

Contemporary Art Galleries

MOTHER'S TANKSTATION LIMITED, DUBLIN



Nina Canell, *O Little Drops*, 2016, Installation view, Courtesy the artist and Mother's Tankstation Limited



Interview with Finola Jones, founder of the gallery Mother's Tankstation Limited in Dublin

In 2006 when Finola Jones founded her gallery, Dublin seemed like a blank spot on the map of contemporary art. Since then Mother's Tankstation Limited has brought artists like Mairead O'hEocha, Nina Canell, Uri Aran, and Noel McKenna to international recognition by showing them at art fairs and off site shows. But everything begins with an old Guinness building in Dublin and a manifesto.

Let's start with the manifesto, which is published on your website. What is the intention of this?

The recently re-composed manifesto says something to the effect; *let us begin in the middle and work outwards, in opposing directions perhaps. Looking forward to looking back...* Although slightly opaque, this works for me. The original manifesto only looked forward, as it pre-dated the gallery and was published on the first website before we even opened the doors for our first exhibition. It was essentially a speculative, academic exercise or prediction of what we thought might be our path and a purpose within the art world. Although the first text retrospectively reads as perhaps too prescribed or didactic, it has however served us well and given real benchmarks from which we have deviated little in practical realities.

Why that refreshment of the manifesto?

Now having just turned ten years old, we have finally replaced the old website with a much more streamlined, “present” and fluid entity which hosts a revised text that is similarly more *mobile*. Given that the website is much about a complete picture of the gallery as both an historic and a forward-moving project, it was important that the original manifesto remained somewhere present as a comparative document, subtly obtained as a live link in the footnotes of the new text. Who was it that said that the truth is always in the footnotes?

How do you see the role of a gallery today?

The answer to this has to be almost as complex as the environment in which we now find ourselves. As a gallerist in a rapidly evolving and arguably saturated cultural climate, I am proud to be an enthusiast, and still see a super-specialized place for galleries with a genuine passion for art, aesthetics, theory and visual culture, within an often dark art world that is very capable of talking about revenue streams and profits as “placing buckets” under things. Although we are ten, I also still see us as a young gallery with a small committed team, which theoretically makes us an endangered species.

Much has been written recently about the proliferation of contemporary galleries around the globe and the economic “power-law”, or 80:20 rule, whereby the existence of the greater numbers of small independent galleries is challenged by the competition of a much smaller number of wealthy, powerful mega-galleries.

So you would say that the gallery scene changed in recent years?

This particular law of economics suggests that *greater choice*, (in terms of more galleries, more art fairs, more presented art) in the circumstances, results in the inverse actuality of *less choice*. i.e., that the small, collective pool of connoisseurs and professional specialists that we all depend-upon, end up doing their looking and acquisition from fewer and fewer outlets. This makes being a small gallery a hard path, one of super-specialized excellence; doing what you alone do and doing it so well that the gallery's presence is cemented through difference, in contrast to the coagulative assimilation, the collective similarities of the rest.

This necessitates the continual originality of artists, and the exhibition of genuinely unique practices, so that the gallery program is literally like nothing or nobody else. We once failed to win an entrepreneurial award for saying that our strength was ultimately the difficulty and complexity of the work we exhibited and how hard we made it for people to buy it. Actually, we came an honorary second, and won some furniture.

Can you tell us the story of the gallery?

Mother's Tankstation, now Mother's Tankstation Limited, opened with a show by Nina Canell, *We woke up with energy*, in 2006, when she was six months out of art college here in Dublin. For me that sort of says it all... Feeling completely inspired by a visit to Liste and Art Basel in June 2005, I just wanted to physically throw my energies into something vibrant, positive, alive.

Nina Canell studied in Ireland and was evidently a brilliant student and I wanted to be part of unfurling that revelation to an international audience. The complexity of her work encapsulated everything I wanted the gallery to say, to stand for. I recall that a work from that first show was proposed to the buying committee of a museum, for a few hundred Euros, it was of course declined. Her work is now subsequently in major collections all around the world. In a similar mode, we applied to Liste when we were three weeks old, but in this instance were fortunate to be immediately welcomed by a visionary team, the first Irish gallery ever to cross it's doors, but indicatively with a solo show by a young Finnish artist.

And what has motivated you?

Our path, our story, has always been to confound expectation, to be an international gallery based in Dublin. The motivation was simply to work and live surrounded by the most fantastic objects and ideas that collectively we, and our artists, might conceive and share them.

What brought you to contemporary art in the first place? What is your background?

I originally trained as an artist and practiced in video and installation until opening the gallery. I believe the laterality of continuing to think like an artist brings a creative and fearless freshness to being a gallerist. As well as Fine Art, I have a master's in curatorial practice and was involved with academia for a number of years. Prior to opening the gallery I was co-coordinating a masters course that combined practice, curation and critical discourse.

A subtext of which was to encourage creative and entrepreneurial risk-taking in the Irish art scene, yet all the good domestic talent appeared to be endlessly pulled away, as ever by an "international" undertow. This is a long-standing issue in Ireland, so it seemed like an appropriate counterbalance to put my teaching into practice.

Where does the name of your gallery come from?

This is a question that we are asked frequently and it's good to put it on record. In many ways it is a conflation of two simple ideas that combine to a fascinating-sounding, evocative, nothing. "Tankstation" is drawn from an arc of large iron letters, on a (now-defunct) warehouse building in the Guinness brewery complex that dominated the view out of our back office window.

We simply married this to the name of a singular New Orleans restaurant, "Mother's", which during the 1926 depression would carve roasts for their affluent customers, while catching the falling scraps and juices ("debris") to serve on bread rolls for a nickel to those down-on-luck. Mass feeding.

The conflation of two distinct ideas seemed, abstractly, to conjure images of nurture, protection, and space for growth: It works on an intuitive linguistically level; people seem fascinated by it and it was also important to pull it away from eponymous naming, to focus on the art, the artists and the building.

Tell us about your program.

In many respects this tags onto, or extends my answer regarding the role of a gallery today, in that I believe that it is better that the gallery program works well, intelligently and appropriately for the right number of artists, rather than un-meaningfully, for too many artists, with artists that are too common to too many other galleries or with work that appears generically fashionable. We have invited many artists to make project shows, simply because we cannot, practically, represent everything or everybody we love, but this does not mean that we cannot show it. It may sound strange to say, in this age, but to show work is more important to us than selling it.

It is always interesting to work, almost in a non-profit role with artists and galleries one admires, and this has generated really memorable exhibitions for us, including Haroon Mirza, Michael Snow, Nevan Aladag and most recently the wonderful Lee Kit.

Similarly, the program has always privileged content over form and we have gained a reputation for working with well-installed, considered presentations of challenging work. Curating, writing, installing and talking about art are privileges, and our enthusiasm in these seems, little by little, has become known.

How do you decide to add a new artist?

A sixty-four thousand dollar question, or something like that, I'm sure inflation must have added a couple of digits on that. Sadie Coles answered something similar by comparing it to falling in love, which I fully understand, but for me it is also about finding an artist who not only believes and understands inherently, completely, what they do, but that it comes from a place within them that is entirely genuine. I find that I am quite regularly asked how I find artists, which I take as a compliment to the program, that it continually looks in new directions and does not rely on singular "stars".

But I'm sorry to say that there is no simple or easy answer other than endless research and crucially, studio visits, where the passage from abstractly liking work to connecting it to a thinking, breathing intelligence and solid humanity, is absolutely key. We believe so strongly in developing the entire group of artists with whom we work, in an arching dynamic curve, so that the whole project is continually driven forwards.

Let's talk about the location. Why did you choose this building and this neighborhood?

I think it's probably fair to say that the building and location chose us rather than the other way around. We live in and love Ireland, so where else? Given that, Dublin real estate, like most capital cities, is a bit tricky and we were fortunate to 'stumble' upon our building (after a year of searching), a former small sausage factory, when property was just a little less pressured.

There simply are not that many former industrial buildings available in central Dublin and we poured our heart and souls in to rebuilding the structure from a rather sorry, derelict shell. It's both big enough and intimate enough to be a non-confrontational space and is certainly not a conventional white cube, but maintains many of the idiosyncrasies of its former incarnations that suit the, multiplicity, the irregularity of the programme.

What does it mean to run a contemporary art gallery in Dublin?

The impact of history means that the Irish art scene is, shall we say, "compact", underdeveloped perhaps: national newspapers or broadcast media – out of habit – give contemporary art little attention. The Irish cultural focus is self-evidently literature and music (no bad thing) and as a reflection the main institutions are underfunded and arguably under-ambitioned.

All of which results in limited opportunities for rising artists, which was one of the fundamental reasons why I felt compelled to open the gallery. The scene just badly needed it, and it feels possible to sense the bounce effect. Still more would be good. The small population combined with a limited visual culture means that exhibitions can be quietly visited, depending on the familiarity of the audience to the artist, but it makes our international engagement crucial to the greater project.

Bringing artists of the quality of Mairead O'hEocha, Nina Canell, Uri Aran, and Noel McKenna, to name but four, to international recognition, through the careful mechanisms of showing at fairs, Art Basel Statements, Art Basel Discoveries etc, and making off-site shows, is profoundly satisfying. Similarly, the familiarization of international collectors with our artists through international work brings people to the gallery especially for shows that they might not otherwise care or know to travel for.

How does digitalization affect your work?

Social media is a strong networking and informational tool, which efficiently allows a gallery to give a taste of shows or curated presentations at fairs to a broad audience and at precise moments. But I don't believe it to be

an effective selling or fully representative medium, I earnestly believe that art works should be experienced in tangible reality. Nothing will ever really replace a visit to the gallery.

There are certain layers of irony inherent in representing some works on line, like that of Yuri Pattison, much of which lives in the world as a digital native, but in reality his sculptural qualities come to the fore. Painting, which in particular is perceived as the most suited medium to digital representation, can also be the most misleading. If a collector intends to live with a work of art, then you have to be happy with all aspects of its physical reality.

What are your plans for the future?

To see the gallery at twenty years old... to keep doing what we do, but better and better. Alongside the forthcoming Frieze, London and Art Basel Miami Beach, I am excited about participating in the gallery led and highly collaborative projects of *Paris Internationale* and *Condo*, go the *coalition of the little*.

Finally, which artists are you showing at Paris Internationale?

At Paris Internationale we are exhibiting in a very beautiful but fragile historic room, where only minimal interventions to the protected architecture are possible, so the choice of artists was very particular.

There is a delicate combination of three correspondingly subtle practices; Noel McKenna from Australia whose remarkable, super-normal, yet metaphysical paintings, which observe from his daily life, are deservedly gaining international attention, having been the sole pleasure of a very particular part of the world for too long. His work has been a well-kept national secret, like a great Mornington Peninsular Pinot Noir, which until now people have been reluctant to export to a global market: its time to share.

Maggie Madden is a beautiful minimalist sculptor; originally from the west of Ireland who is not a regular part of the programme but whom we admire. Her linear, almost invisible sculptures are simply shouting to be hardly seen in this particularly elegant environment.

Finally we are including our newest and youngest artist, Maria Farrar, who is simply a discovery. Born in the Philippines, raised in Japan and now working in London, her paintings are pure joy.

Mother's Tankstation Limited participates in the 2nd edition of Paris Internationale in Paris from October 19th to 23rd 2016.

Info

<http://www.motherstankstation.com/>

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