

EXHIBITIONISTS: Road to the RHA

New RTÉ One Programme sees Artists Compete to Showcase Work at RHA Annual Exhibition

The RHA Annual Exhibition is one of the most important dates on Ireland's cultural calendar and an opportunity for all artists - professionals and amateurs alike - to have their work showcased.

On Thursday 27th June 2019 at 10.15pm, RTÉ One television will broadcast *Exhibitionists: Road to the RHA*, an hour-long documentary following seven artists who are hoping to have work selected from the competitive open call. For the first time ever, cameras have been allowed behind-the-scenes at the 196-year-old Royal Hibernian Academy, including access to the judging process for the exhibition which is fondly known as 'The Annual'.

The seven artists have been chosen from all over the country and each has their own story to tell. From Limerick's Brian O'Rourke, a former cannabis dealer who learned to paint in prison; to Connemara's Mo West who, at the age of 92, has just been accepted into Aosdána; to Mayo painters 19-year-old Hetty Lawlor, who's never submitted before, and her father Jimmy, who's submitted many times before, so far without success; to Laois's chronic depression-sufferer Aishling Hennessey, for whom painting in a freezing cold barn at the end of her father's garden is more than just a hobby - it's survival; to Lucan's Salvatore Fullam whose obsession with identity prompted him to change his name to Salvatore of Lucan; and Dingle based sculptor Mick Davis who makes work from recycled bicycle tyres and chains, most famously for Game of Thrones. (Full artist profiles below).

"The exhibition gives artists the power to launch successful careers, as emerging artists get the opportunity to share wall space with some of Ireland's biggest stars," says documentary director Hilary Fennell, *'however, the standard is incredibly high and, out of over 2,500 works submitted to the open call only 300 or so will be selected. Some of our seven artists have never had work in such a prestigious show before, so it will be nerve wracking to see which, if any, of them get in.'*

The programme follows the artists through the process of creating an artwork for 'The Annual', to finding out whether or not it has been accepted. Along the way we discover why and how they make art and how they deal with rejection. And we reveal, for the first time on television, the dark art of the RHA selection process, chaired this year by its first ever female President, renowned artist Abigail O'Brien, as well as observing the controlled mayhem of the install as the gallery team race against time to create this art marathon of a show in time for Opening Day.

Preview: <https://vimeo.com/333554174>

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Artist Profiles



Brian O'Rourke (51) **Painter, Abbeyfeale, Co Limerick**

'I'm on record as having been the biggest cannabis supplier in north Kerry, north Cork and west Limerick - the Howard Marks of Munster,' says Brian who got busted in 2008 and learned to paint in prison. On release, he did a degree at Limerick College of Art.

Growing up in Shannon, Brian was always a rebel. He became politicised early on and headed for London to become a punk - and painter decorator. His father was an alcoholic and when Brian also developed a problem, he gave up drink. But he's always been pro cannabis. Returning from London to live in Abbeyfeale with his wife Bluw and their two sons, he was shocked at the price of weed and decided to become a smuggler. 'The best quality smoke, at the cheapest prices. That was our creed.' Brian is a keen fisherman and his work reflects his concerns about the environment. His RHA paint / calligraphy piece 'Fish out of Water' argues against the urbanisation of the land.

RHA history before we meet him: Never submitted before.

Work: <http://www.lsadgraduates.ie/brian-orourke>



Salvatore of Lucan (25) **Painter, Lucan, Co Dublin**

'I paint because I cannot express myself in words.' Salvatore grew up in Dublin's Lucan with his mother, grandmother and younger sister. He trained briefly as a hairdresser before going to NCAD aged 17. Salvatore's mother is Irish and his father is Bangladeshi. Last year, Salvatore changed his name from Salvatore Fullam to 'Salvatore of Lucan' as a

response to being constantly asked where he is 'from'. His father is an imam in the USA now. Salvatore met his father for the first time in 2018, 'I doubt I will ever meet him again.' In his spare time Salvatore plays football and hangs out with his girlfriend, Lucy. He has a part-time job in Evans arts supplies shop. Themes of identity and family run through his work. His RHA piece is a painting of himself and Lucy.

RHA history before we meet him: Submitted twice, accepted twice.

Work: <https://cargocollective.com/salvatoreofluacan>



Mo West (92)

Printmaker, Clifden, Co Galway

Mo is a printmaker who, at 92, has just been made a member of Aosdána.

'I love being 92, because you don't have to be beholden to everybody. You can swear, you can be wicked, and people can't gainsay you they simply say "Oh, it's just her...". Mo grew up in India until she was eight with no formal education. On moving to Wicklow, her aunt

saw her drawings and insisted that Mo be given art lessons. She started painting aged 10 and was taught by Lilian Davidson in Dublin and Andre L'hote in Paris, once she'd completed a language degree at Trinity. Now widowed, Mo married a Scotsman, has four children, and became an art teacher. She now lives in Clifden. Mo's social conscience is expressed in her work. Her RHA piece reflects upon the death of immigrants who cross the Mediterranean.

RHA history before we meet her: Submitting since the 1950s. Accepted and rejected many times. In 2017 all three pieces she submitted were rejected so she travelled to Dublin to see the show and figure out why she didn't get in. The following year she submitted again - and got in. She's that determined. She was the oldest artist in that 2018 exhibition.

Work: <http://www.margaretirwinwest.com/>



Aishling Hennessey (37)

Painter, Portlaoise, Co Laois

'Art comes first, well, second after my daughter. I wouldn't be alive without art.'

Single parent Aishling has spent years battling chronic anxiety and depression. She began painting in her teens and graduated from Galway with a degree in Fine Art. But her 20s were a difficult time during which she self-medicated and didn't paint. After spending time in a psychiatric hospital after a

particularly dark period, she and her now-12-year-old daughter Mia moved to her mother's house in Portlaoise for support and her mum encouraged Aishling to start painting again. She paints in a freezing cold barn at the end of her father's garden, but never feels the cold. Her abstract paintings reflect how she feels. 'My life without art doesn't bear thinking about, it's what connects me to the world, to myself and to my inner joy'.

RHA history before we meet her: Never submitted before.

Work: <https://aishlinghennessy.com/about/>



Hetty Lawlor (19)
Painter, Westport, Co Mayo

Story: Hetty is a talented teenager making a name for herself. She's taking a gap year to paint before starting Fine Art in Dublin's IADT. Her father Jimmy is a full-time painter and her inspiration. They both won the Texaco art competition, Jimmy aged 16, Hetty aged 18. Animal lover Hetty's RHA work is a pencil and paint piece of a boy looking at a fish tank.

RHA history before we meet her: Never submitted before, one of the youngest ever to submit.

Work: <https://www.hettylawlor.com>



Jimmy Lawlor (53)
Painter, Westport, Co Mayo

'I get butterflies in my stomach just thinking about what I'm going to do each day. It's an amazing feeling, making a living from creating.' Full time painter Jimmy has his own gallery in Westport, run by his wife Phil. Both are immensely proud of their daughter Hetty. After a brief stint in art college, Jimmy worked as a butcher before getting a job in animation. His

style is slightly surreal, and his RHA acrylic piece 'Play on Words' reflects on the rise of the mobile phone as a source of entertainment and information.

RHA history before we meet him: Submitted several times. Never been accepted.

Work: <https://www.jimmylawlor.com/>



Mick Davis (54)
Sculptor, Dingle, Co Kerry

Story: Sculptor, and keen cyclist, Mick makes work from recycled bicycle tyres and chains, most famously for Game of Thrones. Originally from Dublin's Dalkey,

Mick is an art school dropout who became a stone carver before moving to Dingle with his wife, a primary school teacher, when their first child was born. His children are now 15,17 and 19. Mick learned how to weld four years ago and concentrates on working with recycled materials like tyres, chainsand U2's old guitar strings. His RHA piece is a goat's head.

RHA history before we meet him: Submitted in the distant past. Never been accepted.

Work: <https://www.mickdavissculptor.com/bio>