

Widen the circle

Emerging artists rival big names at the RHA annual show, says **Cristín Leach Hughes**

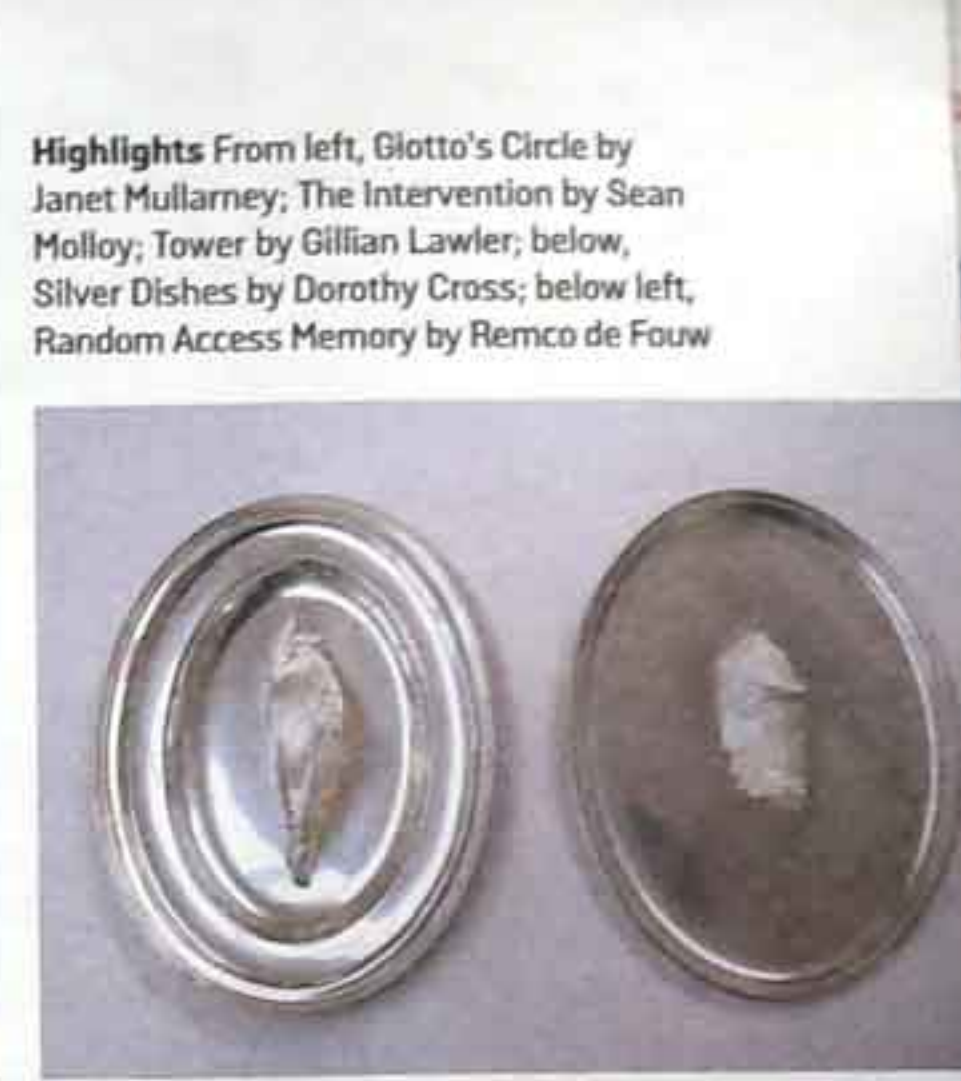
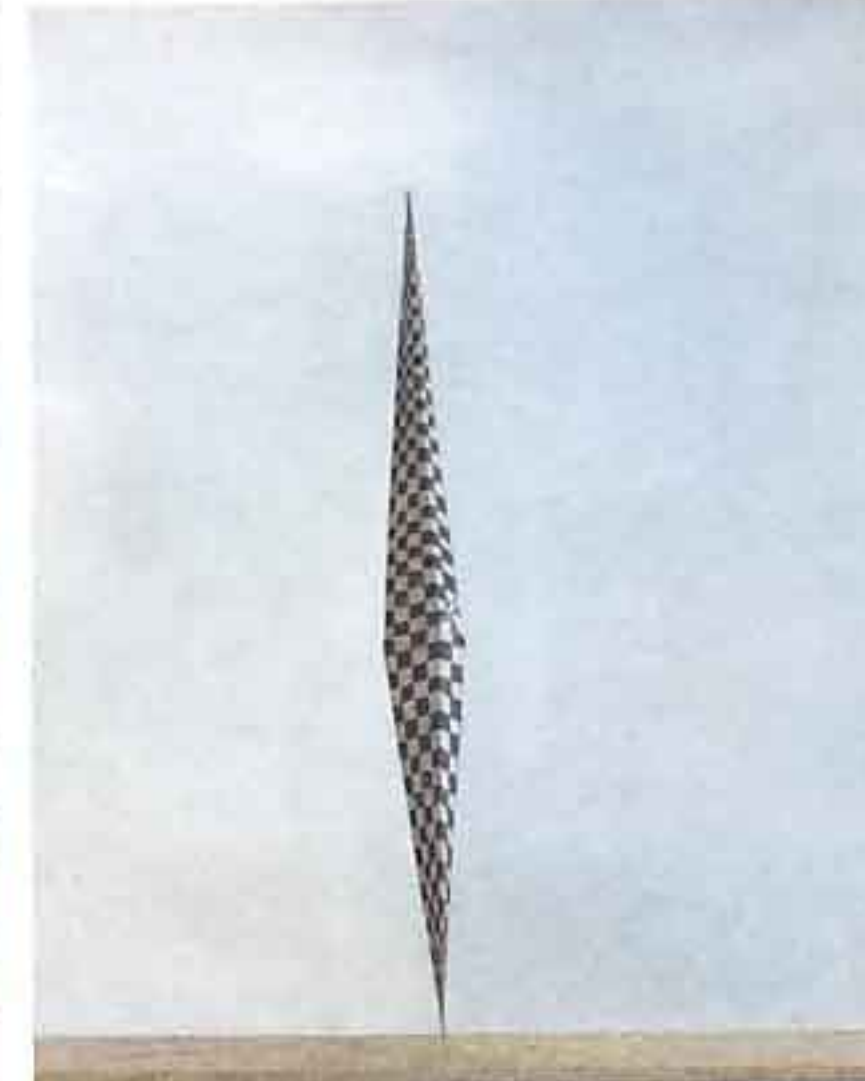
Photography dominates here with Erin Quinn's Chambermaid, from the Docile Bodies series; Mella Travers's Stealth; and Leo Byrne's Claustrophobia, in which a Sarah Jessica Parker lookalike is seen through the window of a pebbledashed house, standing in a kitchen.

Also worth dwelling on are Alison McDonnell's Ivan, part of a photographic series on transgender, lesbian, gay and bisexual people, and David Stephenson's montage of street pedestrians shot against a yellow roller door. Elsewhere, portraits of children stand out. Sylwia Bialoblocka's New Irish is a neat photographic triptych of small, soulful kids. Photography aside, there are a noticeable number of confident, well-heeled young sitters captured by traditional painters such as Blaise Smith, James Hanley and Carey Clarke.

This exhibition is not dominated by commission-earning establishment names, however. There's a fresh feel this year, with strong work by emerging and mid-career painters, a lot of it small in scale. As a snapshot of what's going on in Irish painting right now, this is a fairly comprehensive one-stop shop, with work by Stephen Lawlor, Cian McLoughlin, Catherine Barron, Gillian Lawler, Sinead Ni Mhaonaigh, Gabhann Dunne, Vauney Strahan, Cecilia Danell, Sean Molloy, Jack Hickey, Parac Leahy and a gorgeous Ann Quinn painting with a brilliant title: The Moonlit Existence of a Powerful Cow.

The prizes awarded — for sculpture, photography, drawing, portraiture and more — amount to about €45,000 and are aptly apportioned this year, with gongs going to Geraldine O'Neill, Joy Gerrard, Dorothy Smith, Una Sealy, David Hedderman and Vera Klute, among others. Eamonn Doyle's excellent dark and grainy black-and-white street portraits have won a photography prize, and the ESB Keating Award and Silver Medal for an outstanding artwork went to the most outstanding example of realist, painterly skill in the show: Catherine Creaney's Carer, in which every hair on her generously bearded subject's head and chin is delicately portrayed.

The RHA does a good job of making coherent sense of a show that challenges the stamina of even the most determined visitor hoping to take it all in in one go. Works are loosely grouped by subject,



Highlights From left, Giotto's Circle by Janet Mullarney; The Intervention by Sean Molloy; Tower by Gillian Lawler; below, Silver Dishes by Dorothy Cross; below left, Random Access Memory by Remco de Fouw

medium, size or artist significance. It's an arrangement which places most of the bigger names in the biggest gallery, upstairs, but that isn't to say gems aren't to be found elsewhere.

It's also unfair to give all the plaudits to Cross. Others have quietly brought their A-game, too. Abigail O'Brien's large photographs are unexpectedly breathtaking images of old files. It may sound oxymoronic, but these are visually gorgeous, vibrant images of stored archives. It's work that has to be seen in person: high-definition photography that stands up against painting for the levels of visual and intellectual pleasure it offers. Here, too, is Amelia Stein's striking Sheep Wire photograph, a stunning small Charles Tyrrell abstraction in oil on aluminium, and an arresting, large rainbow-hued Diana Copperwhite canvas, Fake New World II. Downstairs, Allyson Keehan's painting of black satin fabric in blue light on a deliberately puckered canvas is beautiful, but it's also saying something clever about painting, perception and art history.

There are those who keep doing the same thing but do it so well and so confidently there's no chore in seeing it reiterated: three plaster pieces by Maria Simonds-Gooding, a large framed charcoal

drawing and sculpture in Portland stone by Imogen Stuart, and four highly accomplished paintings by Donald Teskey fall into this category.

Much of the sculpture is competent but predictable, with too many established artists riffing comfortably on familiar themes, but there are pockets and glimpses of something new, as well as objects so carefully made that they stand out. Hugh Cummins's Pandora's Box in mahogany and curly maple is one example, Redmond Herry's Undercover (3) in Portuguese marble is another.

Also excellent are Remco de Fouw's glass-tube-studded stones with drilled holes; Janet Mullarney's lightbox-mounted pieces Giotto's Circle and Looking for a Title; and two small, blocky architectural sculptures by Eileen MacDonagh, Archimedes Gate and Cantilevered, in Kilkenny limestone.

It's often the wittier work that succeeds in grabbing attention. David Farrell's Subliminal Thoughts of a Wandering Mind is like a 21st-century photographic re-enactment of a Paul Henry painting with the barely visible words "Yet another F***** Cliché" imprinted in its perfectly cloud-studded, deep blue sky. Clare Marie Ryan's copper etching and aquatint Super Happy Family Fun Time offers Paula Rego-style satire in which a visor-headset-wearing family sit on a sofa, ignoring each other. Nevan Lahart, irreverent as always, presents Portrait of the Artist as an Ad for Portrait Painting, in oil on board, complete with mobile phone number, the final figures obscured.

There are works that stand out as you walk past for reasons of mood, style,

colour or a trigger of recognition from elsewhere: Fergus Andrew Ryan's Hot and Cold, an Andrew Wyeth-esque, Martin Gale-style painting of old baths in a field with a high horizon, trees and barn; Jackie Stanley's exuberant, chalky White Thorn West Cork in pastel, charcoal and silverleaf; Conor Ferguson's atmospheric, blurred photograph of a street with a church spire, entitled The Shudder of Evening.

There are artists you may not have heard of before, but whose names you'll want to look up or keep an eye out for in future having noticed them here: painters Will O'Kane, Darragh Dempsey, Lorraine Walsh, Eleanor McCaughey, Mateusz Lubecki, Jennifer O'Connor and Dave West, whose paintings of Minecraft figurines, sweets and novelty pencil sharpeners breathe new life into still life painting.

More than 1,150 artists submitted over 2,000 pieces for consideration. By dint of its role as an open-submission show, the exhibition operates as a kind of sifting place in which new and established artists hang side by side, abstraction can share a wall with photorealism, and photography, painting, printmaking, ceramics, woodwork or any other medium may meet on common ground.

The painter, and 23rd president of the RHA, Mick O'Dea writes in his introductory essay for this show of the total destruction of the 1916 exhibition, when the academy's Lower Abbey Street premises was burnt to the ground during the Easter Rising. For the next 23 years, the organisation had no permanent site. Next year's show will mark the 100th anniversary of the Rising by reverting to exhibition's original time of year and running from March to June. The RHA is acutely aware of its history, legacy, role and responsibility. The artists are, too. It's a privilege to get in. But this is a good show because the talent is out there. If everyone ups their game next year, 2016's is going to be great. **□**

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The Annual Exhibition, RHA, Dublin, until Aug 9; rhagallery.ie