

Julie Morrissy

Katherine Sankey

Elaine O'Dea

Helena Gouveia Monteiro

Eimear Walshe

# FILE NOTE IV



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### STUDIO VISIT WITH KATHERINE SANKEY<sup>1</sup>

24 JUNE 2020, NORTH STRAND

I arrive a little late to Katherine Sankey's studio, after fumbling with coins at the parking meter for the first time since the beginning of lockdown. Turns out, this very material start to my visit connects perfectly with her work and her concern with the materials and unseen mechanisms and systems that surround us. I am left alone to explore her sculpture, which is in various stages of completion and in various forms. Sankey's art incorporates patinated copper and dead trees. Her materials are connected to one another with piping, nuts, T-junction fittings and other joints. Oftentimes the tree bark is sliced and pared back using a French Opinel knife. I am struck by the physicality of the work, both in its final form and in its making. Huge hunks of trees and branches take their place in Sankey's studio, and her shelves are filled with Band-Aids, varnish, tape and lighters.

We talk about materiality, French feminism and Hélène Cixous, with whom Sankey has studied. As we talk and I circle the studio, my attention to roots, movement and transfer is heightened. I examine Sankey's sculpture, and I think about the networks and processes that connect us to the living and non-living objects around us and to our bodies. These ideas have come up in my own work of late in relation to new materialism, and in my daily life through a new interest in yoga. We discuss a lack of awareness towards our own, human bodies, and the reality that many of us (myself included) are somewhat ignorant about the processes happening at all times under our skin. In the days after the studio visit I find myself turning the taps in my bathroom more purposefully, feeling that connection to the metal and thinking about the network of pipes that sit behind the slightly damp walls of our flat. I am intrigued about the logistics of her practice, and I ask where she gets the trees and branches that become part of her work. She describes how, recently, she has been working with a haulage company to move the roots from Fairview Park to her studio. Again, I am reminded of the physical nature (and the natural aspect) of her work, as she describes finding her materials, often in the aftermath of climate-related weather events that knock trees, unearthing the roots.

Sankey's work asks important questions about how we connect to the unseen and to the mechanisms that we take for granted in the small, routine moments of our lives. Her sculpture gestures to the delicate balance of our ecosystems (in the strict sense of the word but also our own personal systems, both constructed and natural).<sup>2</sup> Her practice also alludes to the sometimes awkward or precarious quality of these systems, brought to the fore in the manner that the artworks are made, balanced and suspended. Every detail is thoughtfully considered, and this

deft attention makes her art all the more powerful. She explains the 'rules' of one particular artwork, telling me that there should be no more than one joint on the branch between two T-junctions, but then shows me places where she has broken that rule. All of this demonstrates the ways in which her materials exercise both self-determination and flexibility. The work inhabits both its own rules and the rules of the systems it engages. I find the benevolence of the work striking and unusual. Sankey's deep commitment to process is notable both in the artworks themselves and in her making practices. I love her willingness to embrace the unpredictability of process, and the ways that vulnerability is allowed to permeate the work.

She shows me another artwork that gives way to leakage (some of Sankey's branches and connective structures allow water to drip through), turning my attention to the excess produced in our systems and the manner in which things quietly escape our control. Water is a central force in Sankey's work, connecting to that notion of movement and transfer but also subtly reinforcing the connection between human and non-human bodies. In mentioning the sea, she remarks that human tears have the same percentage of salt as seawater. This again makes me think about the ways in which matter is distributed in the universe, and one of the prominent questions in her work concerns that continuity between systems. I am drawn to the ways that these artworks allude to time, in that their energies and flow are open in terms of direction, again representing a crucial focus on process rather than on a decisive beginning or end. My attention is fixed on the variety of ways that phenomena move, reaching beyond usual hierarchies and understandings of chronology. For me, this challenge to time acts as an important intervention in our accustomed modes of living *with* and being *in* the world.<sup>3</sup> Strangely, during our conversation we discover a mutual inclination to set processes in their opposite motions. Sankey tells me that she reads the newspaper backwards, and I share that I sometimes watch television series in the reverse order, starting with the last episode and moving back to the beginning. Sankey's work, too, calls for a reconsideration of the order of things and of what we think we know about the forms of life that surround us. I reconsider these processes again when listening to a podcast conversation between writers Deborah Levy and Lauren Elkin.<sup>4</sup> Elkin mentions a connection in Levy's work to circuits and Cixous, and my interest is piqued. It's the word 'circuit' that catches my awareness. I had been thinking of Sankey's work in terms of processes, and I quickly google 'circuit'. The first result from *Oxford Languages* defines it as 'a roughly circular line, route, or movement that starts and finishes at the same place'. Part of the intrigue of her practice is the ambiguity of those starting and finishing points, but all the while maintaining the idea of a purposeful 'route' and 'movement'.

1 In some places this writing amalgamates snippets of my conversation with Katherine Sankey and may include some of her phrasing.

2 'An ecosystem is all the plants and animals that live in a particular area together with the complex relationship that exists between them and their environment.'  
[collinsdictionary.com](https://www.collinsdictionary.com)

3 Reminding me again of new materialism, including Karen Barad, Erin Manning and Rosi Braidotti, among others.

4 'Hot Milk: Deborah Levy and Lauren Elkin'. London Review Bookshop Podcast, 25 June 2020, <https://play.acast.com/s/londonreviewbookshoppodcasts/hotmilk-deborahlevyandlaurenelkin>

## STUDIO VISIT WITH ELAINE O'DEA

### 3 JULY 2020, FIRE STATION ARTISTS' STUDIOS

As the lockdown restrictions continue to ease and Ireland enters Phase 3, I visit Elaine O'Dea in her studio at Fire Station. O'Dea is a recent graduate of NCAD, working primarily in sculpture. I am immediately drawn to her materials, which include plaster, steel, copper, aluminium, wood and bicycle tubes. Of particular interest are the bulbous figures that she casts from balloons, sometimes in plaster form and sometimes in resin. She chooses balloons as her casting method because it allows differentiation in each mould, though the balloons present their own challenges in the process of making. Her practice is a fine balancing act between what she wants from the materials and what the materials will allow her to do. Like Sankey's, O'Dea's is a physical practice that involves construction, and she talks about 'battling with' her materials. For example, making her piece *Upstand* involved her holding the bulbous figures in place on the steel pole for periods of twenty to twenty-five minutes. This pitching of hard and soft materials together is central to the work. Again, in *Overcome* the bulbous materials ooze over a grid-like metal structure, posing questions about which object is dominant as she coaxes her materials and the materials, in a sense, battle with each other. There is a subtle but impactful gesture towards societal structures and the ways in which we move against and within those frameworks. The bulbous entities, especially, possess their own agency. On a close view of O'Dea's new work, in which resin bulbs are encased within stacked steel cages, I notice tiny protrusions from the brightly coloured pink balloons. These small nodes, which could perhaps be viewed as imperfections, prompt a dialogue about the focus on women's bodies in society and culture, aligning with her own strongly feminist politics.

An exciting part of the visit is when O'Dea shares her research notebooks with me. The notebooks reveal a depth and range in her practice and allow me to see her thoughtful mind at work. The research materials include photographs of O'Dea's own body, folded over itself in such a way that, depending on the angle, the body is not necessarily immediately identifiable. I am taken in by the folding of flesh in this manner, which places an entirely different and untypical focus on her body. I can see the connections between her research and the bulbous figures that feature across many of her artworks. As I think again about the relationship between hard and soft, or between the human body and object, O'Dea shows me photographs of her engaging with objects and landscapes in her locality. Some photographs depict her draping her body over steel bicycle racks. In others she crouches down, holding tightly to a large rock. She tests the dynamics of balance and grounding in a manner that brings forth the complex layers of her work, again probing the boundaries between human and non-human beings but also, perhaps, the expectations of how she uses her body as a woman and in what locations and contexts. I am reminded of nibia pastrana santiago's exhibition at the 2019 Whitney Biennial, which included "'choreographic events'... in charged spaces, often outdoors...that implicate

both the gaze and the body of the viewer".<sup>5</sup> Although for O'Dea the events depicted in her research journal are not performances per se, in that an audience is not intended or interpellated, she remarks that her 'research events' (if I can call them that) are witnessed by people passing by, and in that sense, an engagement takes place with the work. I am drawn to the way in which her practice plays with performance at this research stage, and that vibrancy thoroughly makes its way into her artworks.

After seeing the research material, I am spurred to ask about new avenues that her practice might explore. She discusses a recent engagement with digital technology in her new piece with the steel cages, mentioned above. This artwork incorporates QR codes, and we talk about how in both of our practices we engage with new modes in order to move our respective materials in new ways. I examine another artwork, made from winding copper and bicycle tubes, which occupies space in a much more fluid manner than *Upstand*. This outward movement seems important to her practice as it develops, representing the confidence and ambition of her work. We begin to talk about fabric and whether that might feature in the future. O'Dea shares vivid memories of her mother, who was a seamstress, and the ways that she would hold, crease, test and manipulate fabrics to decipher what would work for a design. That tactile instinct is very much present in the work, and O'Dea strikes me as someone who is unusually attuned to our material and sensory world. Her work is imbued with a striking and vibrant curiosity, and she considers a variety of implied permissions when it comes to our own bodies and the forms and structures that we encounter and sometimes have to battle against.

Towards the end of the visit we discuss her artwork *Colour is Dangerous*, exhibited in NCAD in 2018. The piece consists of aluminium cages suspended from the ceiling on a metal chain so that the cage hangs in the middle of the space. Each cage holds a series of bulbous objects, coloured pink or blue. O'Dea also spontaneously worked with the lighting in the room in order to accentuate the role of the shadows. Given that this work plays with weight and balance, the density of the shadows generates another intriguing element, with the pink and blue bulbs gesturing to constructed notions of gender. The grid of the cages reflects onto the gallery walls and floor, heightening a sense of confinement that lurks in this work. The movement of the shadows encourages a reconsideration of ideologies and practices that have become fixed in society, allowing the artwork to occupy new and generative imaginative space. The slippage in O'Dea work, in pieces like *Overcome* and in the resin protrusions, demonstrates a persistent spirit and a willingness to push the limits both of the materials and of her own practice in a manner that inspires a stubborn but complex optimism, always reaching further into what might just be possible.

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<sup>5</sup> NIBIA PASTRANA SANTIAGO | WHITNEY BIENNIAL 2019', *Whitney Museum of Modern Art*, [www.whitney.org/media/42878](http://www.whitney.org/media/42878)

## STUDIO VISIT WITH HELENA GOUVEIA MONTEIRO

### 23 JULY 2020, FIRE STATION ARTISTS' STUDIOS

I return to FSAS, this time to the editing suite. My visit is with Helena Gouveia Monteiro, a visual artist and experimental filmmaker whose practice also engages photography, publishing, literature and installation. Originally from Portugal, she studied in Nice and continues to work with international artistic communities. Her next Light Cone Atelier 105 Residency will bring her to Paris, where she will complete post-production on her short film-in-progress, *Purkyně's Dusk*. It is very exciting to be in the editing suite with Gouveia Monteiro, and I am thrilled that she is sharing a rough cut of her film with me. She explains the film and its context. *Purkyně's Dusk* is a Super 8 film, which is colourised in processing and reworked with chemicals, and which also involves digital colour work. This intersection between digital and analogue is a prominent feature of her practice, as is her exploration of alternative procedures in bringing photographs into film and digital modes. She describes the process of making this particular film, revealing that she does almost everything herself, including processing the black-and-white footage. The only task she doesn't do is the colour processing, which takes place in the lab. I immediately get the sense that materials and her engagement with them are the driving force of her practice. She mentions that her work is based on experimentation with the materials and medium, rather than relying on a pre-determined concept or narrative. She also emphasises the relationship between editing and conceptualisation, which is the point at which her projects hit their stride and begin to come into their own as artworks. *Purkyně's Dusk* is based on a theory of colour by Jan Evangelista Purkyně, a 19th-century Czech physiologist who asserts that our perception of colour is dependent on light conditions. Gouveia Monteiro plays off his theory throughout the film, which is filmed at dusk and progresses from the yellow colour of the original footage through to blue light and then to darkness. This progression is achieved through tinting and digital manipulation of the digitised footage. Her edit then emphasises this process of desaturation.

A few elements of the film are immediately striking. Firstly, as a poet with a sharp orientation towards language, I am interested that the film is silent. However, the most intriguing part of that silence is the fact that the two human figures speak to each other throughout (though we cannot hear what is being said). The choice to omit sound heightens awareness of an inside/outside sense in the film, in that the viewer witnesses the human interactions but has no context or understanding of what is happening between the two figures. Equally, and as Gouveia Monteiro points out, the viewer has only a visual insight into the workings of the non-human figures in the film, which takes place in a garden setting. The film is full of events that the viewer is not given full access to, both things that happen between the human figures and things that happen with the flowers, bees, bushes and other figures of nature that feature prominently. Gouveia Monteiro notes that the humans in her films are not cast as characters per se and are not actors, so there is a balance built into the film between human and non-human subjects.

In filming, this equivalence is enacted in her equal attention to both human and natural subjects, as she films both at the same time. By removing the sound, our ability to analyse based on narrative and psychology is also removed, and so the viewer's attention is more keenly focused on colour, gesture and movement in the film. The cuts and the unstable or shifting movement of the camera add to this sensory experience, further unsettling a sense of continuity that might also be associated with narrative and a human urge towards reason and logic. These techniques reinforce an equilibrium between humans and non-humans and, in a similar vein, the closing credits include the names of the plants and flowers that feature centrally in the film, in addition to the names of the human figures. The credits particularly caught my imagination and made me think about the whole film again. In reconsidering the flowers as central figures, one of the most arresting parts of the film comes in the first few minutes, with red geraniums as the focus. For a period of approximately fifteen seconds the geraniums pulse in and out of split seconds of darkness, with the colour of the flowers and the background desaturating each time. She explains that this part draws on the flicker trope in experimental film, again heightening the sensory experience and giving way to feeling rather than reason. The pulsing flowers certainly had that effect on me as a viewer, connecting me to the bodily experience of a heartbeat but also to sight, as the film interjects into and troubles the persistence of vision.

Towards the end of our visit, we talk about some of Gouveia Monteiro's other projects, including her new film *Sweeney*, influenced by the Buile Suibhne myth, and her publishing collective Stereo Editions. I ask her a little bit more about *Sweeney*, as I am interested to learn how her process of making begins and how her projects tend to develop over time. She talks about collecting ideas with photography and film, and she shows me some of the footage she has taken for *Sweeney* – all birds, in a variety of places, filmed sometimes with her phone, sometimes with her camera, resulting in a mix of quality and resolution. We discover that we work in a similar manner, in that we each collect ideas through notes or images, allowing those ideas to sit and permeate over weeks or months until they become realised in more concrete ways and form part of larger ideas or projects. It makes sense to me when she says that the moment of recording is completely distinct from the moment of conceptualisation, which comes through editing, and I agree that each of those acts involves very different types of attention and engagement. Materials are at the forefront of all of Gouveia Monteiro's work, and her publishing venture is no different. Through handmade publications, Stereo Editions demonstrates a notable concern with sensory experience, object and literary form. As I watch, see, hear, and discuss her artworks, I am struck repeatedly by her unique creativity and her ability to bring that so seamlessly and imaginatively across a variety of mediums. She has deliberately and carefully deciphered a process for making that allows her to break open her subjects in truly exciting and unique ways. Gouveia Monteiro is the kind of artist who can turn her hand to anything, and I leave the editing suite enthralled by *Purkyně's Dusk*, eager to see the final cut and the projects that will follow.

## STUDIO VISIT WITH EIMEAR WALSHÉ

### 10 AUGUST 2020, TEMPLE BAR GALLERY + STUDIOS

I spend a captivating hour with Eimear Walshe in their studio at TBG+S. They have sent materials in advance of our meeting that I am really excited to talk about, and we are joined by Lord Leitrim in the form of a paper puppet. Walshe's practice draws on academic discourse, particularly in the fields of queer theory and feminist epistemologies, and they are currently making work for EVA International 2020. Walshe puts forth 'the libidinal economy' as a framework for this project-in-progress. We start with a conversation about the relationship between sexuality, land and housing, and the contexts in which sexual desires arise. I find their framing of the housing crisis really striking, and Walshe illuminates vital concerns in a manner that I have not previously encountered. We talk about the conditions people need for comfortable and safe sexual intimacy, which, as Walshe points out, are very similar to the conditions required more generally for personal intimacy: physical and auditory privacy, space and some sense of security. However, many people's current housing situations do not afford these basic conditions, and Walshe's practice considers how public sex connects to the very significant limitations of our current housing systems. We also discuss the correlating impact on the emotional landscapes of our lives, with many people living in less than ideal housing situations where numerous aspects of their lives are curtailed due to a lack of secure, personal space.

Walshe's current project has three components. The first is an online artist talk delivered and recorded in the artist's parents' garden in Co. Longford. This is where figures such as Lord Leitrim, Charles Parnell and Michael Davitt come in. The talk explores the Irish Land Wars, a significant moment in Irish history that seems to garner little attention in comparison to other historical events in the life of the State. Walshe crucially revives the history of the Land League and its objectives to achieve fair rent, fixity of tenure and free sale. The Land League was an unprecedented movement in its impact and ambition, and we talk about the fact that this radical reform has not carried through in contemporary Ireland. Walshe's contribution in this artist's talk will be of vital importance in developing understandings of the kinds of change that are possible when we dare to think ambitiously about land and housing. The talk is made all the more poignant by its setting in an outdoor, residential space.

The next two parts of the project are video artworks, the first of which is titled *Trade School*. Before our visit Walshe sends me a short trailer for the film, which explores conflicts between notions of respectability and sexuality through its main character, a fictional TD named Puppy. In a tour of infidelity and sexual scandal, Puppy is taken on a journey of self-discovery by his two masters. I am immediately struck by the soundtrack to the trailer, which begins with unsettling, discordant sounds that I cannot quite identify. I learn that the fragmented sounds are uilleann pipes, played by Ian Lynch throughout the film. At first, these sounds are accompanied by a somewhat shaky or jerking camera movement. However, as the trailer progresses the uilleann

pipes become more melodic and the perspective changes to a car driving through a series of rural landscapes. Though there is a playful tone to some parts of this artwork, the music adds a plaintive atmosphere and, taken together, all the elements of the film – the camera angles, the movement and dress of the characters, and the landscape and buildings – culminate in a textured narrative that is deeply compelling and curious. Its mode of dissemination adds to the intrigue: *Trade School* will be distributed on a USB through the post.

A second video, titled *Land Cruiser*, completes the project, engaging a sort of quest narrative as it follows a couple who leave the constraints of the Dublin housing market to embark on a road trip across Ireland to find a private place for sex. Restrictions allowing, this video will be installed at EVA International in Limerick, and the soundtrack, developed with Cork imprint The Department of Energy, will have its own separate release. It is these types of details that give Walshe's work a very unique energy. Their attention to the possibilities of exploration and presentation in a project continuously brings new and original contexts for the work. This expansive approach is evident in the range of work that Walshe makes. We also spend time talking about their publication *GRETTA*, a mixed-genre book commemorating Margaret (Gretta) Cousins, described as 'a pioneer suffragist, a nationalist, a theosophist, a writer, a publisher, a teacher, a musician, and a vegetarian'.<sup>6</sup> The book comprises a play by Walshe, a text by Maisie Gatley (Walshe's grandmother) and an academic essay by Dyuti Chakravarty. *GRETTA* demonstrates one of the many strengths of Walshe's work, in that it is multifaceted, thoughtful and deeply considered, while at the same time being imaginative and entertaining. The play *I Know Why Women Cry At Weddings* is a conversation between the artist and Margaret Cousins across their separate eras, with the artist speaking from the present day to Margaret in the summer of 1900. The text is enlivened by its shifting language register ('God Margaret, or can I call you Gretta? Anyway you're literally such a Scorpio').<sup>7</sup> In one part Margaret describes an incident in which she is punished for unladylike behaviour in straddling a donkey, to which the contemporary character responds, 'It sounds like your father was acting out his own unprocessed trauma onto you...I have found that the notion of straddling itself draws up such an anxiety in people'.<sup>8</sup> I was enamoured with this play and its voices. I have rarely read a text so vibrant but that also possesses such depth, and at each stage of learning about Walshe's work I find myself wanting to know more. Their work connects to pressing issues in our present moment in a manner that inspires true engagement and attention. Their artwork challenges the ideas that circulate around us on a daily basis, sometimes possibly even going unnoticed. We talk about their sculpture *Middle Spoon*,<sup>9</sup> which I am reminded of later that month when I see a promotional video in which the subjects are asked whether they are 'big spoons' or 'little spoons'. I smile to myself, thinking of

6 Eimear Walshe, 'Preface', in *GRETTA*, p. 4. Available to purchase from Temple Bar Gallery + Studios' online bookshop.

7 Walshe, p. 91.

8 Walshe, p. 95.

9 2018, Galway Arts Centre.

Walshe's sculpture and their wonderfully incisive practice which challenges the overt and subtle ways that our surrounding frameworks attempt to bind us to one way of seeing and being in the world.

## **AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY**

Julie Morrissy is an Irish poet, academic, critic and activist. Her collaborative, mixed-media poetry practice includes animation, moving image and performance. Her work has been published internationally, broadcast on national radio and exhibited in the TULCA Festival of Visual Arts, 2020. She is the inaugural John Pollard Newman Fellow in Creativity at University College Dublin, where she also teaches Creative Writing. Morrissy is a recipient of the MAKE Residency Award 2021 and the Arts Council 'Next Generation' Award, and has been awarded residencies at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre at Annaghmakerrig and The Writer's Room at The Betsy, Miami. She also writes about art and is a regular reviewer for *Poetry Ireland Review*. Her first collection, *Where, the Mile End* (2019), is published by Book\*hug (Canada) and tall-lighthouse (UK). She is the first Poet-in-Residence at the National Library of Ireland.

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