

# OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN

## THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

**MS FIONA KEARNEY**, Director of the Lewis Glucksman Gallery, in University College Cork, on 5 June 2015, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*, on **NICHOLAS FOX WEBER**

A Sheansailéir, a Uachtaráin, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle,

Just over three years ago, we were installing an exhibition of the work of Josef Albers in the Glucksman curated by Nicholas Fox Weber. It was an exciting time for our team – the calibre of the work required equally high standards in terms of presentation and we were determined that our displays would merit the superb selection of paintings, drawings and stained glass that Nick had brought to Ireland for our audiences. As myself and Nick deliberated on how to hang the final section of the show – a series of the famous *Homages to the Square*, we realised that a freestanding wall was required to ensure the optimum arrangement of these luminous paintings. I was unsure how we could achieve this. Our technicians were hard at work, already on tight deadlines and to build an additional structure at this late stage seemed all but impossible. Nick assured me that it could happen - and following one or two phone-calls and some gentle negotiation, he saw to it that we were joined the next day by two skilled construction workers from West Cork, who set about fabricating the essential partition. *"Sure, we would do anything for Nick"*

Nicholas Fox Weber has longstanding ties to the hinterlands of our university – his parents first came here in 1970, and he lives for part of the year at least, in Glandore. Few blow-ins as we Irish tend to refer to those more recently arrived on our shores, would be able to call on such immediate assistance and it is testament to the lasting friendships that Nick has created here in

Ireland, that he was more able to conjure a wall into our galleries than this native Corkonian.

As our new West Cork friends set to work, Nick brought in other visitors to preview the exhibition sharing his vast knowledge and enthusing everyone with his insightful stories of Bauhaus artists. Although even I was surprised to see him – at one point - gently guiding the kitchen staff of the River Lee Hotel around the works – delighting in telling the Head Chef that Josef called the Homages to the Square, “platters to serve colour”. Indeed the kitchen staff took him at his word, and at the reception in the River Lee following the opening of the exhibition, the Head Chef carefully arranged his buffet offerings in square shapes in honour of an artist he had only just come to know. This ability to create connections between art and people, to ignite curiosity about culture and in the words of Josef Albers, “to open eyes” is one of Nick’s great accomplishments, and one that we pay our own homage to here today.

Nick of course, has achieved this in a series of ground-breaking exhibitions that he has curated for some of the world’s best known museums – he has been responsible for opening eyes not just here at the Glucksman but also at the Guggenheim New York, the Philips Collection Washington, the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum and the National Gallery of Umbria to name but a few. He has been recognised in France with the merit of *Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* for his “significant contribution to the enrichment of the French cultural inheritance”. His most recent exhibition made an enlightened association between the work of Josef Albers and the Spanish artist Joan Miro. It was aptly titled ‘The Thrill of Seeing’ and in her own account of visiting ‘the exhibition, Nick’s sister Nancy Weber, a writer, whom we welcome from New York, describes how their parents developed this heightened awareness of the visual.

*“ Our painter mother and printer father encouraged us endlessly to look, really look, at whatever was in front of us: the Picasso ceramics on our dining room*

*walls, words on a page, shadows on a Connecticut trout stream, the lights of Times Square.”*

Nick formalised this early visual education, with third level study undertaking a BA Major in Art History at Columbia College New York and an MA Art History and Fellowship of American Art at Yale University. He has all his life written extensively about art and architecture, and has published numerous catalogue essays, and contributed scholarly reviews and critical commentary to journals such as Architectural Digest, Art in America, and ArtNews as well as thoughtful articles for newspapers and magazines such as the New Yorker, Vogue, the Boston Globe, and Le Monde. Among many texts he has published in the New York Times, there is one in the 1992 Travel section that it feels important to mention entitled: ‘Strolling Ireland’s Second City’, where he describes the topography of Cork as “complicated and rich, elusive but full of life”.

Nick’s own patterns of writing could be described in much the same way, for his words are not just confined to art historical publications and literary journalism. He is also an award-winning biographer and author of fourteen books, with one on the way. In December 2014, the writer John Banville selected his favourite three books of the year. He honoured the poet Robin Robertson, the novelist Richard Ford, and Nick’s *Balthus: A Biography*, surmising:

*“Fox Weber here gives a comprehensive, coolly perceptive and sympathetic portrait of this controversial but undeniably great Polish-French modern artist. A marvellous book.”*

Nick is indeed something of a writer’s writer but perhaps nowhere more so than in his own home – whether that is in Bethany, Connecticut, Paris, France or Glandore, Co. Cork – which he shares with another distinguished author - his beloved wife Katharine, who currently holds the Richard L. Thomas Chair in Creative Writing at Kenyon College and who regrettably is unable to travel

due to her own academic commitments. His eldest daughter Lucy, works with him in the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, and continues not just the Weber dedication to the work of these artists, but also to the creative kindling of ideas that brings their art to life. She has recently embarked on partnerships that have imaginatively extended the designs of both Josef and Anni into luxury fashion labels, high street shops, and online retail. Nick's younger daughter Charlotte, a trained psychotherapist, embodies another Weber family trait – the strong desire to reach out to people and make the world a better place. Of course, Charlotte has also done this by marrying a Cork man, Robbie Smith, and the arrival of their son, Wilder has brought Nick and Katharine the joy of a new generation and turned those West Cork ties into family bonds.

Nick met the Alberses in 1971 and he has been responsible for their Foundation for almost 40 years. What differentiates Nick from other cultural custodians is his commitment to ensuring that the legacy of Josef and Anni Albers is not just conserved and made available for scholars, but that it is a legacy, which is actively articulated through a unique range of experimental, and inspiring programmes. Nick's vision is supported by a remarkable group of people - his team at the Foundation - who embody the Bauhaus spirit of learning by doing. In 1999, Nick established a dedicated studio programme that has given international artists an opportunity to travel to the beautiful woodland site where the Foundation is based, and to spend time in an environment imbued with the Albers's purposeful making. Irish artists selected for this residency - including Nick Miller, Diana Copperwhite, Anita Groener, Donald Teskey and Ronnie Hughes - speak of the transformative experience of being at the Foundation.

Nick regularly receives and accepts invitations to speak all around the world – even a cursory glance at his itinerary is exhausting - but as well as erudite lectures at prestigious institutions such as the Reina Sofia Madrid, the Morgan Library in New York, and the Barbican in London, he has steadfastly sought to

share his passion for art with outlier communities, such as inmates in Bollate prison Milan, and the residents of remote villages in rural Senegal.

For we acknowledge Nicholas Fox Weber today not just as a curator and writer, but also as an extraordinary philanthropist who has dedicated his life to sharing financial as well as cultural riches. In 2005, he established the AFLK foundation, a charitable organisation that:

“empowers dedicated professionals in sub-Saharan Africa to continue their life-altering work. The AFLK Foundation provides the means for doctors and teachers to excel. It enables young children to attend school, and it provides vital scholarship funds at the university level. AFLK encourages a revival of traditional art forms while introducing different creative approaches.”

Never content to rest on these already exceptional achievements, Nick pioneered a major cultural initiative in the region that culminated this year, in the creation of a new art centre in the small Senegalese village, Sinthian. Constructing walls in Senegal is perhaps even more tricky than in Cork, but Nick resolutely engaged the renowned architect Tashiko Mori who worked pro-bono along with Jordan MacTavish, to design a space using local materials such as dried grass, mud bricks and bamboo. Today is World Environment Day when we here at UCC proudly fly our Green Flag and so it seems appropriate to note that this art centre is more than a creative community place, but a building that doubles as a sophisticated water-collection system, a valuable resource in an arid climate. With Nick, culture is life-changing and life-sustaining. It makes sense that Nick would name this new centre Thread linking it back to Anni’s loom in Connecticut, and the glorious idea that as Nick himself put it, “we can go anywhere from anywhere’.

Nick’s adventures and achievements have criss-crossed threads around the globe, weaving ideas of art, architecture and culture around our shared humanity. We are fortunate in University College Cork to be part of this rich tapestry, and it is currently our privilege to exhibit the textiles of Anni Albers.

Her mesmerising materials float down from the gallery ceiling, unfurled far away from their Bethany home, enchanting viewers at every turn.

Three years ago, when that West Cork builder's wall was complete, we hung on it the 1976 Homage to the Square, Josef's final painting and it was wonderful to see our audiences basking in what has been described as the radiant stillness of the work. The writer Colm Toibin, observed, "the colours move in lovely conflict and sometimes fierce contrast and sometimes easy harmony. They throw light on each other"

Today, we throw light on Nick. On his ability to build walls where required, and then ensure that they hum with the energy of art and life...

**Praehonorabilis Cancellarie, totaque Universitas!**

**Praesento vobis hunc meum filium, quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in Litteris, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo totique Academiae.**