

# THE DOCK

## The Gardener Digs:

### Laura McMorrow's contemplative approach to nature and time

— Aoife Donnellan

The Dock presents 'The Gardener Digs', a solo exhibition by multidisciplinary artist Laura McMorrow in her home county Leitrim as part of the venue's winter programme. The presented work examines relationships between the body and nature, creating atemporal landscapes through her painting, animation, sculpture and collage. Subdued pastel colours transform natural scenes into surreal environments, destabilising the viewer's sense of time and place. 'The Gardener Digs' explores the artist's relationship to the garden as a domestic, homely place, as well as a site through which to interrogate control. In the exhibition text, she references her mother, Gillian, an avid gardener who was "extremely dedicated to her craft" and who used gardening as a therapeutic method for her chronic illness called amyloidosis. Through her mother's practice, McMorrow examines the garden as a meditative, reciprocal space, wherein the body nurtures and is nurtured in return.

The gallery space is bright, lit by three large windows, framing a wall of green trees outside. The works are hung in constellations of varying sizes with soft spotlights making visible a symbiosis between the works. McMorrow's landscapes are dreamlike, with soft-hued tones capturing transitory twilights. Trees and plant life stand against undefined backdrops, disrupting the viewer's sense of perspective. The paintings depict a variety of seasons and botanical

specimens, featuring tropical foliage, wildflower meadows, bodies of water, and domestic gardens.

On the mantel above the fireplace in the gallery sits a collection of McMorrow's smaller pieces, merging the natural world with the decorative; a moth's wing appears at the edge of a frame, and flowers are separated into neat rows. Works find their form in a variety of objects, including *Lake Louise* (2023) on the underside of a candle stick holder, *Anemone* (2024) inside a photo frame, and *Stairway in the Park* (2022) on a fireplace cover. The artist sources her canvases in second-hand shops, sometimes returning them painted to be sold to another customer. She describes her mother's gardening practice as concerned with deciding "which plants belong and deserve to self-seed, and which become a nuisance." McMorrow's practice of finding, reusing, and sometimes returning canvases echoes this selective process, deciding what gets a second chance. Discovery is central to these works, creating the sense that there are worlds contained in the histories of these objects. Having served other functions in previous lives, the items take on new roles through McMorrow's interventions, mimicking the role of the gardener who plants, prunes, and harvests.

McMorrow often depicts nature as a dominating force over the body, with leaves looming large behind figures in *Giant Rhubarb* (2023), or nature fluidly swirling around them through blushing pinks and soft blues in *Drought* (2022). This playful approach to scale dislocates the viewer's understanding of a subject. In a circular frame sits a painted tile, portraying what could be a feather falling to earth, or a spacecraft taking flight, against the backdrop of a

moody green and purple sky. The title, *Rocket* (2023), confirms the subject as well as the scale of the scene.

This sense of dislocation continues in the artist's framing. A selection of McMorro's monoprints are installed in the mezzanine outside of the gallery space, capturing the sculptural quality of the artist's two-dimensional works. In *Nostalgia (just this once)* (2024) a solitary swing hangs from a tree, resting on a monochromatic horizon. These works have a sense of unreality to them, capturing moments of movement with attentive stillness. In *Hedge Maze* (2024), the frame is filled with a maze pattern, giving a monumental quality to a structure made from shrubbery. McMorro suspends these potential activities, memorialising them for future contemplation.

Conceptually, McMorro's works are in dialogue with the fluctuating nature of time and its relationship to chronic illness. The exhibition title captures the ongoing and contemporaneous nature of tending to the land. Her mother's gardening practice in North Leitrim inspired the artist to examine gardening as both an ancient and contemporary activity. Gardeners are custodians of landscapes, in dialogue with the actions of past and future inhabitants. McMorro's animation *Modern Nature* (2024) considers this idea explicitly. The work is installed on a small screen, in keeping with the dimensions of the surrounding paintings. Created using a paint-on-glass technique, it illustrates a quote from Derek Jarman's *Modern Nature: The Journals of Derek Jarman* (1991). Jarman was an English filmmaker, active in the 1970s and 80s who, after being diagnosed with HIV, relocated to Prospect Cottage, previously a Victorian fisherman's hut in Dungeness in Kent. The garden of his home

became the protagonist of a number of his works, including his journals. On 7 March 1989 the entry begins:

*The gardener digs in another time, without past or future, beginning or end. A time that does not cleave the day with rush hours, lunch breaks, the last bus home. As you walk in the garden you pass into this time – the moment of entering can never be remembered. Around you the landscape lies trans-figured. Here is the Amen beyond the prayer.*<sup>1</sup>

McMorrow illustrates this quote in her video work through a series of vignettes: a man loses his hat in the wind; a kite soars and is dashed on a tree; a woman reclines as the world shifts around her. While Jarman considers moments in the garden as being outside of time, McMorrow explores the friction between control and freedom in the natural world. Elemental forces intervene in each scene, underscoring a sense of interplay with the environment. Theories of time and its relationship to chronic illness are well-documented by scholars in disability studies. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, a scholar with a focus on feminist and disability theory, notes that “disability is an identity category that anyone can enter at any time, and we will all join it if we live long enough,” challenging the “cultural belief that the body is the unchanging anchor of identity.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jarman, Derek. “MARCH.” *Modern Nature*, NED-New edition, University of Minnesota Press, 1991, pp. 26–47. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.cttttd3m.5>. Accessed 20 Nov. 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory.” *NWSA Journal*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2002, pp. 1–32. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4316922>. Accessed 8 Nov. 2024.

McMorrow captures this sentiment through her figures, whose bodies are bound by temporal conditions but who nonetheless attempt to control ever-changing landscapes. Her gardener digs beyond linear time, rather than outside of it, exploring chronic illness through characters who are active in surreal and ambiguous landscapes, defined by shifting possibilities of the future. The artist's compassionate study of her mother's gardening considers the feelings of hope and trust involved in planting something, in order for it to grow. In this way, the anchor of identity is created through action: the gardener digs, the painter paints.

Using the garden as a site of inquiry, the artist explores organising principles in the natural world. Interrogating how the body is supported and dismissed by the landscape, the garden becomes a place where the present is prioritised and the future is imagined. Through the inclusion of Jarman's text, she makes explicit the exhibition's connection to experiences of illness. Her hypnagogic scenes encourage audiences to see beyond time through to a dreamlike world of action and inaction. McMorrow ultimately captures the serene, forceful and magical elements of nature in her work, meditating on the past, present and future of human relationships to the land.

### **Aoife Donnellan**

Aoife Donnellan is a curator and writer based between London and Berlin. Her curatorial and research practice investigates access as a creative method. She is currently completing a PhD in accessibility and contemporary exhibition-making at University College London.

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