruciform-like structure, requiring the viewer to interact with the canvas, creating a work which was both flat and sculptural. I saw it as a form of figure painting with the viewer acting as the figure outside the pictorial space, in real space.

Desmond MacAvock, in relation to the Tower paintings at RHK (now IMMA) in 1990 thought them 'rather diffuse'. Brian Fallon, some six years later, wrote of your Temple Bar show that they were 'tasteful, controlled and notably well-made. What it lacks is the quality of surprise, or of originality'. Do you think they were right at the time?

That was a small select show in the Temple Bar. I also recall Fallon mentioning having peeked into one of my catalogues, which were on display, that the works appear much more inventive than at first sight, a second look at a broader selection of work would be hugely beneficial. By his standards I'd consider that a great review. Both of them, MacAvock and Fallon, were straight out of the St Ives school, things had moved on by the 1990s. More interestingly for me is that my solo exhibition at IMMA (previously RHK) got a very good review from Cyril Barrett writing in the English magazine *Art Monthly*. He finished by saying 'one of the most promising of the younger Irish artists'. That's a long time ago now but at the time it was very encouraging. You know what they say about bringing three critics into a room to talk about art! I think those works have stood the test of time but everyone is welcome to their own opinion, including the critics.

Renoir wrote copiously on decoration, having started by painting on ceramics. Matisse, an obvious influence I would have thought, also wrote on decoration. What is your view?

Matisse is one of the few painters I like who is decorative. He's so light, perhaps in the same way as Mozart, yet there's a darkness there as well. Maybe I lived too long in Germany to consider the possibilities of using the decorative to better effect. As I've said before, I always see colour in terms of form.

Some time before 1980 you produced the Black Icon series of paintings (in your Gandon Profile book they are dated 1977-79) which consist of abstract geometrical hard-edge shapes with triangles as one of the main organisational principles. By 1989 you are doing The Towers series, evidently influenced by Philip Guston, de Kooning, and perhaps the biomorphic qualities of a Miro, Klee or Gorky. The 1990 RHK catalogue describes your work during this period as 'a thematic obsession with ancient pan Celtic myths and legends, and his interpolations on the work of old Masters, particularly Rembrandt and Titian'. In your retrospective Profile volume you have edited out everything between these dates, so what happened in the eighties!

A friend of mine, brought me a book *The Beckett Country* by Dr Eoin O'Brien. It placed Beckett back in the fold of Irish writers. Although his work may appear bereft of any recognizable features, his work has its origins in the Irish landscape or social-scapes. It had illustrations of towers in it, some of them around Malahide such as The Hill of Wolves at Feltrim and Stella's Tower in Portrane. The landscape around Malahide featured a large variety of towers: Hick's Tower, Rob's Wall, the Martello Tower in Portmarnock, and the aforementioned tower at Feltrim, which disappeared mysteriously overnight. I started introducing these forms into my work.

At the time of the Gandon catalogue I wanted to include more images of the paintings from the period you mention into the book but the budget did not allow for that. With proper sponsorship I would very much like to revisit that era. The *Black Icon* series was included because it had a direct and ongoing link to recent work. During my time in Berlin there were German, English and American artists all coming to terms with their respective identities. It was me and my identity rather than an Irish identity per se. I'm of Ireland and from Ireland but I wouldn't be able to define Irish art!

I originally found inspiration by visiting the National Gallery in Dublin, and later in London looking at their European collections and by studying books. In St Peter's the library was devoid of art books but for some extraordinary reason it had a colossal book on Joshua Reynolds and little else. At art school artists like Pollock, Guston, de Kooning and the Colour-field painters were all influences. But you wander back to your roots: European art. I spent long periods

drawing in art school and later I did life drawing sessions for the fun of it. I come out of a figurative tradition. I knew Guston but wasn't really aware of his later work until I got to Berlin.

What impact, if any, did 1989 have on you, both personally and in terms of your work?

I was sitting in a Tex Mex restaurant owned by an American friend. He said that the wall had fallen. A number of weeks prior to this Middendorf, a fellow artist, had written in one of his catalogues that he presented to me "Die Blätter fallen die Mauer fällt" (The leaves are falling, the wall will fall). We all headed for Checkpoint Charlie. We were standing right at the wall as the crowds came over. Later I remember thinking 'all has utterly changed'. Berlin, the small international but divided metropolis would now be transformed into a sprawling provincial city. It would take a decade or more to obtain a new cultural identity and to become the new capital of a united Germany. Some of the old timers simply left for London and elsewhere. I decided to stay on. I got a lovely atelier in the east of the city. It was filled with German and international artists, the best-known being perhaps the Danish artist Olafur Eliasson. Slowly opportunities opened up as the city moved on. There was a slow aggregate of change. My work developed gradually, slowly, losing all the vestiges of figuration – recognizable with my recent work.



In 5 Spaces (1999), a series of five panels on one of which a carefully figurative portrait of your wife, seen from the rear, looks at an abstract painting. I was reminded of Robert Ballagh's 1970s series of figurative portraits, often seen from the rear, looking at iconic abstract works. What was the reasoning behind the series?

It's called *TSSST*. In a loose way it's dealing with the five senses but more essentially it's examining the basis of language: its expressive, descriptive and communicative functions. I'm trying to formulate as broad a language as possible. The variant sizes were according to the senses. I tried to balance them: to restrain sight to promote smell, to recalibrate touch and so on. In *Sound* I opined that the mimetic touch replaces the need for narrative – like a jazz score.

I was trying to open up the work: it was my Millennium piece. In a way a tension was created between what they signify and what they are. The physical manifestations of the painting partake in what they represent. In other words for me poetic meaning surpasses conceptual meaning. In this sense art should not mean, but be. I remember Robert Ballagh's paintings from the 1970s and admire them.

There is a sense in which you are an abstracting artist as opposed to an abstract one in that figuration (motifs) is never far away and the real world (the seasons, the landscape or seascape) often lurks in plain sight. How do you view this arena?

I see myself as a hard core abstractionist. My interest is not in painting a simulacrum of the visible world. Rather I see painting as acting like a metaphor for the real world. In my present work I'm not abstracting from this real world. My *Knot* paintings, which I think you are referring to, resulted from the liberating act of drawing directly on the wet canvas. I wanted to explore and develop the linear in my paintings. I saw this as painting from a rigorous non-objective discipline; it was pure line.

This is an edited version of an interview that was first published in the *Irish Arts Review*.



John Noel Smith

Born in Dublin in 1952, John Noel Smith attended Dun Laoghaire School of Art followed by postgraduate studies at der Universität der Künste Berlin. He lived in Berlin for twenty two years where he was an important member of its vibrant art community, returning to Ireland in 2002.

He has exhibited internationally since 1980. His work forms part of important public, private and corporate collections.

He is a member of Aosdána.



John Noel Smith and Anthony Caro,
Waterhouse & Dodd, London (2012)

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2017 *Moving Lines*, Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin, Ireland
- 2016 *Selected Works 1993-2015*, Wexford County Hall, Wexford, Ireland
- 2016 *New Works*, Fenderesky Gallery, Belfast, Northern Ireland
- 2015 *German Requiem*, Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA), Dublin, Ireland
- 2015 *Gnosis*, Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin, Ireland
- 2014 *Mehr ist Mehr*, Galerie Stefan Bartsch, Munich, Germany
- 2013 *Tower Buttress and String Ogham*, Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin, Ireland
- 2012 *United Field Paintings*, Konsthallen Hishult, Sweden
- 2012 *John Noel Smith and Anthony Caro*, Waterhouse & Dodd, London, England
- 2012 *Palimpsest*, Wexford Arts Centre, Wexford, Ireland

2011	<i>John Noel Smith</i> , Fendersky Gallery, Belfast, Northern Ireland	1999	Galerie Großkinski Brümmer, Karlsruhe, Germany
2011	<i>The Fold</i> , Solstice Arts Centre, Navan, Ireland	1999	Galerie Leger, Malmö, Sweden
2011	<i>The Fold</i> , Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin, Ireland	1998	Galerie Volker Diehl, Berlin, Germany
2010	<i>Studies in Paint: Jonathan Lasker and John Noel Smith</i> , Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin, Ireland	1998	Green On Red Gallery, Dublin, Ireland
2009	<i>Pandect Series</i> , Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin, Ireland	1997	Green On Red Gallery, Dublin, Ireland
2008	<i>New Paintings</i> , Fenderesky Gallery, Belfast, Northern Ireland	1996	Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin, Ireland
2008	<i>Liliform/UFP</i> , VEC Wexford, Ireland	1996	Galerie Großkinski Brümmer, Karlsruhe, Germany
2008	<i>New Paintings</i> , J. Cacciola Gallery, Chelsea, New York, USA	1996	Galerie Volker Diehl, Berlin, Germany
2007	<i>Liliform</i> , Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin, Ireland	1994	Galerie Volker Diehl, Berlin, Germany
2007	Fenderesky Gallery, Belfast, Northern Ireland	1993	DIN Haus Der Normung, Berlin, Germany
2007	Sligo Art Centre, Sligo, Ireland	1992	Galleri Leger, Malmö, Sweden
2007	Vangard Gallery, Cork, Ireland	1991	Galerie Volker Diehl, Berlin, Germany
2005	Green On Red Gallery, Dublin, Ireland	1991	Galerie Lars Bohman, Stockholm, Sweden
2005	Fenderesky Gallery, Belfast, Northern Ireland	1990	Royal Hospital Kilmmainham, (Irish Museum of Modern Art), Dublin, Ireland
2005	Garter Lane Gallery, Waterford, Ireland	1989	Gallery Eleni Koroneou, Athens, Greece
2005	Éigse Art Festival, Carlow, Ireland	1989	Galerie Clemens, Aarhus, Denmark
2004	Green On Red Gallery, Dublin, Ireland	1989	Galerie Lars Bohman (Galleri 16), Stockholm, Sweden
2002	Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) Gallery, Dublin, Ireland	1989	Galerie Pilou Asbaek, Copenhagen, Denmark
2002	Green On Red Gallery, Dublin, Ireland	1988	Gallerie Folker Skulima, Berlin, Germany
2000	Irish Embassy Berlin, Germany	1987	Galerie Van Alom, Berlin, Germany
1999	Green On Red Gallery, Dublin, Ireland	1987	Galerie Tempo, Stockholm, Sweden
		1987	Galerie 16, Stockholm, Sweden

- 1986 Galerie Folker Skulima, Berlin, Germany
- 1986 Galerie Clemens, Aarhus, Denmark
- 1985 Galerie Leger, Malmö, Sweden
- 1985 Galerie I6, Stockholm, Sweden
- 1984 Galerie Wallner, Malmö, Sweden
- 1983 Galerie I6, Stockholm, Sweden
- 1983 Project Art Centre, Dublin, Ireland
- 1982 Galerie Wallner, Malmö, Sweden
- 1982 Peacock Theatre Gallery, Dublin, Ireland
- 1980 Triskel Art Centre, Cork, Ireland
- 1978 Project Art Centre, Dublin, Ireland



Lars Bohman Gallery, Stockholm, Sweden (1989)

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2016 Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin, Ireland
- 2016 Fenderesky Gallery, Belfast, Northern Ireland
- 2015 *Annual Exhibition*, Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin, Ireland
- 2014 *Annual Exhibition*, Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin, Ireland
- 2011 *Inaugural Exhibition*, St Patrick's Hospital, Dublin, Ireland
- 2011 *Annual Exhibition*, Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin, Ireland
- 2010 Éigse Arts Festival, Carlow, Ireland
- 2009 Rotunda Hospital, Dublin, Ireland
- 2008-15 Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin, Ireland
- 2007 *Substrata* (with Sean Shanahan and Charles Tyrell), Solstice Arts Centre, Navan, Ireland
- 2006-15 Fenderesky Gallery, Belfast, Northern Ireland
- 2006 *Inaugural*, Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin
- 2006 *Collectors Collections*, Ormeau Baths Gallery, Belfast, Northern Ireland
- 2006 *Other Visions*, Purdy Hicks Gallery, London, England
- 2006 *Painting by other Means*, Oriol Mostyn Gallery, Llandudno, Wales, UK
- 2005 *Siar 50*, IMMA, Dublin, Ireland

2005	<i>Annual Exhibition</i> , Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin, Ireland	1997	<i>Small Paintings</i> , Gallery Green on Red, Dublin, Ireland
2005	<i>Summer Group Exhibition</i> , Fenton Gallery, Cork, Ireland	1996	Galerie Großkinski Brümmer, Karlsruhe, Germany
2005	<i>Garden of Earthly Delights</i> , Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Ireland	1994	<i>Kunst in Europa – 16 Artists in Germany</i> , Galerie Neher, Essen, Germany
2004-05	<i>Inaugural Exhibition</i> , Berlinische Galerie, State Museum for Modern Art, Berlin, Germany	1993-94	Galerie Volker Diehl, Berlin, Germany
2004	Graphic Studio Gallery, Dublin, Ireland	1992	Galerie Biemolds, Groningen, Holland
2004	<i>In the Time of Shaking: Irish Artists for Amnesty International</i> , Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Ireland	1991	Galerie Volker Diehl, Berlin, Germany
2003	<i>Colour Chart</i> , Ormeau Baths Gallery, Belfast, Northern Ireland	1989	<i>Berliner Tagebuch</i> , Traveling Exhibition, Germany/Spain
2002	<i>Works On Paper 2002</i> , Green On Red Gallery, Dublin, Ireland	1986	Galerie Clemens, Aarhus, Denmark
2000	<i>Insight</i> , Ennistymon, Ireland	1986	Galerie Folker Skulima, Berlin, Germany
1999	<i>Contemporary Works on Paper</i> , Green On Red Gallery, Dublin, Ireland	1985	Galerie Leger, Malmö, Sweden
1998	<i>Claremorris Open Exhibition</i> , Claremorris, Ireland	1984	<i>Berlin 84 Malerei</i> , Galerie Garage, Berlin, Germany
1998-99	<i>Small Works</i> , Green On Red Gallery, Dublin, Ireland	1983	<i>University Collage</i> , UCD, Dublin, Ireland
1998	<i>Schwarz/Weiss</i> , Galerie Volker Diehl and Galerie Van Alom, Berlin, Germany	1983-89	Galerie I6, Stockholm, Sweden
1997	<i>Chalk Circle</i> , Galerie Michael Fuchs, Berlin, Germany	1983	<i>Freie Berliner Kunstausstellung</i> , Berlin, Germany
		1979-80	<i>Oireachteas Art Exhibition</i> , Dublin, Ireland
		1979	Irish Exhibition of Living Art, Dublin, Ireland

ART FAIRS

2013-14	<i>London Art Fair</i> , UK, Waterhouse & Dodd, London	1986	<i>Art Fair Cologne</i> , Germany, Galerie Folker Skulima, Berlin
2013	<i>Art Miami</i> , Miami USA, Waterhouse & Dodd, London	1984-85	<i>Kunstmesse Basel</i> , Galerie Lars Bohman, Stockholm
2013	<i>LA Art Show</i> , Los Angeles, USA, Waterhouse & Dodd, London	1984-90	<i>Art Fair Cologne</i> , Germany, Galerie Folker Skulima, Berlin
2012	<i>Scope Basel</i> , Waterhouse & Dodd, London	1984-92	<i>Art Fair Stockholm</i> , Galerie Lars Bohman, Stockholm
2011-16	<i>Vue</i> , Royal Hibernian Academy, Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin, Ireland	1991-93	<i>Art Fair Cologne</i> , Germany, Galerie Volker Diehl, Berlin
2008-09	<i>IDA</i> , Royal Dublin Society, Ireland, Hillsboro Fine Art and Fenderesky Gallery	1996-98	<i>European Art Forum Berlin</i> , Galerie Volker Diehl, Berlin
2007	<i>Art-Miami</i> , Florida, USA, Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin	1983	<i>London Contemporary Art Fair</i> , Galerie Lars Bohman, Stockholm
2003	<i>London Art Fair</i> , UK, Green on Red Gallery, Dublin		
2002	<i>Armory Show</i> , New York, USA, Green on Red Gallery, Dublin		
2000-02	<i>Art Fair Cologne</i> , Germany, Green on Red, Dublin		
1999-03	<i>Chicago Art Fair</i> , USA, Green on Red Gallery, Dublin		
1999-03	<i>London Art Fair</i> , UK, Green on Red Gallery, Dublin		
1999	<i>Art 1999</i> , Chicago, USA, Green on Red Gallery, Dublin		
1986	<i>Kunstmesse Basel</i> , Solo Exhibition, Galerie Lars Bohman, Stockholm		

DISTINCTIONS AND SPONSORSHIPS

- 2014 Irish Embassy, Berlin, Galerie Bartsch Munich
- 2005 Bursary An Chomhairle Ealaíon,
Arts Council of Ireland
- 2005 Elected to Aosdána
- 2002 Nissan Prize, RHA, Dublin, Ireland
- 2000 Department of Foreign Affairs,
Dublin, Ireland
- 2000 Bursary An Chomhairle Ealaíon,
Arts Council of Ireland
- 1998 Aer Lingus, Transport Sponsorship,
Temple Bar Gallery
- 1996 Deutsche Lufthansa, Transport Sponsorship
- 1993 Bursary An Chomhairle Ealaíon,
Arts Council of Ireland
- 1990 Aer Lingus, Transport Sponsorship, RHK
(IMMA)
- 1982 Bursary An Chomhairle Ealaíon,
Arts Council of Ireland
- 1980 DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer
Austauschdienst), Stipendium, Berlin
- 1977 Project Award, An Chomhairle Ealaíon,
Arts Council of Ireland
- 1977 Alice Hammerschlag Award,
Arts Council of Northern Ireland

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane, Ireland
- The Irish Museum of Modern Art, IMMA,
Dublin, Ireland
- Berlinische Galerie Museum of Modern Art,
Photography & Architecture, Berlin, Germany
- Senatskanzlei Kulturelle Angelegenheiten,
Berlin, Germany
- The Arts Council of Ireland, An Chomhairle Ealaíon
- The Office of Public Works, Ireland
- Wexford County Council, Wexford, Ireland
- The National Self-Portrait Collection,
Limerick, Ireland



Tower Buttress & String Ogham, Hillsboro Fine Art (2013)

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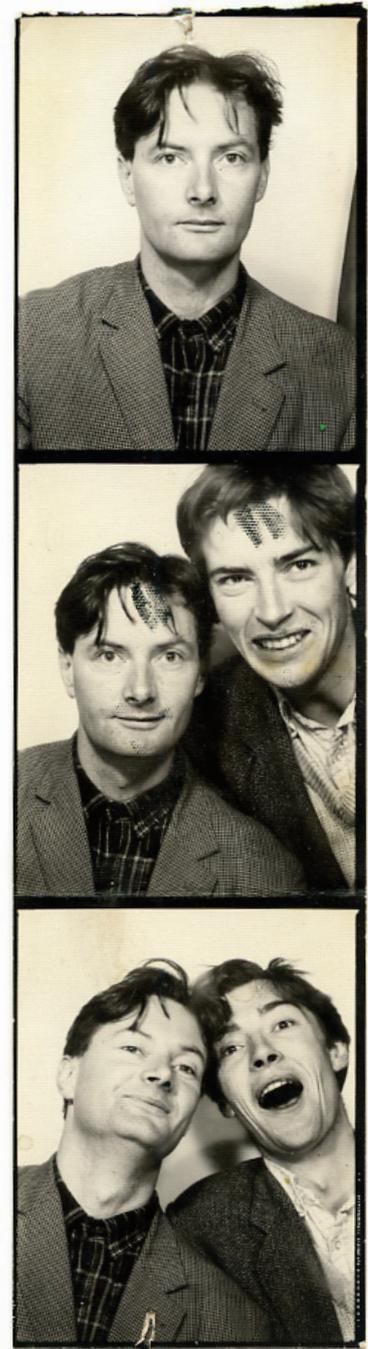
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