

# Navigating a Future



Coimisiún Poiblí Ealaíne de chuid Chomhairle Contae Mhaigh Eo  
A Mayo County Council Public Art Commission

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Is coimisiún de chuid an Chláir Ealaíne Poiblí Chomhairle Contae Mhaigh Eo *Navigating a Future*. Tá an clár á mhaoiniú ag an Roinn Tithíochta, Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreachta faoin scéim ealaíne Per Cent.

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## Navigating a Future

I mí Mheán Fómhair 2020, d'éisigh Comhairle Contae Mhaigh Eo glaoch oscailte ar mholtaí ó ealaíontóirí atá lonnaithe i Maigh Eo do choimisiún ealaíne poiblí nua dar teideal *Navigating a Future*. Is féidir le healaíontóirí freagairt go héifeachtach d'amanna neamhghnácha athraithe sóisialta; trína gcleachtadh déanann siad iniúchadh, ceistiú agus machnamh, rud a chuireann léargais uathúla agus léargais neamhghnácha ar fáil. B'éard a bhí i gceist leis an gcoimisiún seo ná deis a thabhairt d'ealaíontóirí atá ina gcónaí sa chontae freagairt a thabhairt ar thionchar na paindéime Covid-19 agus machnamh a dhéanamh ar an saol a bheidh romhainn amach anseo.

Ba iad na healaíontóirí a ndearnadh coimisiúnú orthu ná Breda Burns, fisealaíontóir; Catherine Donnelly, ealaíontóir rince; Breda Mayock, ceoltóir agus fisealaíontóir agus Áine O'Hara, fisealaíontóir agus déantóir téatair.

Bhí sé thar a bheith suimiúil féachaint ar na tionscadail agus iad ag teacht chun cinn agus ar an dul chun cinn a rinneadh le himeacht ama. Molaim na healaíontóirí as a dtiomantas don tionscadal agus is teist iad na saothair ealaíne a tháinig as na hiarrachtaí a rinne siad chun na torthaí maithe a bhaint amach.

Chuir an Coimisiún deiseanna ar fáil freisin do na healaíontóirí laistigh dá gcleachtas féin; foirmeacha ealaíne nua a iniúchadh agus comhoibrithe nua a fhorbairt, agus ar dhúshlán a chruthú agus a shárú ar an mbealach. Mar shampla, i mí na Samhna 2020, chuir na healaíontóirí tús lena gcuid oibre agus srian taistil 5km i bhfeidhm ar fud na tíre ar ghluaiseachtaí daoine. I ndiaidh dúinn machnamh a dhéanamh air seo, léiríonn na torthaí ealaíne freisin an athléimneacht atá sna healaíontóirí agus an chaoi ar leanadh leis an ealaín a dhéanamh i rith na tréimhse. Fágann an foilseachán seo go gcuirfear an tionscadal os comhair lucht féachana níos leithne.

Faightear léargas tríd na comhráite a dhéanann Sarah Searson leis na healaíontóirí a ndearnadh coimisiúnú orthu ar an machnamh comhaimseartha agus ar an bhfreagairt a rinneadh don phaindéim ó pheirspictíocht uathúil agus phearsanta na n-ealaíontóirí atá páirteach in *Navigating a Future*.

In September 2020, Mayo County Council issued an open call for proposals from Mayo-based artists for a new public art commission entitled *Navigating a Future*.

Artists are well placed to respond to unusual times of social change; through their practice they explore, question and reflect, giving rise to unique and unusual insights. Key to the thinking behind this commission was the desire to give artists living in the county an opportunity to respond to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and to consider our lives going forward.

The commissioned artists were Breda Burns, visual artist; Catherine Donnelly, dance artist; Breda Mayock, musician and visual artist; and Áine O'Hara, visual artist and theatre maker.

It has been fascinating to watch the projects evolve and progress over time. I commend the artists for their dedication and commitment to the project and the resultant artworks are a testament to the efforts they made to realise the outcomes.

The commission also provided opportunities for the artists within their own practice; to explore new artforms and develop new collaborations and to pose and overcome challenges along the way. For example, in November 2020, the artists began their work amid a nationwide 5km travel restriction on people's movements. On reflection, the artistic outcomes also document artists' resilience and how artmaking continued throughout the period.

This publication brings the project to a wider audience. Sarah Searson's conversations with the commissioned artists capture a contemporary consideration of and response to the pandemic from the unique and intimate perspectives of the artists involved in *Navigating a Future*.

Aoife O'Toole,  
Comhordaitheoir Gníomhach Ealaíon Poiblí / Acting Public Art Coordinator,  
Comhairle Contae Mhaigh Eo / Mayo County Council.

# Breda Burns

in conversation with Sarah Searson





Image: Breda Burns, still from her film *Artists' Voices To Be Continued...*

*“It’s people’s stories that I am interested in, it’s where something always unexpected will happen.”*

**Sarah Searson:**

Breda, great to meet you here in The Custom House Studios in Westport. What have you been up to over the last two or three years and how has it been for you?

**Breda Burns:**

It’s been an interesting time in many ways, artistically it’s been a positive, hard-working two years. At the beginning of it all, obviously, it was quiet, you know, when you’re running between different jobs, you don’t ever take quiet time. I was very lucky. I had applied, in 2019, before the lockdown, for an Arts Council bursary which I received in 2020. It was a lifesaver. On top of that, I got this *Navigating a Future* commission with Mayo County Council.

The other thing that I found powerful during the first lockdown was a process Alannah Roberts' set up for the membership of Interface in Galway. We had realised that we were all in our own funny spaces and missing contact. Every week one of us presented our work to the organisation’s membership. It was really interesting, and at the end of it I knew people’s work which I may not have known in the beginning. Out of that, we presented a gorgeous exhibition called ‘Connect’ in 2020. This led to several other projects. I have just returned from an artist exchange in Sweden. I will be joining eight artists, members of three artist-led initiatives drawn together through Interface’s online programming during the second lockdown, in an exhibition. The three organisations, Interface Inagh Valley, Detroit, Stockholm and Pasaj, Istanbul will be showing together as part of GIAF 2022 (Galway International Arts Festival).

**SS:** So were there opportunities that may not have happened under other circumstances?

**BB:** Yes, for example, for that organisation, Interface, the membership, I feel, are stronger. If we ever had to find a place that was Covid-ready, it’s huge, a deserted Fish Hatchery in the middle of Connemara, because no matter where you are there, you’re at least 20ft from each other! So those things have sustained me, those three things. The Arts Council Bursary, The Commission from the Arts Office in Mayo

<sup>1</sup> Founder & artistic director of Interface Inagh Valley Connemara <https://interfaceinagh.com>

and The Interface Project. They're diverse but there are overlaps in all of them.

**SS:** For the Mayo County Council Commission what were your ideas at the early stages and how did they evolve? Sometimes the early concept is really interesting to reflect back on.

**BB:** That's interesting, because it did change. The essence was always there. The opportunity allowed me to take another step or to take a sidestep as ideas developed, and that gives you comfort, it gives you support. I guess, like most artists, you're living on your wits a lot of the time. For instance, my initial idea was to interview artists. Over the last six years I have been constantly interviewing artists. This started with Grainne O'Reilly and myself on The Arts Show on Westport radio and then with other stations as well. I think we nearly got our wish list of artists we wanted to interview over time. Artists by their nature, like to talk about themselves and their art. What was lovely about this interview process is that strangers have become friends, and people who I have known all along, I realised I may not really know at all. It's a focused time with a microphone on live radio and people speak in a different way. So these ideas and observations became my art practice.

I went back to college in 2016 to study under the artist/lecturer Ger Leslie and the others at ATU in Galway, to do Sculpture and Time-Based Studies. I really liked some of the people who were coming out of Galway at that time. I was working away, and I have been very community-based, but I felt something needed to shift. So I did a one-year add-on honours degree. It took me a while to figure out my ideas because everything had changed educationally. I talked with Ger Leslie as I was trying to get a handle on things. He said, well you have two things going for you Breda, you can draw, which is not a necessity, and you've got the radio. Well, I thought, that's interesting.

Over that Christmas I actually drew out every possibility I could think of within an exhibition context which included radio. I had been in the Heinrich-Böll Cottage House on Achill and I had done this lovely drawing of the bog near the House, on top of that drawing I just put a speaker, out there in the bog with a generator. So I realised I could broadcast from sites.

Between one thing and the other that became what I did. That one speaker became five speakers. I made them in the college in Galway, welded them and made stands for them. I interviewed five artists who have two jobs. An Artist/Angler, Farmer/Poet, Priest/Dancer, Vet/Singer, Florist/Art Student. I could hear their voices change when I interviewed them in two different locations. The priest who is also a dancer was interviewed in a disco first and then at Ballintubber Abbey. It was like listening to two different people. With the vet, we went out to a location she liked, her voice was gentle and soft, and then we went to the abattoir and her voice was sharp and precise and to the point. That got me thinking about voices and spaces. I ended up with the project title *Where Are We?* which was the first question I asked all of them. I realised I'm interested in audio. It's not the sounds, it's people's stories that I am interested in. It's where something always unexpected will happen.

**SS:** So this idea was your spark?

**BB:** Yes, and I thought it was a lovely title, *Navigating a Future*. Rather than navigating the future, which might be your first thought. I played around with the idea for ages. In my initial application I intended to interview artists through the Covid period and talk to them about their experiences and how they saw themselves moving forward.

I thought I might look at a visual element and broadcasts. I did also mention podcasts and recordings in the application. When I was lucky enough to receive the award, I re-looked at the project structure. I'm dyslexic, but funnily enough, words are often the starting point for me, for example, it's often the title of a project or exhibition that gets me started towards the rest of the work. When I initially applied I titled the project *Artists' Voices To Be Continued...* I decided to keep that, because that is what I was doing.

I felt as artists we have probably been abandoned; even though we're everywhere. In everything you touch, there is an artist behind it, one who has made it, planned it or printed it, but we are not seen. I think that the artist's hand is everywhere. I was thinking about that sense of abandonment, about being overlooked.



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Image: Breda Burns, still from her film Artists' Voice to be continued

SS: You are very interested in sites too though?

BB: Yes, over the years I've been working with water. I live down by the sea in Westport, I'm looking out over the mud flats, and half the days the tide comes in and the other half it's on its way out. I've been looking at that landscape all these years, through photographs, drawings and videos. I had been working with Luan in Athlone, and on the windows there I installed transparencies of these scenes, as if I was bringing the North Mayo coast up to the middle of the country, thinking about the one direction of the River Shannon, and the two directions in the sea. They were the kind of notions I was making work about.

Then I remembered the empty swimming pool in Castlebar. It's where we all swam when I was young. It's a municipal pool. I came up with this idea to include some sound pieces in the pool, which is currently empty. I had this feeling that it had been abandoned too, as its been replaced by a beautiful new one. Because I was working with the support of Mayo County Council I was able to gain access to it, and it was a great help.

I thought about what I could marry with the pool or what would be the opposite of it. I thought of the Clare Island lighthouse, which is at the very edge the Atlantic. As we all say here, you're looking over to New York. I hadn't applied to do a video, just to do the audio, but you do need something for the audio to hang on. The underlying audio is of five artists. Áine Phillips, Chris Leach, Hina Khan, Shania McDonagh and Sorcha McNamara. We were still in lockdown when it was being made, and I did it online. I used the same technology for each of them. I always try to give the same weight and time to each person, so that their story is woven into the work. I worked with the videographer Frank O'Reilly. We agreed to present the imagery and sound I had collected from the two sites together in one frame. I edited the footage down to a thirteen-and-a-half-minute video.

SS: The artists all have very different arts practices, can you talk a little about them?

BB: I worked with artists like Shania McDonagh, who is amazing. She has won five Texaco Awards. She's currently doing new media work, which is really exciting. Áine Philips is a performance artist and a lecturer at The Burren School of Art. Sorcha McNamara was an artist I was aware of but didn't know in person, and it was great to learn more about her. Chris Leach lives in Manchester. He was just in the process of completing miniature studies of every capital city in the world. Hina Khan had lived in Mayo for a long time. Now living in Cork, she is working on all sorts of collaborative projects.

I tried to look at people at different stages of their career. They all have Mayo connections; they live here or have lived here. I also think it's very important when you do something like this to find people who you don't necessarily know and to make sure that there is a diversity in the voices. Now I feel I know them, there's something about interviewing people that gives you a connection that's very different than any other connection.

My first question was *why art?* And one answer was, *why not?* And another one was asking as artists if we have a burden. I think it's true that we have. The other line I loved in response to the questions was that the artist was interested in "*the unsurefootedness of it all*". It was those kinds of things that were said that attracted me in the project. I find editing really slow, but you get something from everyone. I recorded everyone separately, and you don't really know what you're getting at the time you're speaking with them because you can't analyse as you do it. But by the time you've spent days actually editing and listening... I find that the thread comes through towards the end of the process.

SS: I wonder if this project gave you a chance to consolidate your work and bring it forward in some new way?

BB: Yes. I feel there is a huge importance in artists' voices, and although as artists we're visual people we are often very verbal as well. To me this is a project in itself, however, it's also part of the direction and interest which has been my lifetime's work.



In terms of my processes, after all the voices were recorded, I listened to them. I included my partner in this listening process. I find if I share and listen to the audio with someone else it helps me to refresh what I hear and it frees me up to make choices in the editing process. Then I took all the words that I responded to from the interviews and printed them out. Some of the prints are really big, some of the words were printed very small. I was layering those on Perspex. The next stage was like putting up two temporary exhibitions.

In the swimming pool, I set everything up, the two speakers and videoed the installation as a mini exhibition. The oral presentation of the words and the visual presentation of the words were on these beautiful, overlapped images on Perspex. I took that same set of images, the writing on Perspex, on a boat to the lighthouse on Clare Island. The people were amazingly supportive on Clare Island. So what in fact happened was that I set up two distinct exhibitions in both locations that only myself and Frank saw. That's what can be seen in these videos. The fact is there are the same words in each, even though there are two very distinct locations, so there is the abandonment of the swimming pool and this newly refurbished lighthouse on the island. There is a lovely balance between history and future.

**SS:** It's multi-layered and complex and a response to a particular set of experiences at a particular time. What are you thinking now for the future? Are you fired up with possibilities for this work?

**BB:** I am because it led me down a few roads. It's reinforced for me how much I love this sort of stuff, and how much it's necessary. I have titled it *Artists' Voices To Be Continued...* and I'd like to be part of that continuum. I definitely want to keep up that end of it. This work hasn't been presented yet, so I haven't gotten any feedback on it. The artists who were in it haven't seen the work. So that will be really exciting. I've been looking at this on a small screen, I've been holding it, been the guardian of it. And that's no good. As somebody said, ships are safe in the harbour but that's not what ships are made for. It needs to be put out there to the public.

**SS:** A lovely analogy.

**BB:** I really feel that actually. There is a very clear trajectory right through all my work. Layering, transparency, water and voices. That's me in a nutshell. If I come up with the idea the medium follows, rather than the medium leading. It doesn't really matter what format the work takes.

# Catherine Donnelly

in conversation with Sarah Searson





Image: Artist Catherine Donnelly, working on her film, *Going Under*.  
Credit: Archie Erskine Hadden, Sasquatch Studios.

*“Dance is something that I want to continue doing forever. It’s a surprise to me to say that at my age, but actually I think that might be a possibility – which is brilliant.”*

**Sarah Seanson:**

Catherine, many thanks for meeting me today in the Roscommon Arts Centre and in this lovely dance studio. In light of the past few years, I would love to chat about what it is you’re up to at the moment.

**Catherine Donnelly:**

I’m working on *Blast*, which is an arts and education programme with Mayo Education Centre. I am also starting a residency in Ballina Arts Centre which is part of The Arts Council Dance Artist Residency Scheme. I received an Agility Award, my first Arts Council funding, which supports me with time to work on my own practice, to reflect and to think about work. I have recently started back after Covid, meeting with The Elderberries, a group of over 50s that I work with in Roscommon Arts Centre. It’s so lovely to be back and moving with other people in the same space. There is definitely joy in the room, and they are talking about how they feel when they’re walking out of the studio. So good stuff is happening.

**SS:** There’s something very fundamental about what dance can offer us – what have you noticed with the people you work with?

**CD:** Human beings were built to move. We know we only use a very limited amount of our brain capacity. Our brains are designed for complex movement. So, when you move in different ways, which we do in our sessions, there’s lots of different things happening. That’s bound to fire up different areas in the brain. I’m curious about activity and changes that brings. Take the habit of walking and reflection for example, when we move in complex ways and come back to a problem, things clear up a little bit, or new ideas have come in, or you might have had that flashbulb moment. I use that, for example, if there is something I am doing that needs flexibility, I do stretching movements. Or if it’s something that needs a little bit of direction, I play with directions. Stuff happens. I know it works.

**SS:** The type of work that you’re doing in dance includes a wide range of people of all ages and experiences. I find it so interesting that you’re able to activate people who might be new to dance.

**CD:** I think it's two-way. There has to be a certain amount of interest, openness, willingness to have a go. I'm conscious that when people come, that there's a space to be held and minded. If it means somebody is going to continue exploring dance, it's important that they feel comfortable. With new people at the workshops, you won't necessarily have a conversation with them and don't know what they've experienced. I think we have a very complicated relationship with our bodies. Dance has a lot to offer. One of the women at the workshop today said, "I feel more all one when I leave here. When I come in, I am in my head, but I walk away feeling whole." I thought, okay, that's really good.

Our bodies are the only guaranteed permanent home we have for our entire lifetime. It's the one space where we have a little bit of control over how we feel, and if we feel safe, we feel free. Sir Ken Robinson talks about university professors treating their bodies as a mode of transport to get their heads to meetings. There is scope to go inside and find space within yourself. With so many changes happening in the world at large at the moment, I think that's a useful beneficial to have that access in your toolbox.

**SS:** This commission was an opportunity for artists to think about a future for their practice. I'm wondering what were you thinking about when you applied for it? What struck you about this opportunity?

**CD:** A couple of things. I love water. I love being in water. Our bodies are about 70% water. I like being underwater. I did a little bit of synchronised swimming donkey's years ago. If I want a break from everything, that's where I go, I go underwater. The title of the residency project jumped out at me *Navigating a Future* the word 'navigating' resonated with me. I was thinking, certainly in the first few months of the Covid period, this could be it. What kind of future is ahead of me? What am I gonna do?

I had done a film – a short video – the previous September that had gone really well. I thought, well, this is an opportunity to keep my practice alive. I've seen so many people leave the stage. Career-wise, it's a step forward, and I want to keep advancing. I'm more a tortoise than a hare – slow and steady. There were lots of pieces in the jigsaw puzzle that were just coming together. It felt like the right thing to do.

**SS:** From that point, what were you thinking artistically?

**CD:** A short video was definitely on the cards. Then the other thing I really wanted to do was to work with a composer. I've never worked with one before, I've always used music that was already written for something else, pop music or whatever. I absolutely love music. I have music on all the time. There are all the problems that you come up against with copyright when you use music for video. That was a priority to work with a composer. I was also walking a lot and I was thinking of journeys and direction, and also my own life and my working life. I had images of lots of pathways and there were other ideas floating around too. I was conscious of the use of maths in the news at the time with all the processing of Covid numbers, that grabbed my attention. I was thinking about the bees, the waggle dance that they do. These were some of the ideas floating around.

**SS:** So how did the project start to evolve?

**CD:** I got my cinematographer on board first of all. Then I went to try and source a composer. It was actually quite a scary step to take in terms of collaboration, you don't know if you're going to be able to work together, get on, and if you'll be on the same page. I had to think about how to start that process. There were funding constraints, time constraints, and Covid restrictions in distance, travel, internet connection and all that stuff at the time. I decided I'd ask Breda Mayock and we started working together.

At the very beginning I was really surprised by the questions she prompted me with, and I realised just how little I knew about making music. She was asking me what sounds I liked, what mood did I want? That had never dawned on me – in all the years I've been listening to music, to consider these things so formally. I'd know instinctively what kind of mood I wanted, but to put it into words and be able to say to somebody this is the mood I want – that was new. It was really interesting because then I really started listening to sounds. I think that was happening generally during lockdown. People were noticing what they could hear. I wondered was that because other senses were dumbed down or our hearing was heightened.

**SS:** What were the answers to some of those prompts and questions?

**CD:** I was looking for music which was a bit like complex dance movements. Music that would waken and shake it up a bit. I wanted lots of unexpected things to be happening in the music. I was looking for it to bring the audience to a place and draw them into questions, like why is that happening?

Initially, the music was really about myself. I wanted to be brought into the immediate moment and to be surprised. For this commission, initially anyway, the music was the priority. That was an area I wanted to learn about and to explore and to go on a journey for myself. Breda sent me a couple of samples, we talked about it and worked through it. I'd send comments back to her, and she'd work on it and send it back. That happened a couple of times, not too many. It worked really well. The first three samples she gave me had a really broad range of things to respond to, and I was able to pluck out elements and sounds which I'd use.

**SS:** Filming took you to various locations and places, some more successful than others?

**CD:** Yes, I had been looking at different locations. There's a lovely old dance hall in Charlestown at the back of the Arts Centre, its absolutely gorgeous and atmospheric with its history dripping off the walls. I was really interested in using that space but with restrictions that was getting impossible, too complex and too complicated. I thought about working in Knock Airport, even though it was on the cards for a while, it didn't happen. I chose locations with pathways that had different landscapes or different surfaces.

Eventually dates were set for filming, it just so happened it was the hottest three days of the year. I didn't think about what I was going to wear. I was wearing a thermal vest, leggings and a really heavy dark top. Somebody was spreading silage and we were close to a body of stagnant water. It was really uncomfortable. We went to other locations over the three-day period. It was a very tight schedule, and we got the footage I wanted. However, when I came back and sat with the editors, I decided I didn't like it and I didn't want to use it – which was very disappointing.

What I ended up doing was what I thought about at the very beginning, but at the time I thought in my wildest dreams wasn't an option. I wanted to do something underwater. I had been thinking about underwater cameras, scuba diving equipment, I mean, the whole nine yards, if there were no limits and anything was possible. But obviously the budget wasn't there. I ended up using a piece of footage that I got completely by chance. After the episode with the silage, we went down to the beach to film on a stretch of clear sand. I was making tracing marks through it with my foot movements. After we had got that footage, I thought I was going to die because it was so hot. I had to get into the water.

The wonderful cinematographer that I worked with had brought a GoPro with them. We ended up getting some footage of me falling into the water, just letting go. It was how I was feeling at the time and opportunity presented itself.

When I did go back to look at the footage to edit and compile it, it was like sitting down with a jigsaw puzzle without the finished picture on the front cover. I pieced my way through it to see what wanted to come out. In my experience, sometimes what I think I want for the work is not what's meant to be. So I try and keep myself open. I ended up using the water footage.

**SS:** When people see this work what would you like them to pay attention to or to take from it?

**CD:** I'm actually really interested and curious as to what people see. I don't know what the audience coming to this will think. I'd like people maybe who are new to dance to be able to watch the film and get something out of it. That might be to do with my own first experiences of contemporary dance, which left me completely baffled. I didn't understand what was happening. I couldn't read what was going on. I want people who are new to dance to be able to watch it and get something out of it, so I keep things simple.

**SS:** I was really interested in your perspective and thoughts about your career and the independence of it. There are differences, obviously, between people trying to sustain their practice in a rural place and sustaining a practice in a city. You've made interesting choices, could you talk a little bit about that?

**CD:** I spent some time in France and spent some time in the UK on the periphery of the dance communities there. When I came back to Ireland, I kind of naively thought every county council would have a dancer employed permanently, like it'd be a full-time job! I lived in Dublin for a while and I thought I don't want to live in Dublin. I thought, everybody's gonna tell me to go to Dublin, or Cork or Galway, if you want to work as a dancer. It's a given. I thought, well, no, I don't want to because that's living somewhere where you can dance, whereas I want to dance where I live.

I want to live in a rural community and I want to dance. I was thinking how am I going to navigate my way through that? My thinking was, and kind of still is, well, this is what I want to do. Who's gonna pay me to do this and how do I find the funding? Relying on funding is not a way that I want to live. I started off my working life at 17 working in a bank and from what I have seen in the arts community, the level of expertise that any artist has to bring to the table just to survive is really skilled. If the business community out there were aware of how many balls an artist keeps in the air and the skill sets, they bring to their work, I think they would be hiring them left right and centre.

**SS:** It's impressive how you've navigated that, and the kind of contentment you have to make that decision with clarity.

**CD:** I think in the funding welfare system, you're not in control, you lose your own worth, as it's kind of fluctuating externally, so at least I have a steadier or stronger foundation, I think. I've always had that kind of approach – to work within what's available to me.

**SS:** What changed for you over this project?

**CD:** I think it's given me confidence. Definitely. It's opened up an opportunity for me to think about my art. I think I found my flow in Mayo, but where I'm living now in Roscommon I'm surrounded by trees, there's lots of roots and branches around me. I feel quite positive about the future. If somebody had told me that I'd still be involved in dance at my age I wouldn't have believed it. When I was 18, I thought I'm going to grow out of this, you know, get a proper job. Dance is something that I want to continue doing forever. It's a surprise to me to say that at my age, but actually I think that might be a possibility – which is brilliant.

# Breda Mayock

in conversation with Sarah Searson







*“We have to listen to one another and have more communication. Art and music are vital because they really do bring the essence of people together.”*

**Sarah Searson:**

Breda, great to meet you here in the National Museum of Ireland – Country Life outside Castlebar. Could you tell me just a little bit about your proposal for *Navigating a Future* and how you have found the last couple of years?

**Breda Mayock:**

In terms of 2020, the first thing I think of is the beginning of the year. I remember that feeling of hearing about the possibility of a shutdown on the schoolyard – that schools were going to shut. I thought that could never happen, you know, I mean the idea of it was so unusual. I couldn't image that we would all stop and our worlds would close (or would be closed) down. And so it did happen all of a sudden.

I found that I just clicked into the series of really serious lockdowns, living with in the two five-kilometre radius restrictions. So yeah, it was a really particular time. I live in the country with my family, and I knew I was lucky to have that five-kilometre radius and country roads. We live up on a bog road and suddenly there were all these people walking in the area from around the close vicinity, which is something we wouldn't usually see. We would usually be passing each other in cars unfortunately. It definitely had an effect on me. I became closer to nature. I'm always kind of looking for that connection anyway, in the work that I do, in both music and visual arts. I spent more time in nature and in the fields and that had an influence on the music and the writing. I definitely was writing more. To talk about my writing process, I would always be writing, and the words come first. I had been conscious of writing songs and coming up with a body of work musically. So, I write and then I'd start on piano. Even though I'm not a piano player, I'd work out the songs and the chords in that way. The next step, when I'd feel I have something working, is to put them into a programme. I'd initially use GarageBand and Logic and start writing the chords in MIDI. I find it quite easy to record audio, initially just with a USB Mic to GarageBand. So, the songs start to take form in that way. I was in the middle of that work, and the *Navigating a Future* commission came up. So, I applied for that. Getting that was great, that was really important, because in a way it kind of gave me real permission to work on this body of songs.

**SS:** Is your work very much based out of the words and the lyrics, is that the starting point?

**BM:** Yes, I start with the words, then I'll start working musically. I learned to fiddle growing up, so I might start there, or I'll work on the chords. Sometimes there will be an evolution through that process of bringing music and words together like that. So, I'll change the words, yes, generally the words come first, that's the initial starting point of work.

**SS:** When you made the application for the commission did it help you form the ideas, did it help you to think about a structure that you might not have done otherwise?

**BM:** Yeah, it did. It definitely gave me the structure and the permission to structure what I was working on, and it ended up being a four track EP. It gave me that time to really develop in a way that I probably wouldn't have given myself that time for otherwise. So, it created a whole pattern of work for me, including a four track EP, which I did with Steve Cooney, guitarist, and Robbie Harris, the percussionist. It also created a work situation where I developed a lot further technically. For example, in GarageBand, I developed the piece of music. I would usually work with the chords, then I'd put the vocals on it and work up a series of vocals and also do backing vocals and stuff. But because I was doing the work myself, I started to write bass tracks, keys and strings. So, that was a new development and a really important one because I'd often rely on other musicians to further work up a song / the songs. But I found that I developed a way to work up the songs and was getting a lot further myself. So, that resulted in the four songs and there was a fifth piece I did for the commission, which is the song *Through*, and I made the video for that. In that song I absolutely worked all the music myself. So, that just gives me more autonomy and freedom within the work itself to work up ideas and to create a piece totally by myself. I mean, working with other musicians is amazing, because they bring so much energy to the work, but I did enjoy that autonomy. It was great.

**SS:** Maybe independence was no bad thing, do you think it helped to anchor things and support you to be a better collaborator in the future, in that you're able to have things well resolved creatively by yourself?

**BM:** Yeah, like it definitely helps you to be a better collaborator. Because if I have already explored the bass line, or the strings, or the different forms of vocals, or guitar sounds, or the different electronic sounds, which I'm able to do now more, I have much better communication with the musicians I work with. That's really interesting.

**SS:** I've met with Catherine Donnelly. She was talking a little bit about the collaboration with you. So, there was inter-artist collaboration too as part of this commission?

**BM:** Yeah, that was really positive. We had a few little meetings all together by Zoom. We were aware what direction each other's work was going in. I sent an email to Catherine way early on in the process, asking if there's anything with music, that I might be able to help her with, you know, with musicians or whatever. A good while later, we talked on the phone. We just started working together. It was unexpected, and it was brilliant. It was a huge outlet for me, because it wasn't my stuff. It was so good to work on something that didn't belong to me and which was inspired by Catherine's thoughts, her movements, what she was thinking about. I loved the piece she made. Catherine is very clear. She would take her time to think about something and then we'd have a phone call and she would highlight what was important to her and so on. It was a great collaboration. I really enjoyed it.

**SS:** Do you think you'd like to collaborate more in the future?

**BM:** In fact, we did for Mayo's *FOLKLIFE*<sup>2</sup> for *Faoin Spéir*. There was an open air piece here in the museum in Turlough, Castlebar. I was singing with a choir; it was all outdoors in the woods. Catherine did a dance piece for it, and I did the music for her. We knew so well how to work together – and it worked really well. It was about six minutes long. The piece of performance she did was in one of the glass houses. I hope we will work together again.

**SS:** How did you structure and develop the work?

<sup>2</sup> *FOLKLIFE* is a series of performative events and installations as part of *Faoin Spéir – In The Open*, funded by the Arts Council of Ireland. <https://www.mayo.ie/arts/folklife2022/imbolc>

**BM:** I got in touch with Steve Cooney. We had done an album in 2015. He was on board straight away. At that stage, we had done a very acoustic album together. I talked to him about it being more electric this time. He started to think and work songs with regard to electric guitar and bass. At one point we met each other, just tried some sounds and recorded. We talked a lot about sounds, the work, what the songs were about. In the songs, like I mean, there is a lot about loss and passing of time. I'm definitely prone to that. I think it might be due to the tradition. Growing up with the Irish tradition of song laments from a really early age. I'm very grateful for that, because we didn't come from a Gaeltacht area. My mother certainly would buy us albums, but she had to find all that out for herself. We listened to sean-nós singers, and she'd teach us the words. I think that's where any sense of poetry and that kind of thing has come from, because I was exposed to that, and I learned those songs early on. I still do write very much about loss. At this stage in our lives we have all experienced loss, you know, with good friends or family members. The songs are about the passage of time and loss. The four songs that we ended up doing were definitely about that. Steve would send stuff by email, like, we did a lot of work, recording and sending stuff back to each other. Robbie Harris is my husband. He's very good with recording, and he worked on the percussion and rhythm elements a lot as well.

**SS:** And was there anything about the voice that you were testing or trying to push a little bit that you hadn't done before?

**BM:** Yeah, I did a lot of backing vocals. The EP is called *Waves*. I focused on that a lot, to try and make them kind of wave-like with the sound of the sea coming in and out. I'm always searching to be truer in my vocal work and in the way I sing. It's kind of a life search too, for truth, and maybe I shouldn't be doing that too much and just be freer. Perhaps in letting it be, let the voice be several different characters in your life.

**SS:** So when you say truth, do you mean like a truer version of yourself?

**BM:** Yes, like questioning, is there a true person in here? That's a notion, like yeah, it's about finding a true vocal, but I'm not sure that's the right notion to have as a performer actually. I would have over the years had a long search to have a true voice when I sing. Actually, I

probably would have been much better off searching for characters rather than searching for one true voice. It's like, you know, searching for being true to yourself, but maybe that you can be true to yourself by being lots of different characters that you can perform as a singer. So, I might aim at that direction a lot more in the future, (laughing).

**SS:** Do you need that kind truth in the voice for traditional music, because it was performed so close with people in small settings? Does the voice change where you're performing in venues, to become performative?

**BM:** That's interesting, I learned to sing from sean-nós singers. But even as a kid you were kind of copying that voice, which is not necessarily a bad thing. People copy all sorts of traditions, obviously. We influence and we're all influenced by so many different music types. So, I guess it's finding the spots where you're comfortable expressing yourself and that might be in any genre. So, yeah, definitely. I definitely spent years of my life searching for the holy grail of like truth in my singing. And I might not necessarily have been pursuing the right path! (Laughter).

**SS:** This didn't necessarily come up in your response to the commission. I would like to ask you about your work in visual arts and the community.

**BM:** I have done good bit of work now recently with different communities. I'm really interested in that work. I am just really interested in people. It provides a pathway into different communities that I wouldn't have otherwise. So, with the Traveller community in Mayo and all over, there's a terrible divide. Travellers are not our friends or people we hang out with, and they're not a community in a way that we can easily just mingle with, we don't meet in cafes, or at gigs or whatever. I went to meet some of the Traveller women in Mayo Traveller Support Group, where they work and to talk about hair. That was a great opportunity for me to get to know and talk with the community and to build mutual trust, of course, which is really important. I just loved talking to those women.

So, that project, which was about hair, led then, very recently, to a project I did with the Offaly *Faoin Spéir* with African women living here. It was about black women's hair, and it was just so interesting.

I am working on Africa Day. That's another opportunity for me just to get in touch with people. With that group we are writing a song together about soil and about the earth. One of the women I met there, Celeste, told me one of the first questions her mother asked her when she moved to Ireland was, what colour is the soil? On so many levels that's really moving.

**SS:** Do you have quite an organic approach to the work you do and how you manage yourself?

**BM:** I'm always striving for something to be more meaningful. With the work I was just describing, I want that to mean something, to have meaning for the people I work with and for myself, of course. I'm making contact, communicating and bringing stories together. Bringing what we are like together, I mean, with our relationship with the Traveller community that really needs to happen. We have to listen to one another and have more communication. Art and music are vital because they really do bring the essence of people together.

**SS:** So you balance all those relationships and contexts? How do you situate yourself in this creatively?

**BM:** It's a hard balancing act sometimes. I suppose while you're doing one thing, sometimes you long for the other. I am longing to just get into the studio and paint and be on my own. Then there's the balance of family and the balance of making money. I don't think too long term, because it would just be too much. I just have to try and find a balance as I go along. With the music I am interested in finding a new space where I'm much more comfortable, as a performer. The artist Rajinder Singh is on residency in the National Museum of Ireland – Country Life at the moment. Myself and a few other artists are working with him on an object from the collection, it's been so interesting because, again, because it's somebody coming outside of your own ideas and you're not just working in your own head all the time. It's showing you different paths to go with things. I've just become much more aware of different processes. And so, I think, okay, like, apply that to my next performance as a singer, you know, change things up

**SS:** The project is initiated by Mayo County Council's Arts Service, how do you feel about being an artist from Mayo?

**BM:** There is a strong arts population in Mayo. The Arts Office are so busy and hugely supportive. I'm always very grateful to them, because they're really positive with anything that I might suggest. They work very hard. Mayo is full of artists and that means it's very rich culturally. I am really glad to be here.



## Breda Burns

Ealaíontóir ciosamhairc i Breda atá lonnaithe i Stiúideoanna Theach an Chustaim, Cathair na Mart. Agus í ag obair i meáin éagsúla agus i dtionscadail idirdisciplíneacha, nascann sí trédhearcaí fuaimne, físe agus grianghrafadóireachta mar bhealach chun ábhair inni phearsanta a chur in iúl agus chun an tsochaí chomhaimseartha a dhoiciméadú. Cuireadh taispeántais léi ar fáil go forleathan ar ardán náisiúnta agus idirnáisiúnta mar chuid de roinnt seónna grúpa. Tá taispeántais aonair curtha i láthair aici in ionaid mar an Luan, Áth Luain, Ionad Ealaine, Sligeach, Áras Inis Gluaire Mhaigh Eo, Dánlann Hamilton, Sligeach agus Dánlann Chlár Chlainne Mhuiris, Maigh Eo. Tá go leor dámhachtainí agus cónaitheachtaí faighte aici lena n-áirítear Sparánacht Amharcealaion ó Chomhairle Ealaion na hÉireann. Chuir Breda críoch le scéim malartaithe ealaíontóirí le déanaí le Detroit Stockholm agus Interface Inagh Valley agus ba é an toradh a tháinig as ná cuir i láthair a rinneadh mar chuid d'Fhéile Ealaion na Gaillimhe. Tá sí ag obair go comhuaineach ar roinnt tionscadal agus tá sí i mbun cartlann a chur le chéile de 'ghuthanna ealaíontóirí'.



Breda is an audio/visual artist based in the Custom House Studios, Westport. Working in a variety of media and interdisciplinary projects, she combines sound, video and photographic transparencies as a way of voicing both personal concerns and documenting contemporary society. She has exhibited widely nationally and internationally in numerous group shows. Solo exhibitions have been presented in venues such as the Luan Athlone, The Model Arts Centre, Sligo, Áras Inis Gluaire, Mayo, The Hamilton Gallery, Sligo, and Claremorris Gallery, Mayo. She has received many awards and residencies including a Visual Arts Bursary from the Arts Council of Ireland. Breda has recently completed an artist exchange with Detroit Stockholm and Interface Inagh Valley, leading to a presentation as part of Galway Arts Festival. She is working simultaneously on a number of projects and continues to build an archive of 'artists' voices'.

[www.bredaburns.com](http://www.bredaburns.com)

Instagram: [http://instagram.com/breda\\_burns\\_artist](http://instagram.com/breda_burns_artist)



## Catherine Donnelly

Agus í lonnaithe in Iarthar na hÉireann, tá Catherine ag obair mar ealaíontóir rince neamhspleách le raon leathan eagraíochtaí, aoisghrúpaí agus cumais. Tá suim aici i ndeiseanna a éascú do rannpháirtithe, go háirithe dóibh siúd ina bhfuil an rince mar ghníomh nua acu, chun gluaiseacht agus damhsa a fhiosrú, agus ar conas dul i ngleic leis an bhfoirm ealaine seo; an próiseas cruthaitheach ina úsáidtear an corp mar mheán.

D'oibrigh sí ar chlár Ealaíontóirí sna Scoileanna, Comhpháirtíochtaí Múinteoirí Ealaíontóirí agus bhí cónaitheacht aici i Scoil Náisiúnta na mBuachaillí Phádraig, Caisleán an Bharraigh, mar chuid de chlár faisnéise Scoileanna Cruthaitheacha de chuid RTÉ, *Páistí Cruthaitheacha*. Tá sí ag obair faoi láthair ar an gclár nua ealaion san oideachas BLAST le hIonad Oideachais Mhaigh Eo. In 2007, bhunaigh sí The Elderberries, gluaiseacht chruthaitheach agus ceardlanna rince do dhaoine os cionn 55 atá lonnaithe in Ionad Ealaion Ros Comáin agus bhí sí ina Rinceoir Cónaithe le haghaidh Bealtaine 2018 le hOifig Ealaion Mhaigh Eo. Tá saothair rince léirithe aici sna scannáin; *Defrag* agus *Scaffolding Dance* le linn a cónaitheachta 2018 i dTaighde Déantúsaíochta na hÉireann, sa Mhuileann gCearr, le tacaíocht ó Chomhairle Contae na hIarmhí agus Damhsa Éireann agus in 2008, *Dance Works and Money Matters* le linn cónaitheachta i mBanc na hÉireann, mar chuid de Chlár Ealaion Ros Comáin Art@Work. In 2022 cuirfidh sí tús le cónaitheacht bliana in Ionad Ealaion Bhéal an Átha.

Based in the West of Ireland, Catherine has been working as an independent dance artist with a wide variety of organisations, age groups and abilities. She is interested in facilitating opportunities for participants, especially those new to dance, to explore movement and dance, engage with the art form and in a creative process using the body as medium.

She has worked on Artist in Schools programmes, Teacher Artist Partnerships and her residency in St Patrick's Boys National School, Castlebar, was part of RTÉ's Creative Schools documentary, *Creative Kids*. She is currently working on the new BLAST arts in education programme with Mayo Education Centre. In 2007, she founded The Elderberries, creative movement and dance workshops for over 55s, based in Roscommon Arts Centre, and she was Dancer in Residence for Bealtaine 2018 with Mayo Arts Office. She has produced dance works on film; *Defrag* and *Scaffolding Dance* during her 2018 residency in Irish Manufacturing Research, Mullingar, supported by Westmeath County Council and Dance Ireland, and in 2008, *Dance Works and Money Matters* during a residency in Bank of Ireland, part of Roscommon Arts Office Art@Work programme. In 2022, she will begin a year-long residency in Ballina Arts Centre.

[www.facebook.com/ACHILLESDI](http://www.facebook.com/ACHILLESDI)

[www.facebook.com/TheElderberriesRoscommon](http://www.facebook.com/TheElderberriesRoscommon)

## Breda Mayock

Is ealaíontóir agus ceoltóir é Breda atá ina chónaí i gCo. Mhaigh Eo. Tá camchuart agus taispeántas idirnáisiúnta déanta aici. Sainithníodh fuaim Mayock mar cheann a thrasnaíonn ceol tíre, domhanda agus gan cháim. Eisíodh a halbam *Learning Place* in 2017, tar éis di albam dá cuid i 2015 a raibh cáil air roimhe seo, a thaifead agus leis an ngiotáraí Steve Cooney. Ritheann cleachtas amharcealaíon Mayock taobh lena ceol. Tá taispeántas déanta aici i seónna aonair agus in 2018 bhí sí ina ball de Feachtas an Ealaíontóra leis an Ochtú Leasú a Aisghairm' a bhí ar taispeáint in EVA International 2018. Faoi láthair tá sí ag comhoibriú le pobal na hAfraice i Maigh Eo ar son Lá na hAfraice 2022, agus leis an Lucht Siúil ar thionscadail oiliúna ealaíne, pobail agus raidió. Seoladh píosa nua *Crowned – Scéalta i dtaobh Ghruaig na mBan Dubh* – trí obair a dhéanamh le diaspóra na hAfraice in Éirinn i Márta 2022.



Breda is an artist and musician living in Co. Mayo. She has toured and exhibited internationally. Mayock's sound has been characterised as one that transverses folk, world and alternative music with grace. Her album *Learning Place* was released in 2017, following her previously acclaimed 2015 album, recorded and produced with guitarist Steve Cooney. Mayock's visual arts practise runs alongside her music. She has exhibited in solo shows, and she was a member of The Artists' Campaign to Repeal the 8th Amendment that exhibited in EVA International 2018. Presently, she is collaborating with the African community in Mayo for Africa Day 2022, and with the Traveller community on art, community and radio training projects. A new piece *Crowned – Black Women's Hair Stories* – working with African diaspora in Ireland was launched in March 2022.

[www.youtube.com/c/bredamayock](http://www.youtube.com/c/bredamayock)



## Áine O'Hara

Amharcealaíontóir, déantóir amharclainne agus éascaitheoir í Áine a bhfuil gradaim éagsúla bainte amach aici. Cruthaíonn sí saothar spreagúil agus leochaileach do dhaoine agus a fhágtar go minic as spásanna traidisiúnta na healaíne agus na hamharclainne. Is céimí MFA í Áine de chuid An Lir, Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath agus san Institiúid Ealaíne agus Deartha, Dún Laoghaire. I measc na n-éachtaí agus na gcoimisiún a bhain sí amach le déanaí tá: Dámhachtain Sparánachta Amharclainne na Comhairle Ealaíne 2020, Dámhachtain Tionscadail A4 Sounds Studios 2020, Dámhachtain Oiliúna Ealaíona agus Míchumas na hÉireann agus dámhachtain DUETS le Féile Imill Bhaile Átha Cliath. Mar chuid de thionscadal Áine *Chronic Chats* tá foilseachán atá le teacht gan mhoill.

Áine is an award-winning visual artist, theatre-maker and facilitator creating exciting and vulnerable work for and about people who are often left out of traditional art and theatre spaces. Áine is a graduate of MFA at The Lir, Trinity College Dublin and the Institute of Art and Design, Dun Laoghaire. Recent achievements and commissions include: Arts Council Theatre Bursary Award 2020, A4 Sounds Studios Project Award 2020, Arts & Disability Ireland Training Award and DUETS award with Dublin Fringe Festival. Áine's project *Chronic Chats* includes a publication which is forthcoming.

## Sarah Searson

Tá cúlra Sarah sna healaíona, san fhorbairt chultúrtha agus san oideachas. Is céimí í ó Bhainistíocht Beartas Cultúrtha agus na nEalaíon (UCD) agus í Léann an Chultúir Phoiblí (IADT) agus ba í An Mhínealain an fhochéim a bhain sí amach ó TUD. Is coimeádaí agus stiúrthóir cruthaitheach í. D'oibrigh Sarah go forleathan sna healaíona in Éirinn, ag tacú le hionaid ealaíon agus féilte, i mbun coimeádaíochta agus ag obair le healaíontóirí i bhforbairt na n-ealaíon áitiúil. Tá sí i gceannas ar thionscadail bhonneagair caipítíl do na healaíona agus thug sí tacaíocht do roinnt eagraíochtaí ar fud na hÉireann ó thaobh fáis, athraithe agus treo straitéiseach de. Ba í an chéad Cheannaire ar Ionad na nEalaíon Cruthaitheach agus na Meán Cruthaitheach in ATU na Gaillimhe. Cuireadh le bord Ionad Ealaíon na Gaillimhe í le déanaí agus is comhalta í d'Údarás Rialaithe Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

Sarah's background is in arts, cultural development and education. She is a graduate of Cultural Policy and Arts Management (UCD) and Public Culture Studies (IADT). Her undergraduate degree was in Fine Art from TUD. She is a curator and creative director. Sarah has worked extensively in the arts in Ireland, supporting arts centres and festivals and curating and working with artists in local arts development. She has led capital infrastructural projects for the arts and supported a number of organisations throughout Ireland in their growth, change and strategic direction. She was inaugural Head of Centre for Creative Arts and Media at ATU Galway. She very recently joined the board of Galway Arts Centre and is a Governing Authority of Maynooth University.



Le teacht ar tuilleadh eolais faoin gcoimisiún seo agus faoi na saothair ealaíne, téigh go /  
More information about this commission and the artworks is available on:

[www.mayo.ie/arts/public-art](http://www.mayo.ie/arts/public-art)



Comhairle Contae Mhaigh Eo  
Mayo County Council



An Roinn Tithíochta,  
Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreacht  
Department of Housing,  
Local Government and Heritage