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# IRISH ARTS

SPRING (MARCH - MAY 2023)

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REVIEW



## Diana Copperwhite

OBEN IRISH WATERCOLOURS  
IMOGEN STUART SCULPTURE  
IRISH PSALTER 10TH CENTURY

AILBHE NÍ BHRIAIN GLUCKSMAN  
VÉRONICA BOLAY DUBLIN CASTLE  
ART GRADUATES BELFAST



03



# Colour scale

Ahead of her touring exhibition commencing at the Highlanes Gallery, Diana Copperwhite talks with [Aidan Dunne](#)



1 Diana Copperwhite  
in her studio

**T**his conversation took place in Diana Copperwhite's studio in Dublin. One huge painting, an unfinished diptych, dominated the end wall, flanked by several smaller works on the adjacent walls, most of them completed. Throughout the conversation, the artist often looked at, and occasionally referred to, one or other of the paintings.

**Aidan Dunne:** From your student days on, you've always made paintings on a large scale.

**Diana Copperwhite:** Yes. It's true I've always felt the urge to work on a large scale. It's not just a question of scale, though. It's whatever scale feels right. [She points to works that are no more than 30cm sq.] It's hard to get to exhibit larger work.

**AD:** Large paintings must be more demanding to make, practically speaking?

**DC:** When you are in the middle of a painting, it's a funny place to be. It's hard to get a sense of perspective, hard to see what you're doing, as you are doing it, especially with a big painting. Sometimes I take a photo of a painting and then send it to myself so I can experience seeing it with a fresh eye: 'Oh, so that's what it looks like!' So I can actually see it. And that's usually revealing.

**AD:** You spend a lot of time just looking rather than applying paint?

**DC:** A lot of time. You gradually realise that something doesn't sit right, or annoys you, or is calling attention to itself. [She points to the right-hand panel of the diptych.] That really bothers me. I'm going to have to deal with that, but I'm not sure how yet. I think the figure there – I know people looking at it won't see it as a figure, but to me it is in some way, or at some point it was – is too pronounced. But then, no part of a painting exists in isolation, so if you make a mark, it affects everything.

**AD:** Are the surroundings you work in important?

**DC:** Really important. I'm basically visual, so I don't like being somewhere I don't like, visually. It will get to me; it does get to me. This studio is fine. It's a simple space, a bit limited. I'd like a larger space and, as well, here I'm basically in the context of a Victorian house and that goes slightly against the grain of the work. Really the work calls for a kind of industrial, non-domestic space. That's my feeling. For me, everything finds its way into a painting – everything. That's why surroundings really matter.

**AD:** Do you find you need a deadline?

**DC:** Some pressure is good. I tend to meander a bit if there's no time limit, and with a deadline you are where you are with a painting. Everything is on the surface; you just can't afford to be indecisive. You can't digress. In that state of mind, the painting comes out the way it comes out. There's no disguising it or postponing it.

**AD:** Can that pressure constrain you, though?

**DC:** [Nods] You have to be careful, because in a way there always comes a point while you are working that you have to let go, and



when you can do that, it usually works. I mean, you can map out a painting, place everything, but you have to let it go.

**AD:** What if it just doesn't work out? I know overpainting is fundamental to your approach in the oil paintings... but if things get really awkward?

**DC:** [Smiles] If I hit a wall, often what I do is paint a person.

**AD:** The portrait head is something of a leitmotif for you. I know you can relate each image to a specific person, including family, but likeness as such isn't a priority, clearly. It's more the head as a box of tricks – imagination, ideas, a sort of magic?

**DC:** So many of the heads are from family and friends. [She points to one small head image.] That's my nephew. But I have an instinct to push away from figuration. The colour bars are important in that.

**AD:** Often they virtually cancel an image. You've given accounts of putting down a first layer of paint that always changes as you work layer on layer. What is it that triggers a painting for you – or perhaps the thing you're working towards, the conclusion?

**DC:** Hmm, that's like asking, 'What is content?' In a way,

### I HAVE AN INSTINCT TO PUSH AWAY FROM FIGURATION

content is a kind of focus. It can enable me to finish a piece. But you never know where it will come from. People say things and then later, suddenly, I'll remember something – even just a remark, a random remark. I'll focus on the odd or strange.

It can be trivial. Once, walking down a street in Wimbledon, someone told me about something that had happened in one house on the street. It was a note of strangeness in the benign, ordinary street, and somehow that became the spark for a painting. Not in a historical sense – not a record of the story of what happened – just that slippage between the bland façade and another reality behind it. I liked that.

**AD:** Memory comes up a lot in discussions of your painting – recollection and the fallibility of memory.

**DC:** Yes, memory and perception and things becoming mixed up. Like that one detail about the house allowed me to imagine something, opened it up. Then you've got to work at it, to keep going. It has to be uncontrived; it just doesn't happen if not. You get to the point where you've nothing to lose. You have to be careful not to overthink it. If that happens, if you're too consciously thinking it, you can just forget it.

**AD:** I know your father painted. Was he an important example for you?

**DC:** Yes – he took up painting, though it wasn't what he did originally. Was he an example? Well, he could be quite difficult. Don't misunderstand me: I mean, he was perfectly

nice in many ways, but difficult. He had very definite views. He loved the work of Edward Seago. A kind of Post-Impressionism – landscapes, sailing boats – and he worked in that vein. He was from Galway, loved the sea and painted a lot in Connemara. He was a real West of Ireland type.

I can remember painting in his studio as a child, on lengths of toilet roll. But we had lots of books, illustrated art books, and I used to look at them all the time. I really devoured them. I was unaware that it was unusual to be absorbing all these books. I thought everyone did, that it was normal, everyday experience. Later on I found that even my sister didn't. I was the messy child; she was neat and clean. My father's family had a strong scientific lineage: they tended to go for maths and physics. That's still true of my relations. My father studied science and worked as an industrial chemist for ICI and in mining in Zambia and South Africa. Then, in the mid-1960s, he moved back to Ireland and became a teacher.

He started painting while he was teaching. I'm sure he was painting before he met my mother, because I still have a book of Picasso reproductions that a previous girlfriend gave him. My mother was from Limerick. I think he'd been planning to go abroad again when they met, but he stayed. They married within a year of meeting, which was very quick, even though my father came from a different reality to my mother's family. She was Catholic overlaid on Protestant. Socially, the art thing in Limerick was a big deal – my father was chair of the Limerick Art Society. I get on very well with both sides of the family, by the way. Both are very helpful and supportive.

**AD: Your work suggests an interest in optics and perception.**

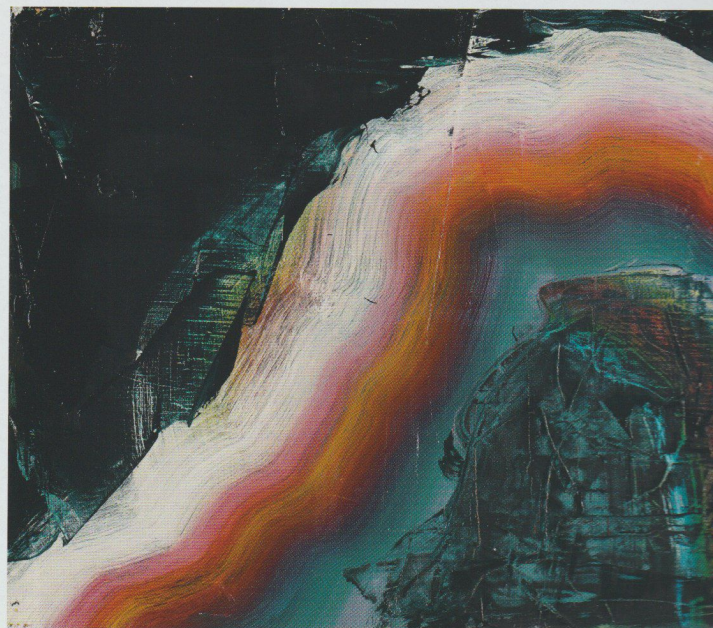
**DC:** I've always been interested in optics. I can remember a prism in my grandparents' house, among the antiques.

**AD: When did you decide to study art?**

**DC:** My father – I think out of a kind of insecurity over identity and social status – had very definite ideas about education and academic prestige. When I said I wanted to go to NCAD, his response was, 'Fine, but I won't cover your fees,' whereas he'd cover the fees if I chose medicine. He wanted us to go to Trinity. Having said that, I'd hate to suggest that he was a strict authoritarian. He was complex. When I was still at school, I never delivered notifications of parent-teacher meetings. I quietly lost them. I thought, 'Well, I don't want them talking to each other, teachers and parents.' When that came to light I thought there'd be fireworks, shouting, but actually he was a bit amused. He said, 'That shows a bit of initiative. I'd say you're going to be all right.'

**AD: You went to LSAD?**

**DC:** Yes, I went to LSAD because he said, 'If you want to do art, Limerick is free – go there.' Then for the final year I switched to NCAD. I suppose it became clear that I was pretty serious about it.



**2** Diana Copperwhite  
**THE DAY BEFORE**  
2008 oil on canvas  
30.5 x 30.5cm

**3** PACMAN WILL  
**DELETE HIMSELF**  
2011 oil on canvas  
120 x 120cm

**4** WANDERER  
2004 oil on canvas  
30.5 x 30.5cm

**5** CHAMELEON  
**CAMOFLEAGE** 2013  
oil on canvas  
180 x 240cm

**6** DOU  
2015 o  
35 x 45



**AD:** Was there a big difference?

**DC:** I found the transition very difficult, partly because you had to do a thesis and I found writing very difficult. I had a lack of self-confidence when it came to art theory and reading in general. I felt they were way ahead on that in NCAD. I wouldn't necessarily feel like that now. But it soon felt like a disaster. I had a tutor who, though extremely helpful on a human level, genuinely very supportive, was totally into this theoretical, postmodern position. Irony. I was told that if I painted as I was doing, I would never get anywhere. The pressure was intense. I had a bit of a breakdown – I literally hid in a corner and hoped no one would notice me.

**AD:** How was that resolved?

**DC:** I went off and spent three or four months in Germany with my closest friend. That was good. And what was really good was that I saw a lot of contemporary art, a lot. So much more than I could in Ireland. There was time for it to sink in. And I was surprised sometimes: I really liked Joseph Beuys' works on paper.

**AD:** That is surprising, given that he's probably most famous for shamanistic performance pieces – and for his persona.

**DC:** I know, but I found his work with paint very convincing – his mark-making, his sense of form, his approach. And he was a great draughtsman.

I came back from Germany with more confidence. It began to dawn on me that if you're going to be a painter there's no point in lying about it – pretending you're not really a painter – which seemed to me what some artists did. I remember going to see Sean Scully talking at the Hugh Lane Gallery and that had a real impact on me. I know for some people he can be a bit much, with that degree of macho swagger, but for me his work showed that you could be serious about painting. It impressed me that his work had this quality that is abstract but in a complicated way. Never just Minimalism: it can be playful and also melancholy. It's like a language that can convey everything and I really liked that.

**AD:** You were barely out of NCAD when you had a terrific show at Temple Bar Gallery. The paintings were architectonic in the way they evoked structured spaces, but non-specific, ambiguously abstract, and the palette was distinctive: pinks, oranges, greens and whites. Looking back, you were all there as a painter, and your painting has remained true to the spirit and substance of that work, and to that palette, since.

**DC:** In the end that show was such a good experience. I was really stressed at the time: people trying to tell me what to do. You have to be determined. I don't know where my particular sense of colour comes from. Not from my father's work, though maybe there's a link in my way of painting tonally – white flowing through colour.



**AD:** The stress wasn't obvious because it seemed very confident.

**DC:** Sometimes I have crises of confidence: I completely lose confidence in myself. That's why it's important to be in touch with artists you have something in common with. Who you're having a conversation with is important. Some artists... I mean, artists who I get on fine with... it's a different kind of conversation. They do what they do and that's fine. But you can't, for example, have a conversation about colour, because they're in a different place.

At the last RHA annual exhibition, looking at paintings by David Crone and Richard Gorman, for example, I felt in tune with what they are doing. I don't mean my work is like theirs – in fact, they are quite different from each other as well – but there is some funny affinity there. I get a sense of what they are doing, what they are trying to do. That kind of

7 THE  
2022 o  
24 x 18

8 PER  
carbon  
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150 x 1

9 CLO  
carbon  
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92 x 70

10 VID  
canva

11 HU  
2022 o  
230 x



understanding is important. If you are of that... Modernist tendency, as I am, you can get lost. It can be difficult.

**AD:** Speaking of the RHA, you are a member, which in some ways seems an unlikely fit, given the historical antipathy between the academy here and modernity.

**DC:** When I joined the RHA I was still in my thirties and I took

a lot of flak. But really, looking around, everything else was gone in Ireland – I mean the Living Art and any viable alternative. In a way, you had to look outside Ireland for affinities, and there are a lot, beyond Ireland. It still seems to me that, with few exceptions, public venues here are uninterested in serious painting shows, either solo shows or surveys. That's one of the things I really liked about Sean Rainbird when he was director at the National Gallery. He was so interested in abstract painting. VISUAL's Elizabeth Cope show is fantastic and it really shows up the fact that hardly anyone else, certainly in Dublin, is doing those kinds of shows.

**AD:** That's true. Apart from the fact that VISUAL is exceptional in having the space, it is hard to imagine any other venue doing that exhibition. Highlanes, maybe.

**DC:** Yes, Highlanes, and other places beyond Dublin.

**AD:** To go back to your studies, you went to Winchester to do your MA?

**DC:** I was sure that I wanted to do it somewhere abroad. I remember someone wrote a review of my work that said, disapprovingly, that my paintings were too different from each other. I mean! I felt,

'I have to get out of this town.' Winchester had this exchange programme running with Barcelona, which meant that I would go to Barcelona. I loved Spain, but most of the time I was working there... it was exhausting, and I felt I couldn't really develop the work. My supervisor was a post-Richter artist with a very closed, dismissive attitude. The philosophy lecturer – he was a surgeon by profession – only knew Wittgenstein. Literally. It does interest me, the limits of language and the nature of language, but it's not the sum total of everything.

Looking back now, I feel it all happened too quickly. The pressure I felt – I think that might have had to do with feeling I had to win my father's approval, because I insisted on doing art. Really, when I was considering an MA, I should have gone to somewhere like the RCA in London, somewhere with a culture of painting.

Really, I felt, 'Here I am, at thirty, and just not taken seriously – treated like a little girl, patronised.' It slowly dawned on me the way power operates in the art world – probably just like any other field, but when you start to notice it's interesting. You see people at openings figuring out who there has the power, who should they be talking to.

I had an inferiority complex about the breadth of my literary and philosophical reading. At one point a cousin came up with a long, eclectic reading list. I read masses, all over the place – Friedrich Nietzsche, Bertrand Russell, Salman Rushdie. And Gabriel García Márquez. Márquez was really important for me – magic realism – because it gave me an insight into how to deal with narrative, how to establish a narrative in painting, how to actually do it – not just talk about it. Painting is not just a record of information. It





**MÁRQUEZ WAS REALLY IMPORTANT FOR ME – MAGIC REALISM – BECAUSE IT GAVE ME AN INSIGHT INTO HOW TO DEAL WITH NARRATIVE, HOW TO ESTABLISH A NARRATIVE IN PAINTING**

needn't work as information. You can get it wrong, in terms of information, but you can still have something true. You have this new version, a new real thing. You come up with an artifact. It's like Pliny's *Natural History*: he had a huge number of sources but he read them badly and he got a lot wrong. Yet he came up with something invaluable.

I realised it was okay not to know, which was important, because you get these guys (they are usually guys) who seem to know. They quote all this stuff and they seem confident about it all. So you think they know. There's this idea that you have to have a system, so that everything makes sense, but it doesn't. And that's fine. A painting might seem chaotic, but actually it's a very controlled process. There's always a balance.

**AD: Do you listen to music while you work?**

DC: Yes. Music has a huge effect on me, so I have to be careful. At times I found I couldn't keep the structure of the music out. And words can't work, because you just can't let go of language. Recently I've found that it's good to start a painting with Arvo Pärt, but that's not so good when it gets further on and more complicated. I love Bach. And I've noticed, listening to jazz, it's easier to deal with multiple elements of a composition. You can jump from one corner to another quite naturally. Even as a teenager I felt that the aural and the visual were tangled up. You notice things differently with music. Literally. It changes things.

**AD: Do you play music?**

DC: I did some piano early on but gave it up. Then I started learning the cello during lockdown. I've always liked stringed instruments, the direct connection between the gesture, the string, the sound. I don't feel any connection to wind instruments. I had an Italian teacher. I was drawn to the cello – the physicality of it – but I had this feeling that it was unapproachable. But then I realised it was logical – there are so many octaves, like the piano. So what I already knew was relevant. I can read music and, once you know how the notation applies to the instrument, like painting, the basics are easy. When my teacher returned to Italy the lessons ended, though. I will get back to it.

**AD: You mentioned a comparison with painting there.**

DC: Yes. Notes are like colour; the key is like tone. In painting you underpin colour with tone; you use an infinite range of whites and greys. Like here [she points to an area of the large diptych she's working on], where I feel the form is too pronounced, I've got to bring it down, tonally. I'm not sure how to do that, but it has to be done. ■

Diana Copperwhite, Highlanes Gallery, 4 March – 15 April; Limerick City Gallery of Art, 27 April – 25 June; Galway International Arts Festival, 17-30 July.

**Aidan Dunne is an art critic.**

1 Elizabeth Cope, 'The Palpable Bump at the Bridge of the Nose', curated by Benjamin Stafford, VISUAL Carlow, September 2022–January 2023

**12 INSTRUMENTS OF LIGHTNESS** 2022  
carborundum  
103 x 150cm

**13 UNTITLED**  
oil on canvas  
91cm OPW St  
Collection

**14 A GREENE LAGOON** 2022  
canvas 215 x 215cm  
(Diptych)