



Into the Ether

An exploration of the nature of line and time are fundamental to Brian Fay's practice, writes **Margarita Cappock**



The discipline of drawing in pencil on paper is often seen as an exercise that accompanies the development of an artist's thinking in terms of preparatory work for a painting or sculpture, a prelude as it were. Not so for Dublin-based artist Brian Fay, whose main practice for over two decades has been the execution of highly detailed, intricately worked drawings, executed principally in pencil on paper. With a background in painting, Fay's switch to drawing came about in the mid-1990s when he made the decision to strip everything back to the essentials. He is still beguiled by the endlessly elusive nature of the medium, which he describes as fecund and rejuvenating as drawing does not belong to any one discipline.¹ His works are meticulously rendered with acute insight and attention to detail.

Aesthetically, Fay's work is distinctive in the manner in which he draws on a variety of source material – principally aspects of the work of diverse artists – and uses these as the springboard for his own visual imagination. Cimabue, Vermeer, Rembrandt, Rauschenberg, de Kooning, Mary Shelley and Buster Keaton have attracted his attention. Fay describes his exploration of these existing source materials as addictive – within them are a whole set of variables and chance encounters. Unforeseen, obscure or hidden aspects of his original sources are assimilated and metamorphosed under his hand, but done with discipline and concentration to evoke layered meanings. An exploration of the nature of line and time are fundamental, enduring themes in his practice. The art that he produces as a response is layered with intellectual complexities. In tandem with the artist's formidable graphic skill, this is what makes his work so compelling.

For the past two years, Fay has focussed on the pioneering modernist artist Mainie Jellett (1897-1944). Prompted by an encounter with four works on paper by Jellett in the collection of Dún Laoghaire Rathdown Co Council, he was drawn to their beauty, but also their

fragility as delicate artworks. These images stayed with him and resulted in a series of exquisite drawings and a watercolour. The four works by Jellett are included in his exhibition, thus facilitating an artistic dialogue underpinned by Fay's enduring preoccupation with the complex nature of time in all its forms – chronological, cosmological, natural, material and biographical.

The role of time in the conservation of an artwork is an abiding preoccupation for Fay, from the perspective of how material time works against artistic time. To what time does the conservator's work belong, especially in the case where multiple treatments of an artwork have taken place. Fay aptly describes these conundrums as 'temporal knots' that he keeps trying to pull.

A certain amount of deterioration in Jellett's artworks has occurred due, in part, to her use of lesser quality materials in these gouaches on paper. This physical manifestation of damage over time is evident in Jellett's *Abstract Composition* (Fig 4). Taking the scale of the work, Fay meticulously mapped the spotted areas of damage that have emerged, resulting in a suite of black-and-white pencil drawings entitled *The Ether series (Rotation and Translation 4) – After Mainie Jellett Abstract Composition, 1937* (Fig 3).

This series references Jellett's theory of rotation and translation, developed with Albert Gleizes, which consisted of the subdivision of the picture plane into different shaped rectangles that were positioned concentrically to emphasise rhythm and movement. Fay adopted this process and applied the technique to mapping the damaged areas through empty contour lines. This cumulative process involved tracing the damage on to paper, and turning and rotating the tracing paper so that, as the drawings develop across a series of nine, they become more intricate. Through a process of repetition and overlapping, Fay changed the weight of the pencil to accentuate the relationship to the background to give a sense of movement. They are titled the 'Ether series' in reference to Jellett's uncle, the eminent Irish physicist George Francis Fitzgerald, whose research challenged the idea of 'the ether'. Fay found the notion of the ether as being almost a space around drawing. The result is a cosmological, shimmering series of works in which one can become completely engrossed.

In the watercolour *Rotation and Translation – Entropy – After Abstract Composition 1937*, the same concept of mapping out the damage is employed but, in this case, instead of the empty contour lines of the Ether series, Fay matches



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the colours with that of the original Jellett work (Fig 5).

From Jellett's monumental effort to promote modernism in Ireland until her untimely death aged just 46, her achievements were significant and Fay found himself more invested in her biography than with previous artists whose work he has explored. Consequently, four works in this exhibition take photographs of Jellett as inspiration. A fortuitous meeting with relatives of Jellett led to access to her former home and studio at Fitzwilliam Square, where her legacy is all pervasive. Coincidentally, at the time of this visit Fay had been working on a drawing from a photograph of Jellett in her studio from around 1922. In these exquisite drawings, in particular *MJ16* (Fig 1), there is a shift in emphasis from line to a soft tonality with no edges of demarcation, thus lending them a sense of ambiguity. They are beautiful renderings of Jellett, with remarkable attention to detail and a level of empathetic intimacy conveyed with great subtlety and consideration. ■

Brian Fay, *A Mobile Living Thing*, 21 January - 30 April, Lexicon Gallery, Dún Laoghaire.

Margarita Cappock is an art historian and curator with Dublin City Arts Office.

1 Fay subsequently completed a practice-led PhD at Northumbria University, England, entitled *States of Transience: Drawing practices and the conservation of museum artworks*

1 BRIAN FAY *MJ 16* (detail) 2020 pencil on paper 76 x 57cm

2 Brian Fay

3 *THE ETHER SERIES (ROTATION AND TRANSLATION 4) AFTER MAINIE JELLETT ABSTRACT COMPOSITION 1937*. 2020 pencil on paper 76 x 57cm

4 MAINIE JELLETT *ABSTRACT COMPOSITION* 1937 gouache on paper 85 x 58cm

5 *ROTATION AND TRANSLATION – ENTROPY – AFTER ABSTRACT COMPOSITION 1937*. 2020 watercolour on paper 75 x 57cm