

**Slavka Sverakova**

*on Art*

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## **Open work ? Belfast (March/April 2016)**

Posted on [May 7, 2016](#)

Three concurrent exhibitions invite that question. Marie Hanlon at Fendersky, Desire Line at Golden Thread Gallery and In-Stream at the two galleries, Ulster University and QSS.

Fenderesky Gallery and cafe is a new place with a four decades of history forged by a kind of classical dealer/philosopher/ artist who does not foreground curatorship staying admirably sensitive and careful about display of each image or sculpture.

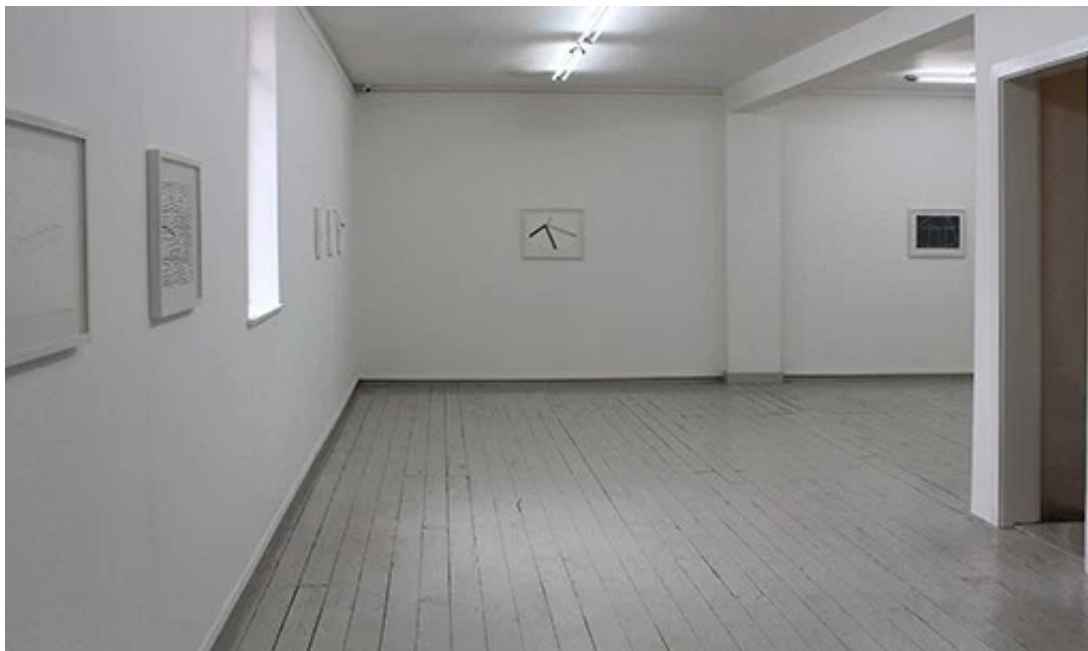
Desire Line and In-Stream are curator led. Quite often, curators require “socially engaged art “to literally articulate responses and messages of change. In both exhibitions a cloud of implied instructions is supposed to activate probable behaviour. More on this later.

**Marie Hanlon** avoids the dangers of a “cause” by working on intrinsic connections between observed and imagined, allowing instinct rather than conscious reasoning to guide her. In her own words:

” But lack of a conscious plan does not mean that our work is random or arbitrary, improvisation always has its rules, even if they are not *a priori* rules. When we are totally faithful to our own individuality, we are actually following very intricate design. This kind of freedom is the opposite of “just anything.” (see Marie Hanlon

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Rhona Clarke, DIC TAT, publ Rubicon Gallery Dublin, p1: essay by Rowan Sexton)



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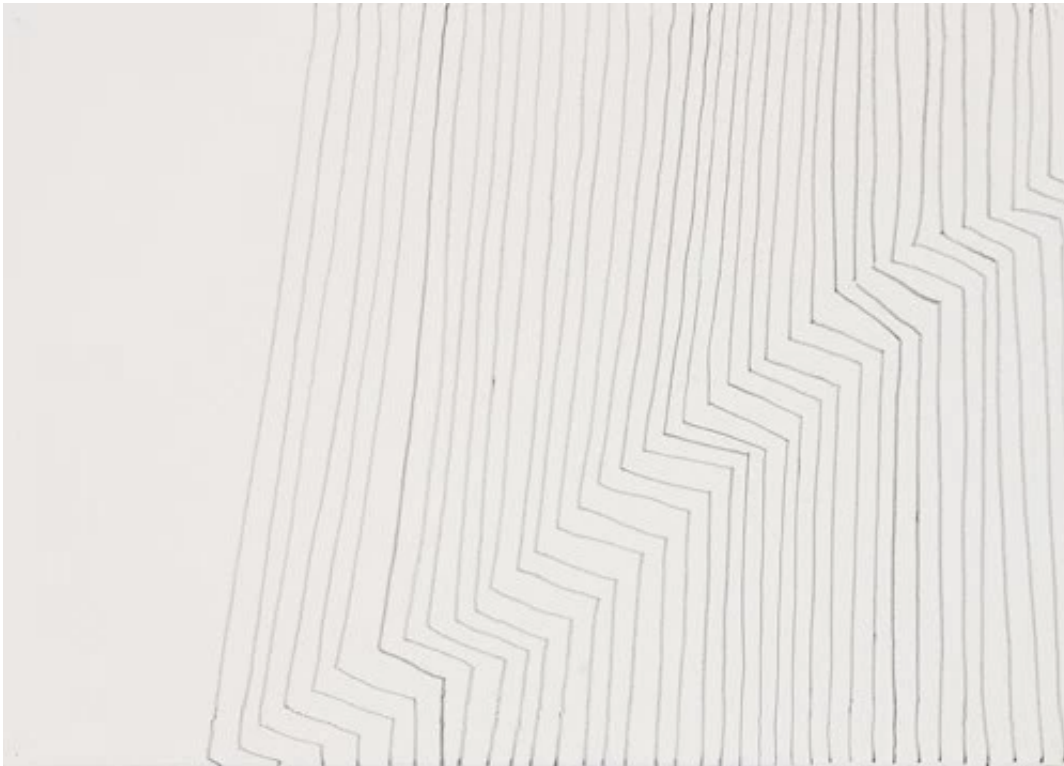
Marie Hanlon : Finding Equilibrium installation, Fenderesky Gallery, Belfast 2016



## Drawing BA\_XI Gouache & pencil on paper 30 x 42 cms 2011

The two unfinished triangles in a chance like meeting **open** the picture plane to the space outside the frame. One of the consequences of that decision is a compulsory illusion of depth where there is none, trapping thus the viewer's range of responses in elegantly reduced visual clues. As it reminds me of unfinished poem, it also strongly evokes the refrain of a song being repeated in a whisper. The link to music is not as arbitrary as it may appear, Hanlon made drawings while listening to a metronome. Rowan Sexton (op cit) has proposed

*The locus of meaning in the metronome suite of drawings comes from connotative dimension, so that rhythm is the all encompassing, primary source of activity*



### Drawing BA \_XX Pencil on paper 30 x 42 cms 2011

This drawing appears in DIC TAT book as Drop Down, 29.7 x 42, 2012. A simple error? If it were a deliberate change it would forge a refutation of the aura of authorship as in Umberto Eco's assertion: "*People are tired of simple things. They want to be challenged*". However, that I failed to find in Hanlon's repertoire of intentions. Her drawings correspond to her resonance with whatever her senses register. She creates correspondences in the sense defined by Charles Baudelaire, here in Richard Wilbur's translation:

*Nature is a temple whose living colonnades  
Breathe forth a mystic speech in fitful sighs;*

*Man wanders among the symbols in those glades  
Where all things watch him with familiar eyes.*

*Like dwindling echoes gathered far away  
Into a deep and thronging unison  
Huge as the night or as the light of day,  
All scents and sounds and colors meet as one.*

*Perfumes there are as sweet as the oboe's sound,  
Green as the prairies, fresh as a child's caress,  
—And there are others, rich, corrupt, profound*

*And an infinite pervasiveness,  
Like myrrh, or musk, or amber, that excite  
The ecstasies of sense, the soul's delight.*

Yet – her drawings do not symbolise a structure – they achieve immersion in a structure she makes visible. Her “living colonnades” appear as a mystery of synchronic co-existence of hearing and drawing to “excite ecstasies of senses” (with apology to Baudelaire)

It was a classical visual art exhibition gently caressing the viewer's capacity for the value Italo Calvino selected for saving for this millennium – visual thinking.

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Making visible is a central concern of the exhibition *DESIRE LINE* at the Golden Thread Gallery (25 February – 16 April, 2016). The intention seems the same as in Henlon's exhibition, but it is not. The rooms were dark, the spot lit quotes in gold hue from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* helped to perceive a black massive black form running across the space as if supported by the air near your hands. The words were more visible than the objects: suspended walnut, compass points, reference to the North Star. The curators defined them as the tools to help visitors to navigate the "desire line" as if of their own choice: "this exhibition invites the audience, or participant, to imagine their own urban space, without any parameters" (see the gallery handout). If in doubt that this exhibition has **a cause** the curators -PLACE – make it clear: "... in this exhibition we present a series of 'objects' or clues that form a framework and give you tools to position yourself physically, without setting a literal narrative.. This space has no pre-supposed history and every future one could imagine." This cloud of words aims at behavioural experiment on your powers of imagination to generate probable but different image of a city, space, place, time, temperature, noise, fumes, colours etc. Commonalities born by knowing the gallery space and Belfast are in a category of deficit for that imaginary city. That wobbly independence of imagination from experience is given a patina of significance. If you fail – it is your fault for not doing as you are told. Although they claim not prescribing what should result from a visit.

Well – if I am given a framework and tools – those **will** limit my imagination, moreover, I am conscious that this is the gallery space I know, I know some its history. No instruction can erase that.

The curators continue:

"We have constructed a sculptural interruption in the gallery. Not prescriptively but referencing a route across Belfast, this sculpture is basis for you, the participant, to create any urban space, actual or fictitious, imagined or

imaginable. Within the environment of the suspended spot lit sculpture, and with certain tools – altitude, compass points and references to the north star – to help you to orientate yourself ...”

There is a planned obsolescence of the whole installation for those who do not resonate with the tools on offer. That includes me.

Calvino’s words “serve as a reminder to suspend your everyday perception of reality...and create for yourself fantastical urban spaces” the curators write.

On reading his book I succeeded to imagine spaces different from any city I have known. Walking through the **Desire Line** installation did not end with such a success. The installation expected me to use its meagre tools to evoke my fantasies about urban spaces... impossible without a lot of memories, miles of walks in various cities and **play**. This, in principle, includes conceptual art, even as paired down as this one, so why I so easily resist its call? What cognitive bias governs my rejection? Others may tell me – one conscious thought governs my aesthetic judgement – that what Calvino defends as visibility, visual thinking. Another salient point of my resistance may be my conviction that art is the kingdom of freedom without instructions how to get there, and visual art in particular. I value its mute poetry.

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University of Ulster Gallery hosted one part of **In-Stream** exhibition (March 7 – April 2,2016) , the other found its home at QSS Gallery in Bedford Street. Photographs courtesy Jordan Hutchings.



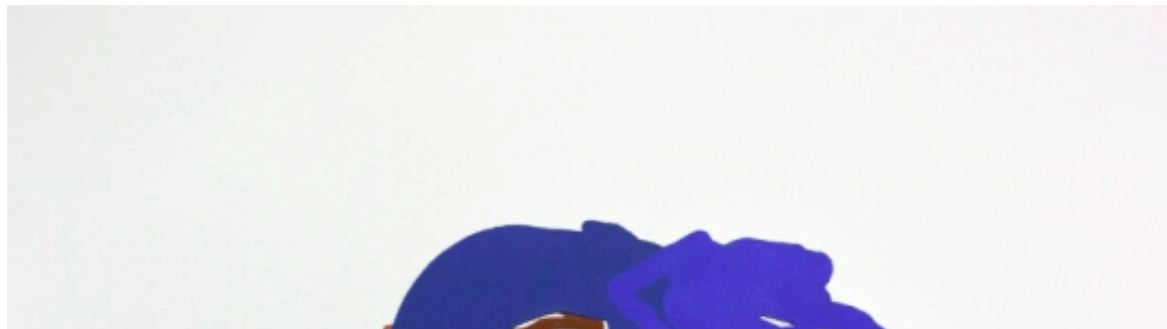
Joan Stacks, Everything will be in one colour, 2016

At the opening the two musicians, **Anthony Kelly** (on the left) and **David Stalling** (on the right) gave an improvised concert/ sound performance.





Above David Stalling's head is visible an abstraction by **Kevin Miller**, which at one point could have been a monotype.





Kevin Miller, All okay 1, 2016, acrylic on acrylic sheet, 37 x 26 cm

Seeing from near its surface evokes memories of gestural abstraction, Tapiés, when not limited to black hue, De Kooning – and some others from the CoBrA group, and also Action Painting as understood in 1952 by Harold Rosenberg. Action Painting has been also referred to as “gestural abstraction” – and this painting shares a number of characteristics with American paintings of that period. The dynamic application of spontaneous directness is denied boundless spread as in colour field. Kevin Miller’s instinct is quasi sculptural, like Hans Arps’s low reliefs or Henri Matisse’s cut-outs. The paint is not dribbled or splashed like in a Pollock. It is smeared in layers that keep distance from one another. Look how the blue arches above the brown! I would not be surprised if it suddenly crawled to the corner on top right. It is almost Klein’s blue, just a shade cooler. The commitment to the presence of three primary colours still tolerates and accommodates the whimsical smaller passages, each holding its own voice. Quite an achievement that it hold all together.

**Anthony Kelly** embraces apollonian principle of measured sophistication of dualism and small gentle shifts on the picture plane – reminiscent of M Rothko grey- in- grey – I saw once in a private collection.



Anthony Kelly, Flutter:Echo, 2013, Enamel paint on Mdf, Timber, each 65 x 65 x 22cm

Kelly invented the trembling wave to connect small interfering white and warmer grey in a kind of dialogue with the hard edged right angled wood that overshoot its destination – frame.

Hard edge had its hey day also in the second half of the 20th C. here it is smeared over with liquid paint and splashes as if to remind the geometry of its subsidiary role. The grey outline is refrained by the grey frame – like in a duo of operatic voices – keeping each their own rhythm and score. And as any Mozart's duo, equally successfully.

Juxtaposition of real and imagined receives tender care from the drawing hand – but the words insist on some absence of care – or even malfunctioning. That is visualised by the density of the black – impenetrable. **Julie Lovett** prefers her *Incidents* in series and in a hand held format. Initiating a possibility that a stretched hand may cover each incident – instills an illusion of control. The visual force of the absence of light inside the animated black shape refutes that, leaving the fearful state of mind to cope, yet – it does not reach the really frightening level.



Julie Lovett, Incident 1, 2015

The curator(s) of **In-Stream** zoomed on the idea of disrupting the viewing of the selected art by dividing the “display” into two different galleries, thus allowing either the memory of one appearing as comparison with the other – or a complete disregard for any continuity.

In the handout for the audience there is a strange idea: “The temporal disruption between Studio -Gallery – City – Gallery is not necessarily bound to or determined by circular closure of both exhibitions spaces”.... yes- that is not only obvious but also completely in the power of any viewer, who – for example- can walk out after seeing one exhibit only.

The interference of the concept that happening together but in two venues alters substantially visual aesthetic experience is not that powerful. Aesthetic experience does not feed that much on comparison – rather it depends on the power of the visual thinking – both on the part of the artist and the viewer. The concept that two groups of paintings (incl prints and mixed media) will alter their essential values by being apart only enters the consciousness on reading the words of the essay or the handout- which can happen long after the visitor saw the visual artefacts. In that sense it is irrelevant.

The curators disagree, grounding their conviction in the power of differences between the two sites and their social and cultural contexts. None of the work is site specific (Joan Stack’s installation will tolerate another site) – so the dependence of my perception of the art on indoors or outdoors stimuli when walking from one gallery to the other – of both sites is as much or as little as in another case, where the distance is not given this spectacular power, e.g. numerous mini exhibitions in the Venice Biennale.

There is one case where the “distance” between members of the same series of prints, paintings or sculptures, comes into the fore. How critical that division is can be established only when the series is meant to be viewed as one work of art, when they all must be seen together by the virtue of their inter- relationships. I’ll illustrate that on the images by Majella Clancy, below.

For the **In-Stream** handout, Geraldine Boyle wrote a magnificent passage on sensual rewards of diligent observation by curious mind triggered by reading up about Urban Flora of Belfast. Her claim that "The gap in between viewing is important – it confirms and creates spaces for new ways of seeing, tangential and associative thinking" is not specific to geographical distance of two groups of works of art. In particular, because a viewer may decide to visit the second gallery days later or not at all. It is also not possible to deny to her/him the capacity for associations and imaginative leaps between sensual experiences in different places and at different times, experience utterly independent of the distance between the two venues.

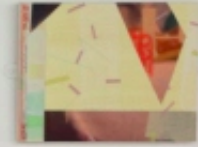
There is a set of 12 related works – four are exhibited at the University of Ulster Gallery and eight at QSS.

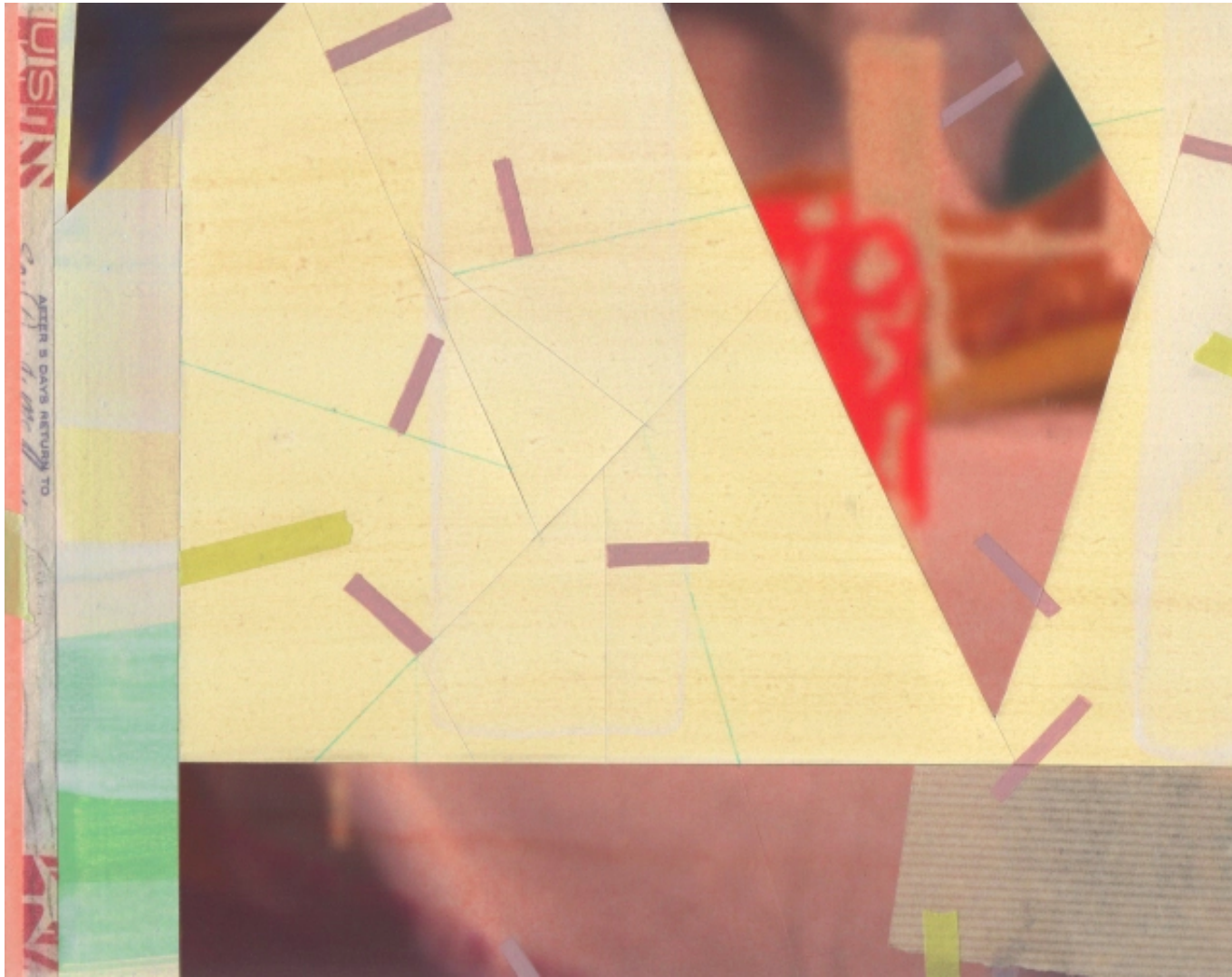
**Majella Clancy's** art is a superior example of that creative force, autonomous visual presence wherever it is displayed.





All four at UU and the eight at QSS share material: oil, paper, digital print, tape, pencil on board; size: 19 x 24 cm; and date: 2016. Admissible to treat them as a set – as a series. From the left: *Overview*; *Land II*; *Mass*; and *Untitled II*.

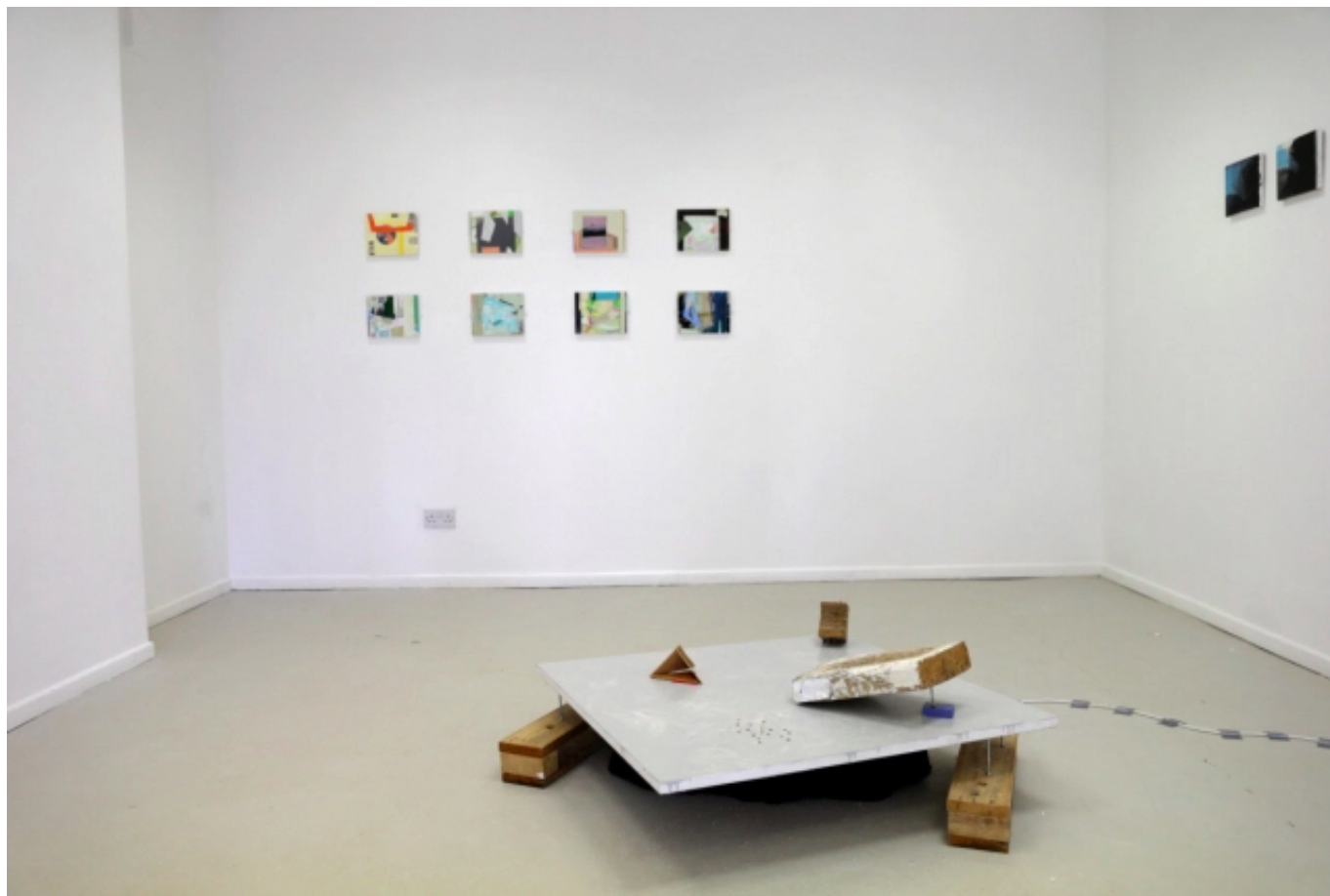




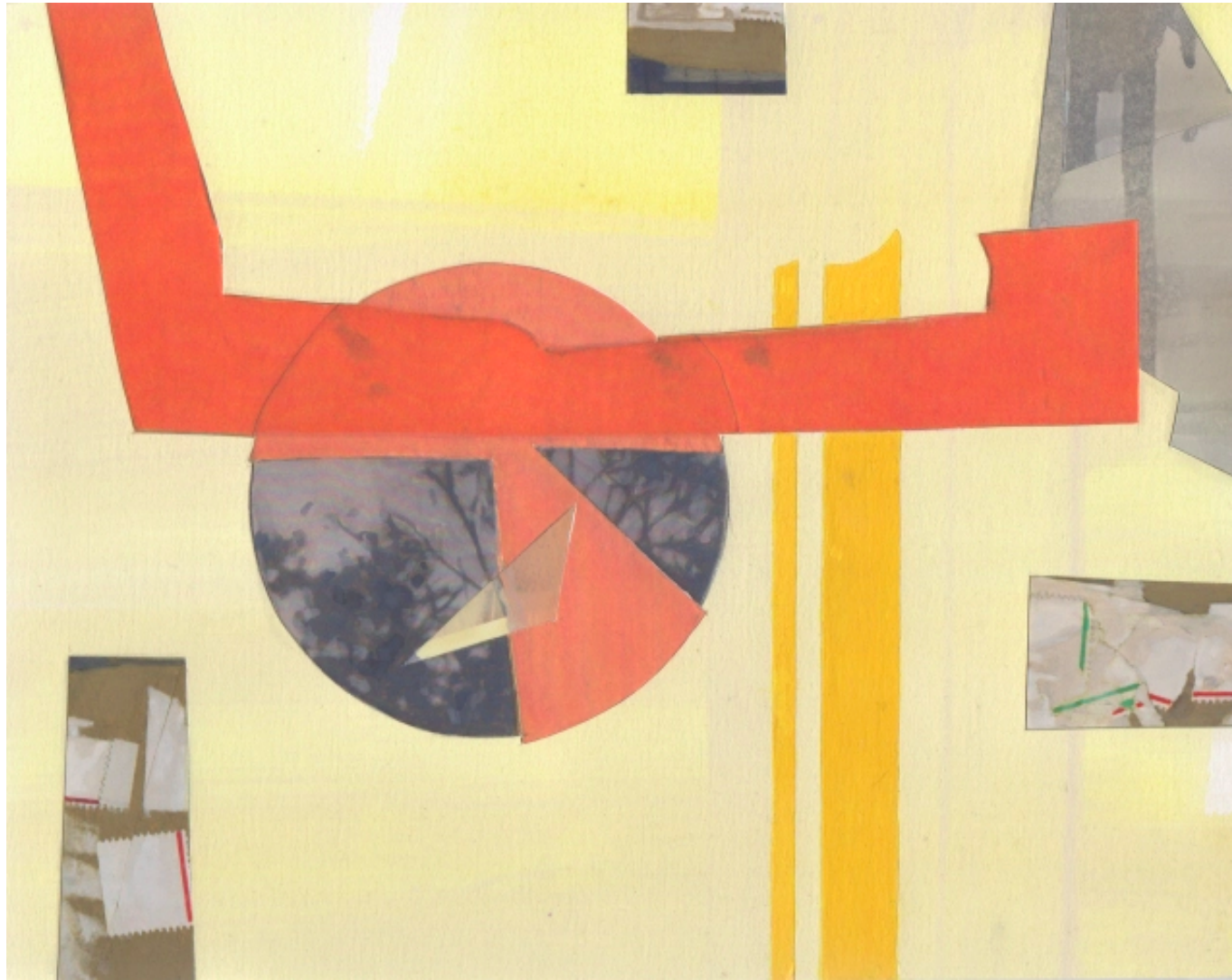
In general, Clancy claims that her collages explore social, cultural and geographical space. Her use of identifier is fairly established – a fragment of text and of lens based image of something seen. The two – although important – are not allowed to dictate to the other elements. The letter is difficult to read – it is there as a sign for all possible letters, the fragment of the photographic print speaks through its tonality of the absence of anything threatening, but is itself pushed down under the lighter field divided into triangular net . Echoing each other the

two parallel spaces, one empty governed by abstract geometry, , the other richly full with fragments of the real world. Careless debris is scrupulously clean and of regular shapes. The image strives at calm after some damaging fracture of the previous whole.

At the QSS -the installation consists of eight images.



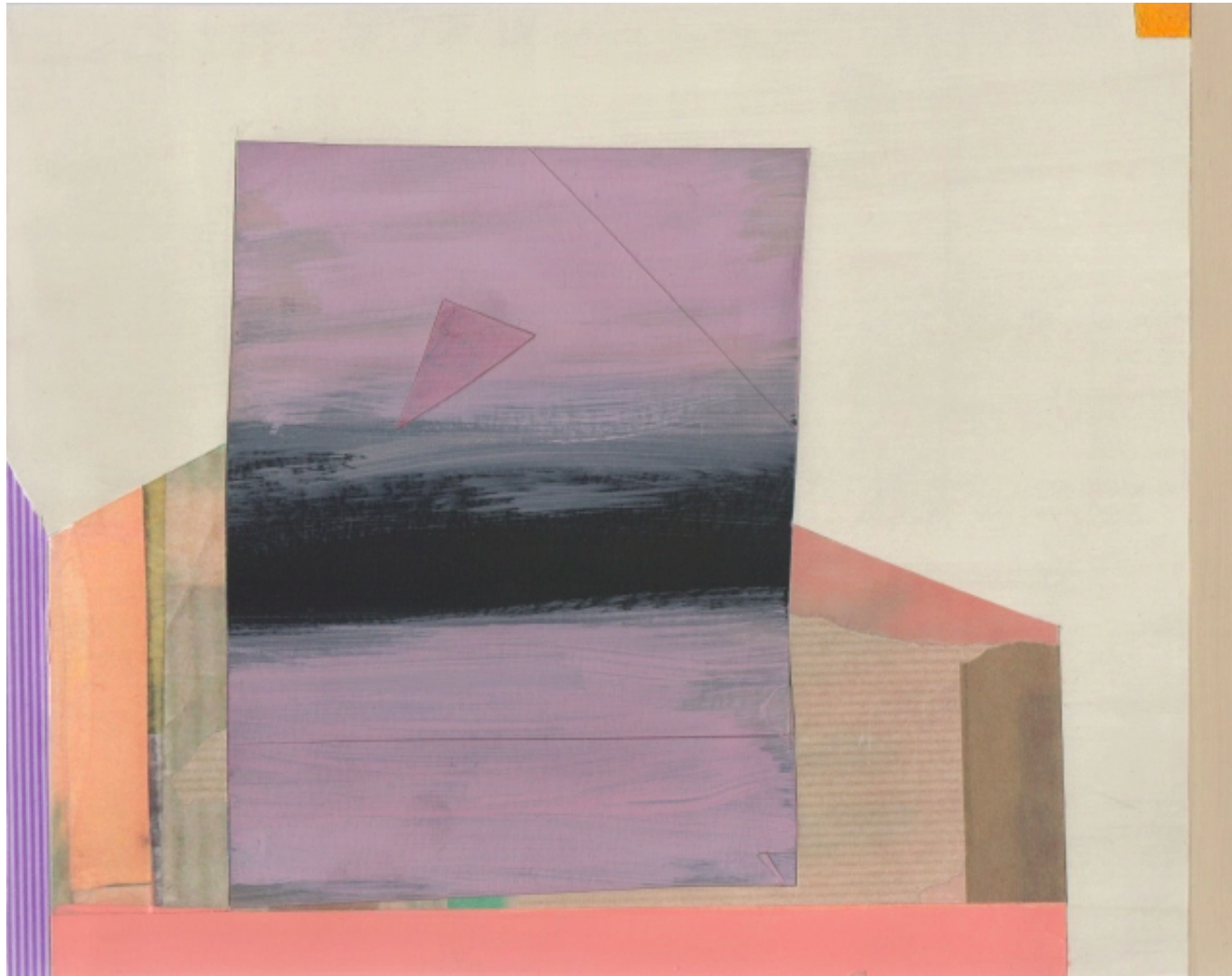
This is : *View* (displayed left top above)



This is the one that manages to use the inner space differently – there is continuity with added depth, which introduces different layers for the elements. Some are nearer the picture plane also by the virtue of the hue, the red somewhat crude cut out shape that looks like broken of a frame. Others shy away into a distance – both small

irregular rectangles, as if not wanting to show off the collection of whitish sheets and coloured sticks. Like pencils ready to write onto the empty pages. The circle offers multiple meanings: it is a photograph of a tree or bush – its lowered acuteness allows it to be read like a distant star or moon. At least until the eye gives that up and sticks with the branches of the tree. That, in turn introduces time, which is also suggested by the circle morphing into a clock face with pink hour hand... There is a warning: what looks like a right angle accuracy – is a result of a wobbly shake of the scissors or brush – softly denying the rule for the sake of trembling individuality of each shape. Just compare it to El Lissitzky – when he needs to tell the story! Majella Clancy tells about her experience, understanding of found relics, while staying true to the feeling of intoxicating awe of the first impact. That's what she gives to me – sincere incompleteness of knowing- paradoxically – that whatever it is, it matters.

Clancy gave this the ominous title: Platform



I owe you my take on the curator's **platform** – as formulated in the handout to In-Stream – that is an attempt to treat exhibition as a work of art – which became recently a fashionable way to battle through regulations of the funding and enabling freedom to select exhibits on their intrinsic not their instrumental value. As such it is

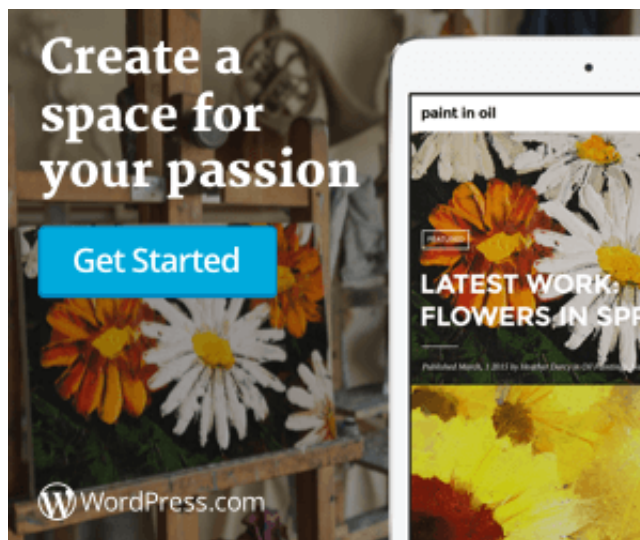
relevant as enabling idea for the outer layers of the business. It is not relevant to the intrinsic value of each work of art for each individual viewer.

I end my communication by Clancy's distinctively freewheeling **Message** – which hides a cheeky smile in a yellow.





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