

*Commissioned exhibition text by Dawn Williams*

*At first / I was land* is the first of a new annual **Emerging Curator Award** exhibition created by the innovative **Backwater Artists**. Highlighting the ongoing need for creative producers to gain support and opportunity across the arts sector, this framework (both mentored and financial) is essential in nurturing and platforming the next generation.

Curated by **Niamh Brown**, *At first / I was land* features the work of five artists – **Debbie Godsell, Paul Gaffney, Fiona Kelly, Sarah Long and Róisín O’Sullivan** – whose work resonates with Eavan Boland’s poem “Mother Ireland” (first published in 1995) which Brown has taken as a starting point for the exhibition. Echoing Boland’s poetical narrative, Brown’s deft understanding of the work enables the curation of the visual and material facets of each of the artworks to speak and, importantly, to be recognised.

**Debbie Godsell**’s two striking colour photographic prints *Elizabeth; Queen* and *Amos; Farmer* are taken from a wider series *The Protestors* (2023) where each portrait re-imagines a person connected to the land, whether by work or ownership. The two heads, constructed with natural ephemera include wheat, turf, barley, shells which, combined with domestic haberdashery items of printed cottons and trimmings, create *Mummer*-like heads. The ‘protestors’ – each appearing muted – consider frugality and zero-waste but also address the gap of knowledge regarding Irish Protestant folklore archived in Irish State institutions. As Godsell has remarked, there is a gap in the representation of ‘the poor and the plain [Irish] protestants[1]’ and their customs which include Harvest Thanksgiving where ‘every October their churches would be festooned with produce to celebrate the hard work’[2].

To the right of Godsell’s work is a photographic image of a haycock, drawn from lifeless gorse and scrub placed on an elevated low stone wall to prevent fire creep once the gorse is set alight and its ashes replenish the soil. This work, along with two other images in this exhibition, are from **Paul Gaffney**’s series *We Make the Path by Walking* (2012) which focuses on the idea of long-distance walking as a form of meditation. Detailing human interaction with the landscape, scrubland flora, and long, lush, cultivated grasslands, the materiality of the images prompts the viewer to pause and consider the overlooked components of our surroundings.

Materiality is central to the three exquisite small-scale paintings by **Róisín O’Sullivan** [3]. Created on found wood, O’Sullivan’s painterly relationship to the materials of the natural world is immediate and sympathetic in which her work could be characterised as being gently guided by nature’s own process of mark-making. With each individually paint-stroke recorded, and considered, the marks become part of a larger reciprocating conversation between surface, line and gesture between paint and panel, creating intriguing, evocative landscapes and mesmeric mind fields.

**Fiona Kelly**'s practice is synonymous with land, and human interaction with and extraction from it. *A Temporary Iteration, Formed by chance* (2020-2023) features four birch ply scalenohedron structures – which emulate the crystal formation of the mineral calcite – punctuate the floor. Printed onto three of the meticulously constructed forms are images of fallow land and flora, as bleak as they are beautiful. The fourth structure has a small embedded ocular window in which one views Kelly's video of a desolate concrete slag pile and the restorative flora of a pink cornflower, offering a metaphoric olive branch between human impact and nature's resilience.

**Sarah Long**'s floor-based video *Tread softly because you tread on my dreams* looks at land, albeit on a micro scale whilst addressing big thematics. Using a digital pen to draw the outline of each frond and leaf contained in a static image, she retells her dreams through her auto-fictional character, Mary – a present-day embodiment of the Mother Ireland figure. Punctuated by stories centred around men's foibles, including those of Samuel Beckett, Michael Collins (NASA astronaut), and William Martin Murphy, whom, when she confronts the 'feckin gombeen' [who is stalking her around Cork City] tells her 'to be a good girl and go about your day'. To underline the power of Irish patriarchy, below the image of the leaves and fronds, are distorted black and white moving images of Ireland's key political figures including General Michael Collins. Long's mesmeric continuous drawing combined with her monologue is as funny as it is serious, and whilst her drawing is strangely mediative, her narrative offers a meandering yet powerful reflection on society's relationship with women, as Mary says: 'I fear we are on a one-way march.., I feel we are just stuck...its incessant and it doesn't seem to matter...it won't stop because the ghosts still have their say.'

For a comparatively small exhibition space, Brown adeptly creates enough breathing space and tension within the display to enable the works to both converse and listen with each other. For me, the artists' concern with the subjects of their work, alongside Brown's perceptive exhibition curation, gently echoes the words of Eavan Boland herself: 'I began to feel a great tender heartedness towards these things that were denied their visionary life'[4].

[1] Debbie Godsell in conversation with Cristín Leach at Uillinn, Skibbereen 22 February 2025 (YouTube) accessed 16 March 2025

[2] Ditto

[3] Róisín O'Sullivan works (l-r) *Gold Night* (2022), *Summer Birdsong* (2021) and *Vesper* (2022)

[4] 'Conversation: Poet Eavan Bolan' PBS NewsHour 9 March 2012 (YouTube) accessed 17 March 2025.

Dawn Williams, *Crawford Art Gallery*