

BIOGRAPHIES

Isabel Nolan's work looks at how aesthetic sensibilities and diverse ways of knowing inform worldviews. She makes objects that undertake to communicate a fundamental contingency to existence, artworks that intimate that the search for meaning and beauty is both necessary and absurd. The work is underpinned by a desire to examine and embed in material form, challenging, seductive or intense moments and meetings with both ideas and phenomena. For Nolan this exploration happens through making things in a wide range of media, whether monumental or intimate in scale, they are tentative and precarious markers of the experience of our place beneath the sun. Recent solo exhibitions/projects include Launch Pad, New York (2015); Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (2014); Musée d'art moderne de Saint Etienne, France (2012); The Model, Sligo, Ireland (2011); Artspace, New Zealand (2008); Gallery 2, Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin (2008) and Project Arts Centre, Dublin (2005). In 2005, Nolan represented Ireland at the 51st Venice Biennale as part of a group exhibition, *Ireland at Venice 2005*.

Tim Stott is Lecturer in Art History and Theory at Dublin Institute of Technology and Associate Researcher at the Graduate School of Creative Arts and Media, Dublin. His monograph *Play and Participation in Contemporary Arts Practice* was published by Routledge in 2015.



SPACE: Maggie Groat

27 January - 13 April 2016

The fifth artist to create a commissioned work for SPACE, Mercer Union's billboard project, is Maggie Groat.

Groat works across a variety of media including collage, sculpture, artists' books, site-specific interventions, and field studies. Forming an ongoing research-based practice, her work explores studies for possible futures, alternative and marginalized ways-of-knowing, salvage practices, and relationships and reconnections to place, from a hybrid Indigenous/Settler perspective. Through reconfiguring and re-contextualizing found and salvaged materials, she assembles images, sculptures, tools and situations that enable moments of envisioning and the potential for action.

Groat studied visual art and philosophy at York University before attending The University of Guelph, where she received an MFA degree in 2010. In fall 2014, she was the Artist Scholar in Residence at Emily Carr University in Vancouver. Select forthcoming and recent exhibitions include; *Maggie Groat*, YZ Artist's Outlet, Toronto; *Field Diaries*, The Orilla Museum of Art & History, Orilla; *Showroom*, Art Museum at the University of Toronto, Toronto (all 2016); *Séance Fiction*, Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff; *Custom Made*, Kamloops Gallery, Kamloop, BC; *Reading the Line*, Western

Front, Vancouver; *For insufficient interest in present circumstances*, Erin Stump Projects, Toronto; *Impermanent Collections, Temporary Occupations and Other Gatherings*, Rodman Hall Art Centre, St. Catharines, ON, (all 2015). She currently lives on the southern shore of Lake Ontario.

SPACE is a series of commissioned works for the billboard space on the side of Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art. The series began in the spring of 2014, previous contributing artists include: Liz Knox (CA), Giles Round (UK), Walter Scott (CA) and most recently Olivia Plender (UK/SE).

Thank You!

We are grateful to our friends, members and patrons who generously contributed to our 2015 Commission Campaign. Funds raised will support a commissioned artist's project in 2016.

As one of Canada's leading artist-run centres, Mercer Union continues to evolve as an important presentation space for contemporary art in Toronto and a place where artists are seen first, allowing for open engagement with new art practices. Our ability to make amazing things happen depends on the support of our community. In order to provide artists with a professional platform, we rely on the help of our friends who share our commitment to artists working at the cutting edge of contemporary art.

Membership is the most direct way to support the gallery and share in our activities. Most importantly, our members' contributions help Mercer Union maintain its high standard of programs for everyone to enjoy.

To our members - we thank you, and to those not yet initiated - we look forward to having you join us on our journey.

If you are not yet a member, help Mercer Union support the work of artists by purchasing a membership and join the community of art enthusiasts contributing to present exciting practices and new contemporary art for Toronto audiences. Enjoy a closer connection to the gallery and its unique mix of artist-run culture.

Visit www.mercerunion.org/join-support to subscribe as a member with access to special benefits and programs.

FORUM: Sven Lütticken: *Motion, Captured*

Thursday 31 March, 7PM

Mercer Union is delighted to partner with the Power Plant and Images Festival to present a lecture by Sven Lütticken on Thursday 31 March at 7PM at the Studio Theatre in Harbourfront Centre.

Taking in a range of practices from artistic and other contexts, Lütticken will analyze modern and contemporary forms of motion study, motion tracking and motion capture. Lütticken teaches art history at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, where he coordinates the research master's program in Visual Arts, Media and Architecture: Critical Studies in Art and Culture. He is the author of the books *Secret Publicity: Essays on Contemporary Art* (2006), *Idols of the Market: Modern Iconoclasm and the Fundamentalist Spectacle* (2009) and *History in Motion: Time in the Age of the Moving Image* (2013).

Space is limited. Visit thepowerplant.org or call the Harbourfront Centre Box Office at 416.973.4000 to purchase tickets Power Plant Members FREE / \$15 Non-Members. Please note: there are a limited number of free tickets available from Mercer Union, to reserve a place email katie@mercerunion.org

This event will be followed by a workshop on Saturday 2 April 2016. For more information visit www.powerplant.org



UPCOMING AT MERCER UNION

Beloved Martina...

An exhibition by Carlos Motta, including works by Arisleida Delone, Del LaGrace Volcano and others
14 April - 4 June 2016

Carlos Motta is a multi-disciplinary artist whose work draws upon political history in an attempt to create counter narratives that recognize suppressed histories, communities, and identities. His work is known for its engagement with histories of queer culture and activism and for its insistence that the politics of sex and gender represent an opportunity to articulate definite positions against social and political injustice. Motta's work has been presented internationally in venues such as Tate Modern, London; The New Museum, Museo de Arte del Banco de la República, Bogotá; Museu Serralves, Porto; and Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona. This is his first exhibition in Canada.



Carlos Motta, *Deseos / حنين* 2015, HD 16:9, video, color, sound.
Image courtesy of Mor Charpentier Galerie, Paris and Galeria Filomena Soares, Lisbon Nolan,



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Cover image: Isabel Nolan *The weakened eye of day*, installation view of at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2014. Image courtesy of the artist and Irish Museum of Modern Art.

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Isabel Nolan *The Weakened Eye of Day*

12 February - 2 April 2016

Artist talk: Friday 12 February, 7PM

Opening reception to follow



Isabel Nolan *Nothing new under the sun*, 2014, 9 ceramic bowls. Image courtesy of the artist and Irish Museum of Modern Art.

Mercer Union is delighted to present a solo exhibition by Irish artist Isabel Nolan. The exhibition, *The weakened eye of day*, explores how light manifests as a metaphor in our thoughts, obsessions and pursuits, and includes text works, sculpture, ceramics, drawings, paintings and a photographic image. It presents an artistic account of the fundamental strangeness of the world and humanity's endeavors to order and rationalize the incomprehensible. This is Nolan's first solo exhibition in Canada.

The exhibition takes its title from Thomas Hardy's poem *The Darkling Thrush* (1899), in which the sun, described as 'the weakening eye of day,' is a dismal star drained of its force by a gloomy pre-centennial winter afternoon. As the sun's gaze weakens, so flags the spirit of the poet who, until interrupted by birdsong, sees only the inevitability of death in the cold world around him. This show is a material account of the strangeness of the world from the formation of the planet's crust to the death of the sun and the enduring preoccupation with light as a metaphor for truth.

Nolan's works both seduce and disarm us. Her work is underpinned by a desire to examine and capture in material form the moments of intensity that can define our encounters with the objects around us; inexplicable and unsettling moments that leave us with a heightened awareness of what is means to be alive. For Nolan this exploration happens through making things – whether these things are sculptures, textiles, photographs or texts, monumental or intimate in scale, they are presented to us as tentative and precarious markers of the experience of our place beneath the sun.

This exhibition is originated by the Irish Museum of Modern Art, and is presented in collaboration with Mercer Union and the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, where it will travel to in July 2016.

Mercer Union would like to acknowledge the generous support of Culture Ireland, provided as part of the International Culture Programme to celebrate Ireland 2016.

The Weakened Eye of Day

Tim Stott

Isabel Nolan's exhibition at Mercer Union derives its title from Thomas Hardy's poem *The Darkling Thrush*, written during the last hours of the nineteenth century. The fourth line describes the 'weakening eye of day,' a midwinter sun setting upon a desolate scene surveyed by the poet himself. Very much a poem of two parts, a 'full-hearted evensong/Of joy illimited' pierces this scene when a bedraggled, darkling thrush chooses 'to fling his soul/Upon the growing gloom' and sing of Hope in the century to come.

Nolan foregoes this familiarly Romantic, 'theophanic' image of nature for one in which the sun not only sets but will die without accompaniment. She brings some of Hardy's initial fin-de-siècle melancholy to bear upon three heliocentric or 'photocentric' cosmologies: the pre-human or mythic, the religious, and the scientific. A fourth domain (barely a cosmology), which we might call posthuman, abandons the sun entirely and leaves us hanging.

The exhibition extends across a variety of media; watercolours, coloured-pencil sketches, ceramics, jesmonite sculptures, metal sculptures hand-painted or padded, and a large-format photograph in black and white. There are two text works. One, which confronts a visitor immediately inside the exhibition, recounts the formation of a slab of variable gneiss 'four thousand, two hundred and eighty million years ago or so,' the other, the failed sun-bound flight of Icarus. The first attempts, quixotically, to write a phenomenology of a Rock, an emblem of a world before and beyond our ken. The Rock does not dream. It belongs to the 'Great Outdoors.'¹ Nolan's language is allusive, at times awkward, as it both illumines the edges of human knowledge and evokes the blind advance of natural processes.

Similarly, the watercolour *The Bureaucratic Indifference of Entropy to Yearning, Pain, or Repair* (2014) gropes its way toward some primeval landscape of sedimenting forms. The alternative, which Nolan distrusts, would be to grasp such ancestral objects, processes, and scenes within a mythic, frequently heliocentric narrative of Creation. We begin to sense that Nolan's sympathies are materialist, even if her means, and, perhaps, her artistic commitments, are formalist. The two often fail to add up, which provides much of the dynamics, pathos and humour of the exhibition.

Nevertheless, perhaps, as Walter Benjamin believed, a melancholic makes a particularly good materialist. She stubs her toe against the world and sorts through mortal and ruined fragments, which she gathers and displays.² In the second text work, *One Sun So Hot* (2014), Nolan recounts the tale of Icarus as a prelude to some thoughts on how human ambition often results in splendid, sometimes comic, even illustrious, failures. The counterpart to Nolan's melancholia is her attraction to creatures and materials – a Donkey and a Rock – and, as we shall see, a stubborn attachment to beauty.

In addition to the above, Nolan's approach to the three cosmologies is informal, amateur, and curious. Her mode of representation is more associative than illustrative. The nine ceramic bowls *Nothing New Under the Sun* (2014) replicate the characterisations of the planets in the Ptolemy's geocentric cosmology. The sun, comprising two stacked bowls and the only one lacking a hole in its surface, shows its perfection, whereas Earth is flawed, a 'twilight world of change and decay,' as Plato called it.³ The bowls, like the planets, are colour-coded, although not obviously gendered or associated with particular professions and sensibilities, as they were by Ptolemy.

The Ptolemaic system of nested circular orbits was a commonplace of medieval cosmology, integrated with astrology in a peculiar mixture of myth, augury, and precise mathematical abstraction. It was displaced by another light-based cosmology, that of reason and observation. The latter rather than revealed or divined light became the precondition of knowledge. Nolan takes this up with the set of seven pairs of coloured-pencil drawings, *Based on My Recent Observations 1-7* (2014). Using images sourced from the likes of the NASA site Astronomy Picture of the Day (APOD), Nolan sketches pulsars, nebulae, galaxies, planets. (Little surprise that the planets are Saturn and Jupiter, the first, the melancholic's curse, the second, her guide.)

Nolan points to an observable universe that challenges our human-scale models of vision but which, oddly, is also made to conform to pictorial conventions of orientation, depth of field, colouring, and so on. She encourages us to ask ourselves what picturing is required to make such cosmic events not just visible but visual. It would seem absurd, even quaint, to render these events with colouring pencils, but perhaps no less so than to render the stellar

¹ The phrase 'le Grand Dehors' (the Great Outdoors) to describe a pre-human or extra-human world is taken from Quentin Meillassoux, *Après la finitude: essai sur la nécessité de la contingence* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 21.

² See Walter Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, translated by John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977).

³ Republic, 508d.



Isabel Nolan *The weakened eye of day*, installation view at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2014. Image courtesy of the artist and Irish Museum of Modern Art.

nurseries of the Eagle Nebula recognisable as the Pillars of Creation. This might be a photo-centric cosmology (if we allow photo- to refer to the entire electromagnetic spectrum), but its display still partakes of an older, not yet superseded iconography.

The nested polystyrene spheres and hemispheres, *The effect of its past and the cause of its future* (2014), take a different approach to the visual culture of science. Coolly coloured and arranged casually, their forms suggest planetary cross-sections, orreries, and the like. Here we find an example of a particular use of the 'cognitive arts' of diagrams, charts, tables, graphs, maps and models.⁴ Similarly, the bones of a star chart make up *Somewhere between Andromeda and Vulpecula, Sky Atlas* (2014). Ordinarily, we take such models and maps to be examples of information design, whose primary purpose is to provide information about a given data set or a set of logical or causal relations within a system, albeit often at a level of generality that refers to a class of objects rather than any one object in particular. Nolan takes these ways of envisioning information, reduces their information content and beautifies them, which for her means to make them more generous, more open, and less reliable.

As a result, such objects, in Nolan's words, 'need to be explained into the world.' This is particularly evident with the biomorphic metal and painted jesmonite frame, *Here (Anchored in Oblivion)* (2014). With this, her commitment both to aesthetics and to abstraction, especially in the face of the strangeness of the world, becomes clear. These are singular objects, not obviously derived from other iconographies or the cognitive arts, and they appear to demonstrate Nolan's continued faith in the capacity of abstraction to provide access to the world on its own terms. Critic Declan Long has written of Nolan's sculptures that they signal 'her interest in stubbornly obscure, enigmatic things; they speak of introverted, obstinately reticent artistic conventions.'⁵

Yet Nolan's interest in abstraction corresponds to that particular strand that developed out of an engagement with nineteenth-century scientific research into optics, the conditions of vision, and the physiology of sensation.⁶ Particularly important to the likes of František Kupka was the newly discovered wave form of light and sound, which led to quasi-scientific speculations about a 'world of vibrations.' In view of such a world, abstract arrangements of lines and colour could be autonomously expressive and an artist could present for decoding 'a speculative thought

⁴ Philip Morrison quoted in Edward R Tufte, *Envisioning Information* (Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 1990), 9.

⁵ Declan Long, 'Note Entirely Related: Notes and Speculations on the Recent Art of Isabel Nolan', in *Intimately Unrelated: Isabel Nolan* (Sligo/Saint-Etienne: The Model and the Musée d'Art Moderne de Saint-Etienne Métropole, 2011), 115.

⁶ See Paul Vitz and Arnold Glimcher, *Modern Art and Modern Science: The Parallel Analysis of Vision* (New York: Praeger, 1987).

that is translated by a combination of plastic and chromatic elements' (La création dans les arts plastiques). Far from working through 'introverted artistic conventions' (and, in fact, Nolan rarely engages her artistic precursors, at least not explicitly), Nolan's concern is less the history of abstraction itself and more the relation of abstract forms to certain worldviews. As an approach, this is now quite rare, and it is far from that 'conventionalism,' once decried by art historian Hal Foster, that periodically resurfaces when abstraction becomes for certain artists a set of readymade signs to recycle and simulate ironically or melancholically.⁷

Finally, however, cosmologies collapse in the face of a photograph of two donkeys standing in a graveyard, *The View from Nowhen* (2014). This is as close as Nolan gets to a real-world image. She abandons abstraction, as figured by the unravelling spiral of *The Weakening Eye of Day* (2014). Here, more than anywhere else in the exhibition, we face the 'particularity of our access to the world' and the limitations of our capacity to figure it.

Derrida stood naked before his cat. 'The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there,' he wrote, in search of an ethics adequate to this intimate but uncanny encounter with a creature that is both a close companion and utterly strange.⁸ By contrast, one of Nolan's donkeys looks over our heads, and thinking, perhaps, comes up against a wall. At this point, Nolan's materialism and her melancholia triumph, as we confront the dumb fact of death and the darkness of an animal's look in which we do not see ourselves. There is no darkling thrush to offer 'carolings' or a 'happy good-night air,' and we are left with the question of how to live in a world that is without transcendence but no less wonderful for that.

⁷ Hal Foster, 'Signs Taken for Wonders', *Art in America*, Vol. 74, no. 6 (June 1986): 80-91, 139.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'L'Animal que donc je suis (à suivre)', in M-L Mallet, ed., *L'Animal autobiographe: autour de Jacques Derrida* (Paris: Gallilée, 1997).



Isabel Nolan *Disorder drowning everything in sight*, 2015, watercolour on canvas, 23.5" x 31.5". Image courtesy of the artist and Kerlin Gallery.