Extreme Painting Today: Five Abstract Artists

David Carrier

What is pure art according to the modern idea? It is the creation of an evocative magic, containing at once the
object and the subject, the world external to the artist and the artist himself.

Charles Baudelaire

Welcome to our exhibition in North Dublin. Walking through the new galleries on the second floor of the Hugh Lane Gallery, what a pleasure it is to see Ruth Root's very flat horizontal pictures. Her reflective surfaces look great in this natural lighting. When then we look across the room to Seán Shanahan's vertical panels, is it not surprising to note the dramatically different way that his color seems to be physically inside the pictures. With their graceful arcs and varied designer colors, Root's paintings on aluminum come from a different world than
his matte rectangles of Medium Density Fiberboard. In the next galleries do contrast the painterly brushwork on Carmengloria Morales's Tondos with the Sean Scully's severe stripes. His oils are painted in horizontal or vertical strokes, while her wonderfully vulgar acrylic pigment, which has a rough texture, is applied at angles. Finally, we get to the room with Frederick Thursz's massive panels, which embody a very different aesthetic. He deserves to be in his own space, for the weighty layers of oil paint identify him as a belated Abstract Expressionist, one who was influenced by minimalism. Shanahan greatly admires Thursz's paintings, finding "them so moving and disturbing that their airlessness would be difficult to live with. They seem to cry." This sensibility, so heavily influenced by Rothko, now feels distant. But "I have no ambition," Shanahan adds, "for such darkness and light." He applies lighter colored paint with a rubber window wiper, creating an effect oddly akin to those impersonally painted icons said to be made without human intervention. There's much to see in this large display of artists who have not previously been exhibited together. And so before returning to take a second closer look, let us go downstairs to the permanent galleries of the Hugh Lane, to look at the Impressionist masterpieces, the wonderful Irish art, Francis Bacon's studio and, also, the permanent installation of Scully's paintings. Then we can stop in the café to have a drink and glance at the catalogue. This exhibition is great fun, don't you think?, because it uses dramatic visual contrasts to present a very challenging interpretation of contemporary abstraction. Employing no hidden iconography, containing no intrusive image quotations, these extreme paintings aspire to make no dramatic autobiographical or political pronouncements. Everything you need to understand is entirely visually available within their paintings themselves.Now the two paragraphs you have just

read are pure fiction, for my commentary, like every exhibition catalogue essay, had of course to be written long before the show we are now viewing together was assembled. Usually art critics evaluate shows after they are installed. Reversing that procedure, I must anticipate how our exhibition will look before it is hung, knowing the gallery space and the art, but not yet exactly which paintings will be on show nor how they will be displayed. Presenting Root alongside Thursz, and Scully with Shanahan, then giving Morales the last room to herself would create a subtly different effect. I have not seen a group show of our artists, and so need to speculate when envisaging its effect. And of course, when our show travels, then it have a different hanging in other spaces. Since no object is perceived in isolation, how any one work of art is perceived is vitally affected by its juxtaposition with others. An exhibition always thus projects aninterpretation, one way of understanding visual relationships amongst the art on display. Other interpretations are always possible, which is why the analogy between walking through a museum and reading an art history narrative is very suggestive. In museums, as in books, individual works of art are presented in sequences. Museums create total works of art, constructing from individual paintings a visual experience that every visitor is aware of, but which is hard to describe in words or even show in single photographs. Looking left and right as you walk through successive galleries, you see not just isolated paintings, but relationships between works of art. There always is an unavoidable tension, then, between experiencing a painting in itself, and
viewing it as an object in a larger history, illustrating some theory of contemporary art and art's history. A necessary tension, for while we seek to understand an individual work of art for its own sake, doing that requires placing it. A walk through an art museum is a narrative under another name, for you need but describe what you see as you walk to write a history. And to extend the parallel, just as you may momentarily put down a book between chapters, so too in museums a resting point is often desirable. Stepping out of the narrative in the galleries, you do well
to stop and reflect. In the Hugh Lane, the café nicely supports this function. In presenting this unavoidably fictional narrative describing the total work of art created by our five extreme painters, I call on memories, some from the recent past, others more distant and so vaguer,
all supported by photographs. I never met Thursz, but I saw his paintings at the Lelong Gallery in mid-town New York and then at its newer Chelsea branch in the 1980s and 90s. I viewed Scully's paintings in various American galleries and museums, in his Manhattan studios, and also in European exhibitions; looked at Morales' pictures in New York in the 1990s and, more recently in her studio in Italy; saw Shanahan's paintings in his house, near Milan in 2004 and again in 2007; and discussed Root's art with her in New York in late Spring, 2007. Like you then, to momentarily accept the terms of this fiction, I am only just now seeing this assembled body of paintings. In fact, as I write these paintings are gathered together in my office at the National Humanities

Center, North Carolina only in the form of photographic and digital images. Momentary focus on this commonplace writer's procedure will be rewarding, for it reveals something important about abstract art.

Nowadays, this is a true cliché, we live in an age of mechanical image production. The very title of André Malraux's Museum without Walls, which juxtaposes art from Africa and Asia, book illustrations, enlarged details of old master European paintings and stained glass windows, all seen on the same scale in reproduction, illustrates the importance of this way that all writers work. Thanks to photography, ours is an age of museums without walls. Even nowadays when so much art is accessible in public collections, almost always when we read about or write about paintings, we are seeing them in photographs. So try this experiment—take a postcard from the Hugh Lane shop and stand back to compare with the art it reproduces. It is difficult, impossible really to accurately copy colors when there is a dramatic change of scale. These inherent limitations of photographic reproductions affect the practice of criticism. It is surprising how little painting most of the greatest earlier art writers know directly, or even in reproduction. Vasari never traveled outside of Italy, Diderot and Baudelaire hardly left France, and Hegel went to Paris and the Low Countries, but not to Italy or Greece, although he wrote about the visual arts of those countries. Nowadays historians and critics are expected to travel to see the paintings they write about. But then almost always we return home to work with the aid of reproductions, producing publications that are accompanied by these same plates.

Before photography, art lovers had to travel. The grand tour took privileged Northern Europeans to Italy. (And many artists, who mostly were not privileged people, also went South.) Claremont House, the original building housing the Hugh Lane collection, was created by James Culfield, first Earl of Charlement, who in 1746 went on the grand tour. He met the Scottish born architect William Chambers on a later trip to Rome in 1763. His building, only turned into an art gallery in 1929, like many art museums later was enlarged. The rooms in which we are seeing our exhibition were completed only in 2006. The grand tour is gone, but contemporary art tourists inherit this aristocratic tradition. To properly understand much art, including many older paintings in museums, you need to see its original site. The first writer about visual art who mattered to me was Adrian Stokes. His great early books The Quattro Centro (1932) and Stones of Rimini (1934) focus on fourteenth-century sculpture. And so starting in the early 1970s, I traveled in Italy, first by bus and train, then driving going to cities and small towns of Tuscany and Umbria, to Pesaro and Rimini on the Adriatic coast, and, eventually, North to Genoa. I eventually visited almost all of the places Stokes wrote about. A few years later I went around Rome and then also in Turin using Rudolf Wittkower's great survey Art and Archeology in Italy 1600 to 1750 as my guide. In the early 1980s, I spent a month in Venice, employing John Ruskin's Stones of Venice and Giulio Lorenzetti's Venice and Its Lagoon. I spent a happy week exploring the

Christian and Islamic monuments of Istanbul with Strolling through Istanbul in hand. In 1998 I taught for a month in Hangzhou, long an important center for Chinese artists. That city, I quickly discovered, is a perfect subject for painters working with ink brush on rice paper. Biking or walking in the humid summer rains, you immediately recognize how a long scroll captures the effect of moving around the lake, and why ink on paper is the perfect medium for showing the mists. And in 2004 when I lectured in India, I saw the Hindu sculptures in Elephanta and the paintings in the National Gallery, New Delhi, my sense of this art was inseparable from the obvious visual pleasure provided by the colorful saris and textures of the densely populated everyday life. You cannot isolate old master European or Asian art from its site. But what about contemporary art, does it also have such a setting? Starting with the French Salons of the 1760s, even before modernism typically most paintings were moveable objects. Nowadays almost all works of art, even the very largest ones, are made to be detached from their original settings. Morales and Shanahan have done site-specific commissions; some of Root's earlier paintings directly engaged the architecture of her New York Gallery; and Scully created Crann Soilse (1992), a massive wall to the left of the entrance to the University of Limerick. But usuallyMorales, Root, Scully, Shanahan, and Thursz do not work for a site. None of the paintings in this exhibition were created for the Hugh Lane Gallery or our other venues. For the study of contemporary painting, so I would argue, the studio visit is the equivalent to these pilgrimages to old master art. Just as the art historian understands older art by going to its original setting, so very often the art critic comes first to know contemporary paintings in the artist's studio. Learning about the studio setting and what an artist sees just before or after getting to work can be influential. I know a great abstract painter who lives in relative isolation in upstate New York. Whenever I visit him, and we go out to the large barn in which he works, I am aware that his very contemplative art is the natural product of this setting. A Manhattan painter would be more likely to be aware of the chaotic, noisy world right outside the studio, and so either respond or learn to tune it out.

Marcel Proust, who was extremely sensitive to settings of visual art, presents a studio visit in the second part of the second volume of In Search of Lost Time. It's summer and young Marcel is at the beach with his aristocratic friend Robert Saint-Loup. At dinner the boys see Elstir, an imaginary artist, who invites Marcel to his studio, an invitation that Marcel lets drop until his grandmother presses him. He is surprised to discover that the painter lives in an ugly house. In the studio Marcel sees an Impressionist masterpiece, Harbor at Carquethuit. Objects depicted by Elstir undergo metamorphosis, a visual equivalent to metaphor in poetry. "The moon," this is Wallace Stevens's metaphor, "is the mother of pathos and pity." Good metaphors make suggestive, unexpected comparisons. So too do Elstir's paintings, transforming awareness of the visual world by showing its essential visual qualities, and thus giving aesthetic pleasure. Proust's characters, compulsively comparing people to those depicted in paintings, thus transfigure their banal everyday experience. Obviously abstract paintings cannot have this effect. In this way

Proust's art world has become very distant. I did studio visits with four of our artists. Morales lives and works in Sermugnano, close to Orvieto, which is just an easy hour's drive North of Rome. In her three story old house, you view paintings in the large working rooms, and also in the domestic setting, which is filled with her own art, and that by friends. An art school library could be stocked from her large collection of books, catalogues and journals. Take care when you climb down the rickety stairs to see her four enormous shaped panels, the Entierro canvases which, she says, "you could sink into, conceived for a square room with a door at each of its four corners." You then reach Shanahan's studio in Montevecchia, just North of Milan, in a morning's fast train ride plus a short drive. But he works in a different setting, both because modern industrial Milan provides a different environment than rural Orvieto and also because his living style is very unlike hers. Shanahan's elegantly spare living and working space seems to absolutely suit his determinedly unanecdotal art. In his surroundings, as in his painting, he strips away everything that is not essential. Root's studio loft near Chinatown, lower Manhattan, is yet another, very different setting. Passing through bustling commercial Canal street inspires reflection about the relation of her smoothly crafted surfaces to the clothing and electronics sold nearby. And Scully's working space, a couple of miles North, is just South of the Chelsea galleries around Tenth Avenue. (He paints also in Barcelona and in the German countryside near Munich.) His studio with high ceilings and natural lighting is larger than all but a few of the nearby commercial spaces. You need only look up to see the relationship between the rhythms of his paintings and the industrial-scale architecture of this grand building.

Earlier I noted the practical importance of photographs for contemporary art writers. In an obvious connection that reveals much about the paintings in our exhibition, the birth of abstract art and photography were intimately linked together. The invention of the photograph in the mid-nineteenth century pushed visual artists to paint abstractly. So long as painting was centrally concerned with representation, art's development involved improvement in techniques of illusionism. Giotto leads to Masaccio leads to Michelangelo. This, the story told by Giorgio Vasari's Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects (1550), is the narrative of progressive development extended by Ernst Gombrich in the mid-twentieth century to include Constable and Impressionism. But that story can to an end once photography dramatically challenged painting. Art then had to become abstract. Traditional painting was meaningful because it represented what mattered, sacred events and powerful people. Can we tell a comparable story about abstract painting? Since it does not aspire to match appearances, how can it legitimately extend this grand tradition? Abstraction pursues different goals. In what way, then, does it have its own history? We value figurative painting because of its ability to tell stories and represent people, places and things. Since abstract painting cannot do that, what equivalent values can it offer? When art became abstract, it needed to find a new way to establish its importance. Here historical thinking is essential. We pay close attention to Root's, Shanahan's and Thursz's color and

contemplate Morales's and Scully's brushwork because abstract paintings are linked to a long artistic tradition. Without this historical awareness, these paintings would be merely decorative color samples. Philosophers have often asserted that aesthetic experience involves concentrating on the here-and-now for its own sake. Walter Pater's classical account makes this claim: In its primary aspect, a great picture has no more definite message for us than an accidental play of sunlight and shadow for a few moments on the wall or floor: is itself, in truth, a space of such fallen light, caught as the colours are in an Eastern carpet, but refined upon, and dealt with more subtly and exquisitely than by nature itself.This sentence is often identified as a seminal expectation of Henri Matisse's decorative painting and, even, as an anticipation of abstract art. But for our purposes that characterization of Pater's analysis is seriously misleading. To understand how our extreme painters use color in form to create intensely expressive abstractions, we need to recognize how they make use of art's history. Because long ago artists depicted sacred subjects, now it is possible to create abstract paintings, which have all of the emotional power of traditional figurative works of art. Our painters have worked out in a most convincing and direct way the implications of this history, developing Western tradition in a dramatic, unexpected way. All visual works of art have presence, a here-and-now-ness inevitably lost in reproduction, whether that reproduction be an old fashioned engraving or a modern color plate. A photography can present, however inadequately, the subject of a figurative picture. But just as the Qur'an, the direct word of God, cannot truly be translated from Arabic into any other language, so abstract paintings are essentially unreproducible. Photographic reproductions of any visual work of art reveal little about the colors and physical presence of the absent originals. And they are specially limited when used as substitutes for abstract paintings, which have striking presence. A small photograph of a painting can never be visually equivalent to that object.
In the pre-modern world, presence had sacred connotations. Then, so the art historian Hans Belting writes, "the beholder was in touch with the real presence in, and the healing power of, the image." When representations were rare, figurative pictures were powerful because there was a tendency to blur the distinction between images and what they depict. A sculpture of Christ or a painting depicting the Holy Virgin seemed to pious believers to be indistinguishable from the sacred figures made present in these representations. Unlike such traditional art, abstract painting does not represent sacred subjects. And so far as I am aware, none of our artists are religious believers. But it is impossible to understand their paintings without grasping the way that they deal in mystery and spiritual energy, in a way that reveals a profound relationship with older sacred art. When Thurz relates his art to alchemy, saying that he would "like to take the colored light on the gray stone of Chartres, and . . . have it just like that without any support," he appeals to this way of thinking. So too does Shanahan: Format, color, sides, material- both surface and means of covering, tone, impregnability, porousness, edges,have only one goal . . . . that is to intensify the confrontation, with the painting in its totality.But once you have confronted these

paintings, then you can re-experience them in mere reproductions. The attention demanded by the abstract paintings of Morales, Root, Scully, Shanahan, and Thursz is the exact equivalent, in our secular age, of the religious experience provided by old master art. Shanahan speaks for them when he says: “My approach is emotional. I want to see what I feel. I want to make it present, manifest it.” To properly understand their art, like that of their Christian precursors, you need to detach yourself from everyday concerns and attend very closely, without having any practical expectations. But where believers prayed before their icons, we contemplate our abstract pictures. In every work-a-day experience we stare at computer screens, totally caught up in useful images which disappear the moment when we turn off the power. Abstract paintings, by comparison, are so very physical, so permanent and also so practically useless. They are abstract, and so inspire close prolonged viewing. Shanahan spends “a lot of time staring at the paintings. I imagine lots of things, I dream before them.” Join me and do the same in our exhibition. You need to take time, to abandon yourself to looking at objects that contain no narrative, and so convey no explicit message. Scully says: Mystery in art is very important to me. I feel that a lot of that is being squeezed out of art in today’s mechanized, digitized world. A number of the twentieth-century artists I most admire . . . created mythologies in order to keep mystery at the core of their work and to fight off a sense that they were becoming disconnected from the natural world.Unless contemporary art creates a sense of mystery, it merely replicates our everyday experience of the world outside the gallery. Giving close prolonged attention requires accepting mystery. A visual work of art is best experienced directly face-to-face. And so when looking at paintings we need to practice what Clement Greenberg called tunnel vision, shutting out awareness of everything else. Only then can we experience their presence. The immediate accessibility of the art by Morales, Root, Scully, Shanahan and Thurz is an essential part of its power. But, I would add, understanding why their paintings possess this presence requires placing them in a larger narrative. To understand why Thursz lays down layers of color; how Morales uses the tondo; and the ways Scully aggressively abuts his fields of stripes; Shanahan suspends fields of color in his fiberboard; and Root composes her color patches, you need to know how they think of art’s history. Were all older European paintings except, say, for a single Nicolas Poussin, to be destroyed, we would still be able to appreciate his virtuosity in creating visual narratives. If, however, only the art of Morales, Root, Scully, Shanahan and Thurz survived, then their abstract paintings would be all but impossible for future scholars to understand. The way that they lay down color, the materials they paint on, and the shapes of their pictures have meaning only in relation to this long history. Seen in isolation, without awareness of the history of art, these individual abstract paintings would seem merely attractive decorations. Imagine, then, an elaborate exhibition, larger than the actual show you are visiting. Unlike the real thought not-yet-realized display described at the start of this essay, this exhibition will never be, for it requires impossible loans. But imagining it provides a very valuable way of

understanding the real exhibition that you are viewing. Thursz, let us suppose, shares a gallery with some Soutines, allowing us to compare two Jewish expressionists. Seeing his abstractions next to Hill at Céret (1921), observe how Thursz, like his predecessor, creates all-over fields of intense color. Looking then at Return from School after the Storm (1939), contrast the ways that Soutine's expression draws strength from figurative content, while Thursz relies just upon large scale fields of paint. And Root's art we place next to a couple of Max Beckman's Self-Portraits, with his piercing eyes catching ours. How benign, by contrast, are the peeping eyes in her abstractions, which serve rather to self-consciously call attention to our position before the picture, as if the painting were a voyeur. Even when now she omits those eyes, this effect remains important. Beckman's aggressive male posturing, so essential to his expressionism, brings out by contrast her feminist concern to decenter the spectator. Seeing a Root, you readily allow your eyes to wander freely, without feeling constrained to return the gaze. Morales gets her paintings hung alongside some Rothkos, for his exhibition in Rome, 1963 was a key inspiration: Can you analyze love at first sight? Rothko immediately cut into my way of using colour. . . . I liked the elemental structure of the painting, classical and centered. However the absence of gravity in his painting and his reliance on light and depth were alien to me. Unconsciously I was looking for something else, for a less sublime reality, more frontal and earthbound. How much earthier are her vulgar aluminum, bronze, copper and gold pigments. Morales is all for art history. Painting, she says, "should find the dignity it had seven centuries ago." The Renaissance tondo with its perfect circularity had many sacred and secular meanings. It was a symbol of God, the structure of an ideal church, the natural shape for paintings showing the Holy Family and, thanks to its domestic associations, a form associated with childbirth. Then it disappeared from high art. The Cubists mostly used ovals, not tondos. Morales employs these associations for, as she says: "Ovals . . . include all the history of painting." Her shaped canvases link her to an old master tradition, which Rothko was at pains to escape. The inability to represent drama is part of Mediterranean culture . . . there is always an empty canvas . . . stay away! You are looking on, you have created a drama . . . however you are looking at a work that is a drama, not at a drama She, a Mediterranean person, is not a Northern Romantic like him. Shanahan's paintings we set next to large Delacroixs, knowing how much he admires that French master:I found the explosive energy that Delacroix manages to momentarily control in order to make the paintings, the fearlessness, the lack of rhetoric and the general air of grandeur in the early work to have been an ennobling source of inspiration. When I came to the Journals, I was completely won over by the desire for construction that at first is less obvious in the paintings.When Shanahan eliminates narratives, he focuses more attention on color. The lines through his color fields, an abstract equivalent to Delacroix's traditional subjects, compose the picture. Is Shanahan then a belated, low simmering Romantic? I have, in a way, anesthetized the work, only to be shocked again by

the colour and presence of the paintings when I stand before them (a little like waking up). The literary side of the paintings interests me less, even though I acknowledge its importance.
To talk about this presence of abstract painting is, in large part, to talk about the power of color. The elimination of storytelling and figurative subjects in abstract painting focuses more close attention on color. As Shanahan notes, itis an emotional short circuit. When colour and application are separated you no longer talk of painting. The simultaneousness of information in colour is what has always intoxicated me. I can think of nothing more mysterious, both present and imagined. I want the colour to be mass.Our exhibition will help us understand his mysterious statement. And I would set Scully's Roma next to some Caravaggios from Santa Maria della Populo, Rome. (I know that these paintings don't travel, but do indulge my instructive fantasy.) In The Crucifixion of St. Peter, Scully notes, there is a green cloth on the floor in the right foreground. The gradually cruel story is once again painted in red, orange, brown and black, all humid and dramatic colors. The green is shocking in its coolness, and brings the drama to a dead stop. Then you start it up again yourself—I painted Roma like this. How suggestive then to see Roma alongside Crucifixion of St. Peter. Scully notes that these Caravaggios are based on black and red. Then he adds very sparingly and with great emotional power blue or green. But this is not run through the painting as in the case of black and orange and red. It is used as a specific point, as a kind of exotic emotional station, where the rhythm of the painting stops, and starts up again. When I came back from Rome . . . I painted Rome, all red and black with a blue band. Looking across from Scully's abstraction, we can better understand Caravaggio's color.

Formalist critics from Roger Fry and Greenberg, down to Michael Fried and Frank Stella, love to construct genealogies, historical narratives in which contemporary painting is the inevitable product of a long tradition. In Greenberg's history, the French modernists' concern to represent appearances made possible the dialectical opposite, abstraction. While Monet created the shadow of a traditional painting, the cubists arrived at the skeleton of one. Then in the 1940s Pollock took up the concerns of Analytic Cubism circa 1912 "from the point at which Picasso and Braque had left it when . . . they drew back from the utter abstractness for which Analytic Cubism seemed headed." Thanks to the cunning of history, search for one goal can instead yield the extreme opposite. From Giotto to Courbet, the painter's first task had been to hollow out an illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat surface. One looked through this surface as through a proscenium into a stage. Modernism has rendered this stage shallower and shallower. In this narrative in which Impressionism leads to cubism leads to Abstract Expressionism, linking old masters to contemporary artists became a way of giving value to the new art. Nowadays we have become all too conscious of the inherently problematic character of these genealogies to find them satisfying. That Thursz can be set alongside Soutine, Root next to Beckman, Morales alongside Rothko, Shanahan adjacent to Delacroix and Scully in the same room with Caravaggio, while certainly visually suggestive, does not in itself necessarily demonstrate that our painters

have any real relationships with these deservedly much admired predecessors. It is one thing to demonstrate how an artist learns from someone of the immediately previous generation and quite another to link historically distant figures like Thursz and Soutine or Scully and Caravaggio. Once we recognize how very different are the works of art presented in these comparisons, then we should legitimately worry about what they demonstrate. No merely rational argument can demonstrate that there the relationships between our extreme painters and their precursors. To connect them requires what can only be called, to use the vocabulary of religion, a leap of faith. Speaking of the importance of seeing has to be understood in an absolutely literal way. Prolonged attentive close looking is required to see how Morales, Root, Scully, Shanahan, and Thursz achieve the same presence as their old master precursors.

Thus far I have imagined a visitor to the Hugh Lane who is familiar with contemporary painting. But doing that may be limiting, for very many people, including a surprising number of museum goers, find abstract art absolutely bewildering. We champions of abstraction would do well, then, to step back and take these people's concerns seriously. What odd objects these works of art are! Imagine an intelligent visitor who knows little about contemporary art. When this person looks at these paintings by Morales, Root, Scully, Shanahan and Thursz they only see oddly colored flat surfaces. What do they need to be told in order to comprehend the aesthetic and spiritual values of this art? Usually exhibitions like the real show we are visiting or the imaginary historical display I have described display elective affinities. But it could be instructive to imagine, also, of an exhibition emphasizing aesthetic differences. The goal of such our third imaginary exhibition, as I envisage it, would be to identify the common goals of Morales, Root, Scully, Shanahan and Thursz by juxtaposing their paintings to works by major contemporary artists with opposed concerns.

Morales employs three distinctive traditional formats: the diptych; what might be called the altarpiece, a vertically oriented rectangle rounded off at the top; and the tondo. In great figurative art the content is irrelevant: "I only look at the subject when I don't care about a painting." But the old master formats matter. Her large tondos are the same width as the space between her hands when her arms are fully outstretched. And her altarpieces are the secular equivalent of Renaissance church paintings. Morales's diptychs always have a blank panel on the right. "The raw canvas, an oxygen bottle, must be at the right of the painted canvas and the painting must be read in the natural way, from left to right." Standing close, you naturally focus at the center point, so that the painted surface lives on the periphery of your field of vision.
A painting composed by weights: the weight of color, of the hand and of the arm that carries the brush. A painting anchored to physical presence. Each time there is infighting. A diptych and the tondo are its territory. Her classical rigor, constantly reinventing, pushes the art forward. Let us juxtapose her diptych to one of Andy Warhol's portraits, also diptychs with blank panels on the right in order, so he cynically claimed, to double their size and thus increase their price. Where

Morales's painting draws on art's history, Warhol links his to advertising and commercial movies. And while she seeks an aesthetic effect, he is concerned with garrish, eye-catching colors. Like Warhol, Morales is very interested in questions of gender and painting: Up to now definitions of the feminine have been crudely produced by a male-oriented culture and often used to indicate weakness. If pink is feminine/weak, is this also true of the pink of Velazquez, Goya, Manet and Picasso? Not to mention Pontormo or Matisse. If lightness is girlish, Klee is quite a girl. While acknowledging the historical importance of this way of thinking, Morales refuses to accept these clichés:I think art is charged with sexuality, but it's not the sexuality that's printed on one's passport. Is Michelangelo's art strong, masculine, tender, homosexual, feminine? I'd say it's universal, which means that sexual connotations are blended in the work as parts of a great symphony. If the color makes her art feminine, does its large scale make it masculine? But then, as she notes, placing artists always has been difficult.Perhaps in the work of Botticelli, which reflects a narrower universe, we can find those signs, which are attributed to the feminine. So I'll leave open the question of whether femininity is a major element in my work. I paint. And just as my work contains the cultural contradictions that permeate us all, my life experience and everything I know or I try to understand, so will it also contain the by no means negligible fact that I am a woman artist.Warhol is regularly praised or criticized for displaying his gay male sensibility. This juxtaposition of diptychs will allow us to think seriously about Morales's relationship to him. And Root's abstractions I would show alongside a group of Peter Halley's paintings. Taken in isolation, his hard-edged geometric pictures can look surprisingly traditional. But they need, ideally, to be closely hung, for then standing in his visual environment is like watching a wall of television monitors. You feel flooded with images whose meaning is absolutely elusive. Apart, perhaps, from Barbara Kruger no one else is better at orchestrating visual shock. Halley understands that in our visually busy culture, only hyper-aggressive abstract painting stands a chance. His are the fastest paintings I have seen. Viewing our Halleys at the Hugh Lane is like drinking three sugar-laden double expressos in rapid succession. Using intense, almost painful visual overload, he creates a purely synthetic world, like the post-modern city as described so brilliantly in his art writing, which thus becomes almost aesthetically pleasurable. "What I dream of," Matisse wrote, is an art "devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art," he adds, which for the businessman could be "something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue." He would be very started by Halley's art, but could certainly understand its goals. After a too long day working before his computer, a very privileged, over-stressed stockbroker will gain intense pleasure from these painfully stimulating paintings. Root, by contrast, wants that we relax the gaze. I want to juxtapose her windows opening onto shallow spaces to his cells to see how she, unlike him, cultivates a sense of humor. Halley is a marvelous decorative artist, but her art can compete with his.If Jasper Johns is our master of philosophic art in which, as Baudelaire characterizes it, "a great attention to

detail must be brought to bear . . . everything is allegory, allusion, hieroglyph, rebus." Scully, by contrast, is our great pure artist. Baudelaire associates philosophical painting with "reasoning and deduction . . . the province of the printed book," which are the recent concerns also of Johns. To understand his pictures, you need to read a great deal about their sources, which often are very obscure. Scully always has been infinitely more direct. Perhaps the reasoning that led him to paint Walls of Light was complicated, and no doubt precedents could be cited. (Johns's Harlem Light (1967) shows a wall.) But you don't need to read to understand his pictures, whose purely visual sensuous qualities are totally accessible. Johns nowadays is in love with doubt, with indirectness, and with uncertainty, which is why, compared with Scully's always absolutely frontal pictures, his recent paintings are oddly disorienting. "The need to create," Scully recently said, "comes because you are split and forced to find some kind of unity. It is not a choice." He perfectly describes his 1980s style, but in the 1990s he did something different. In the 1980s, in his earlier abstractions Scully used rhythms borrowed from urban architecture to suggest narratives about dramas of daily life. Transcending such everyday conflicts, his more recent Walls of Light are visual utopias. Viewing these all-over pictures, we experience a stasis that is but another name for bliss. Architectural structures from the streets, taken into the gallery, provide aesthetic pleasure. A real wall, something you can touch and push against, typically is pretty inert. But there is nothing behind Scully's walls. People travel to see landscapes— they don't usually go to see walls, which mostly are banal. That's why it's not easy to think of a lot of paintings prominently showing them. Walls can seem ominous because often they are meant to exclude. Think of the Berlin Wall, Kafka's Great Wall of China, or the walls surrounding rich people's country houses. But Scully's walls, which reflect changing light, exclude no one and hide nothing. His paint softens the stones on which it seems to appear. Being so very direct is a rare gift in our art world. Shanahan I would show next to Francis Bacon, what puzzles me is the way that Shanahan divides the picture. I put things in the middle. The painting stretches out from the middle to a point of maximum extension, where it's held in tension. The centre is empty. . . the colour is extended from a central space. Composition (involves) putting something in the middle... With colour I can put 'nothing' in the middle. Is there not a strange affinity here with Bacon's aggressive insertion of figures centered in oddly inert background? And Thurz I would juxtapose to Leon Golub, a good painter whose political protest pictures reveal the bad science of the American art world. Golub is the artist our leftist commentators dream of, for his enemies are ours. But although his images made in the 1960s of nasty mercenaries working over their victims speak to our shared concerns, within the art world he remains a marginal figure. Judged just as a painter, perhaps he cannot compare with his greatest minimalist contemporaries. But how does Golub stack up against Thursz, whose abstractions invoke a very different vision of what comes after Abstract Expressionism? Our exhibition will allow us to see the answer. These three

exhibitions have displayed our five extreme artists, set them in art's history, and compared them to their near-contemporary rivals. They thus tell us much about how to compare their paintings, how to see their distinctive qualities, and how to place them within art's history. Ultimately, however, we have provided a merely formalist commentary, only considering the relationship of Morales, Root, Scully, Shanahan and Thursz to other painters. But nowadays when so much pressure is exerted on high art by mass culture, such an analysis cannot be fully satisfying. To fully understand our five painters, we need to juxtapose them to these popular rivals. So let us exit our Hugh Lane exhibition to see a film, hear a pop music concert, and watch television. Here we are not concerned, as earlier, with setting different paintings side by side but with something more elusive, comparing different forms of experience of art. Being in Ireland, we certainly should listen to U2. But in any city, West and East, we need not go far outside the gallery, for mass art is found everywhere.Popular art is so powerful because in all these media it employs compelling narratives, stories of life, love and death, which engage everyone. If you fall in or out of love, lose a friend or parent, and worry about politics, strife and wars, you find art that speaks to you. When under the pressure of photography painting had to give up narrative, it lost this capacity to reach large audiences. Listening to pop music or watching films or television, we enjoy being taken out of ourselves. Viewing extreme paintings, works of art that have no narratives, we are turned back upon ourselves, and so forced to contemplate. Abstract painting will never be remotely as popular as mass art, for high art is difficult. But that does not mean that we should feel discouraged or defensive, or that we should turn our backs on this inviting popular culture. Scully's paintings metaphorically employ the rhythms of everyday urban life. His stripes are not merely abstract. Our streets and office buildings are filled with repeated architectural forms and in pop music. The relationships that I see in the street in doorways, in windows between buildings, and the traces of structures that were once full of life, I take for my work. I use these colors and forms and put them together in a way that perhaps reminds you of something, though you're not sure what. After seeing his stripes, you return to see streets and hear the music differently. Frank Stella's Working Space (1986) is the best defense of abstract art by any painter of his generation. When he explains the strengths of Caravaggio or looks critically at his contemporaries and himself, what a very winning writer he is. Stella himself has moved so quickly that it would take a very gifted narrator to explain his movement from the very early Abstract Expressionist pictures and the minimalist paintings, through to the baroque complexities of his newest art. Stella's world is the world of high art, which perhaps explains why Working Space, a purely formalist analysis focuses on the illusionistic picture space. And so it is surprising to note that the source for his title is some anonymous New York City graffiti labeled "Working Space." For all of the funkiness of Stella's recent three-dimensional paintings, one does not associate him with this populist street art. In discussing the crisis of contemporary abstraction, Working Space omits any mention of mass culture, which is very surprising, for right now what

exerts the strongest pressure on all serious visual art is popular culture. Because film, television and the novel web technologies are powerful and accessible, many museum artists would bring this mass art into the gallery. But they are all doomed to fail completely. We contemplate paintings and sculptures, but are riveted by videos. Set a merely mediocre video near even a great painting, and the still image can hardly compete. When viewing moving images, you hardly aware of anything else. Video thus is an answered prayer for curators, for it allows young artists to fill enormous exhibition spaces with eye-catching moving pictures. And so, it is not surprisingly that grand claims have been made nor that many recent large survey exhibitions include a great deal of video. We write on the screens of our personal computers, and so seek out this technology also in museums. Narrative has been expelled from most contemporary painting and sculpture. But video presents narratives in real time, thus aspiring to play the role traditionally assigned to history painting. High art and video satisfy essentially different demands because we experience them in very different ways. In a one-person show, you look from one painting to another, seeing how the artist's body of work adds together. In a museum, you walk through galleries, first seeing High Renaissance art, then going on to the baroque and Neo-Classicism. It is very natural to compare and contrast several paintings in one gallery, as in our imaginary exhibitions, for even when you focus close up on one painting, you are peripherally cognizant of other nearby works of art. As you move forwards and back, you become aware of your place within the room. High art thus wears its place in history on its face. Viewing video, by contrast, you sit passively while the pictures move. Often, it seems, the speed of motion within the sequence of pictures is meant to compensate for the viewer's enforced immobility. The individual images are usually banal, but visual excitement is generated by the sequence. And usually each video is given a room to itself to eliminate visual distraction. Moving images seem powerful because they engage your total attention. Painting engages fantasy play within the real art gallery or museum rooms. Film and television makes narrated fantasy in an imaginary space transparent and compelling. Mass art has compelling narratives. Because video falls between painting and film, it offers neither the pleasures of high art, nor the power of mass art. Today extreme painting has two important enemies. There are artists like Stella who would reduce it to a rational activity, moving its history forward in a planned way. In a culture in which everything is controlled and manipulated, they flatten painting into a form of decoration. And there are those who would prolong the life of art by introducing the concerns and goals of mass culture into the museum. Neither of these ways of thinking can be effective. If high art just becomes decoration, then ultimately it is no more aesthetically significant than the well-designed utilitarian devices in our homes and offices, useful things that do not belong in museums. And then contemporary art is cut off from its roots in a wilder history of old master painting, which should provide essential sources of strength for abstraction. But when artists try to bring the techniques of mass culture directly into the gallery, then inevitably they create weak versions of powerful popular art forms.

Painting can live in our world of mass art only by retaining a serious relationship to its history. The primitive power of figurative art to depict is recaptured in the presence of abstract painting. But this does not mean that high art then has a merely defensive relation to popular art forms. Greenberg argued in 1939 that mass culture is essentially opposed to the world of high art. Now thanks to Warhol and his successors, that situation has changed completely. On television we see endless sequences of mostly banal images which hold our attention only because they change so quickly. Mass art thus provides entertainment. Looking at abstract paintings, by contrast, we should come prepared for slow contemplation. And yet, as Scully notes, it is impossible to understand the emotional power of his stripes without noting their roots in popular culture. The repeating rhythm and structures running through my work are powerfully connected to Rock and Roll because they are unrelenting. This is the character of rock and roll that made it so objectionable and true in the first place. Our other artists share his concern to ground painting in the larger culture. At a time when almost around us is made produced in factories, abstract paintings are very special sorts of artifacts. Consider, for example, Shanahan's colors:
He sees them first inwardly, in their size and nature, then brings them into being—in a creative act that has more of the artisan than the artist. Sometimes it takes him as long as a week to produce the particular mix. . . Each colour is different. . . None has ever been seen before by the viewer. . . It has no name and comes from a highly personal intimacy.Viewing a film or just shopping, we see endlessly repeated colors, which quickly become clichéd. Looking at Shanahan's paintings, by contrast, we are aware of highly individual colors. Like Elstir's Harbor at Carquethuit and the other works of art described by Proust, our abstract extreme paintings thus do transform everyday visual experience. Certainly this high art stands outside mass culture, but it gains essential power from this attachment to reality. Unless abstract artists can take account of the larger culture, their paintings will remain isolated in the museum. Extreme painting, as Scully rightly says, is "a place of freedom, a place where one can recuperate, a place where one can re-humanise oneself, relocate oneself, remake oneself."

A great deal of recent museum art has been concerned to make political arguments about feminism, identity politics and other issues. But this art always preaches to the choir, for few people in the art world would reject its claims and it reaches no one outside museums. Real political advocacy requires taking action. Compared with mass art, abstract art has small audiences, and so it cannot have any conceivable immediate political effect. That said, there is a real political dimension to the refusal of abstract painting to be reduced to either decoration or entertainment. Thanks to our novel technologies, everyday life is much more comfortable and, on the whole, safer than in the past. We live longer and better than our ancestors. But the price paid for this real advance is loss of contact with the sensuous aspects of experience. No wonder, then, that we desire to escape the limitations of our otherwise liberating technologies. We see this desire expressed often in mass art, which celebrates the drive to transcend the confines of a

bureaucratic culture in which everything is controlled and monitored. And we see it in our passionate fascination with art museums, which preserve ancient artifacts from now vanished cultures. We preserve old art because it makes the past real to us. The more quickly life changes the stronger our desire to hold onto the past and so the more crowded are museums. They have become so important because, in our culture that is changing so rapidly, the threat of losing contact with the past has become very pressing. In a society on more familiar terms with its own past, the need for these institutions would be less pressing.

Every sensitive contemporary artist responds to this situation when, as Scully rightly concludes:A painting is a place of freedom, and it is not here, and it is not there. It is a place that has not arrived at conclusion. And in an age of screaming information, I believe it to be so very important to have a place that one can go to that is free.By creating such a place, the art museum preserves archaic ways of thinking in a technological world. Jürgen Habermas nicely calls Scully "a traditionalist of a peculiar kind," for hekeeps painting as if modernity, which has been shaky for a long time, continues to rest on solid ground. Scully succeeds in persevering with a modernity that has been transformed into a tradition, and he does this without relapse.Here Habermas also effectively describes Morales, Root, Shanahan and Thursz, for these extreme artists all use and radically transform the Western visual tradition, keeping art alive by maintaining its contact both with its past and with the world outside the museum. Abstract Expressionism led to minimalism, a movement which developed in a natural way out of Greenberg's formalism. If, as he claimed, the history of modernism reveals the essence of painting, then the inevitable next development involved stripping visual art of all its non-essential qualities. A painting, it was discovered, was essentially a flat pigment-covered surface, for all of the other qualities of traditional visual art—narrative, subject, composition--proved in the development charted bymodernism to be dispensable. And so when Lucio Fontana, Agnes Martin, Yves Klein, Robert Mangold, and Robert Ryman made minimalist pictures, then it was natural to see them as realizing this prophecy. The fact that Greenberg himself did not admire these paintings did not matter especially. How often does a father figure acknowledge his children? Keeping abstraction and the large-scale canvas, the minimalists eliminated the brushwork, imagery and composition found in Abstract Expressionist paintings. A minimalist, it has been said, is made from an Abstract Expressionist repressed. For many artists going beyond Abstract Expressionism to Minimalism seemed a natural step.Alexander Rodchenko's and Kazimir Malevich's early twentieth-century monochrome paintings were isolated experiments, too historically distant from our artists to function as immediate sources. But minimalism was right at hand, and so had to be dealt with. Thurz's massive pictures containing many colors show the influence of monochromatic minimalism. He said: Painting is invention, not reference or anecdote, neither depiction nor alliteration (recognized color shape or proportion external to the painting). Lilly Wei echoed his thoughts when she said that blankness "is the original condition of painting." In the 1970s,

Scully's severe narrow stripes owned something to minimalism. But then his painting changed dramatically. All of our artists, Scully says, have some "relationship with minimalism. Mine is the strongest rejection of it." They are extreme painters because they work out in a dramatic way this historical logic. Arthur Danto is Greenberg's legitimate successor, the writer who has provided the most suggestive way of understanding contemporary art. In his 1995 Mellon lectures Danto argues that ours is a post-historical period. Greenberg's Abstract Expressionists felt compelled to demonstrate the superiority of the way of art making. But now that situation has changed decisively. Released from the necessity for struggle, artists can choose any style. Danto's treatise The Transfiguration of the Commonplace imagines various Red Squares. Let us consider a painting once described by the Danish wit, Sören Kierkegaard. It was a painting of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. Looking at it, one would have seen something very different from what a painting with that subject would have led one to expect . . . troops of people . . . bearing the burdens of their dislocated lives, and in the distance the horsed might of the Egyptian forces bearing down. Here, instead, was a square of red paint, the artist explaining that 'The Israelites had already crossed over, and the Egyptians were drowned.'But it could also be a Moscow landscape, Red Square; a Buddhist sacred work, Nirvana; a still-life by a follower of Matisse, Red Table Cloth; or a paint sample, a mere artifact "whose philosophical interest sconsists solely in the fact that it is not a work of art."

Danto's imaginary examples nicely brings out the way that abstract paintings are so often interpreted in dramatically opposed terms, as either highly spiritual or utterly materialistic, as either marking the end or the beginning of history. His brilliant analysis treats his red panels as if they were color samples, capable of being substituted interchangeably in these varied contexts. When, by contrast, we consider our extreme abstract paintings, unique physical presence is essential. Ultimately, then, Danto's account has the same problem as Greenberg's formalism. Presenting works of art as objects in a sequence takes us away from what ultimately matters most, focusing on their individual visual qualities. Danto argues that the history of art has ended, which makes everything possible—including abstract painting. If, rather, as we believe, the history of art has not ended, then contemporary abstraction defines the dominant ongoing tradition. Abstract painting is one of the great, almost unprecedented developments of modernism. Looking back over the long history of Western art, it would have been impossible in 1880 to imagine the paintings of Kandinsky, Rothko and Ryman. Nothing created by Giotto, Caravaggio or Manet allows us to envisage these abstractions. Indeed, it is hard even now to cite real precedents. When some scholars compare Inca fabrics, Islamic decorations or details in Tantric Buddhist pictures to modernist Western abstractions, then inevitably we have a sense that these somewhat similar looking things really are extremely different. Abstract art, the product of a very distinctively Western history, was created when painting's traditional concern with representing appearances was effectively challenged by photography. In order for

this painting tradition to continue and develop, art had to become abstract. No other visual culture developed in this way. Right now neither Greenberg nor Danto can provide guidance, for ours in a radically novel situation. When I became a critic, twenty some years ago, abstraction, pushed out of its rightful place in the contemporary art world, became a subject only for academic discourse. And so as yet we critics do not know how to understand contemporary abstraction. In his highly original recent study of modernism, the art historian Joachim Pissarro, grandson of Camille Pissarro, draws attention to the role of communities amongst painters. The urge to communicate, he argues turns the agents of communication into sites of exchanges, and creates between them a sociable nexus, a live relationship. These relationships, in order to exist as such, need rules of action, or norms. Our extreme painters have created a virtual community, now physically gathered together in our exhibition, which gives every reason to be very optimistic. Unlike the French Impressionists or the Abstract Expressionists, our five artists are not a closely-knit social group. Some of them are friends, but this is the first time that they have been exhibited together. And while the Abstract Expressionists were a very American group, our artists are seriously concerned also with modernism in Europe. Two of our artists, Scully and Shanahan, are Irish born, but both have for a long time lived abroad. Morales, born in Chile, studied, taught and paints in Italy. And Root and Thursz are Americans, although he also worked in Europe. For Thursz, Jean Fautrier is as important as Rothko, and Morales and Shanahan care as much about Fontana as his American contemporaries. The shared concerns of our extreme artists arise, then, because they understand abstraction in similar ways. “None of us are lyrical or pastoral painters. There is a desire for the tree roots rather than the falling leaf” (Shanahan). Now, as in Greenberg’s era, abstraction is the single most vital ongoing tradition. When art cuts itself off from history, it loses its most essential power. Abstract painting remains capable of extending the great traditions of Western art. And it has the visual stamina needed by high art when mass culture threatens to dominate visual thinking. Our exhibition shows the history of recent modernism as it should have been, if the development of Abstract Expressionism had not been interrupted. Abstraction in painting needs to be redefined in this age of digitalized imagining when everything has become all too abstract. I can think of no better starting point than our exhibition, which displays magnificently five marvelous artists, extreme in their originality, their skill and also their capacity for opening up productive ongoing dialogue.