

Moran Been-noon  
Fiona Harrington  
Roisín McGuigan  
Marie Phelan

# FILE NOTE VII

File Note is a yearly publication reviewing the work of Fire Station Artists' Studios (FSAS) Practice Awardees, who avail of a three-month residency in either Digital Media or Sculpture. Every year, FSAS commissions a writer to produce critical essays about their practice.

FSAS recognises the need for critical writing in the visual arts sector in Ireland. The File Note provides space for a considered critical essay profiling FSAS artists nationally and internationally. It's an opportunity for experimenting new ways of writing, as well as a way of publishing on the thinking, methods and achievements of annually awarded artists. The essays are a capital that the artists can then carry with them.

File Note is distributed to multiple arts and cultural institutions, as well as relevant third-level facilities, and is also available in soft-copy.

The 2023 Practice Awardees who completed their residency at FSAS are Fiona Harrington (Sculpture), Roisín McGuigan (Sculpture), and Marie Phelan (Digital Media).

The commissioned writer for File Note VII is Moran Been-noon.

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## Biographies

**Moran Been-noon** is a Dublin-based visual artist, independent curator, and writer. She predominantly makes moving image installations, using animation, archived material, and non-traditional projections. Her artwork explores post-migration living and using her own identity and lived experience, how compound ethnicities influence one's sense of belonging.

In 2022-2023, Moran curated a group exhibition for the Irish Arts Center in NYC. Alongside her independent curatorial practice, she completed a 2-year curatorial residency with *glór* in Ennis, County Clare in 2022. In 2021 she exhibited two acculturation-related visual art projects in Dublin: an installation as part of 'On Belonging' exhibition at The Library Project; and an interactive digital video commission for The LAB. In 2023, she will be exhibiting a solo exhibition at the South Tipperary Arts Centre in Clonmel, and in the visual art gallery at Axis, Ballymun.

**Fiona Harrington** is a visual artist who uses handmade lace as an integral part of her practice. She studied Fine Art at Crawford College, Textile Design at NCAD, Lacemaking at the Kenmare Lace and Design Centre and completed an MA in Art and Research Collaboration at IADT, Dún Laoghaire.

She has been the recipient of the Thomas Damann Bursary, RDS Graduate Prize, National Craft Award, Eleanor De La Branchardiere Prize, Traditional Lacemakers Award, Percent for Art Commission and the reimagined Branchardiere Bursary in 2021.

Fiona's work has been exhibited widely and was included in a 3-person exhibition, *Lace, Paint, Hair* at the National Gallery of Ireland in 2020. In 2022 she was an invited artist for *Soft Things in Hard Times* at the Olivier Cornet Gallery, and she has exhibited as part of annual exhibitions at the RHA, Cairde Visual Arts Festival, DLR Lexicon and Visual Centre for Contemporary Art.

She has travelled extensively giving talks and demonstrations on Irish lace in 2018, she spoke at the Textile Arts Centre in New York, *Straight Out of Ireland Exhibition* in Philadelphia in 2019 and was invited to present her work at the *Home/Making Symposium* at Concordia University, Montreal in May 2023. In 2024, she will travel to Tennessee, to teach at the International Organisation of Lacemakers annual convention.

In 2021, she represented Ireland at *Doily Free Zone*, an international symposium exploring lacemaking in contemporary art and design. The same year she was selected to the Michelangelo Foundation's *Homo Faber Guide*, which celebrates European excellence in craftsmanship, where she is currently one of only 4 lacemakers in Europe to be featured.

Most recently, she was awarded the *Fire Station Artists' Studios Practice Award (Sculpture)*, where she is exploring combining handmade lace with mould making, casting techniques and wire sculpture.

**Roisín McGuigan**'s practice is an auto-ethnographic reflection on place, phenomena, and the reverberations of growing up near the Northern Irish border – a complicated and unruly place explored through research, memory and anecdote, and realised through painting, sculpture and text.

McGuigan is a graduate of NCAD, Burren College of Art, and Turps Art School, London. She is the recipient of the inaugural Graphic Studio Dublin Expanded Print Residency 2022 and a Fire Station Artists' Studios Practice Award 2023, and has received bursaries from the Arts Council, Dublin City Council, Kerry County Council and Creative Ireland.

Her work has featured in numerous exhibitions in venues at home and abroad including VISUAL Carlow, Rua Red, Crawford Municipal Gallery of Art, Hun Gallery, New York, and Rugby Art Gallery & Museum, UK, and included in *30 Years, Artists, Places*, a touring exhibition of Irish Art 2015-17 and *Sense of Place* in Matera, Italy, during European City of Culture 2019. McGuigan lives and works in Dublin.

**Marie Phelan** is a multidisciplinary artist who expresses her work through audio, drawing, site-specific exploration, moving image and sculpture. Her focus lies in the realms of transformation, magic, ritual, and belief. The persistence of the Otherworld in the landscape, interwoven with questions of identity and culture, inform her artistic investigations.

Most recently she was resident at Fire Station Artists' Studios, Dublin, through a Practice Award (Digital Media) (2023); exhibited at the Highlanes Gallery, Drogheda, Co. Louth (2023) and engaged in a Live Drawing Collaboration through PS2, Belfast (2023).

Previous exhibitions include 126 Gallery & Studios, Galway (2023); Castletown House, Kildare (2021); The LAB Gallery, Dublin (2020); The Complex, Dublin (2017); and *Sculpture in Context*, Dublin (2016) with residencies at Cill Rialaig Arts Centre, Kerry (2023) and Paragon Studios, Belfast (2022).

She holds an MA in Art and Research Collaboration through IADT (2020). Her work has been supported by the Arts Council Ireland and Carlow Arts Service.

## FIONA HARRINGTON

The history of lace is vast, socially and geographically specific, and in parts still not completely clear. The context of lacemaking as an art practice, thus, comes with a variety of answers – some respond to the context of a class or place, others stem from perceptions of gender and labour. Dublin-based artist, Fiona Harrington’s practice started from painting abstract compositions and grew into lacemaking-focused artwork. The pieces all start from the artist’s research into lacemaking history and social implications, which inspires a narrative and a thematic around each body of work, but the meaning at the core of each piece emerges from the connection between the lace and other materials she thoughtfully connects them to.

My first encounter with Harrington’s work was with her piece *Fragile Economies* (2020). This is a sculptural piece made of halved eggshells, with delicately formed lacework attached to the shell rims. In a way, the two materials can be considered as juxtaposed, one being simple, hard, and natural and the other intricate, soft, and hand-made, but the stories they tell connect in a non-contrasting way. Eggs in contemporary art come with their own vast history, often symbolising life, potential, purity, and in some cases even health or rebirth (with religious contexts sometimes attached to these ideas). When looking at this piece by the artist, the idea of “labour” immediately comes to mind, relevant particularly in an Irish context, where both lace and eggs are significant parts of Irish women’s labour history. Eggs are a symbol of women’s financial independence in rural Ireland until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, where money earned from selling eggs and butter was traditionally kept as additional income, emergency money, and a source of power and standing. During her time as part of the Fire Station Artists’ Studios Practice Award, the artist worked on an expansion of this piece, creating fine porcelain likeness pieces of the eggshells, introducing another hand-formed fragile material into this narrative, onto which she will stitch her laceworks.

For those who are not familiar with the Irish-specific context, the dual meaning of the word labour in a feminist context is important. The intricacies of lacemaking are extremely labour-intensive, which links to the intense moments of the childbearing process, culminating in labour and childbirth. For such powerful metaphors, Harrington’s work is exceptionally peaceful, with the delicacy of the shell and the thread giving the piece a fragile and exquisite beauty. The piece is currently being redeveloped in porcelain, giving further emphasis to the materials’ hard and soft nature alongside their delicacy and fragility.

An Irish focus with a feminist point of view is present in more of Harrington’s pieces. Most of the artist’s work presented at the studio was needle lace, two-dimensional fibre art often created by making many tiny stitches following a pattern. The needle lace works at Harrington’s studio are small delicate designs made in white thread, some of them shaped into three-dimensional sculptural pieces using thin wire. Standing out in the studio was a work-in-progress black bobbin lace piece. Bobbin lace production is a somewhat more cumbersome process, with a pillow acting as a work surface, tiny pins marking the design, and dozens of bobbins (ornamented pen-sized spools) that are used to twist and braid the fine threads around the pins, with the pattern progressing along the surface of the work pillow.

This work, under the title *In Memory* (2022), was included in Cairde Sligo Arts Festival as a work in progress with the pillow, pins, and bobbins still attached. The black lace links the project to mourning customs of wearing black textiles, practiced particularly by the mourning women who draped themselves in black, embodying the family’s bereaved condition. Harrington’s piece is a slow process that includes, alongside the twisting of bobbins and threads, meditation on the lives lost at the Tuam Mother and Baby Homes, to whom this piece is dedicated. The time spent creating, disseminating, and devising the next steps of what is planned to be a mixed media installation when it is completed is akin to the time needed by the Irish public to process the atrocities in Tuam – it is slow, thorough, and thoughtful, and the outcome is yet to be revealed.

Alongside working on her solitary practice of making lace, during her time at Fire Station Artists’ Studios, the artist engaged in a more direct socially-participatory piece in a recent collaborative sculpture, *Threading the Tower* (2023). This piece, a large structure made of thin copper wire, is designed after the Clondalkin Round Tower. This work is a crochet lace collage with lace “bricks” created by local lacemakers and stitched onto the wire structure by the artist. The tower was commissioned to exhibit across South Dublin County libraries, and to be eventually installed at the Clondalkin Visitor Centre.

A unique feature of Irish historical architecture, round towers were, among other roles and meanings, a symbol of power and wealth. By reimagining this structure together with an all-women group of lacemakers, effectively acting as builders, Harrington once again claims feminine power and standing through traditional labour. In this work as well, it is the encounter, the seam between the lace and the other materials in the piece that creates the meaning. In this case place, architecture, and community, is what gives the artwork its conceptual weight, as well as political and contextual impact.

Harrington’s lacemaking practice is at the root of her art practice, with the making traditions and the history of the process, as well as the material itself, acting as inspiration for the concept and politics of her creations. While most of the work we discussed at the studio visit is still in progress, the artist’s own view of her practice and its specific role in the visual art field is very clear – local, timely, and meticulously creative responses to political, social, and cultural aspects of Irish society, an apt reflection of the traditional role of Irish lacemaking itself.

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## **ROISÍN MCGUIGAN**

The idea of holism, unifying matter and spirit into an all-encompassing notion of being, was developed in 1926 to indicate the advantages in considering a whole as greater and more meaningful than the sum of its parts. The roots of the term can be found, among other sources, in the Platonic idea of the soul as it appears in several dialogues as part of the human body, suggesting that when treating an illness, the whole being should be considered and examined. (Smuts, 1927)

Holism in art and in politics came to mind while I was visiting artist Roisín McGuigan at her studio in Mountjoy Square in Dublin. The artist, who grew up in a Northern Irish village that had its historic mill transformed in the 1970s to an army barracks, has been exploring meaning and function along the village's timeline in a manner that can only be looked at holistic. The approach is central to McGuigan's artwork, not looking at the historical and the political as separate from current life, rather emphasising that the past, the conflict, and labour history of the place are present and experienced by its population, including current and previous residents.

The work, being auto-ethnographic, certainly uses the artist's memories as source material to express a creative and political narrative. However, she uses the physical attributes of past memories to discuss situations of right now. The Northern Irish conflict, border issues, identity questions, and political turbulences are still very much present.

*The Kissing Gate* (2023) stands alone in a space. A familiar shape, this gate design is originally set up to prevent livestock from passing through a gate, but without a fence around it, it is a futile task. The artist offers us a choice: we can walk around the gate, neither engaging nor recognising this confined and limited passage; or we can step up to the gate, decide which side we want to walk through, put our hand on the cold steel, feel the resistance of the hinges, and hear the clang of the metal as the gate hits one of the sides of the "trap". We're not reminiscing, it's happening now.

McGuigan offers us opportunities to experience an embodiment of a conflict. Alongside the steel gate materialised from her memories, she has created abstractions of letters taken out of two phrases that she uses as meditations on her views of the situation in the North: "non-negotiable past" and "former impossible potential". These two-dimensional sculptures, made from steel rods, are standing on the floor, creating shadows of indecipherable text, and making it difficult not to try and "mouth" the shapes of the abstract words — an impossible task, of course. Both the gate and the abstract shapes are made of bent and welded steel, a first exploration by the artist into metalwork, which she developed as part of her Practice Award at the Fire Station Artists' Studio.

The exploration into letters follows previous ventures by the artist that explore words, phrases, and verbal narratives that are part of the conflict. She experiments with candid expression, such as with the letterforms above, but also with self-redacted expression which, to me, is an exceptionally Irish practice. One exploration, extracting adjectives out of a written text, taking away any opinion they might express, at the cost of remaining with a neutral description. The discarded words end up forming "adjective poetry" - an affected, emotional, heated narrative made purely of adjectives. Adopting once again a holistic view of the state of affairs in NI, McGuigan also created a physical expression of this word-based practice, by using remnants of flax threads to create an artwork, inserting the previous function of the barracks as a mill as another aspect telling the story of the place.

Art about Northern Irish politics, sectorial identities, and border questions is not difficult to find. There are accepted narratives and forms of visible expression of the historical and the current Northern Irish conflict construct. However, such a compound socio-historical construct like the NI conflict cannot be encompassed in a single structural instance. (Nashif, 2012) McGuigan's work delivers an alternative expression that focuses on the physical experience in the simple, everyday existence as part of a conflict. *Revenant* (2023) is a 2-dimensional installation companion piece to *The Kissing Gate*, that was included in the exhibition 'Remembering the Future' at VISUAL Carlow. The piece is a 2D map of the gate's architecture, drawn on the ground: an open circle, the hinge pole, and the gate. Similarly to her work with text, where she created a neutral version and an affected version, the artist offers us an option of neutrality. It is easy to miss, and as an artwork in an art gallery, most visitors who noticed it probably moved around it rather than engage with it.

The real challenge in reading this artist's work is in the mix between the holistic approach to this political narrative and the abstracted forms of visual art. A necessary challenge, inspiring us, the audience, to engage with the artwork's subject matter as a current political reality. There is a daring freedom in the approach, not limiting the storytelling aspect to a certain period on a timeline, nor limiting the medium or technique to a specific world of materials. The artist asks us, her audience, to engage our own muscle memories in order to connect with her memories and perceptions of the political present. Through triggering our familiarity with moving through a kissing gate, the floor-based piece will have an impact. It is the activation that is in her installation work that loads political understanding into our experience of her work: when we physically feel the situation, we can understand that it is more than mere memory, or history.

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#### **MARIE PHELAN**

I meet Marie Phelan in a café on Talbot Street in Dublin, our conversation is one of six others happening in the space, alongside background music, coffee machine sounds, and traffic noise from the street. We talk about her work, in a conversation that spans four prominent concepts: sound, place, stones, community. These ideas do not come up in the conversation in an intentional hierarchy, they are intertwined within a chronology of artistic development that kept expanding and contracting around them.

When you click your fingers (or make any other sound, including a musical note), the sound ripples travelling towards your ears involve changes in the pressure of the air. (Powell, 2012)

Phelan is a multidisciplinary artist, with a practice that spans digital audio and video, drawing, installation, and a type of "situational" performative process which stands as an informing context to the art outcomes. Sound appears in all these disciplines, it is audio, of course; it is also present in the video and imagery in forms of textures, patterns, and rhythms; it can be found in the performative moments through the ephemeral nature of generating sound in a place by a community; above all, sound is sculptural since the disturbance of air in the artwork is palpable and physical.

Advancing through the work, we start from *Shapeshifter* (2020) where the recordings of crows were digitally processed into a choral-like audio art piece. In *Shapeshifter 2* (2020), the crows were brought to Oweynagat cave in Co. Roscommon, which is said to be the home of the Morrigan, as the first of Phelan's 'Temporary Site Exploration' series. The audio was played in the cave and recorded on location as a nod, among other things, to Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1969). The outcome, for all intents and purposes is a recording of the sound of a Carlow caucus of crows as its ripples bounce off the rock surfaces of Oweynagat cave.

Since infants in the womb react both to unstructured noise and to music with movements which their mothers can feel, it seems likely that auditory perception prompts the baby's first realisation that there is something beyond itself to which it is nevertheless related. (Storr, 1997)

The action of playing recordings of a "caucus" was repeated in *Darkness* (2021), in a solitary venture to Dowth Hall Neolithic site and house in Co. Meath. This project started during the pandemic lockdowns, so Phelan gathered a group for a Zoom vocalising session, digitally exploring an unlocked potential of our voice as a primal connection to our humanity. The recordings were then played in-situ, re-recorded as the auditory qualities met with megalithic stone carvings and Georgian architecture. The sound filled the spaces between walls and among the rocks, creating an audio piece that is effectively a time-based sculpture that spans over centuries, each element of the location responding to the encounter with a contemporary digital community. The architecture, echo, and reverberation are very present in the piece, with human voices acting as a source material.

Stones are transitory lumps of rotting sea creatures or mineral particles that gradually clump tightly together under geological pressure before eroding again over an even longer duration. Languages move at greater speed, but they too peter out. (Magan, 2020)

The most recent addition to Phelan's 'Temporary Site Exploration' series happened at The Hill of Allen in Co. Kildare earlier in 2023. The processing and editing of this part of the series took place in part at Fire Station Artists' Studios media suites, as part of the artist's Practice Award work. Finally, the folkloric and the historical physically met the current community and the ripples it can create in a live performative moment, allowing the artist to witness, document, and create a response to all four prominent concepts at one time. Currently still a work in progress, Phelan's video and audio work negotiates The Hill of Allen's 21<sup>st</sup> Century reality as a quarry and its mythological role, said to be a camp and battleground of Fionn mac Cumhaill and the Fianna.

The voices of the community are more prominent in the audio and video artwork's current state, an interesting phase which brings us back to Phelan's four concepts: sound, place, stones, community. In this project, seemingly more so than in previous iterations of the broader development of her practice, human relationships are fundamental to the creation. The artist did not settle for a digital bridging between eras and potentials, but sculpted a live performance with a group of vocalisers who surrounded the circular tower on the top of the hill under which, it is believed, rest the bones of Fionn mac Cumhaill.

Anything that vibrates or disturbs the air in a regular way between twenty and 20,000 times a second will produce a note. (Powell, 2012)

Back at the café, Phelan allowed for a preview of the visuals, including digitally processed drawings edited into a video exploration of the site, a preview which acted as a window into the editing suite at Fire Station Artists' Studios, a moment of privileged insight into the process. But by the nature of the meeting's location, it didn't feel reasonable to try and listen to the audio pieces there and then. The sound element felt important and symbolic of the nature of her work, creating disturbances to the air, moving factions of voices from the present to the past through an encounter with fragments of stone and stonework. This negative-space-sculptural work culminates with the idea of frequency, and more specifically in the gap between the vibration frequency of the human voice and that of rock, or stone. With its latest iteration being work in progress, this culmination exists as potential, but how it will comment on our relationships with place, language, and material past in Ireland remains a fascinating point of exploration.

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