



'Irish Art Now', installation view, foyer of the Irish Embassy in London with curators Orla Jackson and Joe Duggan, featuring Emmet Kierans, *Synchrony*, 2024, oil on linen, and Richard Malone, *Untitled (cradle with a bay)*, 2025, sculpture in mild steel and mixed media; photograph by Joe Duggan.

Irish Art Now

ORLA JACKSON AND JOE DUGGAN DISCUSS A RECENT EXHIBITION AT THE EMBASSY OF IRELAND IN LONDON.

'Irish Art Now' was an artist-led initiative at the Embassy of Ireland in London, bringing together artists, curators, and art professionals to celebrate the impact of Irish artists in London and beyond. The initiative included a public exhibition, which ran from 8 to 28 January, an official launch event, a panel discussion, and a printed catalogue. It featured 14 artists at different stages of their careers, from recent graduates to established practitioners, showcasing work across sculpture, painting, and printmaking.

We had not met before this project, but as curators, our aims were closely aligned. We had separately approached the Embassy of Ireland with similar ideas and were introduced, leading to this collaboration. Orla, a recent Royal College of Art graduate, was acutely aware of the challenges early-career artists face in gaining visibility, and proposed a group show, featuring recent Irish graduates, who had either moved to London to study, or relocated after their studies in Ireland. Conversely, Joe's approach to the embassy was rooted in acknowledging and celebrating contemporary Irish visual artists and art professionals who have spent years, sometimes decades, quietly establishing themselves in London and wanted to bring all these people together in one room, creating a space for recognition, exchange, and connection.

More Than Just an Exhibition

'Irish Art Now' was conceived as a landmark event to celebrate the contributions of Irish artists and foster new connections. The last significant survey of UK-based Irish artists took place over 25 years ago with '0044: Contemporary Irish Artists in Britain' at PS1 Contemporary Art Center, New York (20 June – 13 September 1999), curated by Peter Murray, which later travelled to Crawford Art Gallery. For us, a renewed focus was necessary – not only to high-



Joe Duggan, *Untitled 69*, 2020, wood plaster and paint; photograph by Dr Matt Retallick.

light contemporary Irish artists, but also to acknowledge their substantial influence on British culture.

Given limitations of time, logistics, and funding, we decided to select artists who have made London their creative base. The quality of Irish artists working in London meant that many more could have been included, but space constraints required a careful selection. The entire process, from conception to opening, was completed in under three months. This included conducting research, contacting artists, building a mailing list, liaising with the embassy and galleries, arranging panelists, and organising the collection, delivery, and installation of artwork. We also designed and secured sponsorship for a catalogue.

The Irish Embassy in London provided a fitting and symbolic setting – an extension of home that acknowledges Irish identity and amplifies its creative influence internationally. A late Victorian Grade II listed mansion with grand proportions and an opulent French Renaissance style, it has been a vital space for Irish representation in the UK since 1949. However, this was the first time a contemporary visual art exhibition of this scale had been staged there. The listed status of the building required us to use existing hanging points and find creative solutions. As a working space with over 50 staff, logistical challenges had to be carefully managed.

The exhibition presented a broad spectrum of creative approaches and perspectives that reflect both Irish cultural narratives and engage with wider global discourses. Richard Malone's textile sculpture explores queerness and class, while Yuri Pattison's work examines the relationship between the digital economy and visual culture. Oisín Byrne's painting presents a pop-inspired portrait, Eva Rothschild's minimalist sculpture

explores art's relationship with materials, while Laura Ní Fhláibhín's sculptures engage with ancestry and care. Emmet Kierans's paintings reveal the imprint of popular films on the psyche. Through the interplay of light, colour, and material, Eve O'Callaghan's works refine painting to its essence. Anne Ryan's collage paintings distil London's energy through its people in motion. Kathy Prendergast's reworked maps reinterpret geographic expressions of power, Kerri McEvoy's redacted book critiques gendered violence, and Aislinn F's illustrations, centring Black women, question contemporary Irish identity. As artists, our individual practices reflect different concerns. Orla's works on paper explore Irish archival narratives of the diaspora, while Joe's sculptures interrogate meaning through form. Together, the presented works resisted a singular narrative, instead raising a multiplicity of artistic concerns, shaped by identity, power structures, and the impact of technology. As Dr Fionna Barber noted in her essay for the exhibition catalogue: "In short, it is impossible to pigeonhole contemporary Irish art in London into one category."

A Timely Conversation

The launch event on 13 January was distinct from a standard private view. Alongside the exhibition, it aimed to forge networks and strengthen cultural ties. Attended by 150 invited artists, curators, and art professionals, it also marked a moment of recognition for these guests and their professional achievements, many of whom hadn't visited the embassy before. Ambassador Martin Fraser welcomed the gathering, acknowledging in his opening speech the role of Irish artists in shaping the cultural landscape of their adopted home and strengthening bilateral relationships. Actor Adrian Dunbar, our invited speaker, reflected on the transformative potential of encountering art early in life and the importance of this initiative.

A panel discussion on 21 January, featuring Dr Fionna Barber, Helen Carey, Emma Goltz, and Mark O'Gorman, examined the significant challenges of sustaining an artistic practice in London while maintaining professional ties with Ireland. The discussion explored the limited institutional support for Irish arts in the UK, the complexities of Irish identity in a post-Brexit Britain, and the broader implications of cross-border cultural exchange. The discussion brought forth strong insights and critical perspectives from both panelists and attendees. The conversation underscored the urgency of these issues, highlighting the need for continued dialogue and concrete solutions.

To further amplify 'Irish Art Now', we produced a catalogue to serve as a record of the exhibition, participating artists, and curatorial vision. Funding was provided by the Department of Foreign Affairs of Ireland and sponsorship from The Doyle Collection, while the support of Ambassador Martin Fraser and the Embassy of Ireland staff was invaluable. However, above all, this initiative was made possible by the generosity of the exhibiting artists.

Looking ahead, it would be valuable to see Irish state buildings abroad used more widely as spaces for contemporary visual art. Building on the momentum of 'Irish Art Now', we are actively exploring ways to expand this initiative into a larger survey of Irish artists, with discussions underway for a future presentation at a major London institution. If you have insights or wish to support this growing initiative, we welcome your engagement – please get in touch with us.

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Hazel O'Sullivan, *Foradh*, 2024, acrylic on canvas; photograph by Joe Duggan.