

IMMA

Presents

Tracing Memories

An archive of voices from Studio 10

Episode 3

To paint myself happy

Studio 10 participants talk about the meaning
of art in their lives

Episode 3

To paint myself happy

Studio 10 participants talk about the meaning of art in their lives



Studio 10 participants at IMMA

Narrator (N): In this episode, our contributors define art as an innate drive or an obsession, an addiction or even a battle. Alternatively, some say art discourse and art making are cathartic means of expression and communication. Art may embrace themes of politics, romance and intellectual engagement, to mention just a few examples. I was privileged to share in these conversations with IMMA's Studio 10 participants as they teased out the role of art in their lives. We were joined by Sandra Murphy, who, like me, is part of the visitor engagement team facilitating Studio 10.

It is a pleasure for me to welcome our first contributor, Sarah Galbraith. In Episode 1, Sarah recounted the joy of mixing colours as a child. I asked Sarah if seeing and responding to art at IMMA has influenced her life in a positive way.



Bryan Hogan with Studio 10 in the formal garden, Photo Joan Walker

'A big rainbow'

Sarah Galbraith (SG): Yeah. I feel like I don't have to hide and don't be afraid, just saying what's on my mind, like, and go with it. When I think about going somewhere to art or I think about the things I've done at IMMA, it just – it makes me want to learn more, you know and just, to not really be afraid. And art – I saw a little saying in a book, it was from [Pablo Picasso](#), it just always sticks in my head, it's "Art washes from the soul, the dust of everyday life"... It just reminds me, like, if I feel upset, and if I think of art sometimes; it's like a big paintbrush, just kind of washing away all the dark clouds and a big rainbow appearing. And I just feel happier and lighter.

Sandra Murphy (SM): It's beautiful.



Flower-making workshop led by Joan Walker and Bryan Hogan in response to the IMMA exhibition *Doris Salcedo, Acts of Mourning*
26 April – 21 July 201

N: "[Creativity](#) in and of itself is important for remaining healthy, remaining connected to yourself and connected to the world."¹ So says [Christianne Strang](#), professor of neuroscience at the University of Alabama, Birmingham and former president of the [American Art Therapy Association](#). Let's hear more now from Sarah Galbraith about her experience of personal growth through creativity.

'It makes me feel alive'

SG: Well I like personal things, like symbols and the story behind them. I find that fascinating. I'm hungry, kind of, to know more. Like, I'd love to be able to paint something, even a blade of grass. I like [Impressionism](#) and Monet, that kind of dreamy kind of effect, you know. It looks so simple, but then when you look at it really close, the amount of work and the different strokes and how they make it look so magic – fantasy kind of – it's great.

¹ Strang, Christianne, quoted by Gharib, Malaka, in "Feeling Artsy: Here's How Making Art Helps your Brain", Washington D.C., National Public Radio (NPR) npr.org , pub. January 11, 2020. Accessed May 10, 2021.

It makes me feel alive. You know, it just – it does something, I can't explain it. I don't have any words, yet. But it just takes me out of myself, like as if I'm floating – although I'm not floating. I don't know, it's just magic.



Olive Galbraith
in her Studio

'Something more hidden'

N: Olive Galbraith likes art that makes you stop and think. Olive finds the challenge of viewing contemporary art to be provocative and intellectually stimulating, as she divulged to Sandra Murphy and me.

Olive Galbraith (OG): I used to like scenery, because it reminded me, say, of a calm sea or beautiful mountains and things like that. And I still do. I thought, "Yes, that'd be lovely." But you get bored with that, and it's something more – hidden, kind of, that you can keep looking at it, and every time you look at it, there's something different in it.

SM: Sublime.

OG: So you can spend your whole life looking at it, and they're the kind of paintings, the modern art I think, that has more in them than a bland painting of a scene, you know.



Olive Galbraith (centre) with Sandra Murphy
and Evy Richard of the visitor engagement team

'A sense of satisfaction and creativity'

OG: For artists, I'd say it's – besides, it's hardly a living, because a lot of artists are not well off at all – but it's a compulsion, I'd say, they have to do it. And it's a sense of satisfaction and creativity, that there's just – it's addiction, there's no substitute for it. And there's no side effects really you know, either (laughter). All you need is your – even basic – a pencil and a sketchpad or a canvas and your paints. You don't have to be rich to do it, you know, and somebody will always like part of what you're doing. But for us, for people viewing their art, it's immeasurable, there's no substitute for it. Life would be just miserable without art.

N: For Olive, then, art is much more than just a hobby; it is essential to personal fulfilment. A [study](#) in 2017 at Drexel University, Philadelphia, found that making art activates the brain's reward pathways and this stimulation is beneficial to brain health.² There's no doubt that this can become addictive.



Brian McCoy in the studio

'Obsession'

N: Brian McCoy, a stalwart of Studio 10, tells us about the powerful hold that art has on him. Brian realised his talent for drawing and painting portraits after he retired. I asked Brian the same question about the purpose of art in our lives.

Brian McCoy (BMcC): When you start to paint, you start to get interested in it, and it becomes an obsession.

SM: No cure!

BMcC: No cure, there's really no cure. Even this morning now, down at the reception, Anne came in, and she was talking to Evy right. And she was – they were saying they're going to see [Vermeer](#) you know what I mean? And Evy is going on Monday and Anne hasn't seen it yet but she has to see it, you know what I'm getting at? So it becomes an obsession.

PB: Yes it does.

² Otto, Frank, "Making Art activates Brain's Reward Pathway – Drexel Study", *DrexelNOW*, www.drexel.edu June 13, 2017. Accessed May 10, 2021.



Studio 10 looking at the IMMA Collection:
Freud Project, *Gaze* exhibition.
04 Oct 2018 – 19 May 2019

'You have to get the eyes properly'

N: Brian paints the people in his life; his friends, family and neighbours, as did the great portrait painter [Lucian Freud](#), many of whose works are on loan to IMMA. Brian spoke about the process and the challenge of painting people. It is Brian's ambition, like Freud, to always paint something better than before. As both Brian and Lucian Freud acknowledged, failure is inherent in the act of painting and it is what drives us on to greater challenges and achievements.

BMcC: Yesterday I was looking, I did a portrait, I'm doing a thing on neighbours. I'm painting all of them, they don't know I'm painting them. But I took the photograph. they think I'm just taking the photograph, right? So I was looking at one of them and no matter what, I can't get this man's eyes properly, 'cause eyes being the window to your soul. You know what I'm getting at?

PB: It's interesting.

BMcC: You have to get the eyes properly – it doesn't matter how you get the face.

PB: It can take forever, can't it? You can do it and redo it – you can drive yourself crazy.

BMcC: Yeah, and I was looking at him and so he's right, you never get anything quite correct.



Barbara Geraghty at IMMA, 2017

‘They draw you in’

N: This obsession has its own rewards, as we become completely absorbed not only in making and responding; we can be equally involved in looking and reflecting as active rather than passive activities. Barbara Geraghty spoke to Sandra Murphy about the joyful and vibrant activity of looking.

Barbara Geraghty (BG): From the museums, say that I have gone to and the paintings I have seen; like a lot of seascapes and sunrises, and it just draws – they draw you in and you can really – sometimes you can feel yourself that you’re actually in the painting.³

PB: Yeah.



Bryan Hogan of the visitor engagement team

‘You look at things differently’

BG: I think art can make a difference, yeah, because you look at things differently and if you look at something, if you can see something and you think it’s beautiful or you can see beyond what’s there; it does influence your life and you will look at other things differently.

SM: Yes, yes. Do you feel it can lead you on to other aspects?

BG: It can lead you on to other things, but as well as that it can – you can just enjoy it and maybe try to bring what you feel from that painting into your own life and to influence other people.



Ben Dhonau in the studio

³Phillips, Renée, in “Art Enhances Brain Function and Well-Being”, *The Healing Power of Art & Artists (HPAA)* March 2015, last updated September 2019, www.healing-power-of-art.org Accessed May 12, 2021.

‘Are things beautiful?’

N: Being fully involved with looking as Barbara Geraghty describes it, leads to the sense of a deeper engagement with life. Ben Dhonau is our next guest, and you may remember him from Episode 1. Ben voiced an awareness of politics in art, yet, like Barbara, he is equally moved by aesthetics, and that’s where my conversation with Ben began.

Ben Dhonau (BD): An awful lot of it is – I could do no better than quote Keats: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty; that is all you know on earth or need to know.”

PB: I love that quote.

BD: So yeah, I mean a great deal of it is, are things beautiful?⁴ Some of it, too, I mean there’s importance – you know they could be politically very powerful as well.

PB: Sure, and some people prefer to keep art and politics apart, but –

BD: Well, you can’t.

PB: You can’t, yeah, it’s part of life, it’s part of art.



Workshop led by Barry Kehoe and Aidan O’Sullivan, in response to the IMMA exhibition *El Lissitzky: The Artist and the State*, 30 Jul 2015 – Oct 2015

‘It’s them and society’

BD: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean it becomes art – well I say the “Art for art’s sake” goes as far as it goes, but it’s not the sole reason for art, and anybody who paints anything, as in, it may not be party political, but it’s reflecting – it’s them and society in some way or another.

PB: It is; it’s of its time.

⁴Zeki, Semir, “The Neurobiology of Beauty”, Tedx Talks, July 2, 2012, www.youtube.com

BD: You can't. They are of their time and you can't totally separate them. I mean I think a lot of conceptual art – well I mean it's trying to, it's making pretty obvious political statements, you know, as if they were profound and deep and so on. And I do have a problem with the narrative that tends to say that art must be left-wing and socially concerned. Art can be right-wing, equally art can be right wing too.

N: Ben's fellow scientist and colleague Barbara Keary expanded on political themes in art. Barbara decided that intellectual discourse and debate are, for her, some of the most compelling components of art.



Left to Right: Barbara Keary, Sarah Galbraith and Brian McCoy with their own and fellow participants responses to *Jaki Irvine: If the ground should open* at IMMA 23 Sept 2016 - 15 Jan 2017

'Politics of the underdog'

Barbara Keary (BK): One of the things I like is documentaries, and I think art can be, can make a statement and is very useful to make a statement politically. I do. I think that's – I would say that that was an important aspect of art; politics, you know. Politics of the underdog, politics of risings, politics of land distribution. All those sort of things can be – can be depicted in art, I think. I would – I think that's really important.

PB: And gender politics too.

BK: I'd be more interested in the human politics, you know, the effect it has on people. I'm interested in people in art and people in politics more than the actual political movement as such.

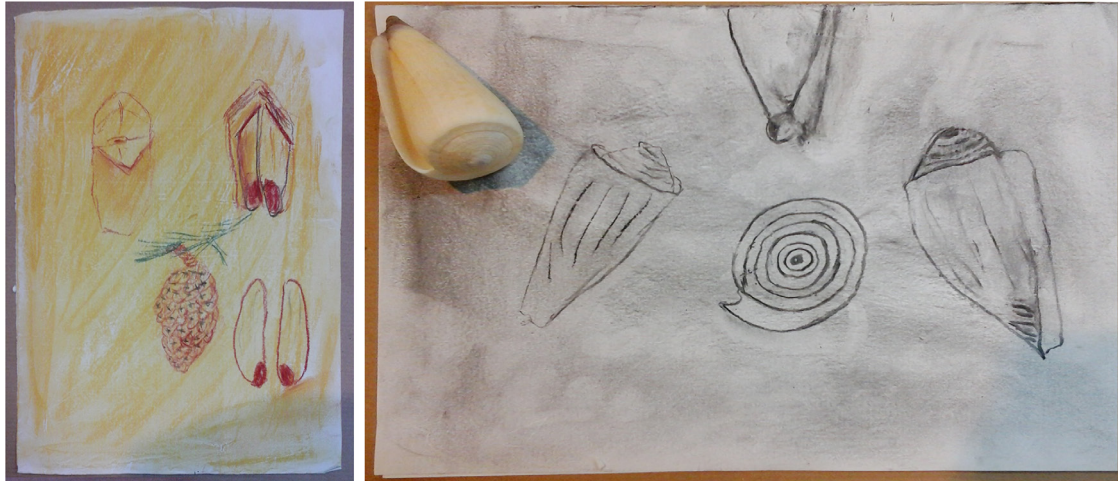
'An innate drive'

N: Barbara teased out the prime motivations behind artistic endeavour, especially the need to communicate to an audience.

BK: Well, I think if you're an artist you have an urge to make an impression on – you know – I don't mean to impress people. You can't really ignore that, because it drives people. And for artists, they feel they need to make a statement. I think about artists: that's what

they do rather than anything else, and the fact that they must do it, and they feel they must do it, in spite of privation and sacrifice, shows you that it is an innate drive, and they have to – it's very hard, like if you squash somebody's innate drive it can have serious psychological effects if somebody feels that strongly about something and there's no outlet.

SM: Yes, they can't express it, yeah.



Barbara Keary responds to the IMMA exhibition *Trove: Dorothy Cross Selects from the National Collections*, 3 Dec 2014 – 8 Mar 2015

N: Alternatively, when an individual's creative drive finds expression, it can be life enhancing. A study on links between art and healing, specifically music, visual arts, movement and writing, appeared in *The American Journal of Public Health* in 2016. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this research found that creating art can significantly lower cortisol levels, thereby reducing stress.⁵ So as well as being enjoyable, creativity can promote better health.



Esmé exhibiting paintings, ceramics and stained glass with NCAD at the RHA, 1990s

⁵ Kaimal, Girija; Muniz, Juan; Ray, Kendra, "Reduction of Cortisol Levels and Participants' Responses Following Art Making", *Art Ther (Alex)*, pub. U.S. April 2, 2016, published online May 23, 2016, *National Center for Biotechnology Information*, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov Accessed May 12, 2021.

'You can see the future'

N: Esmé Lewis was our first contributor in Episode 1, when she shared her memory of drawing on the wall at the age of two. Esmé articulated for Sandra Murphy and me how art has continued to enhance her life.

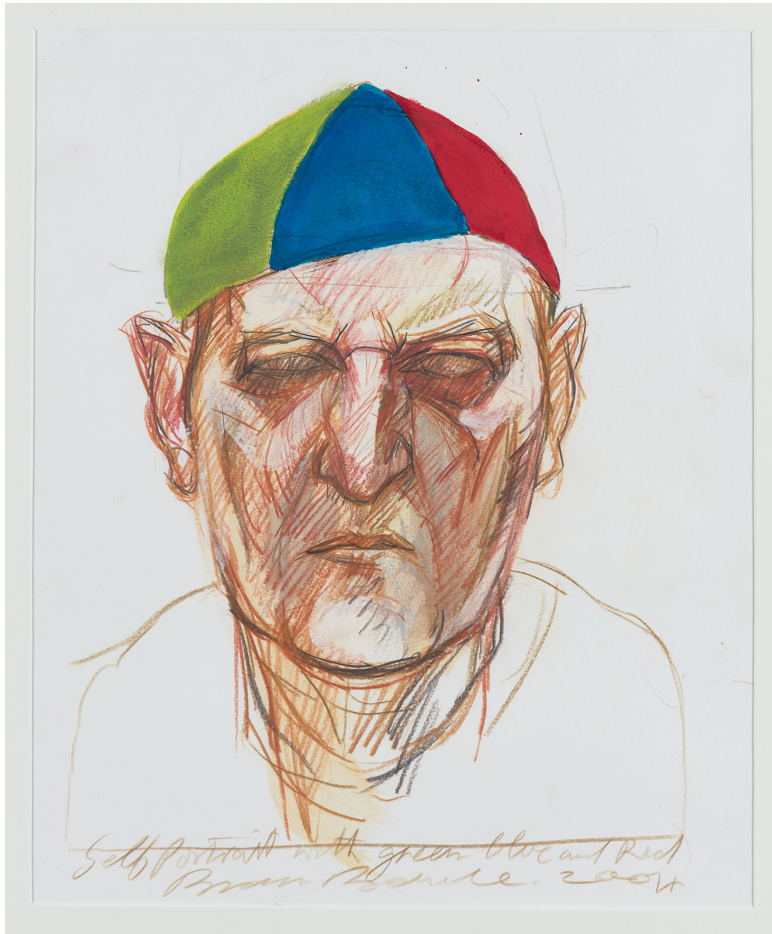
Esmé Lewis (EL): Oh, for my life, it keeps me sane (chuckles) and gives me great pleasure and happiness and encouragement to just do it. I was painting this morning.

EL: I think there are some artists who are lucky, and they have opportunities to actually develop themselves and there's others who evolve. And I'm very, very lucky because I've known so many of the artists going back over the years who've evolved, maybe self-taught.

PB: That's a wonderful way of putting it, to develop yourself, to evolve.

EL: To develop themselves: James McKenna, Brian Bourke, it goes on.

PB: And Esmé Lewis!



Brian Bourke. *Self Portrait with Blue, Red and Green*, 2004

Mixed media on paper. 65 x 56 cm

IMMA Collection: Purchase, 2005

EL: Just the privilege of knowing them, in that era, too. And to see the work now, and be able to appreciate, maybe, the early work too. And then to meet young artists, like a lovely fellow I met last night and he was showing me his work, and you can see the future.



James Mc Kenna
A Funny Thing Happened on the way to The G.P.O.
 1990
 Painted wood
 35 x 35 x 35 cm
 IMMA Collection: Purchase, 1993

N: Esmé has developed and exhibited her own artwork, having had several solo exhibitions, as has our next guest, Noel Moore, who we met in previous episodes. When I asked him for his definition of art, Noel described how imagination is sparked by visual connections between things, by the poetry and romance of art as well as by historical themes.



Noel Moore as Napoleon

‘There’s a story behind that’

Noel Moore (NM): Well it’s an expression of – it could be an expression – it’s a visual expression, of maybe a revolution or something like that. Somebody could – like Picasso, he painted lots of pictures with – influenced by the Spanish Civil War and that type of thing.

PB: True.

NM: Much the same as [Jack Yeats](#) or maybe someone like that. It might be a kind of a historical connection, or maybe a romantic connection.

NM: It's a visual connection between certain events, maybe or subject matter.

PB: Ok.

NM: It could be even a thought you have, just a thought, maybe a bouquet of flowers.

SM: Yes, or an emotion.

NM: Somebody presenting a bouquet of flowers to someone, there's a story behind that.

SM: Of course.

NM: Always is a story behind something like that.

N: Noel is attuned to the range and power of emotions and thoughts that art can inspire in us.

'Things that other people wouldn't see'

N: Jean Brady, a participant of Studio 10 at IMMA for 29 years, has a similar enthusiasm and openness to lifelong learning.

Jean Brady (JB): Well, I find it very relaxing to be honest with you. And when I look at some of them now – there's more so now. I love the ones now more so than some of them years ago... and I loved actually, like, probably paintings more so. And I love to look in and see different things in it. Now, I could stand for ages at something that's all colour, real colourful and pick out different things; now, things that other people wouldn't see, I could see in it, you know.

PB: Exactly, yeah, everyone sees something.

JB: Everyone sees something different, yeah.



Jean Brady painting

'It never ceases to amaze me'

N: Jean admires the talent and ingenuity of contemporary art makers, including her colleagues at Studio 10.

JB: Well, I suppose that, anybody that does art, it's like – they're talented, I find. Because I mean there's lots of people can knit and crochet and do all different things like that, but the people that do art, I find they're – are really very talented. Because they can turn out

– my God! Some of the stuff up there, it never ceases to amaze me because everybody is so different and everybody likes different things and they seem to be able to make art out of anything. I mean, I've seen them making – I've seen stones, worms, clay. Like they can make art out of anything and it'll turn out terrific.

N: Contemporary art doesn't offer easy answers; instead it raises questions and prompts us to stumble upon truths that relate to our particular experience, yet critically probe the certainty of previous outlooks.



Long-standing Participant Jean Brady with May McGibney, beloved and dearly missed pioneer of Studio 10

'All my life is art'

PB: So Ries, what difference has art made in your life? It has been a large part of your life, art and design.

Ries Hoek (RH): It is my life! It is my whole life, from a little boy, that size (laughs) it is good they cannot see the size!

PB: Yeah, 'cause you're a tall man, Ries.

RH: (Laughter)

PB: So for all your life.

RH: Yeah, all my life is art, and I still love, love art. I cannot see anything wrong with it, because I tell many people: "Study – if you want to know something about the world, study art history."



Jack B. Yeats, *St Stephen's Green, Closing Time*, 1950. Oil on canvas. 36 x 53.5 cm. IMMA Collection: Heritage Gift by Brian Timmons, 2002.

'It started with the early people'

RH: It started with the early people making nice things in [caves](#) you know and well, go from there, to today. Well there's a long history. And there's plenty to see, plenty to study.

PB: Absolutely, and Sandra, you said something similar, I think, last week.

SM: Yes, it's a pictorial history, really.

RH: Yeah, yeah!

SM: It involves geography, history, nature, psychology. You've everything: maths, geometry, science.

RH: Yes, and now we come to the people who don't like art. Will we?

SM: I don't know of anybody who would say, "I don't like art". I haven't met anybody yet, but I suppose there are people – then again, when you like art yourself you're inclined to mix with people that are very interested in art, so I suppose –

PB: You mean people who just aren't interested, Ries?

RH: Yeah, I better –

SM: You know there may be people who haven't had the opportunity yet to –

RH: I stop talking what I have to say now.

PB: (Laughs) Okay. So you think art is important?

RH: Oh yes, it is extremely important.

SM: Vital.

RH: But I'm not going to say now what – we're discussing because I think –

PB: We might come back to that.

RH: I think, I think – (laughs)

PB: All right.

SM: Go on!

RH: No! Art communicates to some people, not to everybody, because they don't know about art.



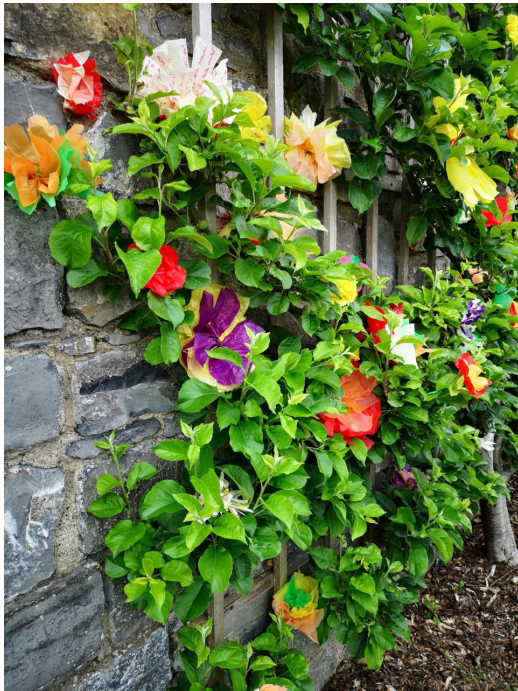
At work in studio 10

'I have a battle with the painting'

N: It is clear that making art brings Ries great fulfilment and joy, as he openly declared his main motivation for making art.

RH: Enjoying myself. When I paint, I have a battle with the painting, to get it right. It takes me a long time to paint myself happy and I say "Yes Ries, you're coming close to the end of this painting." I would never put my signature on a painting if I don't like it. So, if I paint a painting for somebody, I have to battle – to get through that battle to get myself happy, that I put my name on it. Otherwise this goes in the dustbin.

N: Ries has the last word on the meaning and purpose of art. We hope you have enjoyed hearing the voices of Studio 10 participants exchange definitions of art and its transformative role in their lives.



Flower-making workshop

N: IMMA would like to thank everyone who contributed to the Tracing Memories archive: Jean Brady, Ben Dhonau, Olive Galbraith, Sarah Galbraith, Barbara Geraghty, Ries Hoek, Barbara Keary, Esmé Lewis, Brian McCoy and Noel Moore who took part in the project. Special thanks to Sandra Murphy.

Tracing Memories was edited and mixed, with additional post production by Simon Kenny. You can find out more at imma.ie

IMMA3 



An Roinn Turasóireachta, Cultúir,
Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán
Department of Tourism, Culture,
Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media

**ÁRAS NUA-EALAÍNE
NA hÉIREANN**
IRISH MUSEUM OF
MODERN ART

Ospidéal Rioga
Cill Mhaighneán
Baile Átha Cliath 8
D08 FW31, Éire

Royal Hospital
Kilmainham
Dublin 8
D08 FW31, Ireland

+353 1 612 9900
imma.ie / info@imma.ie

