



BREON O'CASEY
PAINTING IS ANOTHER LANGUAGE

PANGOLIN LONDON



(LEFT)
Torquay
c. 1950, Acrylic
on canvas
Unique
116 x 70.5 cm

(RIGHT)
Seascape
c. 1950, Acrylic
on canvas
Unique
88.2 x 75 cm

INTRODUCTION

It is very difficult to talk about painting: it is after all another language...

This simple yet powerful statement by Breon O'Casey in conversation with the poet Christopher Reid, captures the essence of his artistic philosophy. O'Casey was in search of an universal language, one beyond the verbal or simply visual, in which "As one paints, one thinks not in words, but in the language of colour or form." An obvious description perhaps, but as any artist will know deceptively difficult to achieve.

For centuries, the traditional canon of painting had been to create an illusion – often idealised or enhanced – of real life. Breon O'Casey however was more interested in communicating the essence and emotion of an image through his own language of shapes, marks and motifs. Pared back in form, these are brought to life with his exquisite eye for colour and ingenious combinations using subtle chromatic shifts at the boundary between two blocks of colour to give a rich depth of tone. It was not a language that developed overnight; rather it required a lifetime of refinement and this exhibition offers us a rare opportunity to reflect on its progression from the early landscapes that speak of the influence of the French Impressionists to the realisation of his own distinctive voice.

As the son of Irish playwright Sean O'Casey, whose own passion for visual art had almost led him to become a painter himself, Breon O'Casey grew up surrounded by art books and reproductions of Van Gogh, Gauguin and Cézanne. Born in London, O'Casey remembered the lively American comics of Dick Tracy of his childhood and the curious desire to study a Walt Disney *How to Draw* book that belonged to a neighbour in Battersea despite recognising that the drawings were 'rotten'.





After these tentative steps in self-tuition, it was the well-rounded arts education O'Casey received at the progressive Dartington Hall School - also attended by Lucian Freud - which seems to have been so crucial in encouraging him to become an artist. Here physical skills were considered equal to academic ones and O'Casey recalled spending all his free periods in the art room which he also described as 'a philosophy room'. With the encouragement and ethos of tutors such influential émigré artist Naum Slutzky, who had been head of metalwork at the Bauhaus, Dartington equipped O'Casey with the practical and craft-based skills that served him so well throughout his career as a maker and undoubtedly contributed to O'Casey's distinctive approach to his wide variety of media.

It was an exhibition of paintings by Picasso and Matisse held in 1945 at the Victoria and Albert Museum which O'Casey recalled as 'one of the epiphanies of his life' after the hiatus of war. He said:

You hadn't seen any of the pictures that they'd been doing, and they were so powerful. It was extraordinary to see them suddenly after this rather genteel, sort of faint English art. 'God blimey', I thought.. this really is it. This is the cat's whiskers alright. And that left an enormous impression on me that show.

After two years of National Service in the Army, O'Casey returned to London where he enrolled at another progressive, but sadly short-lived, educational centre

(LEFT)
Breon O'Casey painting
his sister Shivaun in
the 1950s.
Photograph: Gjon Mili.
(Courtesy of the
artist's estate)

(RIGHT)
Rainforest
2010-2011
Acrylic
on board
Unique
95 x 125 cm





the Anglo-French Art Centre in St John's Wood. Founded in 1946 by Alfred Rozelaar Green who aspired to revolutionise British art education, artists such as André Lhote, Fernand Léger, Germaine Richier and Jean Lurçat were invited from Paris to teach students along with British artists Francis Bacon, Julian Trevelyan, Victor Pasmore and Henry Moore.

Not wishing to take an exam in his third year, O'Casey returned to live with his parents in Totnes and struggled with the enormous anti-climax of leaving London and the lack of energy after art school. His paintings at this time were, according to him, more in the style of Bonnard and focused on still lifes and portraits such as this one of his sister Shivaun, captured here by the well-known photographer Gjon Mili (p.4).

In this rare and early landscape of a street in Torquay (p.2) we see the inklings of the exciting transformation that O'Casey's painting was about to undergo. The loose and energetic brushwork of the sky contrasts with the pattern of regimented railings, and the square blocks of blue used to depict the sea bear a tantalising resemblance to later abstract works. Yet it was not until 1959, tired of feeling like a 'rhinoceros' walking down the streets of Torquay, did O'Casey make the move to St Ives after seeing a television programme about the artist Alfred Wallis. He said of this important transition:

In St Ives, I felt secure, and there was a sort of electricity in the air. They talked about the artists being attracted to St Ives because of the light. That's all balls: it was the sense of camaraderie against and, at best, indifferent, and at worst, hostile world that drew them.

(ABOVE)
 Anna Livia I
 2011 Acrylic
 on canvas
 Unique
 69.5 x 130.5 cm
 (Photograph:
 Bob Berry)

Arriving in St Ives in an orange Ford van packed full of belongings, O'Casey made ends meet by making jewellery and working as a studio assistant first to sculptor Denis Mitchell and then to Barbara Hepworth. Hepworth helped support the young O'Casey by buying an early abstract painting, now in the collection of the Hepworth Wakefield, and a large silver cross that she was often photographed wearing. However, it was the extraordinary view from his studio at Porthmeor that proved the catalyst to O'Casey's more mature abstraction. Breaking the seascape up into strips of colour which he had tentatively begun whilst still in Torquay, O'Casey began to develop a method of communication that enhances the simplicity of abstraction with a warmth and joyfulness that suited his character. *View from The Studio, 1969* (p.15) an exquisite acrylic painting on paper illustrates this transition perfectly with its bold, rich colours bearing little direct resemblance to the actual colours that could be seen out of the window, but perfectly communicating what could be felt.

By 1969, O'Casey had become a key component of the St Ives art scene, serving diligently for many years as the Vice Chairman of the Penwith Society of Arts which had been founded twenty years earlier by Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicholson, Sven Berlin, Peter Lanyon and Wilhemina Barns Graham amongst others. Whilst juggling family duties, painting, weaving and making jewellery, along with the occasional night shift at the St Ives telephone exchange, O'Casey became more fluent with his new artistic language creating his own lexicon of motifs that would recur throughout his work.



(RIGHT)
 Breon O'Casey and
 his family looking out
 of the window of
 3 Porthmeor Studios,
 St Ives, 1960's.
 (Courtesy of the
 artist's estate)

Simple yet powerful shapes and marks such as the diablo and triangle featured regularly in the late 1970s and early '80s, sometimes in relief or with 'showers' of protruding nails to give a striking depth. O'Casey's signature bird outlines seen in *Flying Bird* (p.17) and *Migrating Bird* also began to develop, and in the late 1980s O'Casey started a series of distinctive figurative profiles inspired by a rare holiday with his wife Doreen to the Greek island of Halki in 1989.

O'Casey had a passion for ancient mythology, and one of the highlights of the exhibition is the opportunity to see as a whole the series of paintings titled *Leda and the Swan* (pp 34-37). As his daughter Duibhne Gough noted: "Breon's allusions to Greek myths come directly from his love of mythology and literature. He had a well-thumbed book of the Greek myths by his chair". In these works, we see O'Casey clearly experimenting with colour combinations and subtle variations of composition to express his interpretation of Zeus' transformation into a swan to seduce the beautiful Leda. It was not only ancient mythology that O'Casey drew from but contemporary literature as we see in *Anna Livia I* (p.6) and *Anna Livia II* (p.47). These two large paintings make reference to James Joyce's final book *Finnegan's Wake* and the character of Anna Livia Plurabelle who embodied the River Liffey that flows through Dublin.



(LEFT)
Katsushika Hokusai
*Amida Falls on the
Kiso Highway*
c. 1833, Woodblock
36.8 x 25.4 cm



(RIGHT)
*Waterfall I (After
Hokusai)*
1992, Acrylic
on board relief
Unique
60.4 x 46.3 cm



(RIGHT)
Halki
1989, Acrylic
on paper
Unique
59.3 x 76.7 cm
(Photograph:
Bob Berry)

The natural world also was a constant source of inspiration for O'Casey. His stunning *Rainforest* series (p.30) was directly influenced by watching David Attenborough documentaries and skilfully captures the markings and coruscating colours of the rainforest rather than any beast in particular. Unlike many artists who portray the natural world in a realistic landscape or try to replicate it in obsessive detail, O'Casey reduced what he saw into simplified elements that had a much more powerful sum of parts. He said:

I find the landscape too difficult to control and arrange into any sort of meaningful pattern: not the wood, not the tree, but the leaf; not the distant view, but the hedge, not the mountain, but the stone. I have no windows in my studio, only skylights.

A trip to the recently discovered prehistoric caves at Lascaux after the war was an important influence in this reduction of form and an important lesson in the power of outline which O'Casey felt had not been improved upon in the 20,000 years since they were made. Also influential was the Japanese master printer Hokusai whose woodblock print of the Amida falls O'Casey recognised in playful homage. Here O'Casey makes the moon the visual balancing act to the waterfall; its still and slow rise the contrasting companion to the rush and power of the fall of water. It is a one of two waterfall compositions in the exhibition that along with a number of other works such as *Spotted Moon, Planets* (p.60) or *Yellow Moon* (p.58) highlight O'Casey's interest in

astronomy, in particular the work of Galileo. Indeed, the appearance of Halley's Comet in 1986 most likely inspired the work *Three Shapes* painted the same year.

This exhibition is one of the largest ever gatherings of Breon O'Casey's paintings and offers us the unique opportunity to enjoy the development of a unique visual language from its tentative origins to its full-bodied, richly coloured voice. We hope you enjoy looking and listening to the work.

Polly Bielecka & Célia Morand

To paint is to wait and watch, to try and listen to the picture, to chance a stroke, to hope for the best.

- BREON O'CASEY



(LEFT)
Three Shapes
1986, Acrylic
on board relief
Unique
36 x 43.5 cm

(RIGHT)
Breon O'Casey in
his painting studio,
February 2009.
(Photograph:
Bob Berry)



CATALOGUE



(LEFT)
Orange plus Brown Bars
1967, Acrylic on canvas
Unique
92 x 51.4 cm

(RIGHT)
View From the Studio
1969, Acrylic on paper
Unique
60.5 x 71.2 cm

I had a studio which looked out over Porthmeor Beach, and so the view out of the studio window was the sky, and there was the sea, and then there was a breaking wave, and then there was the sand. And so, it was four stripes, really... I'd never seen a Rothko then, and I was painting these pictures and they were really just four stripes, and it was through that, in a sense, that I became an abstract painter. It was never a decision, it evolved, and I don't think of myself as an abstract painter now... I don't think anyone is an abstract painter, really. Or, as Oskar Kokoschka said - everyone's an abstract painter, all painting is abstract. But then words become meaning when everything is something.

- BREON O'CASEY



Flying Bird
1982, Acrylic
on canvas
Unique
53.3 x 90.5 cm





(LEFT)
Face
1990, Acrylic
on board relief
Unique
56 x 44 cm

(RIGHT)
Simple Relief
1978, Acrylic
on board relief
Unique
39.4 x 58.6 cm





(LEFT)
Black Over Grey
2003, Acrylic
on board
Unique
71 x 96.5 cm



(RIGHT)
Autumn Landscape
2009, Acrylic
on board
Unique
82.2 x 101.5 cm



Painting is another language, really, and it's not a language of words, and when you're really into painting... You are thinking in terms of colour, and form, and actually, if I've been painting for a long time, it's almost as if I've been speaking in, say, French for a long time, and you come back to England and you find you forget English words. Do you know that sort of feeling? And I forget ordinary words sometimes if I'm really deep into painting, because I've been thinking in this other language.

- BREON O'CASEY

Interior
2008, Acrylic
on canvas
Unique
105 x 79.2 cm

Orange
2008, Acrylic
on board relief
Unique
59 x 60.2 cm





Tree
2010, Acrylic
on canvas
Unique
95 x 125 cm

In the garden is the Tai Haku cherry tree; in the spring a mass of white blossom tinged with pale green and pink, in the summer a pattern of sturdy green leaves, in the autumn, as the leaves turn yellow then deep red, the whole garden is filled with a burnished golden light. Where is the need to look further? Look closely at the grim granite walls of the house, and they are a feast of myriad colours – delicate pinks and ochres, a thousand different greys. In the summer the dragonflies' sharp metallic colours against the deep green of hedges. The incredible hue of the magpie's wing, which is not black but blue. The harsh Burnt Sienna red of the glimpsed fox against the umber ploughed field. The black and white cat with pale green eyes and pink nose, crossing the emerald green lawn. Ben Nicholson's blackbird with a yellow beak in the holly bush; and in the winter the violets and purples of the bare trees against the grey Cornish skies.

- BREON O'CASEY



(LEFT)
Landscape
2004, Acrylic on paper
Unique
82 x 62.5 cm

(RIGHT)
Black Centre
2010, Acrylic on board
Unique
48.3 x 72.2 cm





(LEFT)
The Rainforest
2009, Acrylic on board
Unique
66 x 68.5 cm

(RIGHT)
The Rainforest VII
2010, Acrylic on board
Unique
48.5 x 65.5 cm



*It is very difficult to talk about painting: it is after all another language...
If I have to make ten rings, I can go into my workshop and make ten rings.
They may come easily, or hard, but I can do it. But I cannot go into my painting
studio and come out with ten paintings. Painting is like fishing. Over time
an expert fly fisher will catch more trout than a beginner. But there will be days
when everything is right but not a single fish. Experience helps, but chance is
there. Chance is very much there with painting. I almost feel when I am
painting, that I am watching someone else painting: watching and waiting
for the moment, or the sum of moments.*

- BREON O'CASEY

Moth Red (detail)
2010, Acrylic on board
Unique
56.6 x 66.2 cm





(LEFT)
Leda & The Swan III
(detail)
2004, Acrylic on
board, Unique
67.5 x 69 cm

(RIGHT)
Leda and the Swan II
2004, Acrylic on
board, Unique
56.5 x 78.2 cm



Leda and the Swan IV
2004, Acrylic on board
Unique
82.2 x 112 cm





(LEFT)
Reclining Nude
2008, Acrylic
on canvas
Unique
95 x 125 cm

(RIGHT)
Seated Nude
2007, Acrylic
on paper
Unique
62.5 x 43.2 cm



*It is difficult to use words to describe painting.
As one paints, one thinks, not in words, but in the
language of colour or form, one's tools are light
and dark, red and green, straights lines or curves.*

- BREON O'CASEY

Untitled (Two Flowers)
1993, Acrylic on paper
Unique
60.4 x 77.5 cm



Painting is about nothing but itself. People read things into my paintings. This is like not being able to understand the music of opera unless one has the libretto. Once you know that the tenor is singing at the top of his voice, that he is dying of a dagger wound, you can enjoy the music. I give titles to my paintings, but often only as an afterthought, to distinguish one from another.

- BREON O'CASEY

Green Bird
2010, Acrylic &
oil crayon on paper
Unique
46 x 63.9 cm





Canal
2008, Acrylic on canvas
Unique
129.5 x 92 cm

My real credo is my painting: enough words.

- BREON O'CASEY

Anna Livia II
2011, Acrylic on canvas
Unique
69.5 x 130.5 cm



SCULPTURE
JEWELLERY
& PRINTS



(LEFT)
Flower with Grey Circles
2001, Linocut
Edition of 20
57 x 68 cm

(RIGHT)
Abstract Plant II
2007, Bronze
Edition of 5
14.5 x 18 x 18 cm





Medium Boat
2010, Bronze
Edition of 9
37 x 32 x 19 cm

Blue Bird
2002, Bronze
Edition of 5
76 x 95 x 23 cm



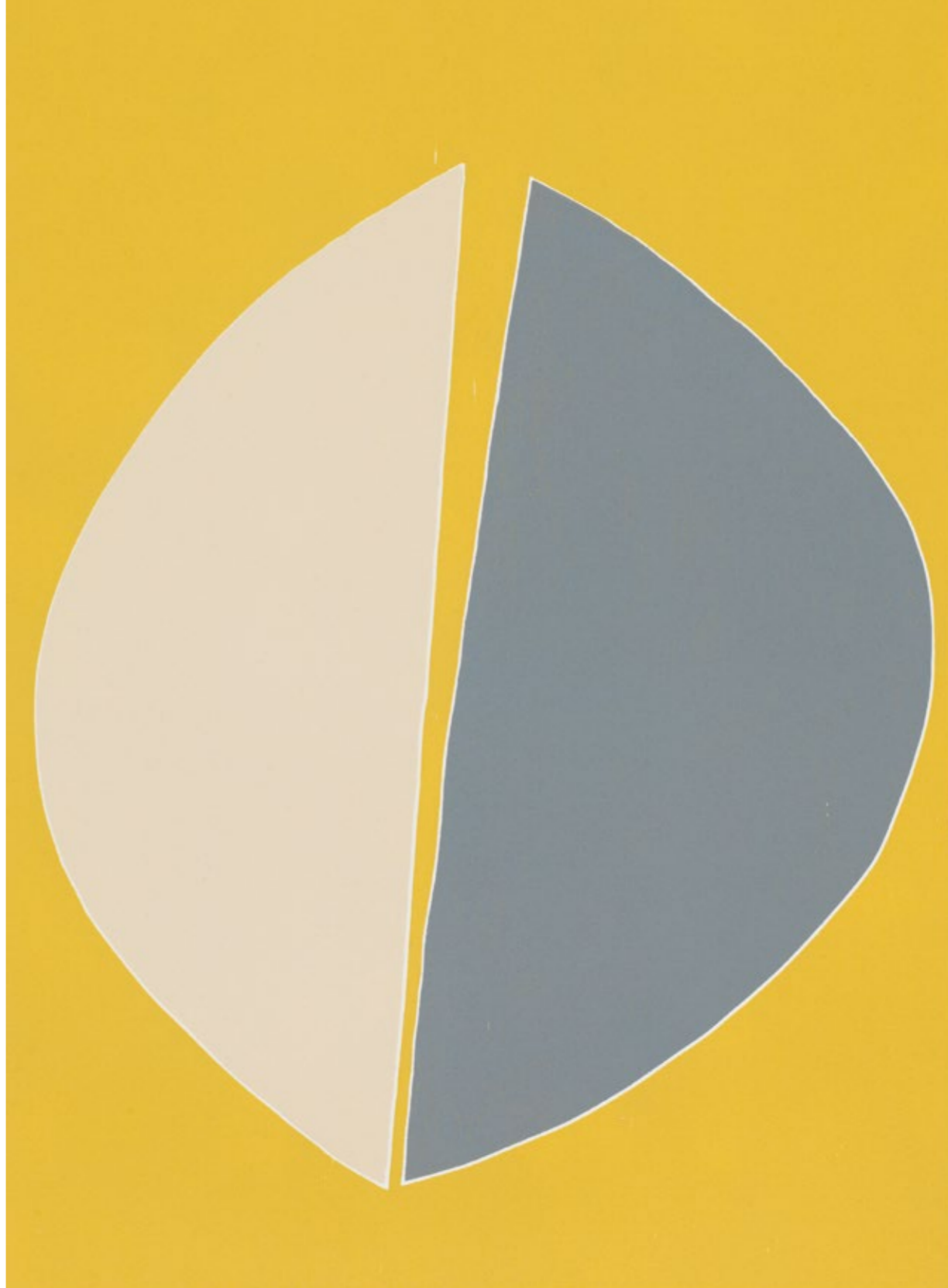


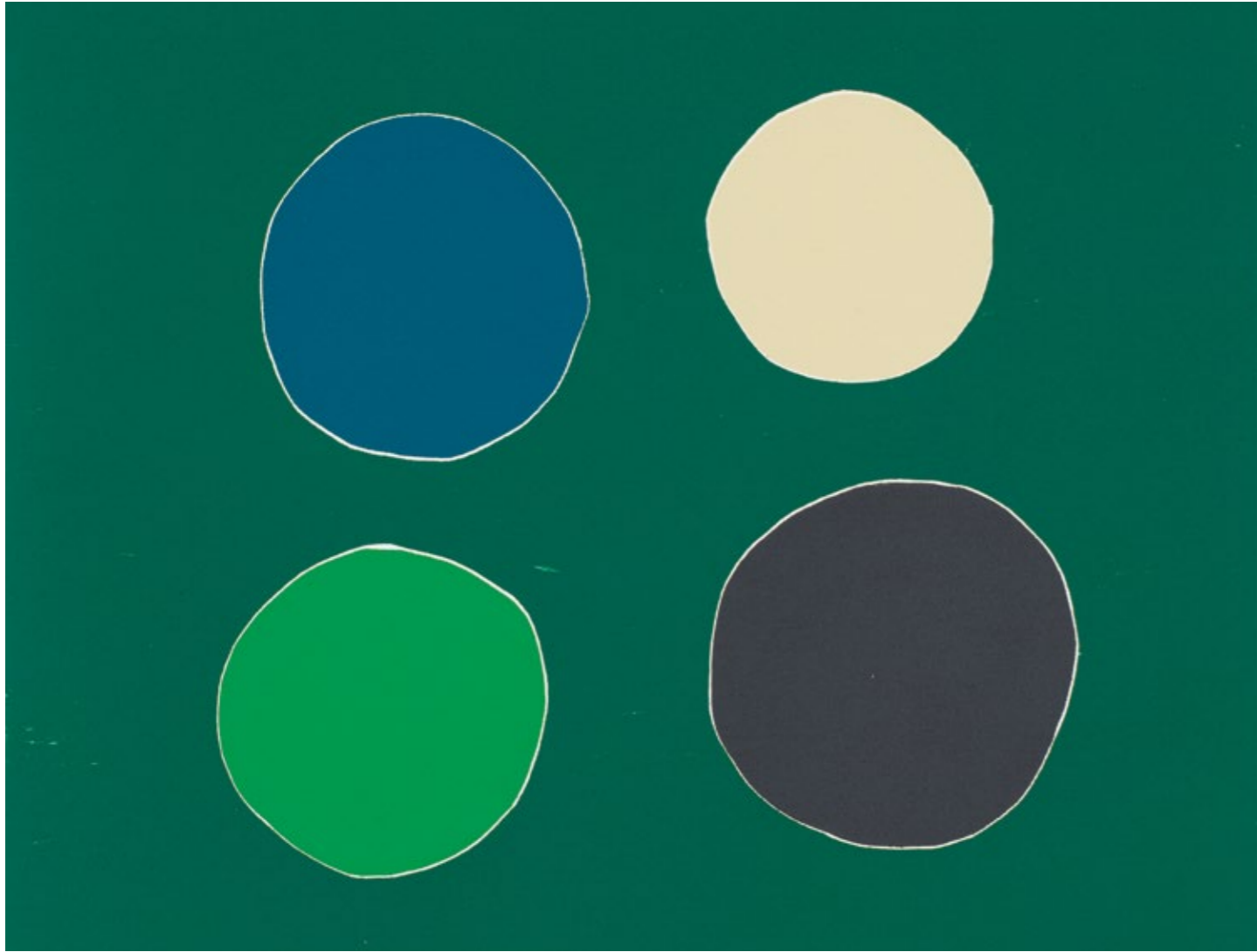
*Large Figure with
Arms Akimbo*
2004, Bronze
Edition of 5
75 x 46 x 29 cm



(LEFT)
Yellow Moon
2001, Linocut
Edition of 20
60 x 85 cm

(RIGHT)
Yellow and Grey
2003, Linocut
Unknown edition
80 x 57 cm





(LEFT)
Planets
2003, Etching
Edition of 15
64 x 74 cm

(RIGHT)
Blue Triangles
2004, Colour
screenprint
Edition of 15
49 x 68 cm





(LEFT)
*Silver and Lapis Lazuli
Earrings*
Silver & lapis lazuli
Unique
8.2 x 2.7 cm

(RIGHT)
Gold and Jasper Earrings
Jasper & 18 ct gold
Unique
3.9 x 2.6 cm

*Gold and Amethyst
Earrings*
Amethyst & 18 ct gold
Unique
3 x 2.7 cm

Gold and Coral Earrings
Gold & coral
Unique
3 x 2 cm



*Silver Squares and
Beads Necklace*
Sterling silver
Unique
Diametre: 25 cm





(LEFT)
Abstract Shapes Brooch
Silver, 18 ct gold &
yellow gold
Unique
4.3 x 5.5 cm

(RIGHT)
Profile Brooch
Silver & 18ct gold
Unique
4.8 x 3.7 cm





BREON O'CASEY

1928 - 2011

BIOGRAPHY

- 1928 Breon O'Casey born in London to Irish parents
- 1937 Moved to Totnes, Devon to attend the Dartington Hall School
- 1948-1950 Studied at the Anglo-French Art Centre in St John's Wood
- 1959 Moved to St Ives from Torquay where he met Doreen Corscadden who would become his wife
- 1959-1961 Assistant to Denis Mitchell
- 1961-1963 Assistant to Dame Barbara Hepworth
- 1967 Became Vice-Chairman of the Penwith Society of Artists
- 1975 Left St Ives for Paul, Cornwall
- 1996 Began to work in sculpture
- 2011 Breon O'Casey passed away aged 83 in Paul, Cornwall

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- | | | | |
|------|--------------------------------------|------|--|
| 2018 | Pangolin London, London | 2000 | Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin |
| 2015 | Pangolin London, London | | Scolar Fine Art, London |
| 2012 | Lemon Street Gallery, Cornwall | 1998 | Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia |
| | Newlyn Art Gallery, Cornwall | 1997 | Lynn Strover Gallery, Cambridge |
| 2011 | Mullan Gallery, Belfast | | Brewery Arts, Cirencester |
| | Stoneman Gallery, Cornwall | 1996 | Black Swan Guild, Frome & touring |
| 2010 | Beaux Arts, Bath | | Trist Ann's Gallery, Dundalk, Ireland |
| | Somerset House, London | 1995 | Oriel, Cardiff |
| 2009 | Peppercanister Gallery, Dublin | | St James's Gallery, Bath |
| | Mullan Gallery, Belfast | 1994 | Wolf at the Door, Penzance |
| | Lemon Street Gallery, Cornwall | | Cornwall Crafts Association, Trelowarren |
| 2006 | Peppercanister Gallery, Dublin | 1981 | O'Casey Craft Gallery, London |
| | Lemon Street Gallery, Cornwall | 1979 | Oxford Gallery, London |
| 2005 | Six Chapel Row, Bath | 1977 | Chastinet Gallery, London |
| | Yorkshire Sculpture Park | 1975 | Marjorie Parr Gallery, London |
| 2004 | Mullan Gallery, Belfast | | Craftworks, Guildford |
| | Peppercanister Gallery, Dublin | 1974 | British Crafts Centre, London |
| 2003 | Berkeley Square Gallery, London | 1973 | Marjorie Parr Gallery, London |
| | Wexler Gallery, Philadelphia | 1969 | Brown Thomas Gallery, Dublin |
| | Yew Tree Gallery, Morvah, Cornwall | 1968 | Marjorie Parr Gallery, London |
| 2002 | Peppercanister Gallery, Dublin | | Park Square Gallery, Leeds |
| 2001 | New Ashgate Gallery, Farnham, Surrey | 1960 | Arnolfini, Bristol |
| | Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia | 1954 | Somerville College, Oxford |

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2003 New Ashgate Gallery, Farnham with Sir Terry Frost RA and Sandra Blow RA
- 2000 Lynn Stover Gallery, Cambridge with Jim Partridge
- 1999 Berkeley Square Gallery, London
Tate Gallery, St Ives with Bernard Leach
- 1998 The Society of Arts and Crafts
- 1997 Bridge Gallery, Dublin: The Irish Friends of Denis Mitchell
Contemporary Applied Arts, London
- 1995 New Ashgate Gallery, Farnham
Oxford Gallery, Oxford
Crafts Council, London touring exhibition
- 1994 Schmuck Unsere Zeit, Zurich
- 1993 Taylor Galleries, Dublin with Conor Fallon
Little Rock, Arkansas
- 1992 Narrow Water Gallery, Northern Ireland with Carolyn Mulholland
Korim Kiele, Helsinki
- 1991 Rufford Crafts Centre
- 1989 Crafts Council, London touring exhibition
- 1989 Oxford Gallery, Oxford with David Garland
- 1985 Victoria and Albert Museum Craft Shop, London
- 1976 British Crafts Centre, London
- 1975 Craftwork Gallery, London with Bryan Illsley
- 1973 Craftworks, Guildford with Bryan Illsley
- 1972 The Goldsmith's Hall, London
- 1971 Bath Festival Gallery, Bath
- 1971 Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol with Bryan Illsley
- 1970 Oxford Gallery, Oxford with Bryan Illsley
- 1968 British Crafts Centre, London
- 1966 Signals Gallery, London
- 1959 Penwith Society of Arts, St Ives

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Arts Council of Great Britain
Arts Council of Northern Ireland
Arts Council of Ireland / An Chomhairle Ealaíon
Cornwall County Council
Crafts Council, London
Dartington Hall, Devon

Devon County Council
Farmleigh House - Office of Public Works, Ireland
Goldsmith's Hall, London
Granada Television
Kettle's Yard, Cambridge
Kunstsammlungen Der Vests, Coburg, Germany
Leeds Museum and Art Gallery
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Pforzheim Museum, Germany
Plymouth Museum and Art Gallery
Royal Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh
Tate Gallery
Sommerville College, Oxford
Trinity College, Dublin
Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths, London
Victoria and Albert Museum, London

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Breon O'Casey: The World Beyond, Pangolin London, 2018
Breon O'Casey: Transitions, Pangolin London, 2015
Breon O'Casey: 1928-2011. Retrospective. Ruth Guilding, 2012
Breon O'Casey, A Decade, Lemon Street Gallery, 2009
Breon O'Casey, An Anthology of his Writings, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 2005
Breon O'Casey: A Celtic Artist, Lund Humphries, 2003
Breon O'Casey, Scolar Press, 1999
Linocuts, Breon O'Casey, 1998
Man and Materials, Breon O'Casey, 1996
Mayo, Breon O'Casey, 1995
Stars are Suns, poems by Scott Chaskey, woodcuts by Breon O'Casey, 1993
Selected Poems, Maurice English, illustrated by Breon O'Casey, 1991

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QUOTES

- P. 3 Breon O'Casey's notebook.
- P. 4 British Library Sound Archive, NLSC, 'Craft Lives', Breon O'Casey interviewed by Christopher Reid, Tape 2 of 10, 2001.
- P. 6 *Breon O'Casey* by Brian Fallon & Breon O'Casey, Scolar Press, 1999, p. 48.
- P. 8 Duibhne Gough in correspondence to Célia Morand, February 2022.
- P. 9 *Breon O'Casey* by Brian Fallon & Breon O'Casey, Scolar Press, 1999, p 54.
- P. 10 *A Celtic Artist*, Breon O'Casey by Jack O'Sullivan, Lund Humphries, 2003, p. 81
- P. 15 British Library Sound Archive, NLSC, 'Craft Lives', Breon O'Casey interviewed by Christopher Reid, Tape 3 of 10, 2001.
- P. 23 British Library Sound Archive, NLSC, 'Craft Lives', Breon O'Casey interviewed by Christopher Reid, Tape 6 of 10, 2001.
- P. 27 *Breon O'Casey* by Brian Fallon & Breon O'Casey, Scolar Press, 1999, p 54.
- P. 32 *Breon O'Casey A Decade* by Breon O'Casey, 'Speeches I Never Made', Lemon Street Gallery, 2009, p. 78.
- P. 40 Breon O'Casey's notebook.
- P. 42 Breon O'Casey's notebook.
- P. 46 *Breon O'Casey A Decade* by Breon O'Casey, 'Speeches I Never Made', Lemon Street Gallery, 2009, p. 78.

Polly Bielecka and Célia Morand hereby assert their rights to be identified as the authors of *Breon O'Casey: Painting is Another Language*.

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