

50 people to watch in 2017

Who will be making waves this year in the worlds of technology, food, activism, sport, music, film, fashion, design and the arts? 'Irish Times' writers select the movers and shakers for the year ahead

© Sat, Jan 7, 2017, 06:01

The arts



Susanne Wawra

In 1989, the Berlin Wall came down and Europe changed. “I want to solidify my memories – but how do you make a memory?” asks Susanne Wawra (36), whose work comes from her own history of growing up in East Germany before the fall of the wall. Her large collages on fabric attempt to call up those fractured but significant moments from the past that accumulate to make you the person you are. She describes it as like “being a spectator in my own life”, where memory is something that “hovers between the real and the imagined”.

Wawra moved to Dublin in 2007 to work for Google but then went to study at the National College of Art and Design (NCAD), and won the Talbot Gallery Graduate Award in 2016. This gives her a studio for a year in the heart of Dublin’s Monto art quarter, plus mentoring.

For Wawra, winning was “hugely motivating and an immense recognition. It is absolutely fantastic to have my own studio straight after college”. Her work is attracting increasing attention and she is planning a solo show in mid-2017.

Lucy McKenna

At first glance, Kilkenny-born Lucy McKenna (34) has a typical art CV. There are group shows, a solo show in Thurles, another in Co Laois and one in Calgary, Canada. But look again and discover she has been an artist in residence at Facebook, as well as at the Armagh Observatory, and in 2012, she travelled to Cern in Switzerland to communicate the scientists’ work to the world.

“That came through Twitter,” remembers McKenna, who was selected from a global call. “They gave us this incredible tour, we met astronauts, saw the AMS (alpha magnetic spectrometer) from the Space Shuttle, and met the guy who designed it, who’d gotten a Nobel Prize. It was mind blowing.” McKenna has mild synesthesia, which means she sees colours connected to numbers and letters. “I think our senses are underused; it’s so primal and so animal, and we’ve bred that out of ourselves. If you didn’t have them, how would you know you’re alive?”

From her studio at Temple Bar Gallery, her current work builds on this, “it’s an organic form of data visualisation that I’m excited about exploring”.

McKenna’s work will be on show at The LAB in Dublin in February (thelab.ie). Then, in September, she travels to New York for a three-month International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP) residency.

Elaine Hoey

Winner of last year’s RDS Taylor Art Award, Elaine Hoey (46) graduated from NCAD with first-class honours in 2016, and is now studying for her masters. She makes interactive installations using virtual reality and video-gaming technologies to create environments that test complacency and the viewer’s sense of place in the world. Her award-winning installation at the RDS, *The Weight of Water*, threw the viewer, or participant, into a refugee’s journey, seeking asylum in Europe. A version is also on show at the Science Gallery’s Design and Violence exhibition until January 22nd (dublin.sciencegallery.com).

Hoey wants her work to open up conversations and says “working with an emerging medium such as virtual reality, means you get to be part of the conversation in defining its creative potential.”

Her latest project explores the rise of right-wing politics in Europe and the US, and looks at how the aesthetics of fear are politically mobilised. Hoey will be showing at the RHA’s Futures in March (rhagallery.ie), at NCAD in June, and at Draíocht in October (draiocht.ie).

Kevin Gaffney

Dublin-born Kevin Gaffney (30) works primarily in film and, in 2015, was the first Irish artist to win a Sky Academy arts scholarship. This included mentoring by art-world heavyweight Kathleen Soriano, and the chance to work on what Gaffney describes as “my biggest film production yet”. He filmed *A Numbness in the Mouth* at Shackleton’s Mills on the edge of Dublin, which was a kind of homecoming after residencies in Iran, South Korea and Taiwan.

In his films, social mechanisms are sometimes pushed to absurdity. *A Numbness in the Mouth* imagines a near-future Ireland, in which a bumper harvest means every citizen is required to consume at least 2kg of flour a day to ensure the economy remains in balance. It’s a beautifully judged parody of our own situation, where the requirement to consume in order to maintain the recovery may be detrimental to ourselves and the planet.

Gaffney’s four main films, all inspired by his travels, are on show at the Millennium Court Arts Centre in Portadown until January 25th (millenniumcourt.org) in the largest exhibition of his work to date, and he will be giving a talk there on January 18th. In June, Gaffney will move into the Fire Station artists’ studios, so expect even more from this fascinating artist soon.

Bassam Al-Sabah

Born in Iraq, Bassam Al-Sabah (22) moved to Ireland in 2004. Graduating from the Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT) in Dún Laoghaire last year, he was included in the RDS Taylor Art Award exhibition, and also received the RHA’s Graduate Studio Award, giving him a vital base from which to work. His art includes film, sculpture and installation and looks at his own childhood experiences in Iraq.

“I’m paying attention to the variation between personal and collective experiences of traumatic events,” he says. Exploring children’s broadcasting in Iraq from the 1970s on, Al-Sabah unpacks the parallels between make-believe and truth, the hero and the every day. “Collectively,” he says, “we can recite factual truths but individually we only have our point of view.”

Opening up ideas of trauma and false memory, Al-Sabah describes how “displacement, sentimentality, personal mythology and nostalgia play a significant role,” as he tries “to capture the experience of being shifted from one culture to another”. Al-Sabah is working on some projects to be realised later this year, so watch this space.

Profiles by Gemma Tipton