

Eloquence Squared: An Interview with Padhraig Nolan

Padhraig Nolan

Painter and Poet
Dublin, Ireland

Patrick Chapman (Interviewer)

Poet, Novelist and Scriptwriter
Dublin, Ireland

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Abstract

In April 2017 I interviewed the painter and poet Padhraig Nolan about his practice. We discussed how his work in each discipline influences the other, what his early inspirations were, and how he came to be both a writer and a painter. He elaborated on the artists, musicians and writers he admires, and which of them inspired him early on. He discussed his recent projects, including the MANTLE exhibition and the Pale Project; how his sense of place has informed his work; and his views on art and poetry today. Originally from Enniscorthy in County Wexford, Padhraig Nolan now lives near Dún Laoghaire, where he works as a graphic designer, illustrator and visual artist. He also writes poetry, reviews and songs. His work is regularly published and exhibited in Ireland and internationally. His website is padhraignolan.com.

PC: Thank you for taking part in this interview and sharing your work.

PN: You're very welcome. Delighted to be asked.

PC: *Where did you first encounter poetry and what attracted you to it?*

PN: As a child it would have been nursery rhymes, liturgical prayer, rote learning, street rhymes, earworm pop songs and suchlike. Also patterns and textures of the natural and manmade world; footsteps, rainfall, tree bark, paving, brickwork, farmland – I feel these things developed an awareness of balance and rhythm in me as a child. More conventionally, my father would now and then batter out a bit of 'The Green Eye of the Yellow God' or something by Robert Service. I think he had a soft spot for those old monologues from his childhood. He left school quite early, but always loved reading and music and had a good singing voice. He worked as caretaker of the local public health clinic, where I would often do my homework in a quiet room after school. At the end of the day, his voice would echo as he walked the hallways, belting out Nelson Eddy numbers and songs from *Oklahoma*, *South Pacific* and all those classic musicals as he locked up. My older sister tells me he would also sing me to sleep as a baby. Perhaps somewhere in there I grew attached to the timbre and

rhythm of a voice raised in song. Then, when I hit adolescence and developed my own tastes in music, I loved lyrics as much as melody and the way whole backstories could be suggested by an enigmatic turn of phrase. Poetry in school seemed more of a chore, but I was still a sucker for an elegant phrase or passage.

PC: *Did painting happen at the same time, or was it a different journey?*

PN: While I was always mad about books, I was really much more into visual stuff from an early age – drawing and making with any combination of tools; pencils, paper, card, crayons, paint, ink, mud, string, sand, twigs, timber, nails, wire. I found great satisfaction in constructing from my imagination. Our home was warm and nurturing, but I was a bit of a timid kid, and perhaps this was a way to negotiate and navigate the world on my own terms. Then, in my final year of secondary school, along with some classmates who also liked to draw, I took after-school classes with the art teacher from the convent school across the river, which really lit the touchpaper. The possibility of applying for art school became a reality and I went on to Dún Laoghaire School of Art & Design (now IADT-DL). Before that decision, I was all set to study science and often wonder how that might have worked out. At art college, I spent a foundation year trying all sorts of things – ceramics, life drawing, sculpture, layout, block printing – fantastic experiences that really allowed my ‘maker’ impulses to run riot. Following that, I chose to study graphic design and, while I loved and still love the creative and craft elements of that practice, a lot of my instinctive visual ‘blurting’ had to be tamed, in the aim of solving communication problems. Growing up I had no exposure to, or understanding of, working artists – so college was simply a place to train for a decent job. I stopped painting around the time I finished college and wouldn’t get back into it for years after I’d begun working professionally as a designer.

PC: *What, if any, is the difference in your practice between writing and painting?*

PN: It can be hard to tell. I actually took my first instruction in creative writing in order to find a fresh way of engaging with painting. As a self-employed graphic designer with a young family, I had started painting again but couldn’t see any way to engage with studying art full-time. However, I knew I needed to push myself further. I went to evening workshops in painting and drawing from life, in order to broaden my understanding of colour and form, and attended the Royal Hibernian Academy life room once a week for a number of years, all of which was hugely beneficial – exposing me to wonderful artists, observing their approaches and sharing insights. This took me to a certain point, but I wasn’t hungry for further academic approaches and techniques. Painting was always very natural to me, but I still felt a need to interrogate my instinctive processes somewhat, in order to make progress.

Having long admired prose writers and poets with the ability to suggest and insinuate in pared-back, yet expressive language, I attended evening classes in creative writing with the poet Catherine Phil McCarthy. I knew texts didn’t (always) arrive fully formed, and was hoping to find correlations between processes in writing and painting through which I could then examine my own approach (and preconceptions). I was certainly overthinking things a bit at that time, but I did find new challenges in crafting poetry – which didn’t come as naturally to me as painting then – which infused my visual work in unexpected ways.

Often this came from simple things – for example, that both practices speak of ‘composition’, the similar methodologies of notebook and sketchbook, of scribbled fragments of text and visual mark-making. Also the common actions of detailed, mindful observation, of keeping one’s antennae in tune – of inspiration coming from ‘happy accidents’, dutiful

research, or the work of peers whether historical or contemporary, international or local. Also, knowing when to stop – a difficult decision (and precision) in both disciplines.

PC: Do the two disciplines ever cross over?

PN: When working through ideas, they may bounce back and forward for a while, before settling in one dominant area – at least initially. For example, during 2016 I participated in the Pale Project, a group psychogeography of the Dún Laoghaire Rathdown area. For this, I spent a lot of time around the former Ballycorus Leadmines site, and initially collaborated with sound artist Anthony Kelly, thinking about producing a series of related encaustic paintings and audio outcomes, before settling more deeply into written responses, of which the poem Mine Hill is one outcome. So words came predominantly to the fore there, but I still have many field notes and research elements which may yet lead into other related outcomes down the road. Often seams of inspiration (or obsession) running through varied activities may only reveal themselves in hindsight. In October 2015, before beginning the Pale Project, I held my second solo exhibition ‘Mantle’ in Dublin – the paintings in this show can be seen to have strong geological undertones. How conscious is the relationship between the interests and outcomes of those two projects? Probably that’s for somebody else to say.

PC: *Which poets do you admire? Were any inspiring to your work?*

PN: So many. And so many artists. I love finding new work that knocks my socks off – which still happens. I’d be pleased to think that something I produce might have that effect on a total stranger. Milestone poets for me would include Louis MacNeice, Philip Larkin and Elizabeth Bishop. Wordsworth still cuts through from my schooldays. I’m also regularly amazed by how many chunks of William Shakespeare and Bob Dylan pop up in day-to-day chat. Contemporary poets whose work I return to regularly right now include Don Paterson, Joshua Mehigan and the recently deceased Tomas Tranströmer. In terms of Ireland, I admire the clarity and energy of our spoken-word performers, Sarah Clancy in particular. While there’s no shortage of seriously gifted Irish poets being published, each of Caitriona O’Reilly’s books surprises and inspires further with every re-reading.

PC: *Which artists do you admire? And were any inspiring to your own work?*

PN: All of them. The very first was JMW Turner. Then illustrator Ralph Steadman was a teenage crush – I wanted to be him as much as I wanted to be Jimi Hendrix or Lou Reed. Steadman’s glorious mark-making was what drew to me towards illustration initially (which led in turn to graphic design as a livelihood). As a founding director of the Illustrators Guild of Ireland, I’m still very much engaged with illustration, and admire homegrown illustrators like Lauren O’Neill, Alan Dunne and Olivia Golden, and internationally, Beatrice Allemagne, Isabelle Arsenault, Martin Haake, Laura Carlin, Jillian Tamaki and Olaf Hajek. Andrew ‘Foz’ Foster’s energetic work blurs genres.

Painters whose work rings me like a bell right now include Francis Bacon, Peter Lanyon and the incomparable Per Kirkby...and so many others. At home, I relate to the technical approaches of Eamon Colman and David Crone, and particularly admire and am inspired by the work of Sonia Shiel, Siobhan McDonald, Frances Ryan, Joanna Kidney and Mairead Ní hEochaidh. I still have a soft spot for more traditional figurative painting and Ireland continues to produce remarkable painters in this area, people like Maeve McCarthy and Comghall Casey. I’m less enchanted with art which puts expression through an overtly conceptual framework, but Alice Maher, Aideen Barry and Dorothy Cross tick all the boxes.

Anita Groener is a Dutch artist based in Ireland whose practice has transitioned from painting to an emphasis on drawing and installation – I find her current work very interesting.

PC: *David Bowie once said he could make music at home with the family but for painting he needed a studio space. What conditions do you need in order to create? Do you need the proverbial ‘room of one’s own’, or can you work in the midst of distraction?*

PN: I can write and edit anywhere, on any scrap of paper and usually have a notebook to hand, or use my phone for notes or voice memos, but I do need some degree of calm, quiet space to assess, refine and finalise a text. With visual work, I can and do scribble, sketch and snap photos for reference anywhere. I regularly disappoint myself at not getting outside enough to draw directly from nature. I’d prefer to make marks onsite from observation, but probably too often resort to photography as visual note-taking. Often, I’ll bring home found objects, either as reference or as kind of fetish or talisman. Then, when I paint, I need to be solitary as much as possible, alone with my reference material, prep work and music conducive to my particular mood at that time. I’ve always been quite happy in my own company for extended periods – sometimes that’s a luxury, but one that becomes vital over time.

PC: *Tell us about your most recent paintings and/or shows.*

PN: My last solo exhibition was *Mantle*, in October 2015, and since then I’ve been experimenting a lot in studio, making new marks rather than finishing a lot of work. Much like a poetry collection, a body of finished work can often come together quite quickly, but there’s an awful lot of shuffling, mess, doubt, wandering and wondering first. I’d like to show some new work this autumn, but I’ve enough deadlines to deal with in my commercial design practice, so I tend to be kinder to myself with personal work. It’ll happen when the work is ready. Bizarrely, having a day job can be liberating at times.

PC: *Have you had any recent publications?*

PN: I haven’t been sending a lot of work out over the last year, but was very pleased to place third in the Red Line Book Festival Poetry Competition 2016 with my poem “Europium”, and also take second place in the inaugural Robert Monteith International Poetry Competition with my poem “Indefeasible”. Part of my prize is an upcoming stay on a small island in a lake in County Westmeath – I kid you not! For an introvert like myself it’ll be both a treat and retreat, away from the busy world in a lovely part of Ireland.

PC: *Did where you grow up and where you live now, have an influence on your work as either a painter or a poet?*

PN: Certainly the tone of my creative practice overall is much informed by my childhood home near Enniscorthy, County Wexford and my current proximity to the sea and other natural landscapes around my current home near Dún Laoghaire. I’d like to travel more, but not via cramped schedules or carbon-hungry methods. I can watch a single tree all day and feel as if I have a magic carpet. There’s a roost of jackdaws in the park behind my house and their raggedy murmurations at dusk shiver my timbers. In summer, I spend the odd evening watching the sky, moving clouds and all beneath fade into night. Other, more negative aspects of living in this country and world also feed into my work. As a citizen, I cannot help but be political in my actions or otherwise.

PC: *Is there anything else you'd like to share with the readers regarding your views on art, life, poetry? Are all three the same thing or not?*

PN: I feel art and poetry are essentially the same thing – some impulse to share personal reflections on emotional responses to aspects of our shared world(s). However, most attempted definitions of these endeavours remain determinedly inconclusive. Life itself seems a brief opportunity to share and be kind, perhaps to deflect fear from getting in our way. For that opportunity, I find myself thankful and, very occasionally, content.

Poetry and Artwork

Padhraig Nolan

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Abstract

Often, creative people are recognised primarily for the work they do in one discipline, with efforts in other areas overlooked. Some artists are truly multidisciplinary, having the ability to express themselves eloquently through more than one medium. This selection of work from Padhraig Nolan, Dublin-based artist and poet, illustrates two strands of his practice: poetry and painting. As discussed in the accompanying interview, he is an artist working in more than one medium, each of which could be said to communicate with the other. In both painting and poetry, Nolan is inspired by landscape and a sense of place, and he turns his inspirations into remarkable art pieces, whether they be crafted with words or paint.

Originally from Enniscorthy in County Wexford, Padhraig Nolan now lives near Dún Laoghaire, where he works as a graphic designer, illustrator and visual artist. He also writes poetry, reviews and songs. His work is regularly published and exhibited in Ireland and internationally. His website is www.padhraignolan.com

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Mine Hill

Padhraig Nolan

We reached the summit baked and weary,
resin-scented pines, Martellos hazy on the coast.
I drifted from the others, raking over hillside
recently burnt black; sedges cropped to stubble,
gorse charred back to bone.

Eyes to the horizon, I almost stepped into
this open-air exhibit; immaculate and barely
singed, a meadow pipit nest upon the ground.

Beneath the open daylight, still as marble,
three eggs rested; silken, speckled,
pristine as when settled into place.

I hunkered down, unsure, I wondered
could the flames have spared this clutch – for all,
or one, might hope retain its hunger?

Or was this final, flawless shield inevitably breached;
all life tongued off, retrieved into the heliacal flare,
leaving only night within each pale clay-crystal caul
instinctually aching to be slipped?

Hunt

Padhraig Nolan

I am a dashed line across snow,
a crooked, skewing, staggered slide.

I am not as I have been heretofore.

See myself in sun, within my youth,
snarled up in knots and eyebright keen.

The elders oversee our game.

Now slow and lessened, seeping heat and light,
I vacillate my pace in brackish gore,

stiffen to the crunch of closing feet.

Kinship

Padhraig Nolan

I reach the bus stop just in time and as it heaves to kerb,
out of the crease of my right eye I spy a straggler;
fellow traveller, whose lack of sprinting prowess
sadly equals mine (I know, I've had it tested over time).

The knot of queueing comrades loosens slightly
not enough to merit comment, not a look is shared,
nor vowel formed as we conspire to tardiness
in doublechecking change; a creased brow here,
pocket rummage there, the muting of an iPod volume,
whiskerlicks of hair.

Until, two steps behind the pace, our runt's aboard
to clutch the pole and tender (shakily) the fare,
panting gratitude upon the driver – as is only fair,
for he's our co-conspirator, cloaked within
his middle distant stare.

By the Connigar

Padhraig Nolan

In town, inland, above the banks,
below the spire, the frozen hand of
Father Murphy points to sites for sale

to the seal at Knocknasilloge
which is there and then gone,
slipping into memory like the vision

that a son has of the father,
head back, canines on display,
under sifting cliffs one lost dog day

Paintings

Padhraig Nolan

On the cover: Detail from *Mantle 2*

Page 74: *Moraine Diptych*

Page 75: *Scape 4*

Page 76: *Scape 6*

Page 77: *Mantle 2*







