

Illusion



Rita Duffy – 2023

Persistent Illusion 2023 –

New works for Crawford Art Gallery Cork, produced at IMMA residency.

“The distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.”
Albert Einstein

Making art has always been my way of surviving, making visual the things I cannot say and giving expression to life - the living, loving, suffering and dying. Memories and trauma emerge from the bog hole of my subconscious and are made visual. The studio is a physical and psychic space into which ideas seep, mutate and transform into the possible. Drawing is my first language. Thoughts gradually emerge through the craft of pencil and pen, colliding with the impulse of urgent everyday lived experience. Drawings are made as meditation towards the fusion moment and always there is hope a new idea will appear. The past, present and future float through the emotional mind, connections are made, an exploratory line spun through fingers spills onto the page. Certainty gives way to openness and a fragile artwork takes on its own shape. Painting for me is a form of magic, that urges outward expression of what is being experienced internally.

Foreword

Persistent Illusion, Rita Duffy’s first solo exhibition at Crawford Art Gallery, features significant new work that provokes and demands our attention. Her work addresses global themes of identity, history and politics and yet remains intensely personal whilst also retaining some deep mystery.

In the artworks recurring motifs of cheese graters, hooded figures and high heels among others; references to popular expressions, symbols of our times such as the ubiquitous mobile phone and high street brands ignite our curiosity.

Central in the exhibition is a trilogy of new large scale works that address urgent themes of planetary crisis, human tragedy, and political chaos. This triptych for our times has its genesis in Duffy’s intense series of small, satirical drawings, *The Emperor Has No Clothes* (2020) which was acquired by Crawford Art Gallery for the National Collection in 2020. Referencing the children’s tale The Emperor’s New Clothes and Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels, Duffy has created a Lilliputian neurotic nightmare that goes to the heart of human rights, capitalism, and democracy.

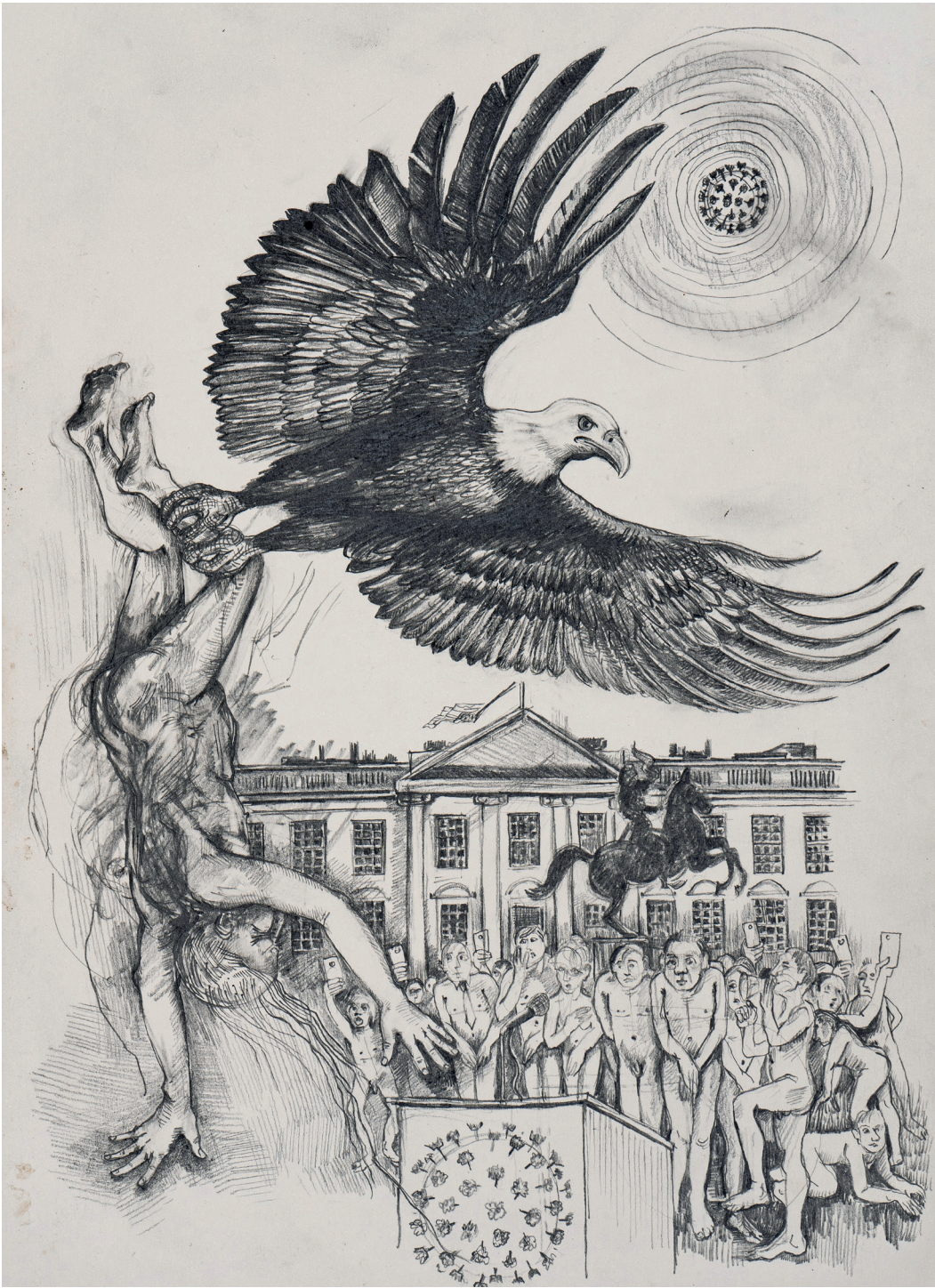
Crawford Art Gallery is committed to supporting artists to create new bodies of work for exhibition and we are grateful to Rita Duffy for presenting these works to our audiences.

Our sincere thanks to Yvonne Scott and Sarah Kelleher for their essays which expand our understanding and enhances our experience of Duffy’s work within historical and contemporary art practice.

Mary McCarthy
Director, Crawford Art Gallery, Cork, Ireland

Anne Boddaert
Curator of Exhibition, Crawford Art Gallery





Title Epiphany
Media Oil on linen
Size 123 x 184cms
Year 2021

Rita Duffy – Persistent Illusion





Title Belfast to Byzantium
Media Oil on linen
Size 123 x 184cms
Year 2022

Rita Duffy – Persistent Illusion





Title Ornithopter
Media Oil on linen
Size 123 x 184cms
Year 2023

Rita Duffy – Persistent Illusion





Essay 01– Rita Duffy–*Persistent Illusion* Yvonne Scott

The concept of 'persistent illusion' draws on a quotation that has been credited to Albert Einstein, referring to the idea that the alleged distinction between past, present and future is illusory. This idea is explored in a dynamic body of artwork by Rita Duffy, where history seems to fold in upon itself, events of the past retain a contemporary relevance and there is a sense of 'déjà vu' in the encounters of the present.

The exhibition includes, as its centrepiece, a trilogy of large recent paintings that each represent a process of travel: by land, by sea, and by air, each of which is related to visual prototypes and caricatures, with a myriad of references that stem from the central concepts, and overlaid with satirical observations of current relevance both at a personal, autobiographical, and at a global level as conveyed both through word of mouth and through media technology: oral history meets documentation; popular culture collides and colludes with the archive.

The processes of travel have changed in terms of technology and duration. Fundamentally, however, a journey remains a liminal space, an indeterminate field of existence between those points of departure and of arrival that are significant in determining identity. A journey infers both place and time, geography and temporality – the time it takes to get from one place to another. Cultural transfer occurs in that transitional movement, taking something of the past to the aspired destination of the future, via the currency of the passage; a threshold less as a line to be crossed in an instant, than as a condition of suspension, a dividing chasm perhaps, between two states, as occurs in drawn out conflicts, whether political or personal.

Duffy's imagery alludes to the migratory journey, signifying a lengthy or permanent change of habitation along with its concurrent association with hybridity, that is, with a sense of belonging to both cultures and creating a dual character. Migration has been a fundamental element in Irish identity, embodying an image of social decline and of population devolution: the departure of Irish citizens to alternative locations abroad, the types of ships and the circumstances that carried them, and the onward transition to their final destinations. More recently, the reversal of the trends has complicated the associated reception for migrants and refugees from elsewhere. There are anomalies in the circumstances; how countries whose populations are defined by migration, can react in various ways when observing the social change of returned and incoming people, with languages and customs that are deemed at odds with tradition and with expectations. Such change serves to contradict familiar, historical structures and norms, but resistance to change perhaps reflects inherent anxieties, and such sagas of experience re-emerge in the present.

In the trilogy of large paintings, each presents a means of negotiating the journey, as opportunity or opportunism. In *Epiphany*, the covered wagon, is presented as a symbol of the courageous pioneer or of the grasping colonialist; the ship in *Sailing from Belfast to Byzantium*, transports migrants both forced and voluntary, as a product for possession or as a paying passenger; the aeroplane in *Ornithopter* doubles as instrument of relief or of devastating destruction.

The philosopher Michel Foucault, described 'other spaces', those that are in some way outside the norm, as forming two groups. Utopias, or those that are 'fundamentally unreal', – representing present society itself in a perfected form. And Heterotopias, those that are in between, or liminal; among the many examples, the journey is described in such terms, with the ship described by him not only as a vital instrument of economic development but as also "the greatest reserve of the imagination".¹

Duffy's painting, *Belfast to Byzantium* presents a great ship, an allusion to the Titanic, an enduring symbol both of the technology and industry of shipbuilding and the catastrophic collision with the iceberg that arrested the craft, thwarting its intended journey, stalling it forever at the point of collision.² The title of the painting alludes to the iconic poem by W.B. Yeats, *Sailing to Byzantium*, whose destination was described by the poet as a metaphor for a spiritual journey.³ The iceberg on the horizon indicates that the quest will be shattered before it is achieved. However, in the iconology of the artist, the iceberg has symbolised for her the potential to thaw and dissipate the frozen political perspectives.

A line in Yeats' poem that appears in the image refers to the process of aging, likened to 'a tattered coat upon a stick'. However, the soul is invoked as an antidote to such mortal decay. Clothing, as well and its absence has been a leitmotif in the work of Duffy over a number of years, and the concept is particularly relevant in this series of paintings. Rita Duffy observes how clothing can be a defining element in establishing a range of factors: from the era of existence, to social class, and occupation. Her autobiographical painting *Exodus, 12th July*, portrays herself and her family dressed in Aran sweaters, knitted by her mother during the winter, as a means of enduring an Irish summer, but also part of their uniform of identity as they exit the city en route for their mother's family home.

Duffy has also observed how the confiscation of clothing has been a tool to undermine and expose, to eliminate identity and to impose a sense of vulnerability. She represents enslaved people as stripped of all signs of their individual autonomy. Nakedness had been applied in medieval and renaissance painting of the Last Judgement or the psychostasis (the 'weighing of souls') to determine the ultimate destination, between heaven and hell. Paintings by artists from Hieronymous Bosch to Michelangelo represented the deceased as devoid of clothing to symbolise their exposure to spiritual Judgement, unable to take with them the trappings of their status in life.

As the imagery in this show demonstrates, Rita Duffy's artwork has a dynamic energy; the figures and objects are presented in a state of tension and movement, in the process of some act or participating in an event; whether they represent cause or effect, they are rarely, if ever static. If they are always in transition, between one state and another, as for example in the *Housework Series*, the protagonists are displayed as constantly in a state of liminality, aspiring towards some utopian concept of perfection that can never be achieved. *Eiru* with her multiple arms, seeks to multitask a myriad of conflicting and concurrent domestic chores; the goal is forever just out of reach, or it is undone and repeated *ad infinitum*.

Rita Duffy's paintings include allusions and symbols of iconic artworks and artists, Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Blind Leading the Blind*; Francisco Goya's 'A Way of Flying', from the series *The Follies (Los Disparates)* which provides the prototype for the flying figures shown in *Ornithopter*. Goya's prints were not published during his lifetime, owing to the political oppression of the times, but are now well known. Other artists alluded to include Georges Grosz and Otto Dix whose paintings critiqued the powerful individuals and institutions they saw as responsible for the First World War and the human sacrifices involved, through loss of life or physical and mental mutilation.

Exploration of Duffy's work reveals a myriad of references both to the past and to the present, collapsing time in the circular repetition of human folly. Her work operates at two seemingly conflicting levels: it is both accessible and profound, readable and enigmatic, compelling and appalling, of magic realism and surreality, of myth and truth, both dynamic and arresting, autobiographical and universal, about history and the present, humorous and deadly serious.

Rita Duffy's world of figuration is redolent of caricatures that are alarmingly real; she lightens her often dark themes with wit and absurdity which, as she explains, is a strategy – a way of confronting those things that are most frightening, that make one nervous: 'Humour is a very powerful way of alleviating fear and opening up dialogue.'⁴

‘Of what is past, or passing, or to come.’
William Butler Yeats, *Sailing to Byzantium*

¹Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1, Spring 1996, pp. 22–27. Original a lecture entitled 'Des Espaces Autres', and published in the journal, *Architecture-Mouvement-Continuité*, in 1984.

²Yvonne Scott, 'Reconstructing the Raft: Semiotics and Memory in the Art of Shipwreck and the Raft', in Tricia Cusack, ed., *Framing the Ocean, 1700 to the Present, Envisioning the Sea as Social Space*, Ashgate, Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, VT, 2014, pp. 165–180.

³The poem was published in 1928 as part of a collection of poems by Yeats.

⁴Rita Duffy in conversations with Yvonne Scott, 2023.

Title Domestic Madonna
Media Oil on linen
Size 70 × 90cms
Year 2021



Title Exodus, 12th July
Media Oil on linen
Size 70 × 90cms
Year 2023



Rita Duffy – Persistent Illusion



Title Protocol
Media Oil on linen
Size 100 x 80cms
Year 2021



Title Partition
Media Oil on linen
Size 70 × 90cms
Year 2023

Essay 02– Rita Duffy: Snapshot of the Apocalypse Sarah Kelleher

Rita Duffy's *Belfast to Byzantium* is an epic canvas teeming with detail. From a distance it looks a little like a strange anatomical diagram, a section of an organ or a cell in suitably fleshy shades of red. However, as one gets closer, its subject is revealed as a cross section of a grand ocean liner crowded with naked figures engaged in all manner of violent incident. They hack and slash at each other with machetes, or upend bottles into their open maws, they blare trumpets and brandish scissors and spanners, or pots and pans, they wave mobile phones and they paw at each others' naked flesh. The chaos is stratified into distinct layers that become steadily more gruesome as one descends. The bottom deck is a hellish orlop where dark skinned bodies are tethered by their necks. In the background black bodies dangle from nooses, or are stuffed into open coffins. The next level is divided into chambers - an Amazon shipping office, a torture chamber, an engine room and a gruesome operating theatre cum birthing suite. The top deck holds a fortunate few who recline on deckchairs, oblivious to the slaughter that surrounds them, while over their heads, vaporous bodies spew as smoke through the ship's funnels. It is a ship of fools, sailing across a sea boiling with drowning bodies.

Duffy's canvas, with its depictions of face masks, Amazon packaging and cell phones, speaks to the utterly contemporary. However, her visual language is also reminiscent of swarming canvases of sixteenth century painters Hieronymus Bosch or Pieter Brueghel the Elder. Bosch and Brueghel were working at a moment of extreme religious anxiety, of displacement and dispossession, of plague and famine and war. In short, a moment very much like our own. Beset as we are by the realities of inequality, of environmental degradation, of the returned spectre of atomic weapons, of the collapse of traditional structures of power, Duffy's reference to these earlier hallucinatory hellscapes makes sense. Bosch and Brueghel's work had a didactic, moralising function, they were intended to decry the folly of sinful humanity and warn their viewers of the horrors of final judgement. Duffy's painting is arguably more bleak, although it merges its horror with pitch black humour, she offers no suggestion of a viable redemption. Her work gives the lie to any illusion we might have of contemporary progress or civility.

This new cycle of paintings began with a series of drawings Duffy made during the first lockdown of the Covid pandemic. Their hectic tenor reflects the anxiety of that unprecedented 'pause', when, confined to our small spaces, many of us spent our time doom scrolling, hypnotised by the unrelenting weirdness and grotesquery of the rolling news cycle. Collectively titled *The Emperor Has No Clothes*, these works approach recent events while making specific reference to earlier landmark works of caricature and satire. One drawing recalls Honoré Daumier's *Gargantua* (1831) which depicted the reigning King Louis Phillipe as an obese man-mountain, who spews reams of paper from his buttocks, while gold is shovelled into his open maw. In Duffy's hands, a Donald Trump-like figure replaces the king. She shows him sitting slacked jawed atop a house of cards, playing with his limp penis, as from his arse swing skeletons, dangling from nooses. In another drawing, a bald yet insistently Trumpian figure stands with his back to us, his naked, sagging buttocks propped up by an array of golf clubs.

Duffy's emphasis on the 'rude' body, her focus on the distended, sagging belly and buttocks, also sits within a significant art historical tradition: that of a particularly caustic political satire which emerges during times of political turmoil. From Daumier in 19th century France, to George Grosz and Otto Dix in Weimar Germany, to American artist Paul McCarthy's recent exuberantly scatological films made during the Trump era - these artists have focused on the spewing, swollen body, using obscene humour as a way of exposing human folly. Although each of these artists worked in very different historical and social contexts, they are linked by a common loss of faith in traditional power structures and a nihilism that manifests in imagery that is angry, confrontational and often, deeply unpleasant. If these images spark amusement, then it is prompted by a cruel, dark and indignant humour.

If we understand satire or caricature to involve the comic exaggeration of a distinguishing characteristic for comic or grotesque effect, then each of these artists make work that deliberately exaggerates the base, embarrassing or taboo aspects of corporeality. In each of these examples, the grotesque functions as a cultural analytic, in that it offers a visual language perhaps best equipped to deal with the grotesqueries of their moment - be it the abuse of power in 19th century France, or the corrupt burgers and brigadiers of post World War 1 Germany, or the rise of the fascist right in America. Duffy's swag-bellied, pop-eyed homunculi, caught up in baying and writhing and trampling fury, are more disturbing than simple parodies; there is no easy laughter here. Instead, making the body into something absurd and obscene acts as a way of puncturing the pomposity of power. If absolute power corrupts absolutely, then these bodies - King Louis Philippe, the pillars of the Weimar establishment, Donald Trump - are absolutely corrupted.

This raw boned, pop eyed style of figuration has been a hallmark of Duffy's work which she has, in the past, leveraged to skewer the bigotry and misogyny of sectarian politics in the North. This new body of work responds to the turbulence of our present moment, in canvases so packed full of incident, they need to be read like a text, carefully, from left to right, to capture each mordant detail. *Epiphany* presents us with a stage coach in front of a walled city, a little like Washington D.C. The wagon is manned by a naked goon in a red baseball cap who pulls the strings of marionette wearing the Statue of Liberty's distinctive crown. Cages filled with crouching children hang from the fabric walls of the wagon. In front, the crowd are divided along racial lines, black bodies to the left, shackled as if on the point of being driven beneath its wheels. To the right, white bodies cavort around television sets, or bang drums, as spiked bombs of virus particles rain down from the sky.

Importantly, Duffy doesn't limit her ire to American politics - as she points out, the covered wagon originated in Ulster, as did the Titanic, which is referenced in *Ornithopter* - but responds to global events. Her canvas Ornithopter (p16-17) depicts a monstrous queue of bodies, mostly naked, that wind across a vast expanse of tarmac to waiting planes. The atmosphere in this canvas is different - this is a chaos born of panic rather than violent depravity. Bodies are trampled beneath a crush of feet, more bodies form human pyramids in their effort to reach the wings of the aircraft, mothers clutch their babies or hold them above the fray. This work recalls the images of the Kabul airlift of 2021, but it could as easily be the US withdrawal from Saigon in 1975 or the evacuation of EU citizens from Sudan in 2023. It describes the anguish and desperation of those who are driven - by war, by economic deprivation, by climate catastrophe - to undertake dangerous journeys to find a better, safer life elsewhere.

This is not subtle work, it is urgent and furious and outrageous. As with *Byzantium and Epiphany*, *Ornithopter* is packed with detail, but no one incident is more significant than the next - the bodies trampled underfoot, the babies precariously held above the scrum - they are all equally disconcerting and they are all happening in the same instant. If these phantasmagorically detailed works can be likened to a snapshot of our current moment, then it is one continuous instant of apocalypse, filtered through the lens of satire to mediate a living horror too real to dwell on.

Sarah Kelleher is an independent arts writer and curator based in Cork and is completing a PhD on contemporary Irish sculpture in the History of Art department at University College Cork. She is an assistant lecturer in modern and contemporary art history and theory at MTU CCAD and has written catalog essays for the Irish Museum of Modern Art, the Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin and the Limerick City Art Gallery. In 2014 Sarah founded Pluck Projects with Dr. Rachel Warriner, an independent curatorial who have produced exhibitions and events for the Cork Midsummer Festival, the Experimental Film Society and the RHA

Title The Housework Series – No.1
Media Oil on linen
Size 25 × 30cms
Year 2022



Title The Housework Series – No.2
Media Oil on linen
Size 25 × 30cms
Year 2022



Rita Duffy – Persistent Illusion

Title The Housework Series – No.3
Media Oil on linen
Size 25 × 30cms
Year 2022



Title The Housework Series – No.4
Media Oil on linen
Size 25 × 30cms
Year 2022



Rita Duffy – Persistent Illusion

Title The Housework Series – No.5
Media Oil on linen
Size 25 × 30cms
Year 2022



Title The Housework Series – No.6
Media Oil on linen
Size 25 × 30cms
Year 2022

Rita Duffy – Persistent Illusion



Title The Housework Series – No.7
Media Oil on linen
Size 25 × 30cms
Year 2022



Title The Housework Series – No.8
Media Oil on linen
Size 25 × 30cms
Year 2022

Rita Duffy – Persistent Illusion



Title The Housework Series – No.9
Media Oil on linen
Size 25 × 30cms
Year 2022



Title The Housework Series – No.10
Media Oil on linen
Size 25 × 30cms
Year 2022



Rita Duffy – Persistent Illusion

Title The Housework Series – No.11
Media Oil on linen
Size 25 × 30cms
Year 2022



Title The Housework Series – No.12
Media Oil on linen
Size 25 × 30cms
Year 2022



Rita Duffy – Persistent Illusion

Title The Housework Series – No.13
Media Oil on linen
Size 25 × 30cms
Year 2022



Title The Housework Series – No.14
Media Oil on linen
Size 25 × 30cms
Year 2022

Rita Duffy – Persistent Illusion



Title Eriu I
Media Oil on linen
Size 60 × 60cms
Year 2023



Title Eriu II
Media Oil on linen
Size 60 × 60cms
Year 2023



Rita Duffy – Persistent Illusion

Title The Pillow Series – No.1
Media Graphite on paper
Size 42 × 29.7cms
Year 2023



Title The Pillow Series – No.2
Media Graphite on paper
Size 42 × 29.7cms
Year 2023



Rita Duffy – Persistent Illusion

Title The Pillow Series – No.3
Media Graphite on paper
Size 42 × 29.7cms
Year 2023



Title The Pillow Series – No.4
Media Graphite on paper
Size 42 × 29.7cms
Year 2023



Rita Duffy – Persistent Illusion

Published by Crawford Art Gallery on the occasion of the exhibition.

Rita Duffy– *Persistent Illusion*

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Rita Duffy

Persistent Illusion

June 2023



**An Roinn Turasóireachta, Cultúir,
Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán**
Department of Tourism, Culture,
Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media