

AIB Prize 2009

Initiatives like the AIB Prize are more relevant and necessary than ever, argues **Donal Maguire**, as he reviews the work of the artists short-listed for this year's award

Irish art, like most domestic industries, benefited from the prosperity and optimism that defined Irish society over the past decade. The sudden influx of capital buoyed a burgeoning contemporary art scene and an abundance of private galleries, art centres and studios emerged across the country. This provided the infrastructure necessary to promote and support the growing number of visual artists in Ireland. Art prizes are an integral part of this system and the AIB Prize has established itself as the most substantial and innovative prize in recent years.

The prize emerged in the early years of the economic boom, an extension of the financial institution's wider commitment to Irish art. Its aim is straight forward; to identify Irish visual artists of outstanding potential and to assist them in launching

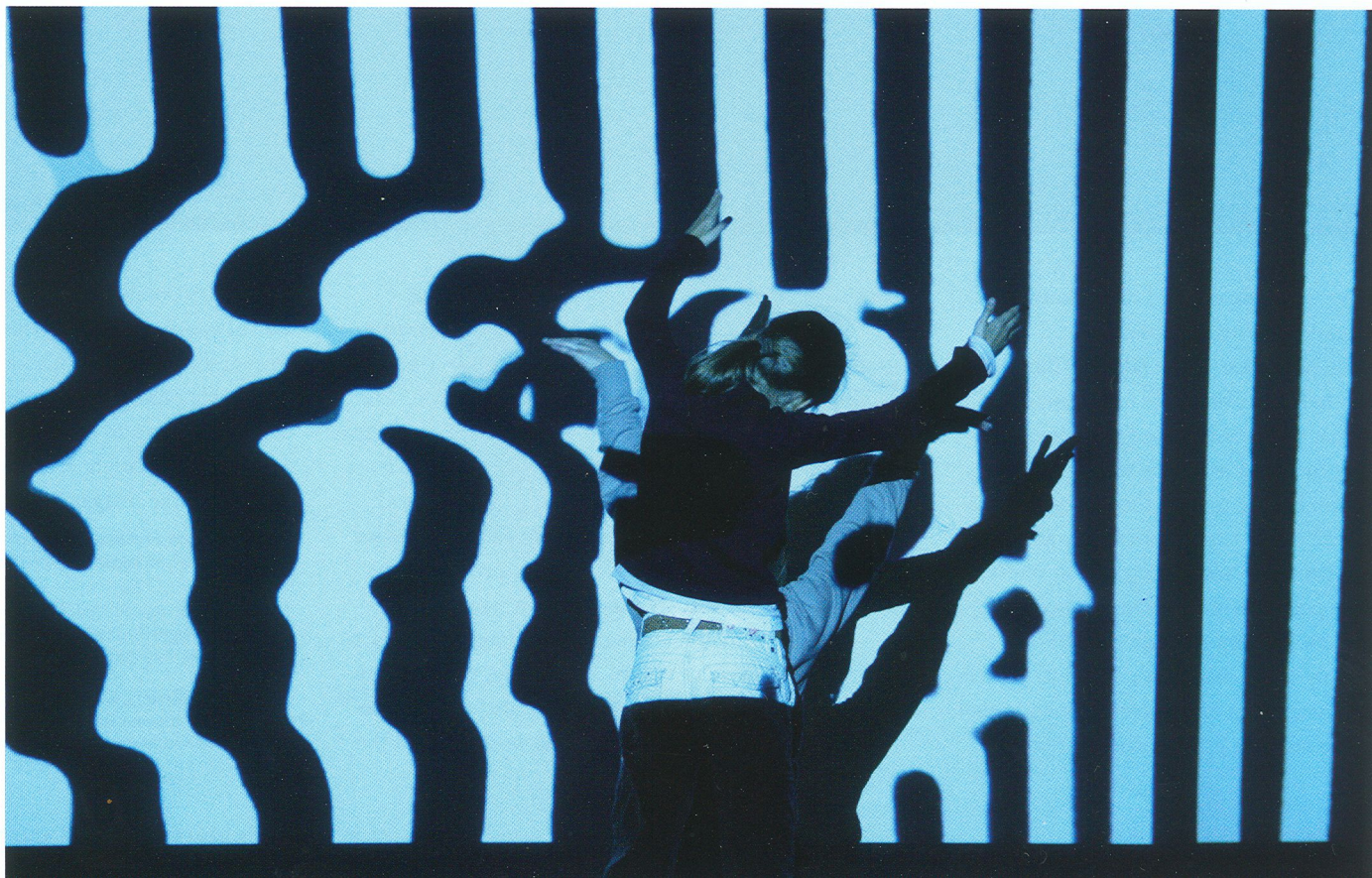
their careers. Its importance, however, is the result of the comprehensive application process and the structure of the award itself. By focusing on the essential elements of professional art practice (gallery representation, the provision of financial resources and the documentation of work) the prize aims to more effectively help launch an artist's career.

This begins with an application procedure that requires a publicly funded gallery to nominate an artist of their choice. In doing so, the gallery commits to hosting an exhibition of the artist's new work should they receive the prize. What's more, the gallery must produce an illustrated catalogue to accompany the exhibition. The generous prize of €20,000 goes towards facilitating the production of new work and the publication of a catalogue. The value and

success of the prize is certainly evident in the career development of previous winners. Caroline McCarthy, Katie Holten, Amanda Coogan, Paul Doran, Linda Quinlan and Diana Copperwhite are all now well-recognised practitioners, represented in both national and international collections.¹

Perhaps most significantly, the prize is not associated with a single discipline but recognises artists working in a wide variety of media. This year's short-list is similarly inclusive and comprises lens-based artist Louise Manifold, two painters Sinéad Ní Mhaonaigh and Sonia Shiel, who also creates installation works, and the multimedia duo Anne Cleary and Denis Connolly. Each nominee has proposed a project for exhibition in the gallery that nominated them. While definitive proposals are often anathema to the processes of art-making such a bespoke project can offer the artist the opportunity to develop their practice within a particular context.²

Nominated by the Galway Arts Centre, Louise Manifold works predominately in photography and video (Fig 4). Her intoxicatingly intimate and sensuous imagery deals with the differing but diverging





where the two artists developed a series of workshops with young people. Nominated by the LCGA, Cleary and Connolly will now have the opportunity to produce their proposed interactive installation, accompanied by a programme of outreach projects.

After nine years of success, the AIB Prize is now heading into its most challenging period yet. As the recession deepens many visual artists and organisations will be preparing themselves for cutbacks and

worlds of mythology, ritual and everyday reality. Her work has a dreamlike quality that draws upon the aesthetics of the silhouette, shadow puppetry, the diorama and early surrealist and silent movies. Having also experimented with installation and sculpture, Manifold's proposed exhibition is inspired by the Victorian *Wunderkammer* (cabinet of curiosities).

Sinéad Ní Mhaonaigh was nominated by the Sligo Art Gallery. To date, she has pro-

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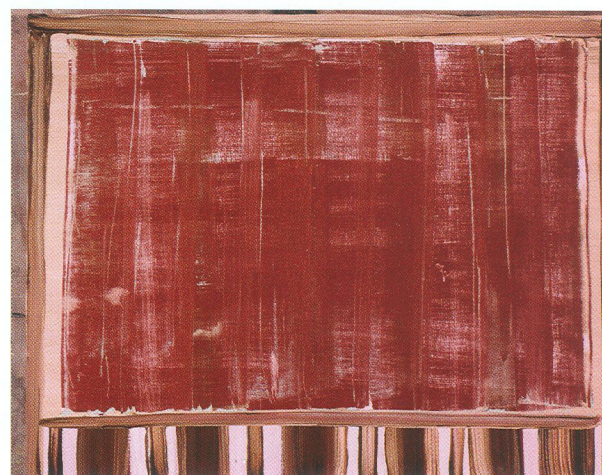
duced a body of work that explores the viewer's perception of space and structure (Fig 3). Manipulating a palette of rich reds and pinks, combined with earthy greens and browns, Ní Mhaonaigh composes imagery that alludes to both natural and artificial structures. These include vessels, mountains, valleys, playing fields, arenas and stages. The latter subjects are suggestive of the physical and performative processes of her painting practice. Thick layers of paint are applied, removed and painted over. Recognisable forms become amorphous and thus verge on abstraction.

Sonia Shiel has developed a dynamic and complex practice that merges myth and metaphor with childhood fantasy and elements of storytelling (Fig 2). This is manifested in a combination of surreal imagery and playful sculptures that juxtapose archetypal characters and motifs, drawn from folklore and fairytales, with found and everyday objects. Her assemblages of paint, sound, video and sculpture suggest the processes and frustrations associated with artistic expression. Shiel has been nominated by Temple Bar Gallery and Studios.

Each of the short-listed artists will receive a bursary of €1,500 while also obtaining useful critical and public attention. However, the adjudicators³ must select a winner and this year it is the partnership of Anne Cleary and Denis Connolly (Fig 1). Cleary and Connolly studied architecture in Dublin before

moving to Paris in 1990. During a collaboration with the French urban theorist Bernard Huet they gained an interest in the concept of the 'filmed city'. Combined with an interest in the social and relational aspects of art-making, they have developed a practice that investigates discourses relating to audience engagement, spectatorship and the connection between art and contemporary society. This is achieved by exploiting a range of media such as interactive installations, performance, experimental film, writing and photography.

Both artists recognise the role of art as an instrument for dialogue and learning. They believe this is achieved primarily through collaboration, audience participation and interaction. One of their first interactive installations, 'Here There Now Then', was exhibited in 2006 at the Limerick City Gallery of Art (LCGA). The installation then went on show at the Pompidou Centre, Paris



1 ANNE CLEARY & DENIS CONNOLLY
PLUS/MINUS
2008 Members of the public interacting with Cleary & Connolly's interactive video installation at the Centre Pompidou, 2008, during the exhibition 'Pourquoi pas toi?'

2 SONIA SHIEL:
THE ROCKET
2007 oil on canvas

3 SINÉAD NÍ MHAONAIGH
UNTITLED 2008
40x50cm oil on canvas

4 LOUISE MANIFOLD
WOLF SHADOW
2008 medium drawing laser cut into aluminium

reduced investment. However, as Sir Christopher Frayling (Chairman of Arts Council England) recently asserted, 'when times are hard, that is precisely when you should invest in the arts... the arts are important to all our futures'.⁴

Indeed, the creative, social and educational aspects of Cleary and Connolly's practice highlight the many benefits to investing in the arts. Adjudicator Frances Ruane once observed that the 'AIB has been remarkable in its continued enthusiasm for their art'⁵—let's hope it continues into the future. ■

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- 1 Success is of course not reliant on winning the award, however, the prize does provide an effective framework through which an artist of talent can launch their career in a particular direction.
- 2 In 2007 Linda Quinlan made exceptional use of the interior architecture particular to the Crawford Art Gallery, Cork.
- 3 Art critic Aidan Dunne, writer and critic Gemma Tipton, artist Hughie O'Donoghue and AIB art adviser Frances Ruane.
- 4 Quoted in Wallace, Arminta, 'No Time for Faint Arts', *Irish Times*, 29 April 2009.
- 5 Ryan, Vera, *Movers and Shapers 2*, The Collins Press, Cork 2006, p.158.