



Celebrating 30 years of South Tipperary Arts Centre

curated by Helena Tobin

18 April - 20 June 2026

Thirty Years of an Arts Centre and its Community

It's April 2026 and the South Tipperary Arts Centre (STAC) is doing two things. It is celebrating its 30th Birthday, having been launched on this spot in April 1996 and it is asking the question; 'What is an Arts Centre anyway?' It's a quizzical conceptual juxtaposition. We might assume that after three decades you wouldn't need to question your role. But it is precisely the posing of this question at this time in its history that makes STAC so important, not just for the local area but for arts centres everywhere. Does it suggest uncertainty, and vulnerability when what is expected is a bit of bombastic assertion? Absolutely not, STAC is an arts centre and the role of an arts centre, like the role of art itself, is to question its *raison d'être* in every generation, every context and in every decade, because time, like the arts and the communities they serve, do not stand still. The juxtaposition is important for other reasons too. It takes courage to ask the question. STAC has both courage and the experience to invite community responses in deciding what is art and who is it for. In doing so it shows a level of self-awareness and leadership that goes far beyond its modest presence.

Step inside this birthday exhibition and the questions pile up. What are we to make of Aideen Barry's *Monochopsis* drawings of innocuous objects imbued, by her, with terrifying possibilities. Their pleasant pastel clarity and unpretentious placement spell out normality, just until the moment when they don't. Austin McQuinn offers equally unnerving, smiling porcelain figures, presented against kinetic backgrounds calculated to drive your anxiety levels sky high. Drawn from the characters in Gaetano Donizetti's tragic opera, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, (1835) the outcome cannot be straightforward. Patricia Hurl, first shown in STAC as part of Na Cailleacha's exhibition there in 2021, shows one of her warrior women self-portraits alongside *Exploding Head*, an inescapable if also comic look at an embattled human psyche. Ursula Burke's, bruised head, in fragile white porcelain, speaks of trauma and vulnerability, while her loyalty to the classical tradition reminds us how precarious our hold on stability is in every age. Animality, nature and feminism all come together in photographic self-portraits by Alice Maher, from the collection of the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA). Little did STAC realise when it first showed Maher back in 1998 and 2003 that she would be one of the artists invited to participate in the main exhibition at the 61st Venice Biennale, chosen by the curator as distinct from the national official representation. The surreal element that is such a constant in the work of Barry, Burke, McQuinn and Maher appears again in a

very different form in the work of local artist, Sheenagh Geoghegan. Geoghegan's sympathetic painting *Teacher/Creature* challenges conventional assumptions about human and animal nature while her practice interrogates painting and sculpture. In doing so, it prepares the way for Bridget O'Gorman's exploration of our relationship to space, place, the built environment and the gallery. Understated in their multi-disciplinary practices Geoghegan and O'Gorman playfully deploy materials with a confidence that was anticipated in the revolutionary work of Clonmel native, John Burke (1946 – 2006) when as a young artist he single-handedly turned traditional public sculpture in Ireland on its head through his use of spray-painted steel to undermine the elitism of monumental bronzes. Burke may be dead now but his legacy lives around the world as his former students take his iconoclastic attitudes to public art wherever they go.

All eight artists, have connections with County Tipperary, either as natives or now living here; seven of them have shown here in the past, making it appropriate that they be included in this celebration, or in the case of Bridget O'Gorman, will participate in another exhibition within the year that examines the part played by the architecture of the centre on art and audiences. They all bring their formidable international reputations and experiences with them to STAC, showing how far the gallery and the centre have come since its early days. But Clonmel has always had artistic ambitions and achievements. Maybe this owes something to its history, to the fact that Laurence Sterne, author of *Tristram Shandy*, was born here in 1713, that the Hungarian composer Franz Liszt gave a piano recital here in 1841 or that Jim Larkin founded the Irish Labour Party here 1912 and that the Women Artists' Action Group' (WAAG) was founded here in 1987. But apart from WAAG, that was all water under the bridge by the time that a new generation of art lovers funnelled their civic spirit into setting up South Tipperary Fine Arts Club (STFAC) in April 1940 and founding a visual arts collection for their town. Clonmel, in the 1940s took on this role for the county and in doing so, gave the town status alongside Kilkenny, Waterford, Limerick and Drogheda as centres of connoisseurship and vision. The work they bought was cutting edge for its time, providing a much-needed antidote to the conservatism of the Royal Hibernian Academy, offering patronage for artists at a time when there was no Arts Council and no national institutions collecting contemporary art. Sadly that energy faded in the 1950s and more water flowed under the beautiful bridges of Clonmel, reflecting emigration, unemployment and factory closures before that civic pride could again assert itself.

In the mid-1980s the Arts Council and Local Authorities across the country, worked to

establish a presence for the arts outside Dublin, initially through the appointment of a designated arts office in each local authority area, to be accompanied by the establishment of arts centres, jointly funded, which would provide physical hubs for creative expression. The plan was ambitious, and heavily dependent on resources, challenging in the pre-Celtic Tiger days of the late 1980s and early '90s, requiring physical spaces, staff to manage them and budgets for programming. The South Tipperary Arts Centre, (STAC) led by a young Siobhan Mulcahy as the committed and ambitious artistic director (1996–1999), opened in the former CIE Bus station in Nelson Street, later headquarters of the Clonmel Credit Union, and understood by everyone as a symbolically significant, but temporary location. The building was much loved, not only for its 1940s architecture, but for all its outstanding community associations. It offered little accommodation for the expectations of the art forms that flourished in County Tipperary then; too small to support itself through ticketed events, which had to be catered for elsewhere. Foregrounded for the visual arts instead, it was limited in terms of space, storage and technical infrastructure.

That STAC is still in the same location thirty years later is testimony to the inspired work of various programmers who have made a virtue of the bus station's physical limitations through imaginative curation. In doing so they have overcome challenges that would have seen off many. Its history to date throws up issues that go far beyond Clonmel in terms of support for the arts in rural Ireland. The Swedish curator, Maria Lind; outlined challenges in relation to a major international museum in 2004 when she asked; "How do you use the support of an institution and still have space for production and circulation in an experimental and flexible way?... How do you circulate ideas and artistic projects establishing an exchange among people from different economic, political, and cultural contexts on an equal level? (Lind, *Curating Now*, IMMA, 2004, p 30). STAC was an institution defining itself in a place where no such provision had previously existed, with all the physical limitations of the architecture and over its first two decades, an economy that fluctuated from the intoxication of the Celtic Tiger years to an international banking crisis, closely followed by the disastrous loss of its Arts Council Funding in 2010/11.

The story of its survival is the story of a community determined not to lose its arts centre. Clonmel is the largest town in County Tipperary and close to bigger centres in Waterford and Kilkenny, both of which delivered well-established culture programmes. In the straightened years following the banking crisis, the Arts Council gave its funding for the county to other towns in North Tipperary - Thurles, Nenagh and Tipperary - to provide much needed arts provision in those places. Once the money went elsewhere it could not be returned.

The people of Clonmel rushed to the rescue. A team of volunteers, headed by a local painter, Maureen Purcell, and a dedicated committee of amateur artists and art lovers, many associated with STAG, the South Tipperary Art Group, ran the centre for six years, providing exhibitions and art classes. They cleared outstanding debts, kept the doors open and the centre debt free through intensive classes, exhibition sales and fund-raising events. Much loved and appreciated as they were, the increasing demand for professionalism in the arts all over Ireland led to demands for a more cutting-edge hub of arts practice and debate. Loughlin Kealy, former head of the School of Architecture in UCD, STAG member and Chairman of the board of STAC (2018 - 2023) instituted a programme of renewal in 2014, that led to public meetings, questionnaires, interviews with stakeholders, school groups, students, and research that drew support from a new generation of Clonmel locals. Among these were two local artists, Eimear King, whose untimely death at the age of 46 deprived STAC of one of its most dedicated supporters, and Sheenagh Geoghegan, both of whom understood how vital a fully staffed and funded, professionalised centre with exhibition space and audiences was for their generation. By 2017, Cliona Maher recently returned from France, was appointed artistic director (2017–19), followed by current director Helena Tobin although limited resources only permitted part-time appointments. In 2019 Eimear King initiated a series of broadcasts on local radio and went on to record interviews with artists showing in the Centre. Her much-loved STAC Podcast (2019-2024) now forms an important part of STAC's archive. Other part-time staff were recruited through state-supported employment schemes.

Connections with the former head of Collections at IMMA led to programming that drew on the IMMA and Arts Council's collections while keeping costs to a minimum yet simultaneously enabling STAC to show artists who had become national household names such as Alice Maher, Patricia Hurl, and John Burke (all of whom are in this exhibition) as well as Janet Mullarney, Pauline Cummins, Frances Mezzetti, Alanna O'Kelly and Kathy Prendergast. Cliona Maher linked STAC to the music festival Finding a Voice and restored a deep connection to Clonmel's Junction Arts Festival. The centre reached out to other art forms too and established a Tipperary focused residency in partnership with Tipperary Arts Office that attracted writers such as Grace Wells and artists such as Mollie Anna King, Leah Corbett, John Kennedy, Annie Hogg, Sophie Behal, The Project Twins and, most recently, Zoe Velthuysen. By the time Loughlin Kealy handed over the role of Chairperson to James Reilly in 2023, and despite the pandemic crisis of 2020-22 and the death of Eimear King in 2024, things were re-established on a firmer footing, with Arts Council Arts Grant Funding for programming (secured from 2021) beginning to creep up in response to responsible governance and imaginative curation. Tipperary County Council which has always

supported the Centre, thanks to some dedicated councillors over the years, rewarded the re-vitalised STAC with a completely new challenge. The Council offered much needed space, in the form of the old military Chapel in the former Kickham Barracks compound to STAC for arts use. Although still subject to refurbishment, STAC Chapel, as it is now known, has already been drawn into service. In 2024 it hosted a twenty-four-hour, uninterrupted live performance by Austin McQuinn and a very valuable symposium about the achievements of WAAG in 2025. STAC effectively, stretches its tiny staff and resources to programme this additional space. For 2026 a programme of STAC Residencies and STAC Talks, paralleling the main exhibitions, will take place in STAC Chapel, emphasising it as a space for ideas, development and experimentation, as well as STAC's ongoing partnerships with Clonmel Junction Arts Festival, Tipperary Dance and Finding a Voice. The level of commitment and achievement here can be gauged by invitations to tour the WAAG exhibition and symposium to other venues. As further proof of STAC's achievements, Helena Tobin was invited to participate in ICI's (Independent Curators International) International Curatorial Exchange at EXPO Chicago in 2024, in partnership with Askeaton Contemporary Arts.

All of the eight artists showing in this exhibition are represented in important public collections from which this collection of 17 artworks is drawn. Here they represent the multiplicity of practices and achievements that are to be found all over County Tipperary. Their connections with STAC since 1996 may have helped to set them on their way. What is clear now is that their current success will help new generations of artists and art lovers to explore their own place in the world of art with greater confidence. We can proudly say now, as Patrick Kavanagh called on Irish people everywhere to do, that we can be proud of the parish and its achievements and in doing so, we will not have to worry about being provincial. For this we have to thank the County Council, Melanie Scott and her colleagues in the County Tipperary Arts Office, all those voluntary board members, directors, staff, and volunteers who have given such dedicated support over the last three decades. The celebratory programme for the coming year will show how their contributions have put STAC on the culture map, not just of the county but of the whole country. To finish with the overriding question that Director Helena Tobin poses 'What is an arts centre anyway?' we can answer that it, like the wonderful artists in this show, tunes its antennae to the burning questions that we all face and through its arts programmes, will help us to find, if not answers to them all, a valuable and inclusive means to deal with them.

Catherine Marshall

Curator, Board member. Consultant to the regeneration process (2014-17)

Catherine Marshall

Catherine Marshall is a curator and art historian. She lectured in art history at Trinity College Dublin, the National College of Art and Design and University College Dublin. As founding head of collections at the Irish Museum of Modern Art she curated exhibitions of outsider art from the Musgrave Kinley Collection, exhibitions of Irish art in China, USA and the UK and throughout Ireland with the IMMA National Programme, and was curator to *The Engagement Project*, which brought together artists from KCAT (Kilkenny Collective for Arts Talent), Callan, with artists from widely differing mainstream practices for a series of exhibitions 2013-21. She co-edited *Art and Architecture of Ireland*, vol. 5, Twentieth century (2014) and *Janet Mullarney* (2019). She is an active member of Na Cailleacha ([Na Cailleacha.weebly.com](http://NaCailleacha.weebly.com)) and in 2024 was curator of *The School of Hibernia* (after Raphael) at Trinity College, Dublin. In 2019 she was recipient of the first honorary doctorate in the History of Art from University College Dublin.

Aideen Barry

Aideen Barry is an Irish visual artist whose diverse international practice spans filmmaking, performance, sculpture, installation, experimental lens-based media, drawing, and sound. Her work employs visual trickery to create a heightened suspension of reality, often exploring themes centred on sinister systems and social critique. Barry's collaborative and intersectional approach has led her to work with a broad spectrum of creatives. She engages with artists, historians, scientists, and activists to produce large-scale interventionist artworks that transcend conventional visual and pop culture with an attempt to democratise the access to visual culture and art linguistics. One of her most notable projects includes the feature film **Klostès**, created in collaboration with nearly a thousand Lithuanian citizens, which is now part of the National Collection at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) and contributed to Kaunas earning UNESCO World Heritage status. Barry's work has been exhibited globally at prestigious venues such as the Bangkok Art Biennial, BFI London, Salzburg Kunstverein, CAC Málaga, NASA Kennedy Space Center, and the Banff Centre in \Canada, among many others. A member of Aosdána and the Royal Hibernian Academy, her art is held in major public and private collections worldwide. Barry is originally from Cork but lives with her children in the Silvermines in North Tipperary.

John Burke

Born in Clonmel, Co. Tipperary, in 1946, John Burke studied at the Crawford School of Art in Cork, and in London with Brian Kneal.

He has shown sculptures in all the major Irish group exhibitions, as well as international shows like *Artists 77*, New York (1977); *18 European Sculptors*, Munich (1978); *Sculpture Européenne*, Brussels (1979); *A Sense of Ireland*, London (1980); and *C.A.N.*, Cork (1985), where he won the sculptor prize. He has held solo shows at Trinity College, Dublin; the Ulster Museum, Belfast; the David Hendriks Gallery, Dublin; and an open-air show in Cork city. He won the Cork Arts Society Award (1967), a Macaulay Fellowship (1970), and the Alice Hammerschlag Travel Award (1979).

Instrumental in defining sculptural practice in Ireland during the 1970s, he juxtaposed simple geometric shapes to form abstract compositions, and employed colour to soften and disguise unwanted elements of the metal. Burke taught at the Crawford School of Art and counted among his pupils Eilis O'Connell, Vivienne Roche, Maud Cotter and Jim Buckley. He is a member of Aosdána.

Ursula Burke

Ursula Burke is an Irish artist who grew up in the Republic of Ireland and later lived in post-conflict Northern Ireland. She uses this experience as a starting point to develop a dynamic practice that reflects on aesthetics and ethics of different cultures.

Incorporating porcelain sculpture, soft sculpture, embroidery sculpture and drawing, her practice investigates identity politics of historical and colonial eras, from tradition to modernity, creating a conceptual bridge between antiquity and the contemporary, mining art historical tropes of representation and display. Mediated through craft-based processes re-configured in a fine art context, her approach destabilises conventions using unexpected juxtapositions of materials, processes and images with a desire that bends towards the surreal.

In 2024/25 she undertook a Highlanes Gallery National Tour titled Siren with partners The Butler Gallery and Wexford Arts Centre, she was awarded a Dwell Here artist residency in IMMA, and she received a Building as Witness commission by the Crawford Art Gallery. Her work was included in *Self Determination* (2024) and *The Narrow Gate of the Here and Now* (2022) exhibitions in IMMA. In 2022, she had a major solo exhibition with Visual, Carlow titled Supplicants. She was awarded a Markievicz Award from the Arts Council of Ireland and the Decade of Centenaries in 2021. Her work is part of national and international collections.

Patricia Hurl

Patricia Hurl (b. Dublin, lives Co. Tipperary), is a former member of Temple Bar Galleries and Studios, Dublin and often works in collaboration with artist Therry Rudin. Hurl was a lecturer in Fine Art Painting at the Dublin Institute of Technology and studied at the National College of Art and Design (1975) and at Dún Laoghaire School of Art and Design (1984). Hurl co-founded the Damer House Gallery in Co Tipperary with artist Therry Rudin in 2012. Hurl is also a member of the artists collective Na Cailleach.

Hurl has exhibited widely in selected group and solo shows such as *Who Will Write the History of Tears?* (Museum of Modern Art Warsaw, 2022); *The Narrow Gate of the Here and Now: IMMA 30 Years of the Global Contemporary: and Queer Embodiment* (IMMA, 2021 – 2022). She has represented Ireland in international symposiums and was also a contributor to 'The Great Book of Ireland'. Her work is included in the publication 'Art and Architecture of Ireland Volume V: Twentieth Century', Royal Irish Academy (2015). Hurl's work is represented in private and public collections including IMMA; The Arts Council / An Chomhairle Ealaíon; the Highlanes Gallery and the Collection of University of Limerick. She was awarded the Pollock Krasner Artist award in 2023.

Sheenagh Geoghegan

Sheenagh Geoghegan completed her MFA at The Slade School of Art, London (2013) where she was awarded the Stanford Scholarship, The Orpen Award and The Charles Heath Hayward Award.

She has exhibited widely in Europe and America including Cornell University, New York, Alma Zevi in Venice, and the Leila Heller Gallery, New York.

She has participated in the *Colour and Poetry Symposium* at The Slade School of Art, University College London in 2024, 2025 & 2026.

Recent solo exhibitions include *Atelier Concorde* in Lisbon in 2023 supported by Culture Ireland, Camera Cluj, Cluj Romania in 2024 and Limerick City Gallery in 2025.

Recent awards include The Galway Arts Centre Bursary Award and The Tipperary Artist Award.

Alice Maher

Alice Maher's work touches on a wide range of subjects often reprising, challenging and expanding mythic and vernacular narratives. She is recognised for her experimental use of non-traditional materials, for her explorations of embodiment and identity, and her incorporation of a range of literary, historical and folkloric subject matter in a multi-various practice that spans drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, and moving image.

Her first major solo show was at the Douglas Hyde Gallery Dublin in 1994. That same year she represented Ireland at the Sao Paolo Biennial. She has had solo shows at the Brighton & Hove Museum, the Djanogly Art Centre Nottingham, Purdy Hicks Gallery London, David Nolan Gallery New York, Green on Red Gallery Dublin, Crawford Gallery Cork, Butler Gallery Kilkenny, RHA Dublin, Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, and many more. She has made numerous collaborative works in theatre, dance, film and social activism and was recognised with an honorary doctorate in Fine Art in 2013. Her work can be seen in numerous international collections and has been selected for inclusion in the 61st International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia 2026: *In Minor Keys*, curated by Koyo Kouoh.

Alice Maher is represented by Kevin Kavanagh Gallery Dublin, Purdy Hicks Gallery London, and David Nolan Gallery New York. She is a member of Aosdána.

Austin McQuinn

Austin McQuinn's (b.1967, Co.Kerry) recent solo exhibition, *Mountains, Fall On Us*, at Limerick City Gallery of Art (LCGA) (2024) amalgamated new paintings with live art performance and sculpture in a series of ambitious installations across the four main galleries at LCGA and followed with a full-colour Publication. His practice is defined by these deeply researched bodies of work creating solo exhibitions; in Project, Dublin; in Butler Gallery, Kilkenny Castle: David Cunningham Projects (DCP), San Francisco: and, more recently, at The Source, Thurles and South Tipperary Arts Centre (STAC) in Tipperary, where he lives and works. For STAC Chapel, he manifested a 24hr live art event curated by Helena Tobin. His doctoral expertise in live art practice and critique is expressed in his book, *Becoming Audible*, on sound, animality and performance, reissued in paperback this year by Penn State University Press.

Bridget O'Gorman

Bridget O'Gorman (she/her) is an artist and writer working with text, live event, video and sculpture. Her career includes group and solo exhibitions and her works are held in public collections including the Butler Gallery, OPW and The Arts Council of Ireland. Recent projects include *The Skin Reads the Room*, Douglas Hyde Gallery of Contemporary Art, IE, 2025, *Supernatural Bread*, Project Arts Centre, IE, 2022, *On Slowness*, Auto Italia UK 2021, *The Legacy of Gesture*, FACT & DaDa Fest UK, 2019. Over the past five years she has been supported in disability-led research by Arts Council England, A-N, and the Arts Council of Ireland. She is a portfolio artist with field:arts curator and producer, larlaith Ní Fheorais. In 2023 they developed an ambitious new body of sculpture and text entitled *Support / Work* as part of TULCA Festival of Visual Arts, commissioned by Arts & Disability Ireland. In 2026, her collective research project *Deep Time* was funded through an Arts Council of Ireland Project Award and produced as part of the 41st EVA International Platform Commissions, culminating in a publication launch with the Project Arts Centre, IE. She is currently engaged in an ongoing, slow working exchange with The Douglas Hyde Gallery in Dublin, towards a major solo exhibition for 2028.

STAC at 30

18 April - 20 June 2026

Events

Opening reception - 17 April 6-8pm with opening remarks by Alice Maher

STAC Talks -

What is an Arts Centre Anyway? - Saturday 30 May

Free but ticketed - booking essential

For more information visit our website for booking links etc.

Curator Lunchtime Talks

Saturday 2 May - 1pm

Friday 15 May - 1pm

National Drawing Day

Saturday 16 May

Programme Overview

4 July - 1 Aug - The Blackened Circle - *Prototype for a Monument*

The result of a nine-month socially engaged project by Seamus Nolan in collaboration with members of the Clonmel Traveller community, continuing STAC's development and support of socially engaged art practices. In partnership with Clonmel Junction Arts Festival and supported by Creative Ireland

12 Sept – 24 Oct - Coracle Press

A small publishing press established in rural South Tipperary in 1996 by writer and artist Erica Van Horn and poet, artist and editor Simon Cutts.

7 Nov – 19 Dec - Eileen Mulrooney

In partnership with KCAT Arts Centre

Mid Jan – late Feb 2027 - Tipperary Artist in Residence 2026

In partnership with Tipperary Arts Office

Mar – April 2027 - Conversing with Architecture

Invited artists respond to the rich architectural history of STAC's buildings.

STAC Residencies & STAC Talks - A programme of residencies and talks, paralleling the main exhibitions, will take place in STAC Chapel throughout the year emphasising it as a space for ideas, development and experimentation.

 SOUTH TIPPERARY
Arts Centre


IMMA ÁRAS NUA-EALÁINE
IRISH MUSEUM OF
MODERN ART

 arts
council
comhairle
ealaíon

funding
the arts

 arts
council
comhairle
ealaíon

Bailiúchán an Chomhairle Ealaíon
Arts Council Collection

 Comhairle Contae Thiobraid Árann
Tipperary County Council

 DAILEAGARÁI CHATHAIRÍ LIMERICK
LGA
LIMERICK CITY GALLERY OF ART

