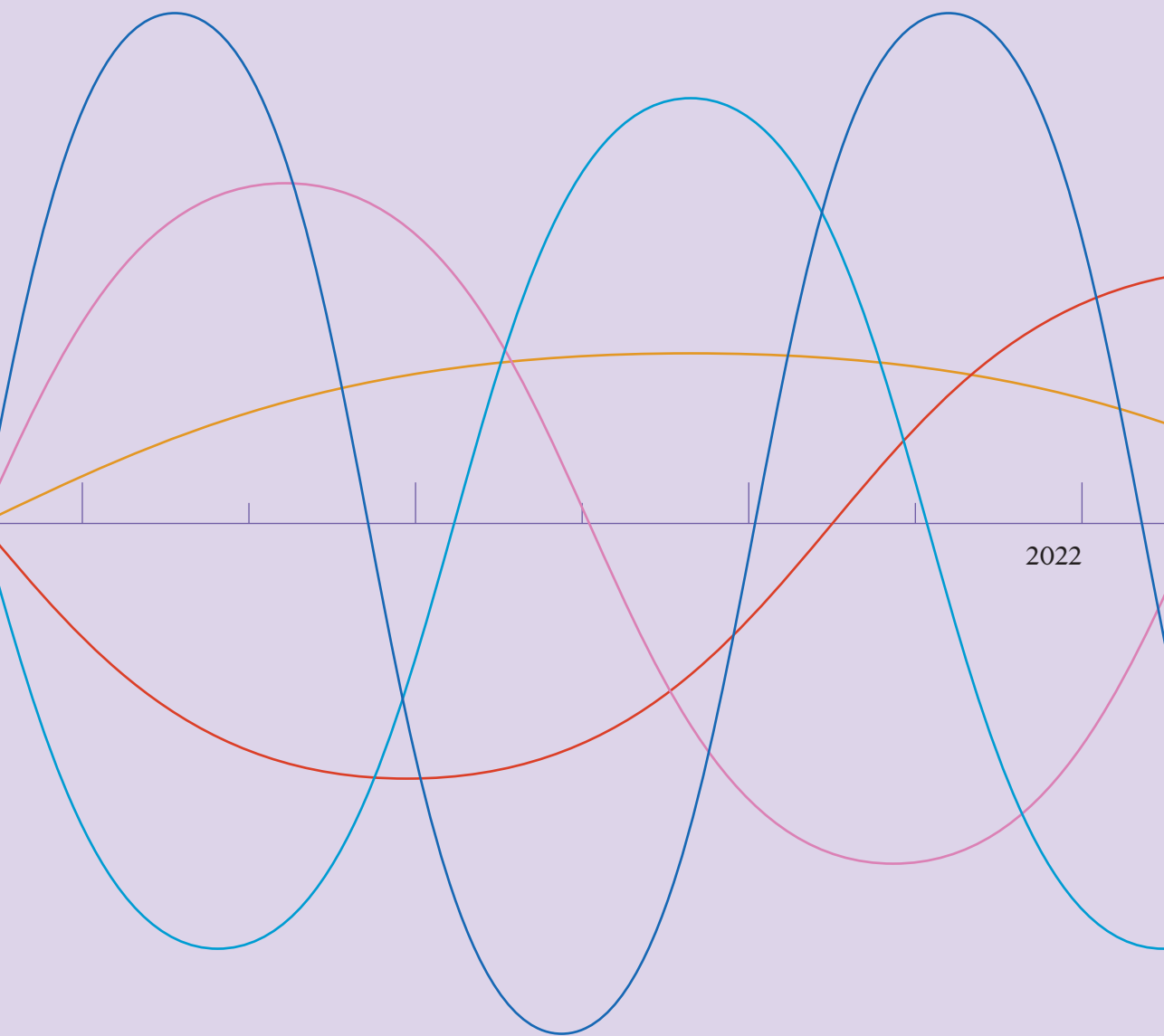
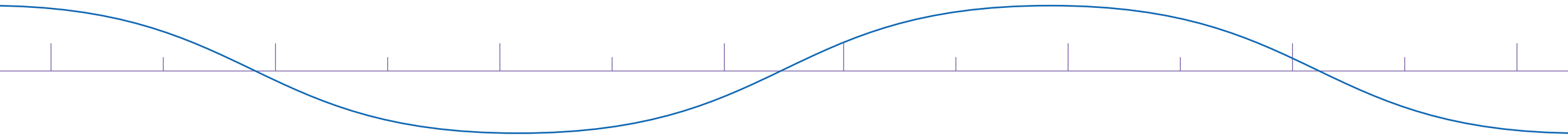


# Critical Voices

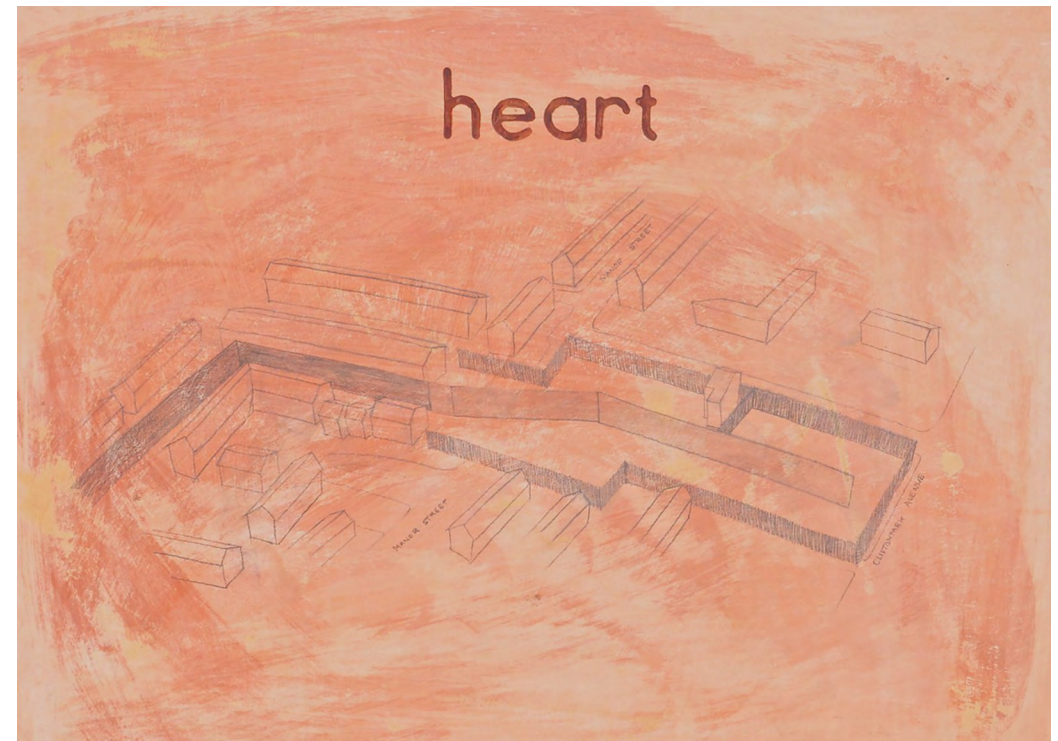
## *Guthanna Criticiúla*





## Portrait of the Artist as a Belfast Woman

My Belfast is a red brick place, with clay-baked walls that change complexion, blushing after a shower. Fear was our neighbour who lived on the same street, with the friendly hand of a daylight greeting, capable, we knew, of who-knows-what in the darkness. Uncertainty and mistrust were carried on the air, sprouting like dandelions in the cracks. A knock at the front door after dark had to be checked – Brindsley Mac Namara's net curtains in the front room took on an urgent Belfast squinting. The shape of a body through lattice, and the quick, silent, visual decoding offered reassurance, discrete and obliging. Catholic father and southern mother was a double hazard.



Territory

I knew an English landscape architect that was employed in the eighties by the Housing Executive to 'normalise' the Belfast streets interrupted by peace lines. A palimpsest of new planting, manageable shrubs skirted peace walls that scraped the sky. His only design brief was 'no right angles for sniper shelter'.

From the maps he gave me, I made a series of graphite drawings on terracotta panels. Seamus Heaney kindly gave me his permission to use his poem, 'Act of Union', and the work *Territory* was created. Streets of red brick houses mirrored by walls, a Belfast fresco in shades of flesh like a cosmetic display of eyeshadow and lipstick colours in curb-stone warnings. A slow carnival of colonial division, unhealthy half-lived lives, collapsing wearily to the heartbeat echo of a bigot's war drum and the narcissism of small difference.



Geansai

Summer holidays were an escape from 'marching season' and my mother knitted ferociously in woolly defiance. Her looming deadline was our annual family holiday down south. One year after considerable industry she produced, right on time for our 11th of July exodus, six aran sweaters. Ivory, white-cabled *Geansai* that reeled us back to where we belonged. A permissible, and unmissable, feminist act of cultural construct, under the neighbours' gaze. I cringe to think how we looked in full Clancy Brothers regalia, marching out and clambering into the packed car.

My father built airplanes that magically landed on water. He told stories that put pictures in my head, and later, I came to realise that these stories were true. One such tale was of his personal eyewitness account, from the time of partition when people on the Lower Falls collectively set fire to their chimneys. Huge clouds of dark smoke protested and signalled distress to Dublin. A scabby old stray dog was caught, daubed with red and blue paint, then chased up the Falls end of the street. Caught again, green and orange paint were added and the unfortunate creature was chased back towards the Shankill end of the street. A confused victim wheezing through a riot of smoke and conflicting colour, trapped in a cruel parallel universe – the Belfast Rainbow Dog.

The Ulster Museum was our weekend playground. One day in the late sixties, on my way home from primary school, I discovered George McClelland's Alfred Street Gallery. I boldly pushed open the glass door and walked into a world of pictures. School bag on my back, I went around the gallery looking at paintings: Gerald Dillon, Colin Middleton, Dan O'Neill – windows into a different world, colour and figures that danced in my imagination. Those windows opened and have never closed. They provided oxygen and allowed me to breathe my own fresh air.

Feeling safe was not my familiar; I lived in constant vigilance. As a natural observer, I was quick to get the measure of situations, and in Belfast it was important to know in which direction to jump. Afterwards, recollecting the images safely in the quiet of my head, trying to figure out what just happened, I determined that there was relevance in addressing what I heard and saw as Belfast erupted.

My journey from the local to the global is the engine that has propelled my flight. Life in south Belfast had its challenges, but my teenage years and the many bus journeys through 1970s Belfast to St Dominic's on the Falls Road, was education in a war zone. In the streets of West Belfast, the clocks ticked a very special time and place. Impressionable



Dessert

and young, I was opening my eyes to a bigger world, and no explanation, no mix of words or music or memories could touch that sense of knowing that you were there, that you were alive in this corner of the world and part of something changing, whatever it meant. There was madness in every direction and at any hour sparks might strike. And they did.

*Dessert* became an artwork cast in chocolate, first exhibited at the ICA in London, and the viewers were intoxicated by the olfactory effects of its substance. I had persuaded the headmistress of St Dominic's to grant me access to its study hall as a venue for the work during the West Belfast Festival. Here, *Dessert* lay silent and funereal in a Victorian museum cabinet, its viewers whispering that they could read the serial number. Then, from somewhere in my memory came an image. That same wax polished wooden interior opened onto a winter's morning, with girls arriving into school from Andersonstown, having found a Kalashnikov on the trimmed lawn. They carried it up the convent steps and Mother Laurentia, taking the weapon by the dangerous end, walked resolutely back

down the stone steps and on to the drive, where she flung it back over the wall.

In the late nineties, there was incessant talk about weapons and the possibility of ceasefires. I began making drawings of guns, gathering information and circling in my thoughts. The domineering fist of violence and the silencing power of weaponry was on a collision course with the age-old romance of resistance and Irish fighting heroes writ large in our history. By 2000, the ceasefires had been secured and a chance conversation with an RUC detective gave me access to real weapons. I was following my intuition with no clear plan; I purchased latex to make a mould, and on my way to cast it bought Brylcreem at a garage shop in a last minute panic, knowing that I would need a release agent. I was shown into a room that displayed the strangest exhibit I have ever experienced, made all the more severe by its authenticity. On display was one of everything that had been used as a weapon in Northern Ireland: a coffee jar bomb, improvised machine guns, a home-made rocket launcher fashioned from a section of grey plastic pipe that had been

tipped at an angle to reveal the shock absorber, and out of it had slid a packet of McVitie's digestive biscuits. A confection of murderous intent, products of the Northern culture of engineering, ingenuity, lateral thinking, invention and improvisation, Cú Chulainn's weaponry of war with surreal domestic twists. Creativity is in us all and we make choices on how we put this energy to work.

I was handed two AK-47s and a policeman sat in the room with me as I worked. I cast my mould and returned the next day to peel back the white rubber with every detail recorded. I thanked them for the assistance and, upon leaving, I spotted an open room, shelved floor to ceiling and packed tight with manilla envelopes. I was told each envelope contained the ballistic report on every shot that had been fired. A chilling installation of microscopic marks on bullet casings as they began their journey, ripping through cartilage, tendon and bone, splintering lives and onwards ricocheting down through families with the pain and the poison of war.

One school friend, whose brother was serving 15 years for blowing up a car showroom, sat in the same classroom as another whose father, a Catholic judge, was shot dead one morning as his car slowed to drop her and her sister off at the school gate. We shared a classroom with the ringing of occasional sounds of gunfire: shots fired at the fortified walls of the adjacent Springfield Road RUC police barracks. 'Come away from the windows girls', followed by a shuffling of desks and chairs. 'Those boys won't sit your exams for you.'

The plan was to fly high over the small streets and the mappings of prejudice and division. Art education allowed me that passage, and gave me access to the 'super-highway' as described by the Surrealists, an energy that hears the heart's plea and, tracing the globe, takes you anywhere you care to visit from right where you are. Lived experience fed into my work, and I've learned to trust the impulse, discovering



Rise Up Baking Soda from The Souvenir Shop

later that the deeper connections, formed by witnessing the manifestation of an event that folded carefully into my subconscious, transformed and revealed.

We were at school not just to learn. We were there as covert operators to do justice, rise up and overcome the violence of imperialism, bigotry, strange handshakes and the subtle determinations of surnames. Education sets you free – not violence. My mother once told me she had applied for a part-time job at Queen's University's Staff Common Room. It was the late sixties, and to have any chance at getting the position, she dropped the 'y' off of our name, Duffy, and spelt her first name as Moira rather than Maura. This rearrangement of letters, now spelling 'Moira Duff', indicated Protestant Scottish descent, rather than Catholic Irish. She got the job. Recent election results didn't fall overnight from the sky, they were shaped and imagined by individual stories of personal courage and determination, by peacefully finding the right combination to unlocking the door and then keeping it open for others.

The 2016 *Souvenir Shop* project had its beginnings in the shattered foundations of our local co-op grocery. The shop materialised as a public art project from a memory that had bubbled up to the surface:

'I stepped off the bus from school outside Hamilton's newsagent's one evening in 1973. It was dark, wintertime and dismal, my only thoughts running to what I'd wear when I'd shed my maroon uniform. Such is the inner workings of the 14-year-old mind. Curiously, metal pedestrian barriers lined the Stranmillis Road, securing a flow of teatime travellers in their cars. I walked towards the zebra crossing – rolled out like a huge black and white rug – leading directly to St Ives Gardens. I stood between the belisha beacons, both feet planted carefully on the curb, and gradually the full spectacle of our local grocery shop in rubble came into focus. My senses took flight. I might have been standing on a magic carpet held in a moment of perfect, surreal motionlessness. Tins and boxes littered the rubble, chaotic shapes strewn over the tangle of pipes and what was left of the shop's alarm. What once opened its door miraculously to 129540 – the magic account number – was in tatters. The initial shock gave way to a simple realisation: someone had blown up the co-op at the end of our street, and the contents were disgorged onto the pavement. A sharp energy fled to my legs – was our house still there? Three doors behind a mountain of debris and groceries, I pushed my hand to the upright front door. What had been there when I left for school was no longer. All had changed, utterly..'

When the event is gone, we are left with stories. With a historical event, we not only have to bear witness – that is, tell what happened and address the needs of ghosts – we also have to interpret and conclude so that the needs of people today, they, the children of the ghosts, can be addressed in addition to the knowledge of history. We need the understanding of art, and stories to identify, even unify, to give meaning. Just as a painting makes sense of colour, stories make sense of life.

I made a choice to make art with support from individuals and arts councils, and I have made it my life's work. Right now, just as the most recent surge of the coronavirus pandemic has ebbed, a war has broken out in Europe and our entire planet is in crisis.

Anxieties are piling up, and yet people seem determined to step stubbornly into some semblance of an outdated normalcy. If anything, this spring is a conflicted and bittersweet season and it is now time to consider how we share this island. There are no borders in the Irish imagination. The arts are a vital force in how we recognise ourselves and each other. On the occasion of the Arts Council's 70th anniversary, it might just be the moment for a bold and brave unification of creativity. By bringing the two arts councils into one, and combining our experiences and strengths, we might look forward together and imagine ourselves better – with art at the centre of our lives, reaching into every village and over every ditch of this small territory.

