

# Examining nature up close and far away



## Aidan Dunne Visual Art

Gwen O'Dowd's powerful, inky expanses and Yanny Petters's exemplary botanical watercolours both impress in interesting new shows

### GWEN O'DOWD: LIMEN ★★★★★

Hillsboro Fine Art, 49 Parnell Square West, Dublin. Until November 23rd  
[hillsborofineart.com](http://hillsborofineart.com)

Limen, as Gwen O'Dowd titles her fine recent series of paintings, is a perceptual threshold, the point on either side of which a stimulus is or is not apparent. We can take it that her paintings have crossed the line into visibility, though they harbour great pools of darkness, deep inky expanses.

Take away the ragged luminescent

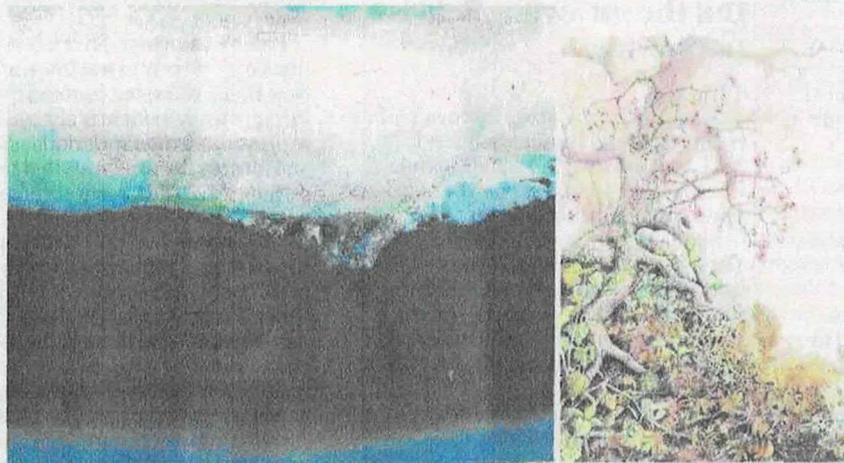
fringes that unmistakably suggest white horses, or the eerie blue phosphorescent glow, equally associated with the sea, and we could be on the other side of the threshold, faced with a kind of nothingness.

O'Dowd studied at NCAD in Dublin. Looking at a record of her exhibitions from about 1990, it's evident that she immediately looked beyond the urban, not just into the rural but into a vision of nature that recalled the Romantic Sublime, landscape as an arena shaped by the play of vast, elemental forces. She works in series and while she has usually linked each series to a particular landscape motif, those motifs are in effect, more often than not, quite general: wave, or cave, or shoreline.

It's true that her use of Irish titles – Tonn, Uaimh, Gladaich – placed the paintings on the Irish coast, mostly the west coast (though in recent years she has spent time on the southeast coast), but more as a matter of record, not in the sense of being about any one place.

It was mildly surprising when in the mid-1990s she painted the Grand Canyon, very specifically and almost schematically and, more recently, made a series of fine watercolour studies of birds. In the meantime, much commentary on her work not unreasonably saw aspects of the landscape imagery as symbolically or metaphorically relating to the body and sexuality.

Not unreasonably, but at the same time it would probably be a mistake to



Left: Detail from Gwen O'Dowd, Limen Series, 2019, oil on canvas at Hillsboro Fine Art; Winter by Yanny Petters, watercolour, at the Olivier Cornet Gallery

overly anthropomorphise the paintings. Equally, while it makes sense to view her work in an ecological context, O'Dowd has always been careful not to claim an environmental agenda.

She could easily have done so at any stage, and certainly in relation to the Limen paintings, which evoke the immense power of the earth's oceans at a time when they are the focus of climate and environmental crises.

A great deal of her work hinges on the interaction of sea and shore. Water tirelessly eats into stone, carving out space, creating space. These recent

paintings are pretty much devoted to water.

Where there are walls, they are walls of water. Waves tower and break. Limitless energy, one feels, is at play. Somewhere in the background lurks Rothko's basic compositional armature, two zones demarcated by a horizontal division.

The restless energy of O'Dowd's paintings, as one zone destabilises or threatens to devour the other, continually disrupts the possibility of stasis, yet they do have a wonderful poise, nonetheless, a hard-won magisterial calm.