

The background of the cover is a solid dark green. Overlaid on this are several large, light green geometric shapes. A prominent feature is a large, stylized letter 'A' that is partially obscured by other shapes. There are also several diagonal lines and triangular shapes that create a sense of depth and movement. The overall aesthetic is modern and minimalist.

WORKING ARTISTS ROSCOMMON

Joanne Laws

Roscommon Art Centre 2019



Frances Crowe, *The disappeared 1*, mixed media, 30cm x 30cm



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**A text in response to:
WAR - WORKING ARTISTS ROSCOMMON**

**Frances Crowe, Joseph Cunniffe, Honor FitzGerald,
Dympna Molloy, Noel Molloy & Anne Rigney**

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On the occasion of their group exhibition at Roscommon Arts Centre, it seems fitting to reflect on the tenacious history of Working Artists Roscommon – a collective of Roscommon-based artists, operating for almost 30 years under the acronym W.A.R. The group formed in 1990, when founding member, Noel Molloy, placed an advert in the local media. Following subsequent meetings and discussions, a formal group emerged, collectively asserting the priorities of visual artists as full-time workers, rather than hobbyists.

As well as supporting members with their individual projects, community engagement was also central to W.A.R's activities, embarking on an array of school projects, workshops and exhibitions. The group also worked closely with festivals and community groups, with a view to establishing a more prominent visual arts presence across the county. On reflection, promoting the arts in the Irish midlands was one of W.A.R's greatest achievements. As advocates for the arts across the region, they lobbied for "the allocation of a greater concentration of resources, to those working full-time in the visual arts, to enhance and compliment the environment"¹.

In search of studio spaces and workshop facilities, W.A.R were given permission to use Edenville House – a former RIC barracks, built in 1702 – with Roscommon County Council becoming the first local authority in Ireland to support and maintain studios for an artists' co-op. Among their plans for the building, W.A.R proposed to develop the county's first community arts centre. Funding of £250,000 was secured through the Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, and a site was later identified for a new building, which became Roscommon Arts Centre. At that time, The Artists Association of Ireland promoted W.A.R as a model for other collectives, based on the group's engagement with the local council, businesses and community groups.

Another of the group's core priorities was to identify alternative venues and vacant spaces in which to hold exhibitions, workshops and live events. W.A.R's first major exhibition took place in June 1990 at the crypt in St Peter and Paul's Church, Athlone, featuring more than 300 artworks. W.A.R were also given access to an empty space above the Bank of Ireland in Roscommon town, where they held annual exhibitions for a number of years. As members continued to exhibit widely - both individually and as a group - they established a range of international connections, which led to exhibitions in Germany, Poland and Scotland. W.A.R often hosted international artists in Roscommon, fostering an ethos of hospitality and cultural exchange that was epitomised during the inaugural *Crossroads Symposium* (14 - 27 August 1995) - an event organised by Noel Molloy and supported by W.A.R - which saw 18 Irish and international artists engage with the spaces and communities of Roscommon town, creating an array of performances, installations and site-specific projects.

As described by Roscommon County Council Arts Officer, Emer Leavy, the *Crossroads Symposium* provided an opportunity to "bring the arts and the artists, literally, to the people"². Permission was granted for artists to work "in and around venues that the local people were directly involved with on a daily basis" - from the church grounds and a roundabout intersection, to the old military barracks and library carpark. Leavy recalls that "for two glorious weeks, artists came and worked in and around the town, most using the local environment and its traditions, heritage and people as their inspiration". Prior to their arrival, accommodation for the exhibiting artists had been organised with a local B&B but was cancelled at short notice. The artists ended up staying in houses around the town - an arrangement that saw host

families becoming directly involved in various events, rallying around to help the artists transport and install their artworks. W.A.R members reflect on the event as a vibrant example of *meitheal* – an Irish term denoting a system of co-operative labour, whereby rural neighbours helped one another to complete tasks too cumbersome to undertake in isolation.

The extent of collaboration displayed during the Crossroads Symposium was reflected in many subsequent projects undertaken by W.A.R. Given that members each had existing commitments in the earlier years – such as full-time jobs and young families – operating as a group allowed them to share the workload of exhibition-making. Despite the breadth of their individual practices, W.A.R. always put together coherent group exhibitions, with themes converging around the natural landscape, materiality and the principles of craft.

Frances Crowe is an accomplished fibre artist whose work engages with humanitarian issues, most recently with a large-scale hand-woven tapestry, focusing on human displacement. The tapestry draws narrative connections between the passage of Syrian refugees across the Mediterranean Sea and the plight of those emigrating from Roscommon to Canada during the Irish famine. In a significant departure from her tapestry work, Frances will be showing a new series of textile sculptures, with a thematic focus on people who disappear. The ambiguous status of missing persons is reflected in the artist's use of transparent materials, a monochrome palette and figurative silhouettes, suspended within robust metal frames. Frances is an organiser of the 2020 International Fibre Art Festival, which will premiere at Roscommon Arts Centre, before touring to Galway and Edinburgh.



Also pursuing a semi-figurative approach, Joe Cunniffe harnesses the material properties of wood, creating sculptural forms inspired by nature. The artist lives near a forestry plantation and draws vast inspiration from this arboreal environment. Joe frequently works with bog oak – a dark, dense wood, formed over thousands of years and preserved in peatland – as well as pine, beech and the lesser-known

bog deal, which is lighter in colour. Led by the process of working with materials, he studies wood intensely, assessing the grain and undertaking sketches, before deciding what form each carving will take. Joe will exhibit a series of sculptures of varying sizes, which draw influence from tribal imagery, Celtic mythology and the natural world.



In a similar vein, Dympna Molloy's sculptural practice has always been led by natural materials – including stone, clay, grass, horsehair and flax – thematically addressing the impact of human habitation on the natural landscape. The artist thinks deeply about material history – particularly prehistoric innovations, brought about by alchemy and pyrotechnics, such as Neolithic bronze casting techniques. Her sculptures often integrate organic materials with

bronze, slate and leather, in order to assess how they may react with one another. Dympna's current body of work, 'In Front of My Eyes', takes its title from one of her poems. This sculptural installation comprises interconnected wall pieces and floor-based works, channelling an autobiographical impulse, based on her thoughts and observations as a female artist.



Honor FitzGerald also reflects her own circumstances and shifting perspectives on the world around her – a vantage-point she refers to as *súil eile*, or 'alternative view'. While Honor works primarily with paint, she also draws influence from her background in printmaking – manifesting in extensive use of texture, layering and stencilling, as

well as collage and frottage techniques. Similarly, Honor's approaches to mark-making draw on her material knowledge of clay – with scratching, dabbing and the dripping of pigment recalling ceramic glazing techniques. She uses drawing both as a research method and as a navigational tool. Figurative sketches of her immediate surroundings gradually become more abstract through the making process, facilitating the aesthetic process of subtraction, as a mode of thinking-through-making.

Opposite above: Joe Cunniffe, *Basket Lady*

Opposite below: Dympna Molloy, *In the making*

Above: Honor FitzGerald, *Place*, Oil on canvas, 100cm x 100cm

Next page above: Anne Rigney, *Heart Lands*

Next page below: Noel Molloy, *Neclaus Requiem*



Anne Rigney is a painter who frequently incorporates mixed-media elements, including collage, watercolour and ink drawing. Her abstract expressionist approach is anchored through a preoccupation with colour and line. Using photographs as source material, Anne documents her rural surroundings, tracking nuanced details, such as the reflection of light on water, or the movement of shadows across the landscape. She is particularly drawn to rivers and lakes, symbolic of flux and transition. Her painterly engagement is largely unconscious and instinctive; however, autobiographical aspects are present, tracing pivotal events in the artist's life. Following a recent health issue, her current series of paintings, titled 'Heartlines', will be installed in a linear configuration, mirroring an electrocardiogram display. Across these paintings, recurring circular forms seem to suggest vessels or inverted bells, hinting at spiritual reflections on the cyclical flow of life.



Noel Molloy's multidisciplinary practice includes sculpture, performance and live events. Noel will exhibit a series of semi-figurative sculptures, titled 'Nucleus Requiem', fabricated using found objects and domestic detritus in a distinctive bricolage style – a politicised art historical genre, associated with a rejection of consumer culture and the commercial art market. Noel

has also developed live art events for the exhibition: 'Going Home' will be performed on 16 August; while 'Whatever Happened to Baby Jane' takes place on Culture Night, 20 September. That same night, Noel will host an Arts Cabaret at J.J. Harlows Bar. This will be the nineteenth edition of the Arts Cabaret - an experimental platform, devised by Noel in the late '90s (in collaboration with Patrick Anderson-McQuoid), for artists working in various disciplines to perform new material. In the spirit of cabaret, audience participation is encouraged. The broader public can also contribute remotely - via fax machine, in the early days (producing its own kind of performative drama) and more recently, via email or Skype.

All of the previous Cabarets have been meticulously documented by Noel, along with the expansive activities of W.A.R. From an archival perspective, the history of W.A.R parallels the evolution of pre-digital and post-internet technology. Members vividly recount stories of exhibitions being organised via fax, letters and telephone. Documentation of exhibitions spans VHS tape, scanned photographs and slides, while exhibition ephemera takes the form of photocopies, typed transcripts and newspaper cuttings. The majority of this material has since been digitised and uploaded to a website³. Perusing this extensive archive, one notices that the activities of W.A.R span not just visual art, but local politics, community education, rural regeneration and cultural exchange. In this way, W.A.R functions as a manifesto for collaboration, galvanised through an unwavering capacity for hard work and sustained through enduring friendships - something at the heart of all historically significant art collectives.

Notes:

1. Frances Crowe, quoted in 'Roscommon Declares an Arts WAR', Roscommon Herald, 1990.
2. Emer Leavy, foreword, The Crossroads Symposium catalogue, 1995.
See: crossroads95art.weebly.com
3. See: workingartistsroscommon.weebly.com

Working Artists Roscommon are a long established collective of visual artists based in Roscommon. As part of Roscommon Arts Centre's 8 DEGREE West programme that hinges on celebrating the legacy, and future, of visual arts in the county, this exhibition will present new works ranging from installation, mixed media painting, to sculpture and performance by all 6 founding members; Frances Crowe, Joseph Cuniffe, Honor Fitzgerald, Dympna Molloy, Noel Molloy and Anne Rigney.

Frances Crowe's new body of work is based on the ambiguous status of missing persons, reflected in the use of transparent materials and figurative silhouettes suspended in metal frames.

Joseph Cuniffe's work harness the material properties of wood, creating sculptural forms inspired by nature.

Dympna Molloy explores the manipulation of women by culture, media, religion, family and other women.

Noel Molloy changes the function of objects from piano keys as fingers to knives as wings, where every object has other uses and endless possibilities.

Honor FitzGerald's work reflects her surroundings, circumstances and changing perspectives.

Anne Rigney incorporates mixed media collage elements onto her paintings. This body of work *Heartlines* reflects her inner landscape and interaction with the world.

About Roscommon Arts Centre's Visual Art Writer In Residence

Visual Art Writer's Sue Rainsford and Joanne Laws are the Roscommon Arts Centre's Visual Art Writer's in Residence for 2019. During this time, Joanne & Sue are invited to write critical texts on selected exhibitions and projects happening across the county. The intention of this residency is to allow writers to experiment with their writing style and explore new ways of disseminating their work. Their writings will be available at Roscommon Arts Centre and online as they are published.

Joanne Laws is an arts writer, editor and researcher based in county Roscommon. She has recently been appointed Features Editor of the Visual Artists' News Sheet, where she will commission and develop new writing for an Irish arts readership. Joanne is a member of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) and a regular contributor to international arts publications including Art Monthly and Frieze. She was assistant editor for the online resource publicart.ie and has previously developed research reports and policy documents for organisations such as 126 Artist-Run Gallery, Kilkenny Arts Office and Youth Work Ireland.

Working Artists Roscommon exhibition has been selected as the Percent for Art project to mark the opening of the new extension at Roscommon Arts Centre. The build project was funded by Roscommon Council Council and part-funded by the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.
