

# Living Landscape

Bernie Masterson



## *Living Landscape*

**By Bernie Masterson**

Bernie Masterson has once again engaged with the rural environment in her latest collection of paintings entitled *Living Landscape*. The artist took her inspiration from the feminine contours of the land, producing works that are a blend of abstraction and representation. Landscape painting has a long tradition in Ireland dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century masterpieces of George Barret, founder member of the British Royal Academy, and progressing to the Italianate work of James Arthur O'Connor. The 19<sup>th</sup> century produced the romanticised landscapes of Paul Henry and Jack Butler Yeats and, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, provided a more abstract expression of our Celtic past in the mystical work of Tony O'Malley. The 21<sup>st</sup> century brought a chaotic interpretation of modernist landscape by Camille Souter and the valuable contribution made by Masterson herself.

The works are presented in two sizes; the larger pieces measure 100 x100 cms and the smaller paintings range from 44 cm squared to 31 cm squared. This division in size denotes an important difference in the creative process and finished work, an issue that goes beyond the question of scale. The smaller pieces are denser in composition and more saturated in colour. These works were created over a protracted time-span and the artist drew her inspiration from her personal engagement with the Irish landscape. These images chart the painter's experience and memory, recording places as far apart as Dingle, Galway, Achill and Sligo, with particular emphasis on the light of the western seaboard. These works form a kind of visual diary as they were inspired by trips out into the countryside, and were initiated by visits to friends and family, as well residencies specifically intended to generate work.

The portability of the smaller pieces suggests a work created on the spot, captured by a manual drawing, but these paintings are not the product of a single view-point, but represent a more distilled presentation generated by a combination of visual memory and experience. Examination of the work shows that they are created on Tyneham paper – a flexible oil-based support. The artist cites the advantages of this choice of medium as being twofold: it facilitates the intense build up of impasto while also allowing the composition to extend beyond the allotted surface area. The layering of paint is often more than a centimetre deep. This demonstrates the artist's skill as she adds a blend of English Turpentine and Linseed Oil to the paint, to achieve this lustrous effect. While the freshness of the finished work suggests a sense of immediacy and painting from the motif – the reverse is in fact the case as the act of building up layer upon layer and scraping back and reworking is a slow exploratory process. The finished works are presented in lime-washed Ash frames, floating on an off-white mount.

Achill Island has long been a source of inspiration for the literary and visual arts. The whole concept of a national Irish identity and the Celtic Revival was largely facilitated by the work of the playwright John Millington Synge, and painters such as Paul Henry followed in his footsteps. The German Nobel prize winner, Heinrich Boll, also lived and worked on Achill. He generously bequeathed his cottage for the use of contemporary artists and Masterson's residency in that creative space yielded a rich crop of work.

The sombre palette of *The Deserted Village I* provides a clue to the subject matter and initially the grid-like marks suggest a topographic structure. As the eye is guided by the map-like lines, it slowly becomes clear that there is a lot of sunlight in the picture. The foreground moves from a mixture of Naples yellow and viridian green towards a deeper bottle green enlivened with patches of emerald green. The village was built in the lee of Slievemore and, at the brow of the mountain, the colour

changes from mulberry to black with a Prussian blue skyline lighting the ridge of the hill. Gradually our eyes focus on the detail and stone-gabled skeletons of the ruined houses are revealed in the landscape. The division of the fields emerge from their patchwork status to display indelible furrows carved by the plough. Our curiosity is aroused about the ancient inhabitants whose voices are rumoured to be still audible in the landscape. This sympathetic interpretation of a ghost village parallels Kathy Prendergast's theme *Lost*, a series of hand-drawn maps exploring the concept of man's alienation within the urban environment.

*A Misty Day in Achill* was painted in an adjacent location but it generates a totally different atmosphere. This work features Slievemore, whose distinctive peak appears in many of Paul Henry's paintings. The pale mauve-blue of the mountain and the sky reference Henry's palette but the undulation of the sky-scape marked by understated linear effect suggests another era.

The larger paintings differ for the earlier 'exploration' pieces as they provide a greater stage for the artist to work on. These second-generation images are a further development of the smaller pieces whose jewel-like surfaces are reminiscent of a miniature manuscript in their level of detail. These large, gestural works are made in an almost 'action painting' mode. Using bespoke tools, Masterson attacks the canvas with an energetic resolve. Uniquely, she is ambidextrous and, with a palette knife in one hand and a brush in the other she undertakes her mark-making practice. Yet again the process is extensive as the work has to go through many stages, and a variety of techniques, before the picture is completed. Like Jack Yeats' later works, these paintings are not static and the viewer needs to take time to access the vision of the artist and, gradually, that image comes into focus.

*After the Tide I* was inspired by the patterns made by the rock pools and light of the retreating tide on Leenane beach in Connemara. This kinetic piece shows

the scudding clouds of a clear blue sky, tempered with the woven patterns of the mudflats.

In the distance – at the edge of the water, small birds feed. The sky is gently articulated while the textural, criss-cross designs of the pools in the foreshore rush towards us.

*The Silvermine Mountain Fields* is one of the most representational oils as it shows a dip in the landscape and the steep curve of the hillside with its complex lattice-work of fields, grass and vegetation. At the brow of the hill, an ancient copse of trees grows around a fairy fort. This small but poignant detail lightly questions the roots of Irish landscape and how it has shaped our experience from ancient times.

*A Gray Light Strand Hill Beach* documents a walk with some friends along Strand Hill on a miserable September day in 2009. Always captivated by the light, the artist saw foreboding in the rain-filled clouds, and the black currach-like waves are threatening in the extreme. Sky and sea become one living heaving body of water, but a glimmer of hope is evident in this apocryphal scene, as a thin sliver of yellow light gleams on the skyline.

This suite of paintings reveals a duality in the artist's methodology as she created large and small art works that satisfy two disparate, yet interdependent needs. The smaller works express the minutiae, exploring the layering of the subject rising on the surface of the Tyneham paper to echo the contours and physical features of the landscape itself. The larger pieces offer a sense of scale and freedom, capturing the wildness of nature, and the energy of their creation is defined by their dramatic force. The scale of the work is telling and anticipates Masterson's future relationship with the great outdoors.

*Dr. Maebh O'Regan, July 2010*

This collection of work is dedicated to the memory of Dori Anne Steele,

friend, poet and writer

whose bravery in life and death remains an inspiration.

1958 - 2010

## **Memory**

One had a lovely face,  
And two or three had charm,  
But charm and face were in vain  
Because the mountain grass  
Cannot but keep the form  
Where the mountain hare has lain.

*W B Yeats (1865 – 1939)*



Misty Day Achill Island Oil on Tyneham Paper 44 X 44 cm ©





Full Tide Oil on Tyneham Paper 35 X 35 cm ©



Where The Tide Gets In At Leenane Oil on Tyneham Paper 31 X 31 cm ©



Sun Lit Mayo Fields Oil on Tyneham Paper 41 X 41 cm ©



Minaun Mountain Achill Oil on Tyneham Paper 44 X 44 cm ©



Silvermine Mountain Fields Oil on Tyneham Paper 100 X 100 cm ©



The Deserted Village 1 Achill Oil on Tyneham Paper 42 X 42 cm ©



The Deserted Village 11 Achill Oil on Tyneham Paper 42 X 42 cm ©



Low Tide at Leename 1 Oil on Tyneham Paper 31 X 31 cm ©





Low Tide at Leenane 11 Oil on Tyneham Paper 31 X 31 cm ©



Clew Bay (Diptych) Oil on Tyneham Paper 56 X 34 cm ©



Strand Hill Beach Oil on Tyneham Paper 35 X 35 cm ©



Gorse Hedges (Co Down) Oil on Tyneham Paper 44 X 44 cm ©



Shadow Fields Oil on Canvas 100 X 100 cm ©



Storm Clouds Over Benbulbin Oil on Tynham Paper 35 X 35 cm ©



A Gray Light Strand Hill Beach Oil on Canvas 100 X 100 cm ©



Mountain Roads Oil on Tyneham Paper 41 X 41 cm ©





Slievemore Mounutain Fields (Achill) Oil on Tyneham Paper 41 X 41 cm ©



After The Tide At Leenane 1 Oil on Canvas 100 X 100 cm ©



After The Tide At Leenane 11 Oil on Canvas 100 X 100 cm ©

## **Biographical Details and Selected Exhibitions**

Bernie Masterson was born in Ballymoney, Co. Antrim in 1958.  
She lives and works in Dublin.

### **Art Education**

1981 – 1982 Limerick School of Art and Design

1975 – 1979 Limerick School of Art and Design

### **Selected Group Exhibitions.**

- 2009    Invited Artist, Xmas Exhibition Custom House Gallery Westport.  
          Invited Artist, Xmas Group Show Cavehill Gallery, Belfast  
          Invited Artist, Xmas “1 Ft Square” Visual Arts Exhibition Higher  
          Bridges Gallery, Enniskillen  
          Selected Artist, Anna Cheyne Visual Art Award 2009 Exhibition,  
          Lisburn Island Arts Centre, N. Ireland  
          Selected Artist, Westport Arts Festival, Co Mayo, Ireland  
          Invited Artist “Hunt the Postcard at the Hunt” Museum, Limerick  
          Selected Artist, Dunamaise Open, Portlaoise, Ireland  
          126’s “How Do You Know” show, Blankspace, Gallery,  
          Oakland, Californis, USA  
          Royal Hibernain Academy Annual Exhibition Dublin  
          Devenish Gallery Enniskillen Co. Fermanagh Ireland
- 2008    Selected Artist, Enniskillen Visual Arts  
          Royal Hibernian Academy Annual Exhibition Dublin  
          127<sup>th</sup> Royal Ulster Academy Annual Exhibition, Titanic Quarter,  
          Belfast, Northern Ireland  
          Selected Artist, Enniskillen Visual Arts Open
- 2007    Fenton Gallery, Christmas Exhibition, Cork  
          Hallward Christmas Show, Merrion Square Dublin  
          Hallward Summer Show, Merrion Square Dublin
- 2006    “Hunt the Postcard”, Hunt Museum, Limerick  
          Invited Artist, Hallward Summer Show

- Utopia Fair, Eigse Carlow Arts Festival  
 “Vivid Visions” selected artists from the Fingal County Council  
 Collection
- 2005 Invited Artist, Cavehill Gallery, Belfast  
 “The Collection” 10 Ormond Quay Dublin, Mill Cove Gallery  
 Iontas National Small Works Exhibition, Ireland  
 “Visuals”, the British Embassy Merrion Rd Dublin  
 Eigse Carlow Arts Festival - Invited Artist  
 Invited Artist, “Dialogues with Form”, Canvanacor Gallery  
 Lifford, Co Donegal
- 2004 Invited Artist Cavehill Gallery Belfast  
 The 123rd Royal Ulster Academy Annual Exhibition Ulster  
 Museum Belfast  
 The 174th RHA Annual Exhibition Dublin  
 Boyle Arts Festival Co. Roscommon  
 The Summer Show the Hallward Gallery Dublin  
 “Currents” Art of the State Touring Exhibition Ireland
- 2003 Wexford Opera Festival  
 The Moulin Gallery Denmark Street, Limerick  
 The 173rd RHA Annual Exhibition Dublin  
 Iontas, National Small Works Exhibition, Sligo  
 Invited Artist Radharc Draíocht Dublin  
 Four Painters, Invited Artist, Gallery One, Kilkenny  
 Eigse Carlow Arts Festival, Carlow  
 The Fenton Gallery Cork  
 Hallward Christmas Exhibition, Dublin  
 Christmas Exhibition the Dyehouse Gallery Waterford
- 2002 Christmas Exhibition Riverview Gallery Enniskillen  
 Invited Artists Christmas Exhibition Hallward Gallery Dublin
- 2001 Christmas Exhibition, Hallward Gallery Dublin -  
 Summer Show Hallward Gallery Dublin
- 2000 Hallward Christmas Exhibition Dublin  
 Eigse Carlow Arts Festival Carlow  
 The Winter Show Dyehouse Gallery Waterford  
 (Invited Artist) Microsoft September Exhibition

- Aer Rianta Gateway to Art, Dublin Airport  
Hallward Gallery Summer Exhibition Dublin
- 1999 Aer Rianta Gateway to Art Dublin Airport  
Hallward Gallery Summer Exhibition Dublin
- 1998 Set Pieces the Hallward Gallery Dublin  
The Oireachtais Art Exhibition,(Invited Artist)  
The Hunt Museum Limerick  
Omagh Art Auction National Concert Hall Dublin  
Microsoft Exhibition Dublin  
Iontas National Small Works Ireland  
Boyle Arts Festival, Boyle Co. Roscommon  
The Blackcombe Gallery Cork
- 1997 Green Thoughts the Hallward Gallery Dublin  
Aer Rianta Gateway to Art Dublin Airport  
Invited Artists the Hallward Gallery Summer Exhibition Dublin
- 1996 The Oireachtais Art Exhibition  
The Dillon Gallery Barnes London England  
SIPTU Inaugural Exhibition Ireland  
Aer Rianta Gateway to Art Dublin Airport -Iontas National  
Small Works Ireland
- 1995 Old Library Gallery, Cardiff Wales  
The Portobello Open Exhibition Tabernacle Gallery London  
Womens Art Festival England  
The 165th Royal Hibernian Academy Annual Exhibition Dublin  
Monaghan Open Exhibition, Co. Mayo  
The Second International Female Artist's Art Biennial  
Stockholm Sweden  
Iontas National Small Works Exhibition, Ireland  
International Watercolour Exhibition Treg'Aquarelle  
Tregastel France  
International Crossroads Symposium, Roscommon  
Fe-mail Art Expo, Old Library Gallery Cardiff Wales  
Boyle Arts Festival Boyle, Co. Roscommon  
Art '95, New York International Art Exhibition New York, USA  
Aer Rianta Gateway to Art, Dublin Airport

- 1994 United Arts Club, Ireland  
International Watercolour Exhibition Treg' Aquarelle  
Tregastel, France  
High Season Hallward Gallery Dublin  
Ireland Cork Arts Festival- Ireland  
Claremorris Open Exhibition  
Boyle Arts Festival Co Roscommon  
Ashling Exhibition- Patheon Gallery Dublin
- 1993 Monaghan Open Exhibition, Ireland  
Hallward Gallery Dublin
- 1992 Riverrun Gallery, Dublin

### **Solo Exhibitions**

- 2010 Living Landscape, Custom House Gallery, Westport,  
Co. Mayo Ireland
- 2010 Drawing on the Body RUA RED Tallaght Dublin
- 2005 Landscape & Memory, Clothworthy Museum, Co. Antrim
- 2004 Landscape & Memory, Draíocht, Dublin
- 2003 An Engagement with Nature 1, Hallward Gallery, Dublin
- 2002 An Odyssey, Kerry/Queensland Works, The Hunt  
Museum Gallery, Limerick
- 2001 Dun Aímhígin Gallery, Department of Arts,  
Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands – Two Painters,  
Rachel Kierans & Bernie Masterson – Dublin,
- 1997 A River of Images, The Dyehouse Gallery, Waterford
- 1997 A River of Images, The Dolmen Gallery, Limerick
- 1996 New Paintings, The Hallward Gallery, Dublin
- 1994 Moods of a Landscape, The Dolmen Gallery, Limerick

### **Awards and Residencies**

- 2009 Awarded Custom House Studio Residency, Co Westport
- 2008 Awarded a residency by the Heinrich Boll Association
- 2007 Artist in Prison Scheme, HOPE, Farranferris College, Cork.

- 2006 The Cill Rialaig Project, Ballinskelligs, Co Kerry
- 2002 Nominated by the Hunt Museum for the AIB Award
- 2001 The Cill Rialaig Project, Ballinskelligs, Co Kerry
- 2000 The Tryone Guthrie Center, Annaghmakerrig
- 1997 Arts Council of Ireland Artflight Award.
- 1996 The Tryone Guthrie Center, Annaghmakerrig
- 1996 The Oireachtais, Douglas Hyde Gold Medal Award  
for Painting
- 1995 The Cill Rialaig Project, Ballinskelligs, Co Kerry

### **Bibliography**

- 2009 “New forms, solid values” by Aidan Dunne, The Irish Times,  
Saturday May 30<sup>th</sup>, Arts Review
- 2008 Not in Alphabetical Order Fingal Public Art Collection Volume  
One
- 2005 Circa on-line review by Brian Lynch
- 2005 “Landscape and Memory” by Sara Keating, In Dublin, Issue 38
- 2005 Review by Brian Lynch, editor of Tony O Malley, Circa on-line,  
January the 28<sup>th</sup>
- 2004 ‘Landscape & Memory’ catalogue essay by  
Marianne O Kane  
Art of the State Catalogue
- 2003 ‘Object lessons’, by Aidan Dunne, The Irish Times,  
September 10<sup>th</sup>, Arts Review
- 2003 ‘Magnetic quality of images’, by John Fitzgerald.  
The Kilkenny People, July 11<sup>th</sup>
- 2003 ‘Celebrating the beauty of Irish landscape’, The  
Echo, February 2<sup>nd</sup>
- 1996 ‘The missing heart in group art, Taispeantas Ealaine  
an Oireachtais, Guinness Hop Store’, by Brian  
Fallon. The Irish Times, September 19<sup>th</sup>, Arts  
Review
- 1996 Art exhibition winners named, The Irish Times  
Section: September 12<sup>th</sup>
- 1996 Art of the State Catalogue



- 1996 Aer Rianta Exhibition, Arts Show Radio Programme
- 1995 International Crossroads Symposium interview with Mike Murphy, (RTÉ Radio 1) August
- 1995 'Gateway to Art', by Brian Fallon. The Irish Times, February 15th. Arts Review
- 1994 'Right mix of many styles', Brian Fallon visits two major group exhibitions. The Irish Times, August 3rd, Section; Arts, Pg 12

### **Corporate Collections**

Smith, Kline and Beecham  
 New Market Partnership  
 Office of Public Works / Government Buildings  
 Fitzgerald Insurance  
 Dept of Telecommunication & Regulation  
 Tyrone Productions  
 Limerick County Council  
 Norkom Technology  
 Microsoft Ireland  
 Harcourt Development  
 Brian Hogan Architects  
 Stewarts Hospital, Palmerstown, Dublin  
 Department of Finance and Personnel, N. Ireland Civil Service  
 Fingal Council County  
 No 10, Ormond Quay, Dublin  
 Axa Insurance  
 Allied Irish Bank  
 Garda Headquarters

### **Private collections in Ireland and Abroad**

Associated member of the New Art Studio, Mary Street, Dublin  
 Educational Service to Prisons  
 Member of the Visual Artist Ireland

Maebh O' Regan graduated from Trinity College Dublin with a Bachelor of Arts degree in the History of Art and Classical Civilization. She continued her studies in the National College of Art and Design where she was awarded a Ph.D for her thesis on the life and work of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Irish painter, Richard Thomas Moynan. Maebh has been lecturing in the NCAD since 2000. Her main focus of interest is Irish art practice.

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