

Iarlaith Ní Fheorais

Olivia Normile

Casey Walshe

Emily Mc Gardle

# FILE NOTE VIII

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 2024 FSAS Practice Awardees are Olivia Normile (Digital Media), Casey Walshe (Sculpture) and Emily Mc Gardle (Sculpture).

The commissioned writer for File Note VIII is Iarlaith Ní Fheorais.

Julia Moustacchi  
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## Biographies

**Iarlaith Ní Fheorais** is a curator and writer and the author of the free online resource Access Toolkit for Artworkers. She is an Independent Producer at field:arts, working with artists Bridget O’Gorman and Eburn Sodipo. She has previously curated the 21st edition of TULCA Festival of Visual Arts and curated Speech Sounds as Curator-in-Residence of VISUAL Carlow. As a writer she has written for publications including Frieze, Burlington Contemporary, Viscose Journal and Girls Like Us. She regularly contributes towards public programmes and lectures including at Somerset House, KW Institute, Konstfack University, Royal College of Art and Arts and Disability Ireland. She has sat on numerous selection panels including EVA Platform Commission 2025, Unlimited International Open Award and Edinburgh Arts Festival Platform 2023.

**Olivia Normile** is a visual artist based in Dublin, working through installation, drawing, animation and film. Her practice engages with fictional storytelling by considering human to non-human relationships through opportunistic and structured moments. Her works focus on converting these moments into sculptural sets and scenes accompanied by non-verbal and gestural communication. She uses online spaces to deconstruct the threshold between digital and hand-made processes.

Recent residencies and awards include; Platform Commission, 41st EVA International, selected by Iarlaith Ní Fheorais and Roy Claire Potter (2025), Digital Media Practice Award (2024), Fire Station Artists' Studios Dublin, Arts Council Agility Award (2022, 2021), Dublin City Council St. Patrick's Lodge Residency (2019), Emerging Irish Artist Award, Burren College of Art (2018), Ormond Art Studios Graduate Award (2018). Recent exhibitions include; *peripheriesPAIR*, Periphery Space, Gorey School of Art (2024), *Dog-Eared Paradise*, screen service (2023), *Matters of Table*, Periphery Space, Gorey School of Art (2023), *Remembering The Future*, VISUAL Carlow (2023), *Deliverables*, Pallas Projects/Studios Artist Initiated Projects (2022). She co-curates *The Collision Project* (2024, 2023) with screen service and is a visiting lecturer at The National College of Art and Design (NCAD) Dublin.

**Casey Walshe** is a trans masc visual artist based in Dublin. At present, the motif of the flower is the starting point for their work, which is based in painting and sculpture. The artworks are love letters to, memories of, and portraits of lovers and friends. Casey's recent paintings point back to earlier works about the brain and the heart and point forward to abstraction and self-authorship. The paintings are love stories branching from the tradition of minimalist figurative abstraction.

In the process of making, pressing questions have emerged about queer desire, memory, fantasy and reality. Casey is now assembling their most autobiographical work, dealing with themes of discomfort, lust, growth, expansion and retraction – much like the cyclical stages of a flower.

Earlier works, which explored functionality and energy were made with the support of The Royal College of Surgeons, Dublin, where Casey had access to heart and lung specimens. Emotion and the lived experience play a valuable part in the formal decisions of painting – the paint is applied carefully, delicately and slowly. Casey's images consider ideas of arrangement and the point at which, through the process of interpretation and deconstruction, a form alludes to a story and becomes something it previously was not.

Casey Walshe graduated from The National College of Art and Design, Dublin in 2010. They have recently received The Next Generation Award from The Arts Council of Ireland 2022 and have been twice shortlisted for The Hennessy Craig Award 2022 and 2024. Previous solo exhibitions include TENDER at The RHA Gallery Dublin, 2023, Come on baby at Limerick City Gallery of Art 2023 and Beatland at Pallas Projects Dublin 2017. Previous group exhibitions include The Pleasure Ground at Rathfarnham Castle, Dublin 2022, Paipear at Hang Tough Gallery, Dublin 2022, WE CAN DANCE, a site specific project in West Cork 2021, and ARTWORKS at Visual Carlow 2019. Their work has been purchased for Irish state collections including The OPW 2023 & 2017, Limerick City Gallery of Art 2023, Trinity College Dublin 2021, The Arts Council of Ireland 2020, The Royal College of Surgeons 2016 and The Central Bank 2010.

**Emily Mc Gardle** is a printmaker from Co. Monaghan. She graduated from Dublin Institute of Technology in 2016 with a First-Class Honours degree in Fine Art and was the inaugural recipient of the Mont Kavanagh Trust Fine Art Award. She received an MA in Print from the Royal College of Art, London in 2020 and was awarded the Augustus Martin Print Prize. She has received Established Artist and Emerging Talent awards from Monaghan County Council's Artist Support Scheme in 2021, 2022, and 2023. Emily is a member of Black Church Print Studio, Dublin. She was shortlisted for the 2022 Zurich Portrait Prize, the 2023 Trinity Buoy Wharf Working Drawing Award, and the 2024 Derwent Art Prize.

## Olivia Normile

I recently listened to a podcast about a group of scientists who ‘discovered’ sperm whale communication had a form of grammar. The whales communicate in clicks that are incoherent to the human ear; and presumably didn’t have any greater meaning beyond echo location or at best “food”, “danger” or “fuck me”. Sperm whales are incredibly social creatures and have the largest brains of any species so scientists had a hunch that they may be capable of greater linguistic abilities. Feeding the clicks of a herd of Caribbean sperm whales into an AI analyser, the researchers found that these clicks formed a complex alphabet of codas, which are described as a “short package of clicks”. This exercise was part of a larger study to determine if these codas can be controlled by the whales, but the way the media contextualised this research was by asking if these were words, and therefore asking if sperm whales used grammar, and therefore a language? As the frustrated scientists attempted to express the limitations of this scientific study for a popular science audience, they concluded that codas could be combined into “communication patterns”.

The study concluded that the codas were not random and could be altered using rhythm, varying speeds, ornamentation and tempo, dependent on context. Interestingly, the scientist who led this study was a computer scientist and robotist, and conducted the study using the methodologies and values of her field. She hopes to move the project forward by using machine learning to uncover the semantics of these communication patterns, and eventually develop an AI language model that produces clicks to communicate with sperm whales. The underlying logic of these studies and the media attention they attract is the compulsion to personify how non-human species convene with each other in ways that - we hope - are akin to ours. That we are the standard that all other species must meet to prove their moral virtue, intelligence, and in the context of human caused mass extinction, the right to survive. The argument is if a species has a language with a grammar, their intelligence provides them protection, opposed to all other animals who weren’t as fortunate to be blessed with such human-like traits. And it is these questions of how non-human biographies are mediated that Olivia Normile’s practice is attentive to.

Working in a multidisciplinary fashion, Normile’s practice deals primarily with drawing animal subjects, often in a hand drawn graphic style against a plain background. Usually drawing cats, dogs and rabbits; the animals that we share this world and our domestic spaces with. These drawings include dogs filling a dishwasher, standing by a radiator drying clothes, eating from bowls or reading to a magpie; going about their own mundane, yet extraordinary lives. Speaking to Normile, she shares that animals can act as a type of witness to the unvarnished truth of our lives, in tune with the world through a different set of senses. Yes, they share the world with us, but they go about it in their own peculiar way, which often leaves their human companions bemused. Having spent time in a sanctuary for former lab rabbits as a part of her research practice, this is a practice attuned to the intricate violence and subtle relations between our species and others. Of the power relations between humans and animals they own; and how these relationships mutually shape our lives. As she moves her practice towards animation and digital spaces, Normile carries the analogue materiality of drawing as she further explores the relationship between humans and the wider animal world.

This move to animation has been influenced by the material conditions of Normile’s changing disability, allowing for a more modulated, flexible way of working. Considering the different senses and abilities of human to nonhuman relationships, Normile’s *Dog Eared Paradise (2023)* held space for new ways of working. Commissioned by the digital platform for screen-oriented projects Screen Service, *Dog Eared Paradise (2023)* is both an online exhibition and digital theatre, spanning across multiple pages of the Screen Service website with hand drawn animations and clickable objects. Developed from research into a sanctuary for lab rabbits, the project carefully considers animal biographies and an empathy for non-human liberation.

While at Fire Station Artists’ Studios, Normile will explore the potential for animation in her practice. Using the equipment and technical support provided during the residency, she is testing ways to translate the sensibility and effect of drawing into an animation. Specifically using 3D scanners to scan miniature animal objects that capture mistakes and glitches by scanning quickly in low light on a wobbly surface that not only replicate the hand drawn nature of drawing, but communicate the ungraspability of convening with the non-human; of reaching across in sympathy. This is reinforced through further experiments with animating awkward scenes; playing with ‘off’ movements, gravity levels and animals using mirrors. These scenes will also include scenes of animals using mirrors as part of self-awareness tests, which are designed to measure animal intelligence in a human-centric fashion.

In the whale clicks study, the computer scientists attempt to measure a form of non-human intelligence, and through their own human restraints, measure that with a very human set of standards. As many neurodivergent people or those with learning disabilities understand, there is a violence in having your intelligence measured under such a myopic point of view, and against ways of being that just don’t make sense for you. Unlike the scientist approach to studying the whale, Normile’s empathetic practice draws our attention away from human centric models of understanding animal life, with an eye towards intuitions beyond our immediate grasp, facing towards liberation and the quiet respect of living with the unknowable.

## Casey Walshe

Having recently moved to an inner suburb of North East London, I became aware of the abundance of Easter Lilies in the small patch of lawn at the front of many of the late Victorian and Edwardian terraced homes in the area. Whole swathes of streets feature mature, verdant flower beds of Easter Lilies, unlike anywhere else in London. With the flowers’ connections to Irish Republicanism, it was quite a surprise to find them in such numbers in the heart of the imperial beast. As most of the city’s architectural landscape is made of these near identical two-story terraced brick homes, the Easter Lily beds act as a significant distinction to yet another monotonous inner London suburb. I cannot find any information on the reason for their proclivity, but can only speculate on some long forgotten fad saved from gentrification more intensely ravaging other parts of the city, a once thriving republican community or some local flower mania at some point in the last 150 years.

The Dublin based Casey Walshe has a long-standing engagement with flowers. Their delicate paintings often feature small bunches of one type of flower, moving between abstracted orb-like forms to more literal interpretations of recognisable flowers, largely using blues, reds, creams and black hues. Sometimes framed by a simple monotone background, others are accompanied by abstracted shapes. The flower serves a certain role in art history, adopted as memento mori, or as a symbol of love, sensuality and fragility. They allude to a certain sexuality, either as metaphor for the sexual acts, of pleasure and courtships and the simple substitute for autonomy. In the context of queer history, the flower operates within a parallel yet distinct symbolic order. For example, the green carnations were infamously popularised by Oscar Wilde as botanic queer wink and nod for gay men in Victorian London as an early proto-hanky code or the violet symbolising sapphic love for over 2,000 years.

It is in this queer lineage that Walshe’s floral work feels most at home within, working with flowers as a means of marking a personal queer history of romance, friendship and sensuality. The flowers may be literal depictions of flowers they’ve received from lovers and friends as gifts, memorialising those moments of connection. Speaking with Walshe, the flowers that make up their painterly garden are not all literal depictions, and can be a pictorial means of trying to hold onto a memory, feeling or event that is difficult to grasp; too pellucid for one physical flower to capture. As with the lily - regarded as a symbol of everything from peace, republicanism and of death - flowers hold a twin meaning of both connection, love and pleasure, and conversely as they wither, of the enviable loss, heartbreak and death. Walshe’s paintings are also resistant to easy reading, holding space in their softness for poetic affect; from queer love, longing to loss, and the longing for companionship.

During their time at Fire Station Artists’ Studios (FSAS), Walshe work is evolving from this floral bedrock, towards more sculptural, and even theatrical environs. Beginning with designing custom benches for their RHA exhibitions *TENDER*, Walshe wanted to slow audiences down and create a more intimate connection with their work, inviting visitors to rest. A bench is obviously a piece of exhibition design, but also serves the purpose of an access device, whose importance is often sorely overlooked by artists and curators. In this instance Walshe gained a new appreciation for the sculptural form of the bench, especially the way objects can affect audiences and create space. This sculptural spur has evolved into a new body of work which Walshe is producing using the technical capabilities available at FSAS.

These include suspended circular sculptures, draped in fabrics, intended to divide a room, partitioning viewers from each other, partially visible through semi-opaque fabric. Theatrical in nature, acting almost as a set, viewers separated from each other, try to catch a glimpse, playing with the erotics of being seen, and not seen. Of orbiting around each other, checking each other out, cruising and coming in and out of view behind the chiffon fabric. In contrast to this sensual sensibility, the sculptures will be 8 - 10 ft high, framed by a metal circular frame, creating an extra-human stature, of the sense of being overwhelmed, of being enveloped; of a new cacophonous sensual register. In a continuum with the benches, Walshe’s fresh interest in how sculptural forms can influence viewers’ behaviour act as mirrors of a newly confident gendered subjectivity, and a material sensitivity to how queer socialities function within space.

In many ways, Walshe’s work already exists in relation to a wider set of artistic and social intimacies. Throughout their practice, Walshe has commissioned writers to respond to their work. These texts are written by friends, collaborators and co-conspirators and range in style, including art writing, personal essays and poetry. Reflecting largely on the flower paintings, they point to a wider set of intimacies, both real and fictionalised. These texts give flesh to the sociality of a practice, of the world of relationships that shape an artist and their work. Beyond that, they allow for the work to live outside of the gallery walls, and engage with the emotional, political and social hereafter. As Walshe’s sculptural work continues to mature, they hope to collaborate with theatre makers to produce sets as a way to enliven the queer lifeworld in which their work sits within and informs. Just as the Easter Lilies are the botanic afterlife of an unknowable lost world of human desires, Walshe’s flower paintings and shrouded sculptures feel like the artistic process that longs to make our obfuscated sensual impulses materially legible.

## Emily Mc Gardle

On the first approach, the Monaghan based Emily Mc Gardle’s drawings, prints and sculptures embody a sense of uneasiness. There are a fleshy, uncanny, if not wholly grotesque, assortment of disembodied teeth and eyes, of lumpy engorged lips and fake smiles. Much of the work has the look and feel of cartoonish anatomy models, authored by a particularly sarcastic maker. The human body is cut open and we are given a voyeuristic view of subjects’ innards, revealing their inner thoughts and machinations. The work has a comedic bent, often playing with a sense of awkwardness, contorted forced expressions and strange perspectives. Many of her drawings deal with the forced smile, and what might be lying underneath. Looking closer, the artist is examining social expectations, specifically around gender and the patriarchal distortions of the feminised body.

Many of her drawings are self-portraits, ranging from the realistic to the outright strange, depicting the artists with engorged lips, hanging upside down, with double hands outstretched, reaching for handshake or laughing hysterically. Although self-portraiture may allude to a certain level of personal self-reflection or even narcissism, these self-portraits act as a convenient vessel to explore the political and social role of the social body and its multitudinous expressions. Mc Gardle wrote her MA thesis on election posters in Ireland, attending to the literal grotesque (facial) expressions of power. The political poster is a particular phenomenon of the Irish political process, a peculiar visual culture of political campaigning and ambition. The strained smiles, the plastered-on makeup, straight on stare and awkward poses, attempting to mimic authenticity and ease intend to disguise an obvious hunger for power, overwhelming whole communities like a swarm, then disappearing in an instant. In a number of Mc Gardle’s work, such as *Anatomy of a False Smile* 2020 and *An cailín gealgháireach / “The Smiling Girl”* (2023) depicts a smiling figure with a section cut out from the face, revealing a mechanical process behind the smile with explanatory labels, detailing the inner forces compelling an awkward forced smile.

Getting her start in drawing and screen printing, Mc Gardle made her first move into sculpture whilst studying in London. Continuing this interest in awkwardness and uncomfotability, as part of an exhibition about the fear of touch in the midst of the ongoing pandemic, Mc Gardle made a hand that could be interacted with through the exhibition. Attracting a visceral reaction from the audience with its eerie uncanniness, Mc Gardle was reminded of the fleshy potential of sculpture. While at Fire Station Artists’ Studios (FSAS), Mc Gardle is expanding her sculptural practice in new ways, exploring new materials and ways of working. Based in rural Monaghan, the source material of these new silicone sculptures is to be found in the vicinity. Using silicone, Mc Gardle has begun to cast goosegrass; the sticky plant that is the favourite of country kids. Leaving those caper-like seeds after contact, Mc Gardle has cast hands with goosegrass seeds on the back of hands, recording an often overlooked or fleeting moment. She has also casted nettle leaves, with both plants making an impact on humans, by either causing pain or adhering itself. Reflecting the circumstances of her surroundings and of rural making, Mc Gardle uses the material at hand, examining these overlooked weeds.

Growing up in rural Galway, goosegrass was a ubiquitous yet unworldly material as a child. The means of its adhesion a mystery, we would often secretly attach it to the back of an unsuspecting friend, never failing to muster muffled laughter. It seemed like an almost magical plant that was designed purely for our entertainment, and symbolised that childlike mischievous relationship with the rural landscape. The same with nettles, unavoidable on the long muggy summer days roaming through fields. It burns the sensation of summer, an accepted result of days out exploring, alongside the smell of dock leaves mudded vigorously against burns, leaving a green paste like residue. In engagement with the botanic substance of the sociality of rural childhood, Mc Gardle again plays with the subtle materiality of our lives; of the lesser seen materials that facilitate a social world, and its subjectivities.

Mc Gardle is also invested in language as a tool to express a set of social conditions or subjectivities. As a native Gaeilgeoir, Mc Gardle has written and illustrated *Screenprinting as Gaeilge: treoir bhunúsach*, recording 60 Irish words associated with screen-printing, which were previously unrecorded, committed to a legacy of knowledge sharing. Continuing the relationship with place, language and knowledge sharing, she is currently working towards an exhibition in Belfast around Irish proverbs. Attentive to the botanics, language and lore of place, Mc Gardle is invested in the social, linguistic and biological interweaving threads that make up a place.

As the goosegrass uses our sense of play and tricksterness to spread its seeds, Mc Gardle’s practice deploys humour, sarcasm and wit to undercover dynamics of power, human emotions and the materiality of place. Her work is sticky and oozes irony, using self-portraiture and a cartoonish style to create a sense of unease and introspection. While at FSAS, Mc Gardle takes a new exciting path in her practice, using sculpture to explore the materials of rural life, and the uncanniness of plant life, creating strange and unexpected objects, hoodwinking us into taking a second look.

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