
Art of the new – keeping it contemporary

**Catherine Giltrap, Curator and
Head of the University Art Collections**

These past ten years the Art Collections team has had many adventures. In fact, we have described many of our projects as ‘once-in-a-generation’. Since Dr Patrick Prendergast was elected 44th Provost at the age of 44, we have conserved, collected, commissioned and collaborated on a vast array of programmes throughout the whole campus.

Weaving tradition and innovation between our respective long-standing and relatively new roles and building on key developments by Provosts McConnell and Hegarty, we have aspired to place both the appreciation and care of visual art at the very heart of the campus and its community more coherently, consistently and creatively than was feasible before. Never the same day twice, which is how we like it, and we have learnt to take every challenge as an opportunity for conservation and for creative solutions and innovations. During one particular May–June period – nicknamed affectionately thereafter as ‘May-hem’ – within a six-week time frame we brought to a close at least eight of these ‘once-in-a-generation’ projects of major conservation, commissions and curating new capital projects; one of these was six years in the planning.

An unending tapestry

Whilst much of our focus is on celebrating and protecting our existing visual art collections, we have simultaneously insisted on the importance of the present tense. We cherish our recent and centuries-old heritage whilst creating the future with the imprint and interests of today’s artists, today’s students and staff, today’s national and global concerns, and attempt to weave them into an unending tapestry, filled with a biography of the past, present and future.

RIGHT – Damien Flood ‘Tumble’, 2018, oil on reversed black-primed canvas, purchased from Green on Red Gallery.



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During the past decade, we have added over 200 artworks to the collections, now totalling in excess of 3,000 items. What is distinctive about our art collections is how they inhabit the whole campus, from the city centre to Tallaght University Hospital, from private to more public locations, with works on display in up to 500 locations at any one time.

One of the most important acts of support for the visual arts that Provost Prendergast has realised at Trinity, is the offer of sustained and consistent financial support for the purchase of contemporary art, acquired directly from living artists and from galleries.

This took the form of 'The Provost's Fund for Contemporary Art', set up towards the end of 2014. This fund has enabled us to collect 44 artworks for the benefit of the students, staff and visitors to our University. In addition to this, the Provost secured significant one-off funding of €100,000 within the parameters of the new student accommodation programme at Printing House Square to purchase art for student areas. This will enable us to further bolster our plans to dynamically re-design the concept of the Picture Hire Scheme so that as many common areas in student residences as possible will feature a modern or contemporary artwork, all year round.

The Committee proposing, discussing and selecting contemporary acquisitions via The Provost's Fund has included the Provost, Dr Yvonne Scott, former Director of the Trinity Irish Art Research Centre, and myself as Curator and

Head of the Art Collections, in the generously hard-working company of student representatives, staff from across the disciplines, alumni, and external visual arts professionals from the education and gallery sectors. The artists whose work we have selected have mainly been new to our collections, some recently graduated, others well established nationally and internationally, including representation of Ireland at the globally-acclaimed Venice Biennale of Contemporary Art.

Since the Modern Art Collections at Trinity were established, some sixty years ago now, each advocate for the Modern and Contemporary Art Collections at Trinity, including George Dawson, Anne Crookshank, David Scott, Peter Cherry and myself, as the first Curator, sought to collect artworks of the moment, in the moment. Many were acquired by donations but a significant number were purchased directly from the artists themselves, not long after their production, at a time when support was much-needed. However, there was never a consistent means to buy other than the minimal, and not very predictable, fees from the Picture Hire Scheme. We should not underestimate the works that this scheme supported though, as they have been significant. The Provost listened and recognised the ongoing struggle to keep up this momentum and the ad hoc nature by which we strove to collect the contemporary and sought to resolve this by regular support and encouragement.

LEFT – Jane Rainey ‘Solo Traveller’, 2017, oil on canvas, purchased from Cross Gallery.

BELOW RIGHT – Amanda Coogan ‘The Fall’, 2009, edition 1 of 3, C-type print, purchased from Kevin Kavanagh Gallery.

BELOW LEFT – Paul Hallahan ‘Aimlessly Pretty III (114)’, 2017, watercolour on HP fabiano paper, purchased from Berlin Opticians Gallery.



New commissions and donations

Over the past ten years, we have marked many firsts and carried out so many worthwhile projects too numerous to mention here in detail. Highlights include the commission of the first new portrait for the Dining Hall in over 150 years, our former Chancellor, Dr Mary Robinson. Also, at the instigation of the Provost, we are commissioning the four portrait busts of women for the Long Room, adorned with sculptures featuring men since the 1740s.

Contemporary art additions include important bodies of work from the Irish and international collections of honorary fellow Patrick J. Murphy, former Director of the Douglas Hyde Gallery John Hutchinson, and individual significant works such as the campus sculpture by Rowan Gillespie from the collection of Eric and Barbara Kinsella, a large-scale piece by Lennon donated by Derek Dockrell in memory of Professor and Fellow Rodney B. Dockrell, and many donations by artists, such as the continued, longstanding generosity of artist Richard Gorman, most recently with the support of fellow alumnus Robert Mahaffy at the Trinity School of Business.

A very special commission/artist-donation of Janet Mullarney’s small-scale sculpture, now on display in The Trinity Long Room Hub, was realised by funds that could be saved over time from the hire scheme due to the sustainable, parallel support for additional contemporary art purchases

by The Provost’s Fund. Recent portrait commissions have included the former Vice-Provost Linda Hogan painted by Miseon Lee, and former Registrar and current Pro-Chancellor Shane Allwright by James Hanley, and, on the cusp of commencing, is the process to paint the portrait of the Bursar and Director of Strategic Innovation, Veronica Campbell.

As a means of acknowledging the artists, galleries and donors with whom we have connected this past decade, we will launch the first in a new series of illustrated catalogues focusing on recent acquisitions, commencing with The Provost’s Fund for Contemporary Art to recognise how he has helped us to stay contemporary.

We aim to create a balance between acquiring emerging and established artists, and, since 2014, we have displayed many of these additions initially at the new exhibition walls in the Arts Building and then distributed them throughout student, staff and open spaces so that visual art is present for those who visit the libraries, the lecture theatres, the cafés, and the grounds. The new Board Room, Trinity School of Business, Trinity Biomedical Sciences Institute, new teaching facilities in Tallaght and many more premises across the campus have new displays of modern and contemporary art to enjoy and more are being planned for our developing campus and community for the future.