

FATHOM - GALLERY VISIT



FATHOM is Caoimhe McGuckin's first solo exhibition. From folk measurement to phrases of measurement, **FATHOM** presents the artists view of measurement in a tangible and visual form.

Caoimhe McGuckin is a Kildare based artist working in sculpture, jewelry and photography. Graduating with a first-class BA(Hons) from the National College of Art & Design in 2017 Caoimhe has been successful in several competitive selection processes and has been the recipient of awards including; a Future Makers Award from DCCoI and NCAD Designer of the Year from Newbridge Silverware. Her work has been exhibited in a number of group shows including *Crowded Thresholds*. She was the recipient of the Emerging Artist Bursary award 2019, generously supported by Kildare County Council and Riverbank Arts Centre.

In her sculptural works of varying scale, she makes use of collected, inherited and found objects of everyday use that function as carriers of meaning and memory.

She creates works with a focus on narrative and concept. The themes of her work deal primarily with identity and human frailty.

Her current work explores the notion of measurement.

Fathom by Caoimhe McGuckin runs at the McKenna Gallery in Riverbank Arts Centre until 28 Oct 2022. Admission Free.

Artists Statement

Measurement is a subject most of us take for granted; it is an ordering principle that impacts every tiny area of our daily lives. It has facilitated the greatest breakthroughs in our understanding of the world and enables us to discern our place in the universe. In short, we use measurement to organise our world around us.

Measurement is an artifice we use to understand and orient ourselves in time and space. We need dimensions to help us make sense of an otherwise chaotic existence. Tools of measurement serve as reliable, purposeful objects that keep us in line and on the straight and narrow. This sense of authority can provide a place of solace and support in the face of uncertainty, upheaval and powerlessness.

In the situation we find ourselves over the last number of years, living through a relentless storm of anxiety, stress and unpredictability, it stands to reason that we are reaching out in search of stability, certitude and reassurance. Structure is the common theme across the many reasons for the importance of measurement.

Described as the cornerstone of cognition, measurement underpins structures and systems around us.

Time itself, as a measurement, has been remarkably little studied. The concept of time may be hard to grasp, but the measurement and perception of it have been fundamental to all civilizations, and probably especially to Western Europe, the most time-conscious society of all time. The history of time measurement is the story of the search for more consistent and accurate ways to measure time. Early human groups recorded the phases of the Moon about 30,000 years ago, but the first minutes were counted accurately only about 400 years ago.

For many centuries, time has been thought of in imprecise terms. Throughout most of human history, we have perceived time through days and weeks. The creation of the calendar makes it possible to chart out the length of time in a year. Before modern technology individuals were able to distinguish the time of day by tracking the sun through the sky. When the sun rose, it was morning; at its apex in the sky it was afternoon and when the sun set it was night. Back then it was impossible to track hours, minutes and seconds thus those particular measurements were irrelevant. Time can still be considered an abstract measurement. You can't see it, and it can only be perceived through specialized means (such as a sundial). In today's world, the concept of time dictates when we eat, when we sleep, when we work.

Once upon a time there was no time at all, and no weight, and no mass, and no height and no volume. This realisation - that measurement is not an intrinsic feature of the world, but a practice invented and imposed by humanity helped me understand that measurement is a mirror to society itself; it is a form of attention that reveals what we value in the world. To measure is to choose; to focus our attention on a single attribute and exclude all others.

Heisenberg's uncertainty principle is taken to mean that whenever you measure something, you alter it. We know that the word 'precision' comes from the Latin *praecisio* – meaning 'to cut off', so, by examining how and where measurement is applied, we can investigate our own impulses and desires.

In this series of work, I have endeavoured to gather and construct a personal system of measurement as filtered through an imperfect metric I use measurement as a means of imposing structure and as an attempt to reign in chaos. Anyone who has experienced the immense satisfaction to be gained from organising a bookshelf or the top rack of the dishwasher perfectly knows the reward of transforming chaos into beautiful functional order.

Inspiration for this work is based on research around the origin and evolution of measure and reliable objects.

The origins of measurement can be traced back to the ancient Egyptians and Babylonians who developed and applied consistent units necessary for monitoring the seasons, aiding construction, trade, economy and astronomy. They understood that accurate observation of our world allows us to experiment, develop and progress.

In these ancient times, the body ruled when it came to measuring. The length of a foot, the width of a finger, and the distance of a step were all accepted measurements. The cubit ran from the elbow to the fingertip; the yard was the distance from the tip of an outstretched hand to the middle of the chest (or to the tip of your nose); the fathom was the distance between the extremes of a person's outstretched arms, and the ell (an abbreviation of elbow) was traditionally an arm's length. Length units could be systematically related because bodily dimensions were understood as organically related.



Leonardo's Vitruvian Man (c 1485) represented confidence in the proportionality of human body parts: 'The length of the outspread arms is equal to the height of a man; from the hairline to the bottom of the chin is one-tenth of the height of a man; from below the chin to the top of the head is one-eighth of the height of a man.'

Tailors as well as artists knew some of these systemic relations. The human body was a cosmologically and aesthetically resonant measuring-kit. It was metrically intelligible, useful and, above all, it was at hand. Traditional measures were "human" in many respects – they were expressive of people and their work. It was only in the 18th century when measurement became a cohesive system.

This historical trajectory of standards is often described as disembodiment, but the process can be a different kind of embodiment, the transference of standards from flesh to metal. From arbitrary limbs and items to objective, created items of measurable meanings.

Using a diverse range of media including modified domestic objects this work has been created to soothe an increasingly desperate need for certainty, a desire to remove chaos and provide structure.

This exhibition demonstrates and examines the arbitrary interpretations of measurement that are commonplace and accepted.

My work examines the power of individual interpretation of measures that ultimately dispute narrow parameters. **FATHOM** considers the comforts of standardisation offered by accepted, scripted measurements and the unexpected freedoms of personal interpretations that also lie within the broader spectrum of delineations.

Throughout the making of this work, I began to notice how many phrases of imprecise measurement we use in everyday life. '*A stone's throw*' '*the blink of an eye*'. These phrases motivated me to continue with a renewed interest as they recognise the fallibility ever present in human affairs, an essential quality of human nature. These phrases are in themselves indications of the subversion of precision.

A unit can be arbitrary so long as it remains consistent in that arbitrariness. I am fascinated by the idea that something as fundamental as units of measurement were conceived by humans. Units of measurement have been redefined and made more reliable using fundamental constants of nature.

I travelled 7,693.4 Smoots from my home to Riverbank Arts Centre. In October 1958 the span of the Harvard Bridge was measured using the 5'7 body of Oliver Smoot.

His college classmates stood Smoot upright, lay him down on the ground, stood him up again and repeated this across the length of the entire bridge. The bridge was found to be 364.4 smoots plus or minus an ear (always leave room for human fallibility).

Smoot's contribution to measurement continued after graduation as he went on to head both the American national standards institute and the International Organisation for standardisation.

Had you heard about the Smoot unit of measurement? Look it up on Google Earth!

Measurement provides us a baseline, a reassurance by 'confirming' the existence of predictable order in our world.

Is it possible that we measure, not the world itself and its realities and energies, but rather the distance separating what is currently in shadow from some fuller natural light? We measure the distortions of our current unknowledge, without attempting to train our own artificial light on the 'thing itself'.

When we can measure what we are speaking about, and express it in numbers, we know something about it – the items in this exhibition are my attempt to know about the world, to get a measure of life and meanings and speak with authority on meaningless things.

Fantasy and imagination still have free reign in people's lives, more than many of us would like to admit. In a time when science is preeminent, irrational thinking can lay hold on the mind as much as in olden times. Fathom that!

Comments by Caoimhe on her practice and technique

Making my work provides me with a touchstone in my attempt to dismantle, quantify and organise abstract or intangible thoughts and ideas.

Like many people I sometimes struggle to gather my thoughts and organise them in an orderly fashion

Making for me is a form of enquiry and self-organisation.

It provides me with a touchstone in my attempt to dismantle, examine, quantify and organise abstract or intangible thoughts and ideas.

The outcome satisfies my desire to trace by documenting and safekeeping evidence.

The process of designing my work as well as the finished outcome both serve to stabilise and provide a sense of order.

What appeals to you about the physicality of the materials?

Objects facilitate the narrating of experience. In their physicality they provide a material evidence and existence to ideas, thoughts, memories and desires and can be used for continuity of reflection and examination.

I make use of objects and materials rich with associations and explore a variety of methods of transforming them, hoping to provide layers and new identities in the process.

The physical nature of the materials appeal to me. The indisputable thingness of an object. Weightiness, substantial solid material, in contrast to fleeting, transient escapable thought.

The readymade objects I use act as receptacles of memory and meaning, creating connections, associations and resonances, transmitters of charged connections.

Working from the basis that our personal belongings are extensions of ourselves, integral to the way we construct and communicate our identity; I use a variety of sometimes unexpected materials and if a piece calls for it will learn a new technique to produce a finished piece.

What or who inspires your work?

Inspiration informing my work often arises from language, abstract ideas and stories.

A phrase or title is often the starting point of my work. This necessitates the creating of a visual representation.

Two pieces inspired by phrases:

The Blink of an Eye – Looking at generations of family, how quickly children grow up, move away, possibly have families of their own.

In this piece the glass is aged mirror, so the viewer can see their own eyes and my daughter's closed eyes, indicating the speed of a blink.

A Stone's throw - The stone's throw was designed around an old surveyor's tool called the Gunter's chain, (can be seen in the Science Museum in Maynooth) used throughout the 1600's through to the late 1800s, it was used to survey land accurately. It was 66ft long and was made of 100 links, each joined by two rings. Every ten links was furnished with a 'tally link', like 'charms' indicating a particular distance.

My version was made to house the perfect skimming stone and the chain housed within the glass measures my height.

How do you work?

All of my work has its origins in very ordinary everyday observations and from there begins a process of enquiry.

I enjoy the challenge of designing a finished piece from an elusive and immaterial origin. I value the search for knowledge as much as the outcome.

I approach the process of making from the perspective of solving a problem.

I work with ideas first and foremost and my approach to research is thorough and systematic, enthusiastically making my way down many a worm hole, note-taking, site visits, interviews, sketches, collages, material testing etc.

Following this I allow all the information, all the sketches to filter through while I go about my business, waiting until little seeds of ideas begin to surface.

I collect and surround myself with all manner of things, objects I am drawn to.

I photograph and draw in response to an object, usually with a pencil or wire. Sometimes an image is the only outcome.

I then attempt to create order from the pile, arranging and rearranging objects, making connections between objects. If a particular combination works I can then begin working out how to go about making the final outcome.

What themes do you pursue and how are they manifested?

People, place, memory, identity.

Most of my work starts from a very ordinary place, but will inevitably end up an exploration of personal history/narrative, identity and inner worlds as well as inherited narratives. I explore the way in which the past can inhabit the present through objects.

Exhibition Theme

I set out to create pieces that were designed to reassure and comfort but instead reveal contradiction, bewilderment, resignation and humour.

Gallery visit to FATHOM - some questions to consider:

Do you think there is enough context/supporting materials to enable the public to connect with the work displayed? If not, what do you think is missing?

What do you consider are the advantages of hosting this exhibition in the McKenna Gallery space?

Is there a particular flow to the way the pieces are exhibited? Is there another approach that you think would work better?

What do you think of the concept which joins all the pieces together as an exhibition?

Has the exhibition, or any of the pieces made you ask questions that you never considered previously?

Did any of the pieces challenge your previous assumptions on the topic?

Do you feel a connection or a response to any work in the exhibition? Can you describe this piece and your response to it?

Do you think your response or connection is provoked by:

- the subject matter and the ideas behind the artwork
- the composition or materials/medium
- the artist's technique/skills
- Or a combination of some or all of these aspects?

In the introduction, Caoimhe mentions 'Heisenberg's uncertainty principle' – Heisenberg's uncertainty principle is a very precise mathematical statement about the nature of a quantum system – Can you think of a way in which art can help explain science?

What other works on this topic would you be interested in seeing?

What other units of measurement could you invent?

GALLERY VISIT - ABOUT RIVERBANK ARTS CENTRE

Riverbank Arts Centre is the county arts centre based in Newbridge, Co. Kildare, funded by The Arts Council and Kildare County Council. Riverbank Arts Centre works in partnership with international, national and local artists to deliver an accessible and consistently high quality arts programme in an intimate environment. We provide a multi-disciplinary programme which includes theatre, cinema, comedy, music, dance, workshops and visual arts.

Riverbank Arts Centre currently has three gallery spaces:

- McKenna Gallery - An enclosed room measuring approx 65 metres sq. (See floor plan below)
- Children's Gallery - a corridor gallery space
- Foyer Gallery - a temporary/pop up gallery space - full of natural light.

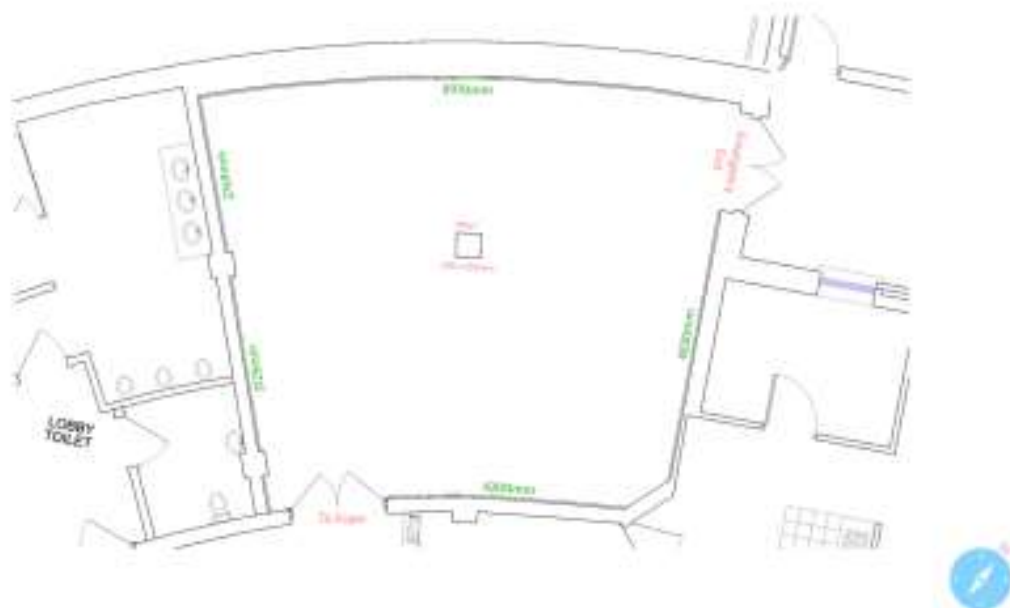
Riverbank Arts Centre is a producer and co-producer of new work. We work closely with visual artists and theatre artists to develop and present work, with a particular focus on arts experiences for young people. We commission exhibitions, host residencies and have presented world premieres of work by leading theatre companies including Theatre Lovett, Monkeyshine, Moonfish, Fidget Feet Aerial Dance Company, Branar Téatar do Pháistí, Collapsing Horse, and Super Paua.

RIVERBANK ARTS CENTRE



MCKENNA GALLERY

The McKenna Gallery at Riverbank Arts Centre is a large open room measuring approximately 65 square metres. There are no windows in the room which allows for an intimate atmosphere to be achieved with low lighting levels directed only at the individual pieces of work.



McKenna Gallery at Riverbank Arts Centre

Riverbank Arts Centre hosts solo exhibitions, group exhibitions, and artist residencies at the McKenna Gallery and each exhibition is accompanied by a talks programme and/or workshop opportunity, if the artist wishes. In addition to curating 5-8 exhibitions per year, Riverbank Arts Centre partners with Kildare Arts Service on an 'Emerging Visual Artist Bursary Award' each year, which enables the **first major solo exhibition** in the McKenna Gallery by an emerging artist. Previous

recipients include Brenda Kearney, Marta Golubowska, Noel Hensey, Michelle McBride, Isobel Egan, and Shane Hynan.

Some recent exhibitions at McKenna Gallery, Riverbank Arts Centre:

Clockwise from top left: Portal by Tina Claffey, Be-Longing by Marta Golubowska, Normal by Kildare Art Collective, State of RoY by Michelle McBride.



McKenna Gallery - technical information

Walls: Skimmed Plasterboard backed with 18mm MDF. Matte White 2440mm to highest hanging point.

Floor: Grey Vinyl Paint on Concrete.

Ceiling: Concrete. Exposed ducting, structural beams and infrastructure painted black.

Lighting: Suspended Track Lighting. Individual Led Spots can be refocused to the needs of each exhibition. There is no natural light in this room.

Size: The room is 7.4m at its deepest and 9.5m at its widest with walls of various dimension