

## The Trinity College Dublin Art Collections

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**Artist:** Margaret Corcoran  
**Title:** *Return to Cythera*, 2014  
**Medium:** oil on canvas  
**Notes:** Purchased from the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, October 2014  
Exhibited: 'Margaret Corcoran – Return to Cythera', The Solstice Arts Centre, Navan, Co. Meath, Ireland, 24 April – 7 June 2014; 'The Abundance', Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, Dublin, Ireland, 4 September to 4 October 2014

b. Dublin, 1963

Margaret Corcoran lives and works in Dublin, exhibiting consistently in both group and solo exhibitions at home and abroad since 1999 when her work was selected for EV+A, the international contemporary art biennial held in Limerick. In 2003, she won the Golden Fleece Award for her painting 'An Enquiry II: A Moment of Youth'. A graduate of the National College of Art and Design (NCAD), Dublin, she also studied for three months at the Chelsea School of Art and holds a Masters in Fine Art Painting from NCAD, Dublin.

Corcoran's approach to painting delights in dissolving, or ignoring, any notion of a distinction between contemporary and historical visual arts practice, actively generating a personal debate with artists and artworks of past centuries. Her canvases emerge from densely-layered iconographies stemming from a stream-of-consciousness style of enquiry, both conceptual and compositional. While the artist punctuates her investigations by means of individual paintings, she also allows a variety of fluid discussions to be staged across different works. Each one encapsulates myriad internal conversations, ongoing and constantly developing, not all of which reveal themselves on the surface, but without which the painting would be imperceptible. There is a sense that, long after the artist has cleaned her brush, the work itself continues its own enthusiastic discussions across a time-space-continuum of artistic practice; there is effervescence innate in each piece so much so that one expects to find the composition has evolved of its own accord.

In this painting entitled 'Return to Cythera' the artist reflects on a number of universal themes that have captivated artists across the centuries, using them as a lens through which she observes and contemplates contemporary national and international

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Written and researched by Catherine Giltrap. Curator

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concerns. More specifically, Corcoran has, for a number of years, researched the overlap in Christian and Islamic religious symbolism in a personal effort to strive towards what she terms a “healing post 9/11 theme”<sup>1</sup>. She notes that in both religions we find - among other similarities - Adam and Eve, angels, and the iconographic significance of peacocks, an early Christian symbol of immortality. In this iteration of her ongoing enquiry, she has teased out and amalgamated the narratives and formal compositions of three historic works as springboards for her own contemporary exploration. She commences by letting the brush follow similar forms as those assimilated from the older paintings and then allows herself to diverge from these connections, without limit, permitting her investigations and theories to develop contemporary tangents and proposals as line, form and colour. This is not mimesis or pastiche; this is a very personal cross-cultural, trans-era visual dialogue.

As conceptual platform or stage-set for this painting, she looks to Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721) and the painting he submitted as his reception piece into the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in 1717, *The Pilgrimage to Cythera*, now in the Louvre collections. In Greek mythology, ‘Cythera’ is the birthplace of Aphrodite, or Venus in her Roman guise, and therefore the island of love or ideal union. Watteau's piece is an allegory of courtship and falling in love. We are never quite sure if the group of people he depicts in an idyllic landscape are leaving for Cythera or have just arrived but what we do know is that they are seeking an ideal union, a perfect state or “an Eden”<sup>2</sup>, as the artist puts it. The physical attributes of the composition of Watteau's painting are recognisable in previous works on this theme by Corcoran but, while there are faint echoes here, additional prominent elements prevail such as the profusion of animals, the Adam and Eve figures alongside a peacock, and, to the left, another female figure, here the Greek goddess Daphne.

Also key to this painting is the use of trees as formal and conceptual constructs; often in artistic iconography trees are attributed female characteristics and are associated with fertility and renewal. At the heart of this painted dialogue, and identified by the presence of Adam and Eve, we have the ‘Tree of Knowledge’ bearing witness to another area of the artist's ongoing research, inspired by observations on Jonathan Fisher's landscape painting in the National Gallery of Ireland – *A View of the Lower Lake, Killarney*. Corcoran suggests that Fisher's tree, rather than solely functioning as stage-set, becomes one of the main protagonists, as art critic Aidan Dunne proposes – “an almost Beckettian character”<sup>3</sup>. The prominence of trees links equally to the

appearance of Daphne in what was ostensibly and originally an Eden scene. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Daphne is pursued, unwillingly, by Apollo but is saved by her instant transition into the form of a laurel tree at the touch of his hand. In Corcoran's oeuvre, Eve and Daphne can be interchangeable, but here they appear together to challenge the balance of Eden by introducing the notion of the extra female in the garden of Eden, in what the artist describes as a reference to Judaism's Lillith, Adam's first wife, who has become associated with Adam as a way to explain contradictory versions of Creation in the book of Genesis.

The artist also willingly elucidates that she has, in fact, incorporated two further paintings in her vocabulary of enquiry here – an early 17<sup>th</sup> century Persian miniature of 'The Conference of the Birds' depicting a 12<sup>th</sup> century mystical poem by Farid al-Din 'Attar, now in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and painted by Habiballah of Sava (active c. 1590-1610), and Peter Wenzel's 'Adam and Eve' on permanent display in the Pinacoteca at The Vatican Museums. The Persian miniature depicts a group of birds who are about to embark on a pilgrimage to find the 'Simurgh', a mystical bird representing spiritual unity. They, like the Cythera group, congregate in the *pursuit* of union but realise at the end of the journey that what they were seeking was in fact what they had forged at the start, a union of souls, *Simurgh* meaning 'thirty birds', the number they started with. Corcoran, plays on this by visually unifying these Western European and Islamic narratives, so much so that the Persian imagery is so fused now in the layering of the paint and the flurry of colour that we cannot easily distinguish it, but the artist has used their formal and conceptual union to her own end:

"... looking for an explanation to the chaos of life and the universe, and a suggestion for the respect of all our versions [to] be given ... that Eden is a far more complex imagined terrain than usually depicted. And often those claiming it can clash, as can the inhabitants, but that hopefully that peace prevails."<sup>4</sup>

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1, 2, & 4. Email discussion between Margaret Corcoran and Catherine Giltrap, 2 March 2015

3. Aidan Dunne, 'A Fruitful Tree for Margaret Corcoran', *The Irish Times*, 5 May 2014