



# THE IRISH TIMES

## The bright new gallery by the sea



**Aidan Dunne**  
**Visual Art**  
Dún Laoghaire's flagship Lexicon, a testament to civic generosity, has a fine gallery

**Soundings: Collective Memories of the Sea**  
Gary Coyle, Anthony Haughey, Emma Johnston, Sabina MacMahon, Julie Merriman, Lisa Reburn  
Municipal Gallery, DLR Lexicon, Dún Laoghaire  
★★★★

Dún Laoghaire's extraordinary new library, DLR Lexicon, comes with a gallery not so much attached as embedded. The Municipal Gallery and its adjacent project room are at the heart of the building. A feeling of civic generosity characterises the building.

Those who work in DLR's arts office are clearly delighted. "There are people who would come and visit the gallery anyway," says assistant arts officer Ciara King. "But by virtue of its location here we can reach a much wider public. We hope they'll come in, and then come back again and again."

Encouraging and building an audience are integral to the arts office's approach. The inaugural exhibition, *Soundings: Collective Memories of the Sea* comes with an extensive programme of live events, screenings, public talks and several ambitious workshops. The workshops include three practical projects developed by TOG Hackerspace, an organisation based on Chancery Lane in Dublin that promotes DIY creativity across the arts and sciences. With Dún Laoghaire's maritime tradition in mind, the two remaining TOG events, on January 17th and 24th, cover building a crystal AM radio and stealth communications.

Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown council has a good record in arts involvement, including the visual arts, with various projects, residencies and commissions to its credit. It has also built a sizeable collection, with an emphasis on local artists.

### Local connections

There have to be many artists with local connections, but some are especially close, as in the case of two generations of the Coyle family, for example. John Coyle's

fine realist paintings are rooted in his immediate urban landscape. In different ways, the work of his son, Gary Coyle, who features in *Soundings*, is also rooted in Dún Laoghaire. He has made a substantial projects based on his practice of swimming daily at the Forty Foot – some of it is in *Soundings* – but besides that he has delved into many aspects of the region in other pieces, often with a noir-ish edge.

Prior to the opening of the Municipal Gallery, DLR's exhibition venue was the concourse of the County Hall. While it is a big open space, and has been suitable as a venue for large group shows such as the annual exhibition of the Watercolour Society, it is not a purpose-built gallery. "We'll still have the concourse," says King. "And it will still be available for shows like the Watercolour Society that are simply too large for the Lexicon."

The Lexicon space is substantial but not huge, with a smaller projection room at the end. "It's on an approachable scale," says King. Looking to next year, *Home*, opening on February 13th, will be selected from an open submission – again by artists with some link to the area – by respected curator Mark St John Ellis of Nag on Francis Street.

"Tara Murphy – herself a local – of Solomon Fine Art is putting together a show by five RHA members with a local background, including sculptor Melanie le Brocqy, John Coyle and George Potter," says King. "Next June we've something quite different: Matisse cut-outs from the Hayward Gallery in London. We're hoping that will attract a lot of popular interest."

*Soundings* was curated by Michael McLoughlin, who also made a collaborative work with members of Dún Laoghaire's RNLI crews. Last year, the two RNLI boats were at sea for about 1,500 hours. The crew members are volunteers and come from all walks of life. We know this because McLoughlin set up a series of photographs of individual crew members going about their day-to-day activities, but while kitted out in their seagoing gear.

McLoughlin generally works in the context of community. So too does Anthony Haughey, who often co-operates with those who have individual and group experience of migration. His 2009 video *Prospect* recounts the desperate experiences of one immigrant whose journey to Ireland involved a terrifying Mediterranean voyage in an unsuitable vessel.

### Rich body of work

Sabina MacMahon has developed a rich body of work using the scholarly tropes and conventions of historic and scientific narrative and display, to explore a realm somewhere between fact and fantasy. In so

doing she gently questions our tendency to shape the world into neat, plausible, reassuring stories. Humour is part of her vocabulary. Here we learn about the trained archaeological seagulls used by Eileen Champion Poole to search the waters off Killiney beach for traces of a drowned village. You may be sceptical on all counts, but then, not only are Poole's trusty seagulls displayed in a glass cabinet, preserved after their demise, but so too are fragments of pottery they recovered from the seabed.

Julie Merriman's beautiful drawings are like incredibly dense architectonic blueprints, suggesting not only physical structures but also the passage of time, as in her rendering of the terminal building marked for demolition on Carlisle Pier.

Lisa Reburn's soundscape is linked to her documentary photographs of derelict Marconi radio sites in the west of Ireland.

Emma Johnston makes lush textile prints inspired by Edwardian decoration. Look closely and you will see stories woven into the patterns.

*Soundings* spans quite a range of practice while remaining thoroughly accessible. The prospects look good for DLR's Municipal Gallery.

**66** The work of Gary Coyle is rooted in Dún Laoghaire