

O'DOWD, GWEN (b. 1957) [341], painter. From the date of her first solo show at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin in 1984, O'Dowd has maintained a reputation as one of Ireland's foremost contemporary artists, who carries forward a tradition developed in the 1950s by Nano Reid, Patrick Collins and Camille Souter (qqv). Her paintings use abstract elements of landscape (qv) as the basis for compositions, the artist adding layers of oil paint, mixed with materials such as wax, to create complex weathered surfaces that are rich in colour and depth. Writing in 1989, Julian Campbell emphasized the importance of the scratched and striated surfaces of O'Dowd's paintings: 'In spite of their abstraction, there is a gritty "down to earthness" about them – a sense that they are somehow involved with her real experiences and natural environment.' (Campbell, p. 3) Campbell also pointed out another essential element in O'Dowd's work, a sense of mystery, an inclination towards the sublime, heightened by the artist's preference for dark, intense colours and her focus on aspects of the landscape, such as cliffs, caves and rock pools. In more recent years, however, O'Dowd's paintings have become freer, more expressive and even lyrical.

After graduating from NCAD in 1980, O'Dowd was one of the founder members of the VAC in Great Strand Street, Dublin. In 1984 she used the George Campbell (qv) travelling scholarship to travel to Spain for several months. Over the following years, she produced paintings that are meditative, sombre and intensely felt. A journey to Wales in 1986 resulted in paintings that form a visual diary, recording the ascent of Snowdonia. Explorations of the Dublin coastline resulted in another series evoking sea and shore. Works inspired by a visit to the Grand Canyon were shown at the Kerlin Gallery in 1995; other paintings were inspired by the Burren in the west of Ireland and the frozen landscape of Alberta. Always conscious of damage inflicted by mankind, one series of O'Dowd's work was inspired by the 1991 Gulf War. As well as solo exhibitions

at the Hillsboro, Kerlin and Vangard galleries, she has shown at the Butler Gallery, Kilkenny (1989), the West Cork Arts Centre, Skibbereen (1989) and the RHA's (qv) Ashford Gallery in 2000. She has also participated in many group shows, including the IELA (qv), Independent Artists, the *Parable Island* exhibition at the Bluecoat Gallery in Liverpool in 1991, *Re/Dressing Cathleen* at the McMullen Museum at Boston College in 1997, and *Éire Land*, held ten years later, also at the McMullen Museum.

O'Dowd is a member of Aosdána (qv) and her work can be found in the collections of the AC/ACE, ACNI, AIB, IMMA and CAG. PETER MURRAY

SELECTED READING Julian Campbell, *Gwen O'Dowd: Paintings*, exh. cat. Butler Gallery (Kilkenny 1989); Rosemarie Mulcahy, *Works 13 – Gwen O'Dowd* (Dublin 1994), pp. 12–25; Brian McAvera, 'Composing the Elements', *IAR* (Spring 2004) 77–84.

O'KELLY, ALANNA (b. 1955) (qv AAI III), performance, multi-media artist. Alanna O'Kelly's work is inspired by a deep and intuitive sympathy with humanity and nature. Roderic Knowles cites the critic Dorothy Walker as saying: 'Her work is the most rigorous in the pursuit of its own ends' in reference to O'Kelly's early career when she made artworks from organic materials, often sited in natural habitats, and using archetypal forms that refer to such things as boats and shelters, to tap into universal, as well as Irish, folk knowledge (Knowles, p. 211). As Walker went on to point out, that work had a lightness of touch that defied conventions about monuments, but it made a powerful impact for that reason when brought indoors at the *Without the Walls* exhibition at London's ICA in 1980. Towards the late 1980s O'Kelly's work moved increasingly in the direction of performance, fusing this with a radical and experimental use of new technologies, especially video, sound and slide projection or combinations of these (see 'Time-based Art' and 'New Media Art'). Since 2000, her practice has been devoted to performance art which she also teaches.

The destructive politics of the race for nuclear armaments provoked the first important video and performance work, *Chant Down Greenham* (1984), in which O'Kelly added traditional Irish keening or lamenting to images of the human chain that was attempting to preserve Greenham Common in England from the establishment of a Cruise Missile base there. Other work, using tape/slide technology included *Dancing with my Shadow*, shown at the DHG's important *Irish Art of the Eighties* exhibition in 1990, and *Echoes II* [342]. But it was for her work in commemorating the Great Famine of the mid-nineteenth century that she became widely known.

Like all O'Kelly's work, the three Famine-related installations, collectively entitled *The Country Blooms, A Garden and a Grave* [3, 326], that won her the first IMMA/Glen Dimplex Artists Award in 1994, and *Á Beathú*, the work that she subsequently showed when she represented Ireland at the São Paulo Biennial in 1996, had a long gestation, being developed, shaped and reshaped from performances and photomontages since 1990, as the artist refused to hurry her composition. Fed by a sense of the guilt, humiliation and anger that Irish people have

341. Gwen O'Dowd, *Ice Fields*, 1990, oil on paper, 18 x 26 cm





internalized ever since the Famine, by her personal experience of living in Britain in the 1980s, which inspired thoughts about earlier emigrations from Ireland, and by her awareness of starvation around the world, O'Kelly understood what official attempts to commemorate the Famine a few years later did not; that no amount of bronze monuments could ever assuage those emotions until the nation had first acknowledged the scale of the trauma and had mourned its dead, and the damage to its culture.

That is what O'Kelly set out to do, through performances and installation art (qv) that involved sound and photographic imagery. By pulling together the sounds of keening, breathing, panting, praying, singing, incorporating the Irish language (the first language of many of the victims of the Famine), images of nature with its traces of the old potato growing patterns, and signs of rebirth, O'Kelly was able to lead viewers through a complex cycle of powerful and cathartic emotions. Subtle references to contemporary Africa and Asia force viewers to question their own complicity in supporting systems that enable the continuation of similar tragedies in the world today.

An important factor for performance artists is the immediacy of the experience in real time which cannot be mediated by anyone other than the viewer and the performer. This, and a

discomfort with the commodification of artwork as a 'thing to be bought and owned', means that little of O'Kelly's work is saleable and therefore acquirable by public collections. As Medb Ruane said of her: 'You're not known as an artist who's an opportunist' (Ruane, 1996).

In 1996 IMMA acquired *Sanctuary/Wasteland* [326], one of the three installations that made up *The Country Blooms, A Garden and a Grave* and photographic montages with text by her can be seen in the collection of the Crawford Gallery, Cork. *No Colouring can Deepen the Darkness of Truth* (1992–95, ed. 1 of 3), another work from her IMMA/Glen Dimplex trilogy, was installed in the Workhouse Famine Museum in Carrick-on-Shannon in 2008, making it the only work by this influential artist to be placed on permanent display. It has also been acquired by Ireland's Great Hunger Museum, University of Quinnipiac.

Born in Gorey, Co. Wexford, O'Kelly studied at NCAD and the Slade School of Art in London. She has worked and performed in venues in Europe and in North and South America, and in many different environments from Lapland – where she designed and built a snow house in which she lived for some time – to the United States, where she participated in the 1987 Women's Caucus of the Arts in Boston.

O'Kelly's work has been shown in such exhibitions as *Without the Walls*, during the *Sense of Ireland Festival* in London in 1980, *Irish Women Artists*, NGI and HL (1987), *Irish Art of the Eighties*, DHG (1990), *IMMA/Glen Dimplex Artists Award Show* (1994), *L'Imaginaire Irlandais*, Beaux Arts, Paris (1996), *Representations of the Famine*, Dublin, Cork, Belfast and Castlebar (1998/99), *Irish Art Now*, Boston, Philadelphia, Halifax, Chicago and Dublin (1998–2000) and *Views from an Island*, Beijing and Shanghai (2003). CATHERINE MARSHALL

SELECTED READING Knowles, 1982; M. Ruane, 1996; Jean Fisher, *Alanna O'Kelly* (Dublin 1996).

O'KELLY, MICK (b. 1954) [343], artist. Mick O'Kelly's work foregrounds issues of social need over aesthetics, or to put it differently, his work questions traditional aesthetic values, the role of art and the gallery system in the face of marginality, exploitation and imbalances of power. It asks how an artwork that consciously ignores those realities can be beautiful.

Educated at the College of Technology, Dublin, NCAD, the California Institute of the Arts and holding a practice-based PhD from the University of Ulster, O'Kelly began his art practice with photography (qv), but his training in technology and construction empower him to work comfortably with large three-dimensional projects, and to teach sculpture at NCAD.

Almost immediately after his graduation, O'Kelly's work was selected by Lucy Lippard for inclusion in *Divisions, Crossroads, Turns of Mind*, which travelled to venues in the USA in 1985. Three photographic works with overlaid text, from his series 'Allegories of Geography' (1987), shown in the Politics section of *A New Tradition: Irish Art of the Eighties* at the DHG in 1990, cemented the association of his art with social issues. This was furthered by his work for the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and residencies at the Semperit Tyre Factory, Ballyfermot

342. Alanna O'Kelly, *Echoes II*, performance with Trish Haugh, Douglas Hyde Gallery, 1983