

Wunderkammer

*by Cliodhna Shaffrey, Temple Bar Gallery + Studios Director,
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Centre, Co Wicklow.*

It was towards the end of the studio visit that Joanna handed me a bundle of coral shells she had collected from a beach in Australia over twenty years ago. The corals looked like particles of bone, twig-shaped and weightless to hold. Their translucent surfaces inscribed by a mass of spirals and radial ribs. Strewn on the floor of her studio, the shells sat amidst an arrangement of specimens that will fill her cabinet of curiosities - pieces of fabric, bundles of thread, remnants from her own artmaking, such as the scrapings of paint which seem to have congealed into imaginary butterfly wings; mud-prints, cut by the heel of a boot and hardened into the shape of a geometric grid; images printed on cheap paper and sourced from the Web, depicting microscopic biological entities, living invisible things, like cells and microbes. The raw matter of her artmaking - the residual, as well as the sources—to be classified and pinned to her Cabinet's walls, like a personalised natural history museum. The display gives evidence of her quest for the ordered complexity found everywhere in living matter: - those invisible mathematical equations patterning symmetries, spirals, meanders, waves, foams, cracks, stripes, trees, spots. Like many other artists she is by nature a collector, collecting seemingly trivial finds and keeping the worthless loose ends of artmaking. If her cabinet will present an aura of institutional authority and imitate traditional taxonomic display, it too is the storage place of her ideas and the materials from which these spring. An inspiration found years ago on the surface of the coral shell—the delicate pattern suggesting the co-existence of coherence and mystery - remains central to her thinking. And it is not surprising that the corals with their decorative skeletons would inspire a practice that is fundamentally based in drawing.

In Emma Dexters' essay 'to Draw is to be Human', she offers a reading of Walter Benjamin's 'Painting and the Graphic Arts' —a short text written in 1917—to conclude, with Benjamin (as others have too), that drawing exists at another level in the psyche, than say that of painting: 'It is a locus for signs, by which we map the physical world, but it is also in itself the pre-eminent sign of being. (Drawing, we remember pre-dates writing). Therefore, 'drawing is *not* a window onto the world, but

a device for understanding our place in the universe'. It is precisely in this way that Joanna Kidney's art proceeds. Her methodologies demonstrate a contemporary experimental approach to drawing, using a diverse range of materials and methods in an exploration of drawing as a medium, but always doing so in relation to thinking through our existence within a scene – our interrelationship with the physical world around us, the connectivity between all things and matter – as we might imagine exists between the tiniest cells in the human body to the electrons and neutrons making up the farthest of stars. For Joanna, this interconnectivity is sought out in the infinitesimal and her art suggests a form of mapping, in part, so that we might *read* her drawings, rather than see them as representing the appearance of something which they are not.

A series of blue ink monoprints are a case in point, each constructed out of multiple repetitive mark-making—triangles, loops, arcs, spirals and blobs—rippling from the centre, leaving backgrounds blank, so the lattice-like compositions seem to float on the white paper. While these drawings suggest organic influences, they are not about the totality of an image nor represent or describe specific natural forms. They remain elusive, coming from a subjective position and the act of memory. If these origins are sourced through looking down microscopes or pouring over the published illustrations of biologists, such as Ernst Haeckel's drawings of microorganisms and sea creatures, or the lichen and molluscs sought out on her walks - her drawings are always, in themselves about a process of translation. And they perform as an act of thinking, an act of remembering. Like the poets, who hampered by language, show that meaning does not come from reality, the thing itself, but exists in the gaps. And, so, it would seem, in our interaction with Joanna's art, the ultimate pleasure happens in the act of looking. In the simplicity and obsessiveness of her mark-making, visibly manifest and legible, where no mark remains to itself, but calls out for an echo, repeating and multiplying. And what then appears to translate in her drawings is the immediacy of dynamic patterning, which like a vortex of a cluster of activity, orders invisible forces - hinting at how living things grow, how things flow.

These same ideas are explored further in a series of encaustic paintings where organic-like forms are repeated in various guises onto the waxy surface of the painting. These paintings can clearly be read as an expansion of her drawing—but they also add another dimension to her work—in their exploration of another medium, the employment of a different technique, and in her feeling for colour. Here single coloured backgrounds, sometimes a vivid yellow, or strong green or blue, but more

often a soft whitish colour, are muddied, marked and veined, and provide a dramatic setting, enobling the central motif – the curling wave forms of tracks, dots and spirals which she *draws* with paint using a metal tool. Like fragments of organic growth they seem to float through the very space that gives rise to their formation. They appear as if in a state of becoming, rather than static. (They might disappear, too, in a blink, we could imagine, once the very moment of their luminous presence dissipates). It is in the interplay between foreground (motifs) and background—an ambiguous, open space, scarred and rhythmically by accidents - a spot of red, a segment of a circle, a fissure of lines—which imbues a mysterious atmosphere to these works.

And, in the final work of Joanna Kidney's Mermaid exhibition, a large-scale translucent hanging sculpture, made with thousands of machine stitched lines of coloured thread on soluble fabric which is finally heated away - we see the evolution of a practice that is actively playful. It is a reminder too of Paul Klee's perception of drawing (from his *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, 1925), 'a line goes for a walk, moving freely, without a goal'. Indicative of a liberating approach to art-making, intuitively led, Joanna creates works which are in themselves about a process of discovery—of the medium of drawing and the potentialities of diverse materials. But it is also a process of discovery of artmaking that begins in the physical realm to evoke a metaphysical one – conjuring an unseen dynamic, structuring things in the universe.