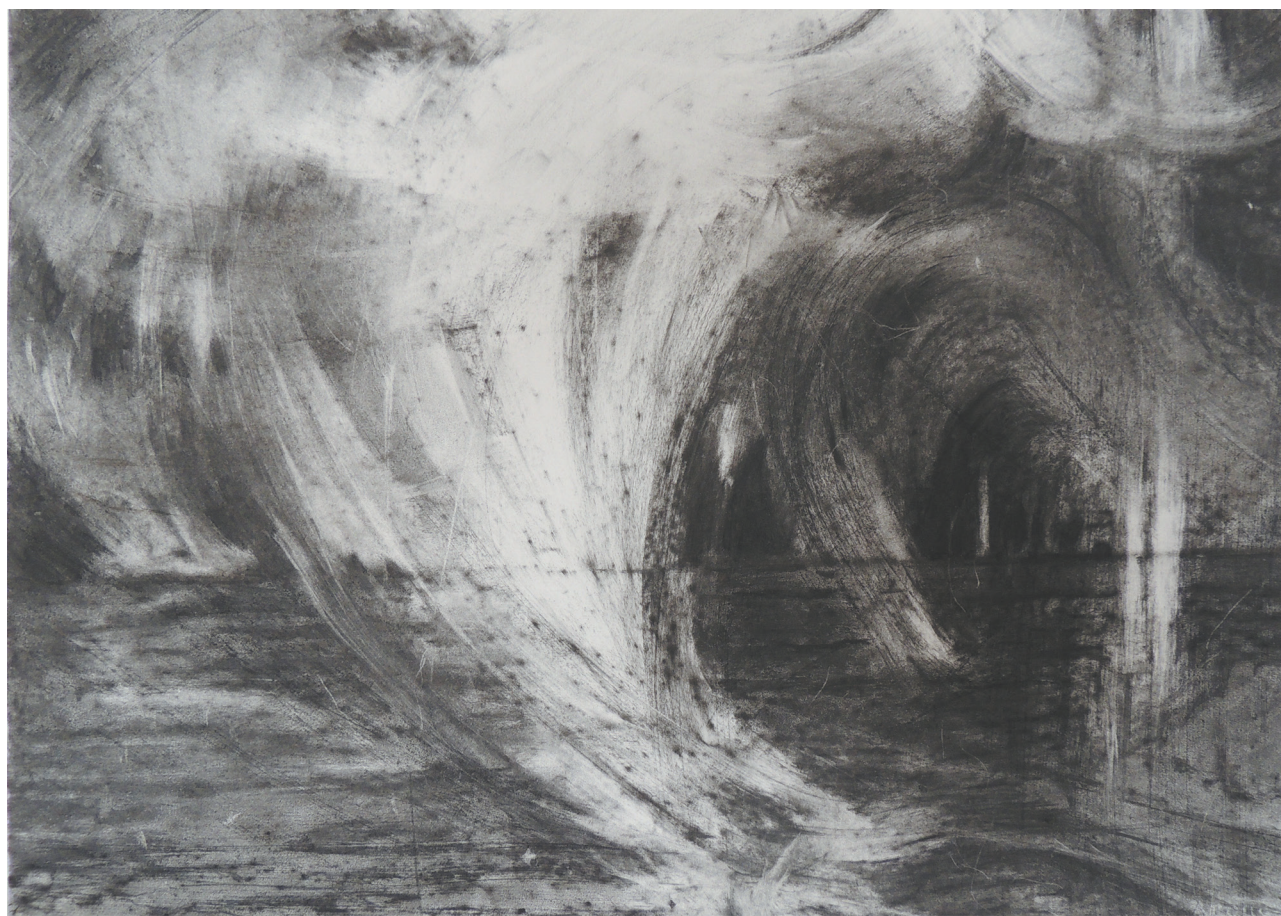
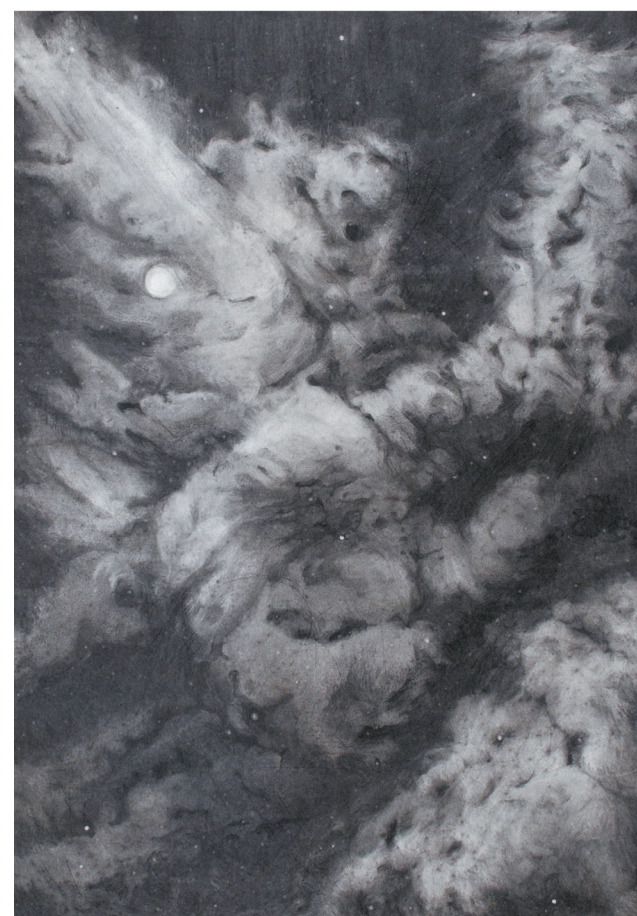


# Lunar Landscapes

WICKLOW-BASED ARTIST MELISSA O'FAHERTY DISCUSSES THE FOCUS AND TRAJECTORY OF HER ART PRACTICE TO DATE.



Melissa O'Faherty, *Celestial Kanagawa*, charcoal on paper, 76 x 56 cm



Melissa O'Faherty, *Nebula Dream Machine*, charcoal drawing, 82 x 114 cm

**PRESENTLY**, the main focus of my practice is drawing. I am continually attracted to the medium, as it engages and satisfies my curiosities. As well as freedom of expression, drawing also gives me the discipline to practice more formal and traditional skills. With this combination of overlapping approaches, my work has evolved into a semi-abstract style. I make large monochrome drawings and work predominantly in charcoal, because I enjoy the tonal range, velvety textures and intuitive mark-making that the material can produce. Through the immediacy of drawing, I can problem-solve and learn about new subject matter. I'm interested in finding a balance between abstraction and representation in my work. I like to explore how an artwork can simultaneously be delicate and fragile, as well as dramatic, responsive and forceful.

My visual and art historical influences are quite varied. I enjoy looking at Rembrandt's printmaking, which rely on drawing techniques to communicate sensitivities and humour of his subjects, which is evident in his recordings of everyday life. In particular, I find Rembrandt's drypoint etching *The Three Crosses* (1653) inspiring for its use of composition and sharp cross-hatching, as well as its dramatic handling of light and dark. I also admire the preparatory drawings of the sixteenth century Venetian master, Titian, with his style of dissolving form into 'vibrations of light' when using charcoal. My photographic influences include a series of cloud photographs called 'Equivalents' by American photographer and gallerist Alfred Stieglitz (1864 – 1948). Stieglitz's moody photographs seemed to capture his own emotional experience at the time, making them self-portraits in a way. I find the photographic experiments of the early 1900s particularly interesting, where accidents and imperfections held suggestive pictorial qualities. For example, Spirit Photography conjured up images of the deceased, through the interpretation of ambiguous marks and shapes. I am interested in how these works invite the viewer to participate in an imaginative response, creating a two-way dialogue between artist and audience.

Last year I spent time at the wonderful artists' retreat Cill Rialaig, in County Kerry and found this residency to be a very positive experience. It offered a unique opportunity to focus purely on my work in an inspiring setting at the edge of the world. I spent time walking, drawing outdoors and photographing the terrain, some of which is so rocky and barren, that it can appear almost lunar. There was time to reflect, research and write, all of which are valuable

elements of my creative practice. The residency also gave me the chance to meet up with other artists, which was enriching, because I usually work alone and found this interchange of ideas stimulating. Earlier this year, I took up a residency at the Tyrone Guthrie centre, a beautiful secluded artist residential workplace in Monaghan. I valued my time working there without distractions and enjoyed exchanges with other practitioners who work in various artforms. I was lucky to have a spacious open-plan studio where I could roll out large lengths of paper and work on a bigger scale.

My first solo exhibition, 'Drawings', was presented at Signal Arts Centre, Bray, in 2016. This exhibition comprised a collection of drawings exploring birds as historic metaphors for peace and eternal life. The making of the work was inspired by the accidental find of two deceased birds. In order to observe and better understand the subject matter, I made a series of photographs and drawings. This work evolved alongside the long illness and passing of my late father, Al O'Donnell, who was an artist and folk musician. He had a hugely positive influence on me growing up, introducing me to the world of art. The themes of transcendence, spirituality and the transience of life resonated deeply with me during this time. The physical act of making the work over a year-long period became almost ritualistic and meditative. The processes of lighting a candle, blackening charcoal and burnt cork and layering paper surfaces were all-consuming and engaging. This experience led me to pursue ongoing themes within my work, which contrast the vulnerabilities and survival instincts found within the natural world.

My most recent exhibition, 'The Spaces of the Imagination', was presented at Mermaid Arts Centre, Wicklow, from May to June 2017. The concept for this show was sparked by increased media coverage surrounding space exploration and the search for new worlds suitable for human habitation. With current threats to our own planet – not least political instability, global warming and impending threat of nuclear war – there is a sense of urgency about space travel that has not been felt since the Space Race during the Cold War. As an artist, I felt there was huge scope to develop a project that would use exploratory drawing methods to imagine what these undiscovered territories might look like. Keeping in mind the pioneering spirit of past explorers – as well as the drive of human curiosity that forced them to overcome adversary – my drawings became a way of visualising unknown, barren, yet strangely beautiful landscapes. It

was my intention to bring the audience on this imaginary journey. As part of my research, I became very interested in the historic tensions between art and science, focusing on the early nineteenth century, when artists and scientists seemed to work more closely together within a community of interchange and understanding.

For 'The Spaces of Imagination', I developed a new presentation strategy, which involved photographing a series of large-scale charcoal drawings and displaying them as paper hangings that appeared to float in the gallery setting. By using this display method, I wanted to draw the viewer in, so that they could closely examine the microbiology of my imagined terrain. I also discovered that an interesting slippage occurred, between the drawing and photographic mediums, which prompted reflection on how imagery is presented and perceived. Using this approach, the drawings seemed to transform into three-dimensional landscapes, situating the viewer within them, while also creating an atmosphere of distance. As part of the exhibition programme, I delivered an artist's talk. During my presentation, I shared documentation of my drawing notebook, which shows the groundwork, experimental mark-making and thought processes that underpin my finished pieces. In addition, the artist Gary Coyle was commissioned to write a critical text about drawing to accompany the exhibition. Working with the professional and supportive team at Mermaid Arts Centre was a great experience for me.

As part of my drawing practice, I regularly attend life drawing and artists' masterclasses at the Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin. This has proved to be an excellent resource in terms of sharpening my observation and drawing skills, thus enhancing all other aspects of my practice. I have recently begun to make new work that explores humanity in medicine and science through studying human anatomy and specimens. Last year, I took part in a contemporary drawing peer discussion hosted by VAI. The participating artists have since reconnected and we are currently discussing possible new collaborative projects. I've found that such conversations and exchanges with other artists can be inspiring and motivating. As I continue to develop as an artist, I hope to take up other residencies and collaborations, stay open to new experiences, learn new skills and try to remain fearless along the way.

**Melissa O'Faherty is a visual artist based in County Wicklow.**  
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