

**OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN  
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND**

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

**PROFESSOR SARAH GLENNIE**, on 9 October 2019 in the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*, on **MS ABIGAIL O'BRIEN**

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

As someone involved in the visual arts in Ireland for over twenty-years I commend the National University of Ireland for their commitment to celebrating the important work of our leading visual artists by awarding the degree of Doctor of Fine Art, and it is my privilege Chancellor to present to you Abigail O'Brien one of Ireland's leading artists with a long established and extensive national and international reputation.

Abigail O'Brien's list of achievements within the visual arts are extensive with work included in the collections of The Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, The Caldic Collection, Rotterdam, The Museum of Modern Art, Vienna, The Gemeentemuseum, The Netherlands and Centro Nacional des Artes, Mexico and solo exhibitions in institutions across Ireland including the Royal Hibernian Academy and Highlanes Gallery, and internationally in major international galleries including the Haus Der Kunst Munich.

This is all very easy to say but much harder to achieve. As with all creative practice, success and recognition is hard won by visual artists. We have a rich well of creative talent working in the country but a small infrastructure of galleries, collectors and museums able to platform and support this work, and the gaze of the international art world does not always look to Ireland without a lot of prompting. It is testament to the strength of Abigail's work that a major piece was bought by the Irish Museum of Modern Art in 1996, two years before her graduation from NCAD with an MA in painting in 1998. This is almost unheard of.

In 1996 I was an assistant curator at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, only in Ireland for a matter of months, and I remember the excitement within the museum about Abigail's body of work *Seven Sacraments*, begun in NCAD and continued until 2005, a body of work which reframed the rituals of the church within a secular exploration of the rites of passage that shape all of our lived experience, bringing into the realm

of art the often over-looked details of the domestic realm that tell us so much about the rituals and traditions that shape our contemporary life. Like many contemporary artists Abigail uses many media in her work through which to explore her ideas - photography, sculpture, video, sound and hand-embroidered objects. However, it is not just the visual sophistication with which Abigail approaches her work that has earned her the recognition she has continued to receive for the significant body of work she has gone on to develop since bursting out of NCAD as powerful force to be reckoned with – like all good art, her work resonates with audiences because of the space it creates for us to reflect on ourselves, on how we live, asking us to look again at the small details of our day to day life that we take for granted – and through that reflection to perhaps come to a different understanding of ourselves and the world around us, a reset through which we might begin look at things differently. This potential - is a very powerful thing and something that is critically needed now in our society as we feel the consequences of group think. This is why it is so critically important that we in Ireland support our artists to not just survive, but thrive.

Abigail O'Brien's importance as an artist extends beyond her own practice to the active role she has played in shaping the art world for artists of the future.

In 2017 Abigail was appointed the first female President of the RHA, an appointment that marked the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of Ireland's most important visual arts organisations, an organisation that until that point, like many, had been consistently led by men. I was struck in an interview in the Sunday Times at the time of this appointment by Abigail's honesty in admitting that this was not initially an position that appealed to her, but her acceptance came from a recognition that if you want to see change, you have to take personal responsibility to create it. As President she has been active in ensuring the RHA is an organisation that holds equality of access and visibility at its core – and that this isn't just about balancing the numbers, but a much deeper acknowledgement of the need for different perspectives to be represented through exhibition – to paraphrase her from the aforementioned interview – it is time to move on from the dominance of the female nude bronze. This vision and her work as an artist who has brought into the spotlight the female lived experience - an experience historically denigrated as linked to the domestic, and as such an unworthy subject for the lofty realms of art – lead us today to recognise Abigail O'Brien as both an artist of significant importance – but also as a powerful driver of the change that means that the many young women currently studying at NCAD see no reason why their strong,

independent and inspiring voices should not be heard, and that is a very exciting prospect for the future.

I have the honour of presenting Abigail O'Brien for the award of Doctor of Fine Arts.

**PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:**

**Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam, quam scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneam esse quae admittatur, *honoris causa*, ad gradum Doctoratus in Artibus Optimis idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.**