

'An Assertive Silence' – Mary Donnelly's Paintings in Context

'Silence is so accurate'

Mark Rothko¹

Twenty-first-century modernization, shaped by the sprint to advancement, has created a world of endless, perpetual noise. Cities and towns clatter with the crash and bang of daily life; car engines, loud speakers, trains, buses, mobile phones, burglar alarms, sirens, radio, television. We, the human 'race', rush around with paper coffee cups, feeling hurried, over-stressed and busy, like worker bees in a colossal colony, our routine controlled by structures of one sort or another. Yet, amid the necessary din, there is, in the human soul, a simultaneous desire for peace and tranquillity – a moment borrowed to admire the coupled swans, a minute to acknowledge the ancient glimmer in the starry night sky, an early morning drive through the rising mist, an evening at a poetry reading, an hour with a favourite novel, or an afternoon spent wondering through the rooms of an art gallery - the quest for serenity illuminating the truth of the significance of nature, imagination, and creativity to the industry of living in a modern world.

The clang of the modern has been an inspiration to many artists throughout history, but it was the extent of technical developments during the twentieth-century, along with the adverse political issues, and the emergence of the work of writers such as philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, and later, of psychologists, Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud, that drove and influenced artists to engage with new forms of expression to interrogate their ever-changing world. Pablo Picasso and George Braque, for example, invented an innovative way to represent the fragmentation of society, while another form of abstraction, wrought from a similar desire to find a 'new means of expression' was developed by Expressionists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Edvard Munch and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner.² The Dadaists celebrated uproar – even inventing noise 'music' by means of machinery, James Joyce seems to have acknowledged the Dadaist engagement with 'word chance' in *Ulysses*, and Surrealism became a by-word for a 'bid for freedom' for all those who wanted 'to resist the rationalism of the twentieth century'.³ As the century progressed, Abstraction and Constructivism came to represent the geometry of utopia, and the city as metropolitan ideal, well-expressed in Piet Mondrian's *New York City 1* (1942) and *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1943).⁴ In the meantime, and as the Second World War broke out, many Irish artists who were abroad to avail of training in the art centres of Europe, had to return home.⁵ Ireland remained neutral during the war, and thus the time also heralded the arrival of conscientious objectors, Kenneth Hall and Basil Rakoczi, founders in 1935 of The White Stag Group 'for the advancement of psychological analysis and art'.⁶ Along with several Irish artists and writers who joined, The White Stag Group, based in Dublin, was influential to the development of culture in Ireland during the war years.⁷

Yet, while numerous artists deliberately engaged with the urban centre to develop a personal mode of expression to signify their sense of identity amid the noise, equally there have been many who sought to remove themselves, whether physically or emotionally, from the clamour of modernity. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that artists' colonies emerged in countryside and seaside settings, for example, in the Forest of Fontainebleau in France, Skagen in the north of Denmark, and St Ives on the coast of Cornwall in the south of England. Nonetheless, there are contradictions in the concept of the rural idyll:

'The practices and images of rural artists articulated central concerns [for] urban middle-class audiences, in particular the yearning for a life that was authentic, pre-modern and immersed in nature. Paradoxically, it was precisely this nostalgia for the pre-modern that placed artists' colonies firmly within modernity'.⁸

So too, artists throughout the ages have wanted to find for themselves, and to exhibit for their viewers, a sense of spiritual sanctuary amid the rolling hills, vast skies and extraordinary seas of the world. Artists such as Caspar David Friedrich, J.M.W. Turner and John Constable, sought in a busy world to 'depict nature as the divine creation, to be set against the artifice of human civilization'. With that in mind, there was, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, and there still remains, a disillusionment with materialism and consumerism which, for some, led to a belief in, and an acknowledgement of, the mystical existence of the divine. It is at this point that the viewer begins the journey into Mary Donnelly's paintings. It is at this point that she invites her viewer to forget the din, and to look instead at the world beyond that which we have created.

'It is impossible to read the daily press without being diverted from reality. You are full of enthusiasm for the eternal verities—life is worth living, and then out of sinful curiosity you open a newspaper. You are disillusioned and wrecked.'¹⁹

Donnelly began her artistic journey as a result of an apparently minor event at school, thereby proving that 'education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire'.¹⁰ A former pupil, by then in her first year at art college, was visiting the school to discuss her portfolio. Donnelly, who had been expecting to study science, observed what was happening in the art room that day, and in an instant she decided that she wanted 'learn to draw like that'.¹¹ It was an extraordinarily simple beginning into what was to become a life-long journey into literature, poetry, music and metaphysics, all of which have conspired to inspire her daily artistic practice. Paddy Graham, recognised as a 'master of pictorial space', and then a tutor at the College of Marketing and Design where Donnelly undertook her training, proved an early inspiration on her work.¹² Having completed her training, Donnelly's first studio, obtained in the cultural quarter in Dublin City known as Temple Bar, put her at the centre of the crash and bang of city life. Surrounded by shops, bars, restaurants, apartments, the area was, and remains, incredibly crowded, noisy and hectic, yet enormously stimulating. So, she began her career painting lyrically-inspired landscapes in the middle of Ireland's then most up-to-date version of architectural, cultural and social modernization. It was important to have the professional recognition associated with a studio in Temple Bar, yet, recognizing her innate need for 'isolation and solitude', she sought refuge from the never-ending clamour in the emotional music of Clannad, Sinéad O'Connor and Moving Hearts, in whom she found an artistic equivalence.¹³ Donnelly spent a number of years in Temple Bar before finally deciding to get out of the city, and away from noise. Inspired by the poet, Patrick Kavanagh, who believed that it took 'a lifetime to get to know a field', Donnelly was aware that landscape was for her, as it was for the poet, a metaphor for a journey to the inner self. She moved to the west of Ireland, intending to remain there for three months. Amidst like-minded friends, she now lives quietly, contentedly and confidently, at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, and in the place most associated with Ireland's cultural imagination.

**'He knew that posterity has no use
For anything but the soul,
The lines that speak the passionate heart,
The spirit that lives alone.'**¹⁴

Although not an artists' colony in the true sense of the expression, the west of Ireland has long been a destination for those who desired to get in touch with their creativity through the practice of solitude. W.B. Yeats, for example, urged his friend, John Millington Synge, to 'find himself' on the Aran Islands, Grace and Paul Henry created their modernist mode of painterly expression amid the pre-modern hills of Achill Island, while poets, musicians, writers and playwrights, too numerous to mention, have through the ages, eulogized the restorative and otherworldly merits of the west of Ireland as a place where 'strange things pass' to 'catch the heart off guard and blow it open'.¹⁵ As a visual artist with many years of practice, Donnelly is concerned that a world driven by capitalism and materialism denies the individual the opportunity to acknowledge and engage with the inner self, which she in turn describes as 'the space where the poetic is experienced and felt'.¹⁶ As already outlined, her concerns are not unusual, and reflect those of many artists through the ages; Friedrich, Turner and Constable for instance. So, and in pursuit of a creative route that many have taken before her, Donnelly lives in 'isolation and solitude' so that she may inhabit the stillness of nature to expand her inner mind, and, as a result, her mode of creativity.¹⁷ Consequently, while she does not wish her landscapes to reflect a national identity in a globalized world, her work, and method, reveal a primal sense of synergy and rhythm between place, inner calm and creativity. Donnelly's paintings, which she describes as 'groundless', are 'landscapes of immersion', in which she invites her viewer to witness the world as it once was – and still is for those who are drawn to nature.¹⁸

Often working on a painting for months, or even a year at a time, Donnelly begins by drawing. She gets to a basic image onto which she 'builds up texture, line and colour' that she then repeatedly sands away to reveal something underneath.¹⁹ It is a slow, rhythmic progression while the paintings are literally 'hewn into shape' as

if in response to the tempo of nature itself.²⁰ Throughout the procedure Donnelly continuously uncovers the newly formed, but previously unnoticed, under the old - an image that brings to mind the magical metamorphosis of a chrysalis, or the leafing of a tree under the warmth of the sun, or indeed, the volcanic creation of the earth over the millennia. The presence of an object in the work; a fencing post or copper wire, suggests the physical presence of man - present yet absent - and re-orientates the mind's eye so that one is immediately aware of the physical and the metaphysical – the here and there. Indeed, Donnelly is drawn to 'the use of objects within or without' her paintings.²¹ She has found artistic similarity and inspiration in that quest in her recent discovery of the work of Lawrence Carroll who wrote:

'I remember one day finding an old staircase on the street. It had four steps in it. I carried it home ... and placed it in front of one of my paintings ... I liked the feeling of the stairs in front of my painting. They led you into the painting. They invited you in ...the feeling was something that stayed with me. That you could walk into a painting, metaphorically speaking ...A place to move into, to occupy, to unload something that you have been carrying with you. A body of sorts'.²²

At the same time, Donnelly readily acknowledges further influences on her creativity, not least, Irish poets, Patrick Kavanagh and W.B. Yeats. Intellectually engaged by the creativity of others, and an avid reader, she is also inspired by Victor Hugo's sepia-toned watercolours, which, owing to their atmosphere of solitude owe a lot to Caspar David Friedrich, by J.W.M. Turner's extraordinary depiction of light, by Jackson Pollock's quest for cosmic harmony, by Barnett Newman for his interest in the transcendental, and by Anselm Kiefer for his use of materials. Added to that might be Mark Rothko whose work is vastly different to Donnelly's, yet, by virtue of his process and his personal quest for inner peace, he encouraged his viewers towards meditation, away from a noisy world. Equally, Donnelly's awareness of Irish artists such as Patrick Graham, Gwen O'Dowd, Hughie Donoghue, and Michael Canning, invigorates her process and practice.

In describing her work the artist discloses a trust in the sacred that is made evident in her attention to the use of light. Referring to 'Jacob's ladder' descending from the sky, she fills the void of possible estrangement with the 'inner radiance' of 'Light', life or 'the descent of divine inspiration' sent to 'shatter the edifice' of the human presumption of knowledge, an attitude that she attributes in the first instance to W.B Yeats.²³ While all her paintings contain attention to light, several seem to actually refer to the spiritual concept of Jacob's ladder descending, seen, for example, in *Light, An Inner Radiance Breaks Through* (2011), *The Light Begins to Touch the Growth* (2011) and *Rain Becomes Part of the World* (2012). Winter is the artist's favourite season. It is, she believes, a time when 'the landscape reveals itself'.²⁴ It is a moment when the countryside is overspread with the inspirational silver-toned half-light that beseeches pragmatists to believe in magic. Donnelly's empathy with the mystical world beyond the horizon is clear in all her work, but perhaps more acutely so in images such as *All That Was Solid Melted into Thin Air* (2013), *Melting into the Quick Dark Rain* (2013) and *Under the Immense Sky, Renvyle* (2013). Yet, although attracted to the silence of emptiness, whether deliberately or otherwise, she often pictures something of man's intervention, seen, for instance, in the ancient potato drills in *Frosted Air* (2013), or the field markings evident in *Winter* (2013), and the pathways and fencing in *Everything Waiting for the Rain* (2012) and *Twilight* (2013). It is always, however, a gentle intrusion, rather than an interference, and one that helps the artist to negotiate the otherwise liminal space between here and there, foreground and beyond, presence and absence. On the other hand, Donnelly also illustrates atmospherically abstracted visions in which the horizon is entirely obliterated, so that the passage of time, and the here and there, blend into one monumentally significant moment, evident in, for example, *The Sighted World* (2012) or in *Winter Ground* (2013) and in several of the aforementioned paintings. At the same time, *White Skin of Distance* (2007), ostensibly an image of snow-covered hills, yet in which the reclining curves slumber like a forest of marble breasts, seems also to acknowledge the ancient beauty of the female earth. There is splendour to be found in the curve of the cow's backbone in *Unexpected Beauty* (2013), and in the shapes cast by leafless trees, or groups of animals whose presence grounds the otherwise otherworldly. While the ghostly breath of winter life prevails in *Winter Absence of Green* (2013), or in *Belonging to Another World* (2013) ultimately Donnelly's vision is a positive one. She revels in the magic of that particular, shimmering, winter light that reveals itself to those who seek it in the early morning or in the twilight of the day, to be seen in so many of her paintings including *Winters Light* (2012) and *Winters Light on the World* (2012). No matter the place to which solitude may bring her, or her viewer, according to *Winters Ground* (2013), *November*

(2013) and *Autumn behind the Sky* (2013), among others, Donnelly assures us that day will always follow night, and the sun will always rise. Her paintings are confident, process-driven and truthful. Several, such as the aptly titled *Opalescence of Light and Colour* (2012) and *Perpetual Light* (2012) are, perchance, pantheistic hymns to the universe, and to the essence of life itself.

'It can be said that the artist, like a true creator, is delving into chaos. It is precisely this that makes him an artist, for the Creator in creating the world began with the same material -- for the artist tried to wrest truth from the void'.²⁵

Donnelly has an extraordinarily truthful, sensitive, physical and metaphysical engagement with her place, her materials, and her inner self – her quest is to 'wrest the truth from the void' of modernization, noise and clutter. Yet, landscape for Donnelly is not a signifier of a particular physical identity; it is metaphor by which she can explore and interrogate the meaning of life, a process that has led her to recognition of the significance of a spiritual existence. Her practice is grounded in the enduring aspiration to fully understand, and to encourage her viewer to experience, the truth of many things; of authenticity, of living, and of the importance of an inner world and vision that is directly connected to, and inspired by, reality. The authenticity of her practice is grounded in the fact that the viewer knows that Donnelly is painting somewhere 'real' in order to describe the inner, spiritual world, and at the same time, the very act of making the work, inspired as it is by the desire to reveal nature, is plain to see. Artists remind us to see, and to ponder, or as W.B Yeats put it, to remember that 'the world is full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper'.²⁶ Mark Rothko once said that 'art was a lonely thing'. Yet he knew that 'many of those who are driven to this life are desperately searching for those pockets of silence where we can root and grow. We must all hope we find them.'²⁷ There will come a time when Donnelly will move again, away from the west of Ireland, and perhaps to Dublin, London, New York or Berlin - a return to the inspirational noise of city life. But in the meantime, she is content to stay in solitude, and in search, in the place that has offered her the opportunity to find herself, just as Synge, the Henrys and others did, and many continue to do. She has found the 'magic' in the world, and has willingly entered a bond between it, her materials, her process, and her audience. In turn, Donnelly is making powerful paintings that visually associate her creative vision with nature's realm. She has found a place where her work can 'root and grow', away from 'chaos', a 'pocket' in a busy world, and, by virtue of the evidence, hers is an assertive silence.

'Let us go forth, the tellers of tales, and seize whatever prey the heart long for, and have no fear. Everything exists, everything is true, and the earth is only a little dust under our feet.'

W.B. Yeats²⁸

©Dr Éimear O'Connor HRHA
Dublin
March 2014.

¹ http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/8322.Mark_Rothko

² Bekah O'Neill, *The Life and Works of Kandinsky*, (Bristol, 1995), p. 5. See also, for example, Edward Lucie-Smith, *Visual Arts in the Twentieth Century*, (London, 1996) and Bernard Blistène, *A History of 20th-Century Art*, (Paris, 2001).

³ Blistène, 'Surrealism', p. 67.

⁴ Centre Georges Pompidou and Museum of Modern Art (MoMa) New York respectively.

⁵ S.B. Kennedy notes that Ralph Cusack, Louis le Brocquy, Patrick Hennessy and Norah McGuinness were 'compelled' to return to Ireland at the time – see Kennedy, *Irish Art and Modernism 1880-1950*, (Dublin and Belfast, 1991), p. 90.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁷ For the narrative of The White Stag Group in Ireland see, Kennedy, 'The White Stag Group', in *Irish Art and Modernism 1880-1950*, chapter five, pp. 90-114.

⁸ Nina Lübbren, *Rural Artists' Colonies in Europe, 1870-1910*, (Manchester, 2001), p. 2.

⁹ Patrick Kavanagh, *Signposts*, Collected Prose (Dublin, 1967), sourced from <http://www.poemhunter.com/patrick-kavanagh/quotations/page-3/?search=>

¹⁰ W.B. Yeats, sourced from http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/29963.W_B_Yeats

¹¹ Donnelly to author, 4 February 2014.

¹² Timothy Hawksworth on Patrick Graham's recent paintings at Hillsboro Fine Art, see <http://www.hillsborofineart.com>

¹³ Donnelly to author, 4 February 2014.

¹⁴ Patrick Kavanagh, 'If Ever You Go to Dublin Town', (l. 57-60) in David H. Greene, (ed.), *Anthology of Irish Literature*, (The Modern Library, 1954), sourced from <http://www.poemhunter.com/patrick-kavanagh/quotations/page-2/?search>

¹⁵ Seamus Heaney, 'Postscript', see for example, *Translating Seamus Heaney*, Centre for Literary Translation, TCD (Dublin, 2013), p. 28 in which 'Postscript' was reproduced from Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level*, (London, 1996).

¹⁶ Donnelly to author, 4 February 2014.

¹⁷ Donnelly to author, 4 February 2014.

¹⁸ Nina Lübbren, *Rural Artists' Colonies in Europe, 1870-1910*, (Manchester, 2001), title of chapter 5.

¹⁹ Mary Donnelly, 'My Landscapes are Groundless', artist statement, 2011-12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Donnelly to author, 4 February 2014.

²² Angela Vettese and Laura Mattioli Rossi, *Lawrence Carroll*, (New York and Milan, 2008), p. 39.

²³ Donnelly to author, 4 February 2014.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ 'The Plasmic Image', in P. O'Neill (ed.), *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, (New York, 1990), p. 140. Sourced from http://www.oberlin.edu/amam/Index_Newman.html

²⁶ http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/29963.W_B_Yeats

²⁷ http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/8322.Mark_Rothko

²⁸ W.B. Yeats, sourced from http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/29963.W_B_Yeats