

THE
DOCK

Helen O'Leary
Soft Spot

Soft Spot is on display at The Dock
between 21 March — 30 May 2026.



*Helen O'Leary in her studio.
Photo by Paul Takeuchi.*

Introduction

The Dock presents *Soft Spot*, an exhibition by Irish artist Helen O’Leary that foregrounds reuse, repair, and ecological thinking as generative artistic strategies.

Raised in rural Ireland in the 1960s and 70s, O’Leary’s formative ethos — “if you can’t make it, you can’t have it” — continues to inform her materially rigorous practice. Over decades, she has developed a distinctive formal language built from modest materials and unglamorous gestures: dismantled supports, reused canvases, exposed joins, residual paint. Her works occupy a dynamic space between painting and sculpture, blurring categorical boundaries while insisting on the physicality of their making.

O’Leary’s constructions respond to what she describes as a “flipbook of faith, money, possibility, belief, absurdity, disappointment, and the ethical collapse of so many systems that never worked for so many.” At The Dock, this sensibility is sharpened through what might be termed a form of *studio archaeology*: earlier works are disassembled into rudimentary slabs and reconstituted, transforming failure and obsolescence into fertile ground. Grids buckle,

Réamhrá

Tá áthas ar *The Dock Soft Spot* a chur i láthair, taispeántas leis an ealaíontóir Éireannach Helen O’Leary, a dhíríonn ar ath-úsáid, deisiú agus smaointeoireacht éiceolaíoch mar straitéisí chun ealaín a ghiniúint.

Tógadh O’Leary faoin tuath in Éirinn sna 1960idí agus 70idí agus tá an t-éiteas a chuaigh i bhfeidhm uirthi ina hóige — “mura féidir leat é a dhéanamh, ní féidir leat é a bheith agat” — fós mar bhonn eolais dá cleachtas, atá pointeáilte ó thaobh ábhair de. Leis na deiceanna de bhlianta anuas, tá teanga fhoirmiúil, shainiúil forbartha aici atá bunaithe ar ábhair umhla agus bearta neamhghalánta: tacaí díchóimeáilte, canbháis athúsáidte, ailt nochta, iarsmaí péinte. Tá a cuid saothar suite i spás dinimiciúil idir péintéireacht agus dealbhóireacht, a fhágann teorainneacha dochta doiléir agus a léiríonn fisiciúlacht a gcruthaithe ag an am céanna.

Tugann an saothar a thógann O’Leary freagra ar, mar a deir sí féin, “leabhar meariompaithe d’iontaoibh, airgead, féidearthacht, creideamh, amaidí, díomá agus cliseadh eiticiúil an oiread sin córas nár oibrigh riamh don oiread sin daoine.” Ag *The Dock*, déantar an chéadfacht sin a ghéarú trí rud a d’fhéadfaí cineál de *sheandálaíocht stiúideo* a thabhairt air: déanann sí saothair a bhí déanta aici roimhe a dhíchóimeáil ina leaca bunúsacha agus iad a

supports tilt, surfaces carry the memory of prior use. Fragility and resilience coexist in what the artist has described as an “ecology of form.”

Soft Spot situates painting as a site of rupture and restoration. Through circular processes of reuse and repair, O’Leary aligns artistic method with regenerative thinking and ethical making. The exhibition also activates her commitment to environmental practice and local engagement. Elements of *The Sustainable Studio*, developed with artist Kim Flick, will unfold during the exhibition alongside glimpses into the artist’s dye garden and a DIY museum initiative — durational and participatory frameworks that extend the gallery into a space of collective enquiry.

In *Soft Spot*, vulnerability is not weakness but structural condition: a means through which inherited systems — aesthetic, ecological, institutional — may be taken apart and reimaged.

For press images, interviews or further information, please contact
thedockartscentre@gmail.com

athchruthú, chun talamh torthúil a dhéanamh de theip agus dífheidhmeacht. Tá greillí lúbtha, tá tacáí claonta, tá an úsáid a baineadh astu roimhe seo fós le brath i ndromchlaí. Tá idir leochaileacht agus athléimneacht ann in “éiceolaíocht na foirme”, mar a thug an t-ealaíontóir í féin tuairisc uirthi.

An léiriú a thugann *Soft Spot* ar an bpéintéireacht ná suíomh an bhriste agus an athchóirithe. Trí phróisis chiorclacha athúsáide agus deisiúcháin, déanann O’Leary modh ealaíonta a ailíniú le smaointeoireacht athghiniúnach agus déanamh eiticíúil. Cuireann an taispeántas a tiomantas do chleachtas comhshaoil agus do rannpháirtíocht áitiúil i ngníomh freisin. Beidh gnéithe de The Sustainable Studio, a forbraíodh leis an ealaíontóir Kim Flick, le feiceáil i rith an taispeántais, chomh maith le sracfhéachaint ar ghairdín ruaimeanna an ealaíontóra agus tionscnamh músaeim DIY — creataí marthanacha agus rannpháirteacha a dhéanann spás don iniúchadh comhchoiteann as an dánlann.

Sa taispeántas *Soft Spot*, ní laige í an leochaileacht ach riocht struchtúrach: bealach trína bhféadfaí córais a fuarthas le hoidhreacht — córais aeistéitiúla, éiceolaíocha, institiúideacha — a bhaint as a chéile agus a athshamhlú.

Chun íomhánna don phreas, agallaimh nó tuilleadh eolais a fháil, déan teagmháil le **thedockartscentre@gmail.com**

Helen O'Leary by Vona Grooke **Poet / Ireland Professor of Poetry**

Written in 2017, reprinted and translated with permission

'The end of art is peace / could be the motto of this frail device', writes Seamus Heaney in *The Harvest Bow*, but it is an end that is rarely, if ever, easily attained. In between the identified need and the desired end is a process of some turbulence and disorder, wherein the claims of fracture and disappointment must be accounted for. Helen O'Leary's new work understands the play between a unifying scheme of resolution and its opposite: how art is to be wrestled from difficulty and contest, and may still cohere on a surface that is given to peace as much as to beauty.

Helen O'Leary's art draws on her Irish background, and explores with deftness, rigor and craft, the idea of origin, of how everything we subsequently become has been framed by the visual, cultural, moral and emotional lines of definition that are drawn around our formative childhood worlds. In these surfaces, I see the shadow remnants of ploughed fields and scrubbed wooden tables, of the straight lines of rural conversation and tidy timetables, of the ongoing poetry of season and tide, pattern and ritual.

Helen O'Leary le Vona Groake **File / Ollamh Filíochta na hÉireann**

'The end of art is peace / could be the motto of this frail device', a scríobh Seamus Heaney ina shaothar *The Harvest Bow*, ach más í síocháin toradh deiridh na healaíne, is toradh é sin nach mbaintear amach go minic, má bhaintear amach ar chor ar bith é. Idir an riachtanas sainaitheanta agus an deireadh inmhianaithe tá próiseas ina bhfuil roinnt suaiteachta agus neamhoird, áit nach mór cuntas a thabhairt ar an mbriseadh agus ar an díomá a mhaítear. Tuigtear i saothar nua Helen O'Leary an t-idirghníomhú idir scéim aontaitheach a thugann réiteach agus a mhalairt: conas is féidir ealaín a chruthú as deacracht agus comórtas, agus conas is féidir léi a bheith ciallmhar i gcomhthéacs atá tugtha don tsíocháin chomh maith leis an áilleacht.

Tarraingíonn ealaín Helen O'Leary ar a cúlra Éireannach, agus déanann sí iniúchadh le scil, críochnúlacht agus ceardaíocht ar choincheap an bhunúis, ar an gcaoi a bhfuil tionchar ag an sainmhíniú amhairc, cultúrtha, morálta agus mothúchánach a thugtar dár saol le linn ár n-óige ar gach gné dár bhféiniúlacht ina dhiaidh sin. Sna dromchlaí seo, feicim lorg na páirce treafa agus an bhoird adhmaid sciúrtha, feicim lorg ord agus eagar an chomhrá faoin tuath agus an amchláir

The beauty of the work is indisputable, but these are paintings which also benefit from considerable intellectual ballast and emotional resonance. As well as their obvious awareness of the painterly tradition, the depth of Helen's engagement with literature and, in particular, with poetry, is markedly visible in these paintings: Beckett's restraint, Heaney's lyricism, Rimbaud's visionary luminescence, and Chekov's way of structuring narrative all contribute to the forceful and yet elegant articulation of her work.

There is resolution here, certainly, but it is neither glib nor occasional. What O'Leary offers within her frames are meditative spaces that do not renege on the disarmingly messy business of life, but instead suggest ways in which this might be resolved into moments of intense feeling and deliberate art. As a craftsperson and technician, there is real achievement here: the handling of colour, shape and texture reminds us that O'Leary is a painter of profound and noted skill. But she is also an artist of sensitivity and range. These are not surfaces easily come by and in their delicate negotiations, they declare a stay on discord and friction, offering to us instead this most accomplished peace.

shlachtmhair, agus feicim lorg na filíochta leanúnaí atá ag séasúir, taoidí, patrúin agus deasghnátha.

Níl aon dabht faoi áilleacht an tsaothair, ach tá machnamh intleachtúil agus ailíniú mothúchánach suntasach le feiceáil sna pictiúir seo freisin. Chomh maith le feasacht shoiléir ar thraidisiún na péintéireachta, tá doimhneacht chaidreamh Helen leis an litríocht agus, go háirithe, leis an bhfilíocht, le feiceáil go soiléir sna pictiúir seo: cuireann srianadh Beckett, liriciúlacht Heaney, lonracht fhísiúil Rimbaud, agus bealach Chekov chun scéal a struchtúrú, leis an mbealach láidir agus galánta a chuireann Helen a saothar in iúl.

Tá réiteach anseo, cinnte, ach níl sé fánach ná ócáideach. Is é a thairgeann O'Leary ina frámaí ná spásanna machnaimh nach ndiúltaíonn míshlacht an tsaoil, ach a mholann bealaí inar féidir é sin a aistriú ina bpointí dianmhothúcháin agus ealaíne atá á cruthú d'aon ghnó. Mar cheardaí agus mar theicneoir, tá fíor-éacht déanta anseo: meabhraíonn an chaoi a láimhseálann sí dath, cruth agus uigeacht dúinn gur péintéir í O'Leary a bhfuil scileanna doimhne agus aitheanta aici. Ach is ealaíontóir í a bhfuil íogaireacht agus réimse aici freisin. Ní dromchlaí iad seo a chruthaítear go héasca agus sa chaoi leochaileach ar baineadh amach iad, cuireann siad easaontas agus aighneas ar fionraí agus cuireann siad síocháin iontach ar fáil dúinn ina ionad sin.

List of materials

- Aluminium
- Ash dieback reclaimed timber
- Burberry bush and tree of heaven (invasive species, PA)
- Carbon
- Casein
- Ceramic
- Chalk
- Charcoal
- Crushed egg shell
- Crushed stones
- Depression-era Tramp art frame from reconstructed cigar boxes (unknown artist)
- Dyes from roots
- Egg yolk tempera
- Fish glue
- Framed cross-stitch c. 1890 (unknown artist)
- Gold leaf
- Graphite
- Iron
- Lake pigments from plants
- Linen

- Milk
- Mirror
- Oak galls
- Oystershell
- Pigments
- Polymer
- Rabbit skin glue
- Reclaimed and restructured wood from ash dieback
- Reclaimed pigments from Acid Mine clean up in PA
- Silver leaf
- Silverpoint
- Soil
- Soot
- Spun nettle
- Steel
- Various reclaimed and recycled objects over 40 years
- Violin bow maker Gary Leahy's pernambuco shavings
- Wood scrap
- Wool

Biography

Helen O’Leary (b. 1961) is a Wexford-born artist best known for constructions that blur the boundaries between painting and sculpture. She holds BFA and MFA degrees from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Based between New York and Leitrim, her work has been widely recognised through awards and residencies including the Rome Prize American Academy in Rome; New Jersey Fellowship for the Arts; the Hennessy Purchase Award, IMMA, Dublin; the Purchase Award American Academy of Arts and Letters; the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship; the Pollock-Krasner awards; the Joan Mitchell Award for painting and sculpture; the Centre Culturel Irlandaise, France; the Sam and Adele Golden Residency, NY; the Mac Dowell Fellowship, New Hampshire; the Skowhegan program, ME; and the Yaddo Residency, NY.

Among multiple and prestigious exhibitions are the American Academy of Arts and Letters, NYC; The American Academy in Rome, Italy and NYC; The MAC Belfast, Ireland; National Gallery of Art, Ireland; Lesley Heller Gallery, NYC; Maine Museum of Art, Bangor, Maine; Muscarele Museum of Art, Williamsburg, Virginia; The Butler Gallery, Ireland.

Her work has been featured in various publications and blogs, including Sculpture Magazine; Why I make Art: Contemporary Artist stories of life; Work, Sound and Vision Podcast; Art Forum; Hyperallergic; New York Times; The Brooklyn Rail; Art News; and The Irish Times.

Acknowledgements

The artist would like to thank Eva O’Leary, Kim Flick, Vona Groarke, the Dolan family, The Sustainable Studio at Pennsylvania State University, and Save Leitrim.

Thanks to Gareth Cooze, John Mathews, Terry McGovern, and Terry Markey for technical support and to the team at The Dock — Jane Carmody, Mary Conlon, Aaron Dobson, Jonathan Harte, Krzysztof Kuczerawy, Terry Leahy, and Liz O’Dowd.



Leitrim
County Council
Comhairle Chontae Liatroma

