

THE DOCK

Sian Costello

Hymn to Him

Studio image: *Summer's Day*, 2025, oil on canvas



Introduction

The construction of images has been a long-standing preoccupation of artist Sian Costello. *Hymn to Him* is a guilty pleasure, a sustained glance at the relationship between the unstable and convoluted lives of artists and the composed stillness of the characters they create.

In her painting and photographic work, she lingers on the surfaces of things — bellies, primroses, vegetables. Costello inserts herself into her compositions and, as her own model, she remains in control of both sides of the canvas. Her paintings are less representative of their classical subjects — portraiture, nudes, and still life — but more about grappling with the dichotomy of fact and fiction within the artist's desire to create new realities and the desperation to represent her own.

Methods of photography are present in Costello's practice through her regular use of camera obscura to create her images for painting. For this new body of work, Costello takes a specific moment at the birth of photography as her jumping off point, a moment in which the history of contemporary art was at a crossroads. Costello's interest in this period lies in the ways that practitioners were split in two camps; those who believed that photography's realism was the key to legitimacy, and those who saw it as an opportunity to enhance the artist's hand.

The former documented real-life people and events to fill a gap in accurate representation, while the latter staged their subjects in the language of academic painting where the viewer is left wondering what is a brushstroke and what is light upon a sheet of film.

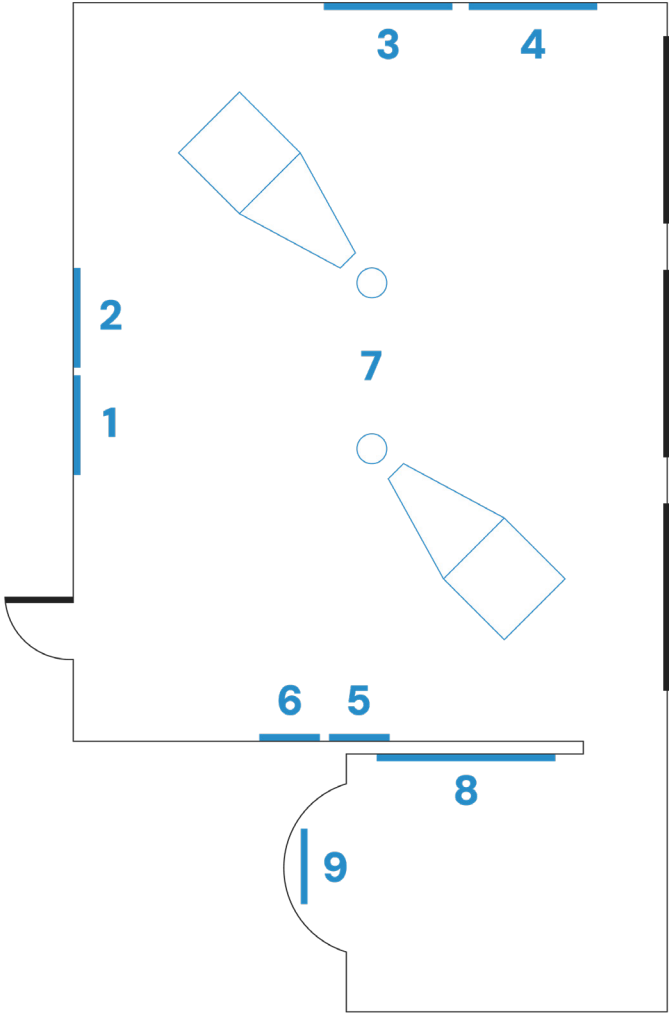
Through painting, installation, and film, Costello aims to take the viewer on a loop around the history of figuration and the hierarchies of authorship. This body of work presents multiple mediums of human representation and mimicry, not as a linear progression from worst to best, but as a web of impulses, predicated upon varying motives.

Speaking to ideas of desire, desperation, and control, this exhibition takes its title from a song in the final act of Lerner and Loewes's 1956 Broadway musical *My Fair Lady*, based on the novel *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw. In this adaptation of a Grecian myth where an artist falls hopelessly in love with his creation, the second act sees a 1950s revisionist ending where the 'creation' eventually succumbs to her creator. In using herself as her own model, Costello could be seen as engaging in a radical act of self-love, but in actuality is confronting the reality of living as a socially-awkward portrait painter.

Hymn to Him is curated by Niamh Brown.

Map

Gallery 2



Gallery 3

List of Works

Gallery 2

1. *Summer's Day*, 2025, oil on canvas, 165 x 150 cm
2. *The Mime*, 2025, oil on canvas, 165 x 150 cm

These paintings tell a story of the opposing function of photography in painting. In *Summer's Day*, the artist captures the figure in a moment, whereas in *The Mime*, the figure is staged. Together they expose the unclear relation between what is natural and what is artificial in the construction of images.

3. *Corpse*, 2025, oil on canvas, 120 x 160 cm
4. *The Model*, 2025, oil on canvas, 120 x 160 cm

In the tradition of still life painting, the subjects are positioned in front of the artist's camera obscura. Coexisting with the realism the lens allows, the photographic artifacts are represented in paint. Through using herself as the model, the body becomes a material to study as much as a tossed bouquet of flowers.

5. *Come to me*, 2025, pastel on canvas, 110 x 80 cm
6. *Bend to me*, 2025, pastel on canvas, 110 x 80 cm

The artist views primroses through a zoom lens camera obscura and translates their image using pastel on canvas. Their representation is reduced to an abstracted field of vision.

Gallery 2 (cont.)

7. *Pygmalion*, 2025, two camera obscurae made with lenses, plywood, tracing paper, blackout curtain, fabric tape, studio lights, motorised turntable, plaster casts, dimensions variable.

Camera obscura is an analogue viewing machine originating in the 15th century. The artist is exposing her method for capturing her source material. For the artist, the camera obscura represents a formative method, as well as an accessible tool for image making.

Audiences are invited to view life casts magnified and abstracted through these machines.

Gallery 3

8. *Auguste and Louis forever*, 2025, film with sound, 19 mins 3 secs

In this film, the artist reimagines the invention of autochrome photography patented by Auguste and Louis Lumière in 1903. Autochrome photography was the first commercially-viable form of colour photography created using a matrix of dyed potato starch.

9. *Set piece*, 2024, oil on canvas, 60 x 80 cm

The artist returns home from the studio in this final painting. In contrast to other works, this painting takes its starting point from a long-exposure flash photograph. This disconnect between warm domestic lamps and the unflinching flash of the camera could be representative of the ongoing working relationship between photography and painting.

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Biographies

Sian Costello (b. 1998) is an artist based in Limerick City, Ireland. Since graduating from Fine Art Painting at Limerick School of Art and Design in 2020, Costello has exhibited nationally and internationally, recent solo exhibitions include *The Crush* at PS2, Belfast and *Hot Child* at Ormston House, Limerick.

She has been the recipient of the Visual Art Bursary Award from the Arts Council of Ireland and funding from Culture Ireland. Her work has been profiled in The Guardian, The Art Newspaper, British Vogue, Another Magazine, The Visual Artists' Newsletter, and The Irish Arts Review.

Niamh Brown is a curator and producer based in Limerick City, Ireland. She currently works as Curator of Strategy & Development at Ormston House. She holds a B.A. in Fine Art from Limerick School of Art & Design and was Creative Producer for the 39th edition of EVA International.

Independent projects include *Community Spirits* with Laura Fitzgerald, Inch, Co. Kerry and *At first / I was land*, featuring Paul Gaffney, Debbie Godsell, Fiona Kelly, Róisín O'Sullivan, and Sarah Long, Backwater Artists Studios, Cork. Recent exhibitions at Ormston House include *Hot Child* by Sian Costello, co-curated with Pádraic E. Moore; *Strange Weather* by Laura Fitzgerald; and *Other Ghosts* featuring Ursula Burke, Joy Gerrard, and Jennifer Trouton.



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