



as a landscape painter,³ a designation she accepts with caution, distancing herself from any assumption that landscapes are limited to pleasant, consoling blandness. Her work is removed also from the traditional landscape composition comprising a range of typical constituents set within an anthropocentric view or panorama, that is, presented so that viewers can imagine themselves entering into illusionistic space designed to infer human occupation. By contrast, O'Dowd reduces the range of landscape paraphernalia in order to focus on the selected field of interest. Her seascapes often comprise no other element than sea, and as a consequence, the viewer is denied the usual spatial co-ordinates that enable their positioning, and is offered limited clues to either scale or depth of field. The infusion of encaustic with oil paint has often been used to convey an aqueous environment that has both surface and depth, but remains visually ambiguous, at once both intimate and infinite. Such images are consequently seductive, immersive, even contemplative. Her iconic diptych, *Underneath the Waves* (1988) is a seminal example; it was

possibilities of different materials in order to translate direct encounters with the physical world of the landscape environment into convincing two-dimensional images that engage the imagination of the viewer. It takes insight and creativity to repeatedly address a seascape with almost nothing else in sight – other than perhaps a slip of horizon or coastline at the edge – and yet still command attention. In order to convey, on one hand, the mutability and translucence of the

commissioned for the touring Clean Irish Seas exhibition, for Greenpeace, which opened first at the Grapevine Arts Centre. Artists from countries bordering the Irish Sea participated, and their mission was to draw attention to concerns over insidious pollution. O'Dowd was arguably one of the first artists in Ireland, along with Barrie Cooke, to react through her art to ecological imperatives. She did not confine her responses to the sea, but has also addressed land-based events including the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and the toxic oil fires in the Gulf she heard described graphically in the radio broadcasts of Robert Fisk, in turn inspiring her *Fisk's Fires* series in 1991. When Fisk saw for himself O'Dowd's interpretation of the scenes he conveyed, he was moved to acquire one of them for himself.

Movement is a key dimension in Gwen O'Dowd's work, in both the emotional and the physical sense. As someone who spends time by the sea and regularly swims in the elements, she has both a somatic and visceral appreciation of it; she maintains, too, a healthy respect for its sublime power and potential to overwhelm, a dimension often found in her work. Her concern as an artist is to represent the language of its movement, even to inferring sound in the clashes and depths of colour and tone. O'Dowd's *Tonn* (wave) series of 2014–15 for example, reflects the distinctive reverberations where sea meets land. Series titles are often drawn from the Irish language. While she asserts she is not a *Gaeilgeoir*, or Irish speaker, she is drawn to its poetry and the onomatopoeia of relevant terms: *Glór na Mara* (sound of the sea), *Doimhneacht* (the depths), *Cladach* (seashore), *Uaimh* (cave).

Above all, she seeks to convey the abstract emotion of direct experience of encounters rather than to evoke specific places. She has been described as a painter of 'abstract landscapes', a term that may seem contradictory given the tangibility of the physical landscape, and the often emotional or spiritual associations of pure abstraction which dispenses with readable objects. However, the phrase makes sense on observing her interpretations; they are evocative rather than descriptive.

In an era of increasing concerns with the ecological balance and safety of the planet, Gwen O'Dowd's representations of the sea take on a particular resonance. In the last year or two the twin hazards of global warming and of pollution have been highlighted with ever increasing urgency. These are not of course recent phenomena; during O'Dowd's 1989 residency in Banff for example, the shrinking glaciers related to global warming gripped her attention. Responding to frozen expanses and to the revelation of landscapes sculpted by the slow flow of a river of ice led, in turn, to her exploration in the early 1990s of the Grand Canyon in Arizona where the artist explored the aesthetic geology of the deep gorge carved out over aeons by the relentless erosion of the Colorado River in a manner evocative of Georgia O'Keeffe.⁴ Similarly, in the West of Ireland, O'Dowd was prompted to examine the incessant onslaught of ocean on the precipitous cliffs of the Aran Islands and of North Mayo; her images range from the white fan of surf soaring above the cliff edge on impact⁵ to the intimate hollows of the *Uaimh* series which, in particular, provided her with a kind of counterpart to the geologic processes of the Grand Canyon. More recently, her frequent observations of a stretch of beach on the south-east coast present her with contemporary concerns. However sublimely

romantic her imagery, she has remained acutely aware of current issues, both political and ecological.

Recent media exposure of the impact of plastics infesting the oceans is added to the long established anxieties of leakages of toxic waste into the sea and the sky, a context subtly acknowledged in O'Dowd's work. In representing these elements, she reflects the fact that the destruction remains, if largely indiscernible superficially; in Ireland at any rate, the view of the sea and sky continues to appear to be pristine, whatever about the truth of its constituents. However significant the anthropocenic impact on these elements, and man's potentially irreversible incursion into their constituency, they nonetheless retain a power that may be occasionally harnessed, but remains fundamentally beyond human control, as the spate of tsunamis, hurricanes and storm surges in recent times has demonstrated. Post-Modern, contemporary artists are often concerned to confront the catastrophic destruction of environments and the consequences visited in particular on the poor and disenfranchised; a situation translated into a grotesque aesthetic of dystopia.

Where does that leave artists keen to retain and project the romanticism of environments now under threat, artists like Gwen O'Dowd whose images compel rather than dismay? In addressing the primal force of natural phenomena, albeit subjected to hidden degenerative infiltrations with all the fluid ambiguity of their reach, O'Dowd not only addresses what may be irrevocably lost, but more significantly, and positively, what may still remain to be saved. ■

Gwen O'Dowd: 'immerse' The Graphic Studio Gallery, Dublin until 5 December 2017.

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3 PURPLE RAIN
2017 etching
34x25.5cm

4 BROWN RAIN
2017 etching
34x25.5cm

5 TONN I 2017
carborundum
84x117cm

OWD'S PAINTINGS HAVE BEEN NOTABLE FOR THE TEXTURED, SOMETIMES TORTURED, SURFACES THAT EVOKE THE ABRASION OF WEAR WHETHER IN RELATION TO URBAN DECAY OR THE RELENTLESS EROSION OF WATER ON STONE

ocean, and on the other its sheer physical power and presence, O'Dowd has exploited a range of media over the years, combining paint with plaster, glue, clay, varnish, or encaustic, and leading repeatedly to her comparison with artists like Antoni Tàpies, immersed in materiality.

Since her first solo show at the Project Arts Centre in 1984, O'Dowd's paintings have been notable for the textured, sometimes tortured, surfaces that evoke the abrasion of wear whether in relation to urban decay or the relentless erosion of water on stone. The consequent inference of time was observed by the artist in a review of that show: 'What interests me is not strictly the decay element of the city but the marks of time and change.'² At least since then, O'Dowd has been described



1 I am grateful to Robert Russell, Graphic Studio Dublin and Peter Brennan of Graphic Studio Gallery and to Gwen O'Dowd for their enlightening observations and demonstrations of the challenges of print-making. For further information on printing techniques in Irish art, consult various texts by Angela Griffith of Trinity College Dublin.

2 Gwen O'Dowd, quoted in Ciaran Carty, 'Graffiti without words', *Sunday Independent*, 5.2.1984.
3 The first of the works listed in the show was entitled *Landscape*, while another, cat.5, was entitled *Urban Landscape*.
4 See Yvonne Scott, 'Georgia O'Keeffe's Landscapes: Modern and American', in *Georgia O'Keeffe, Nature and Abstraction*,



Skira, IMMA, and Vancouver Art Gallery (2007), pp.20–29.
5 Gwen O'Dowd's *On Inis Mor II* (1992), in the collection of the Irish Museum of Modern Art was shown in the exhibition 'The West as Metaphor' at the RHA 2005, curated by Yvonne Scott and Patrick Murphy; catalogue illustration, p.96.