



A WALK IN THE SUBLIME

AN ADVENTURE IN 21ST CENTURY
ROMANTICISM

NIALL NAESSENS

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RHA, Ashford Gallery

16th October -16th November 2025

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ROYAL HIBERNIAN
ACADEMY of ARTS

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NA GAELTACHTA

*For Orla,
Nicholas, Billie, Sally and Aoife*

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Cover image: *Landscape with Botticelli Roses* (detail), 2025.
Digital drawing. Archival inkjet print on bamboo paper, 95 x 95cm.



NIALL NAESSENS A WALK IN THE SUBLIME

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Rain, a form of precipitation, water falling from clouds under gravity, this is the natural element I most associate with Niall Naessens's work. In early etchings it was slanting, strong diagonals aiming for land and sea, cutting across the landscape as they cut across your line of vision. Rain, light or lashing. Rain in the distance, rain on your face. Rain as ruled and etched lines in the surface of a copper plate. Soft rain and hard rain, and rain, like the tiny vessel in the early etching *One Hundred and Fifty Days and Noah's Boat*, (2002) leading towards brighter prospects, towards a gap in the clouds. Rain has made way for other elements, for all weathers, in fact, and especially for the starkly exposed, mercurial conditions of the West Kerry coastline. Though an intrepid explorer of the outdoors, I don't think I've ever seen Naessens in a raincoat. He, like *The Wanderer above the Atlantic Ocean*, maintains his own style in the encounter with nature.¹ In the mixed-media work, a red-haired figure looks beyond rocky promontories towards an ocean liner edging the horizon. Based on Casper David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, Naessens's period-dressed man, however immersed, remains distinct, the better to observe the landscape he is helping to create.

As weather and landscapes have changed, so too have Naessens's methods, with printmaking evolving into drawing and painting and back again. His complex mark-making builds hybrid forms that include, in a more recent development, the relatively automated forms that come with working on a computer. This turn to technology might seem unlikely at first, the artist moving closer to nature only to spend hours at a computer screen, but such anomalies are part of his restless

Toyota Corolla Estate 1973 and the Plough, 2023

Digital drawing. Archival inkjet print on bamboo paper, 95 x 95cm.

enquiry, an approach to image-making based less on established notions than the possibility of surprise. Sometimes, this avoidance of the obvious creates a visual awkwardness. His choice of square formats, for example, forces the natural expansiveness of the landscape into a box-like frame. But look at *Farmer with Working Dog above Sás*, where the square format helps pile-up the coastline as a series of dramatic steps. High above a small beach, the eponymous figure and his dog appear within an abstract pattern of interlocking shapes. Contrary to convention, the subject of this work is not the illusory scene or its vertiginous aspect, but rather, an equal combination of the scene and the scenography, the deliberate set-building employed by the artist through his idiosyncratic approach.

Surprisingly, it's often in the more automated methods of computer drawing that Naessens's distinctive mark-making most strongly emerges. Printed onto a sheet of bamboo paper that measures 95 x 95cm, *Red Toyota Estate 1973 and the Plough* (2023) is a work much larger than the screen it's originally made on. The marks and gestures that make up the nocturnal scene become exaggerated, blown up to lively caricatures of their original selves. The scene itself is also unnatural, with the vintage car's headlights burning a path before it but failing to burn out the starry plough above. This is the power of picture-making, where natural vision is replaced by the vision of the image itself, the artist's nightscape illuminated by its own logic.

A more recent work, *Little Red and Harvest Moon*, has another version of this dichotomy. Rising over a red-roofed barn, pink and mauve clouds circulate the magnetic moon like a floating archipelago. On the ground below, and following the

beam of a handheld flashlight, a female figure walks in the shadow of the barn building. There are details that could be symbols – a ladder, black dogs – but the balanced rendering makes everything seem homely, the near and the distant, the ordinary and the sublime in dreamlike harmony.

However dreamy though, sheer gorgeousness in Naessens's work is rarely allowed to exist unencumbered. When it almost does, in a work like *Studio Lights and Dawn*, the similarrendering of clouds, rooftops and faraway hills are such that you keep your footing in the image as a careful construction. Wiping the foreground, swallows pass like hang gliders, the silhouetted hunters strangely anthropomorphic. You don't get lost or overpowered in Naessen's version of the contemporary sublime, you become entangled. The sublime, naturally expansive, is more suited to grand gestures than the hand-held approachability of works on paper. But even the largest artwork is no match for the landscape – the map is never the territory itself – and all rendered landscapes involve the suspension of disbelief. A line on the surface might be a distant horizon. An inch of paper might be an earthly mile. The appearance of the artist's studio, present in the title but only a small detail of the image, is a reminder of the site of making, the work's most salient location.

A recent exhibition was called *The Edge of Marvelous* (2023).² Conceptual, physical, poetic, this evocative title reminds us that edges are important in all kinds of ways. The edge of a field, a sheet of paper, a printing plate. So much happens at the boundaries where shapes are defined and colours meet; where the image and the world acknowledge their differences. Naessens is especially sensitive to

this quality, seeing the landscape (or any view) not as separate, but as something defined by our association with it, and by the apparatus of vision itself. The oblique reference to Dziga Vertov in *Artist and Cine Camera* summons the pioneering Russian’s insistence that cinema is a language separate to those of literature and the theatre, a language with its own grammar and ways of seeing. The original English title of his *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) was *An excerpt from the diary of a cameraman*, and this sense of daily practice is captured in the image by the figure of Naessens himself, head bowed under a familiar hat, walking away from the camera and out of the frame. With his back to the dramatic landscape – a reversal of the Rückenfigur synonymous with German Romanticism – the artist is already pondering its translation into the image we are looking at now.

By the simple expedient of etching their portraits, Naessens provides us with a line-up of historical figures important to his work and thinking. Whether writing or painting, Edmund Burke, J.M.W. Turner and John Constable (along with the previously mentioned Casper David Friedrich) progressed ideas of the romantic sublime. The mind is awed by representations of a world that can be dark and uncertain, but also reassured by its containment within art. Immanuel Kant, responding to Burke’s *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), described the sublime as something boundless, a concept paradoxically defined by our inability to grasp it. This confusion, between grandeur and fear, solace and anxiety, remains familiar to us today, art as beautiful, but challenging material. Naessens belongs in this romantic tradition, and though these other figures are eminent and he modest, he has

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earned his place among them by attempting to grasp the natural world through his own experience and sensibility. From the backseat of a bus going to the NCAD, he remembers eyeballing Burke on his plinth outside Trinity College.³ He didn’t know it then, but the Dubliner’s writing on the sublime would become an abiding influence; their paths would continue to cross.

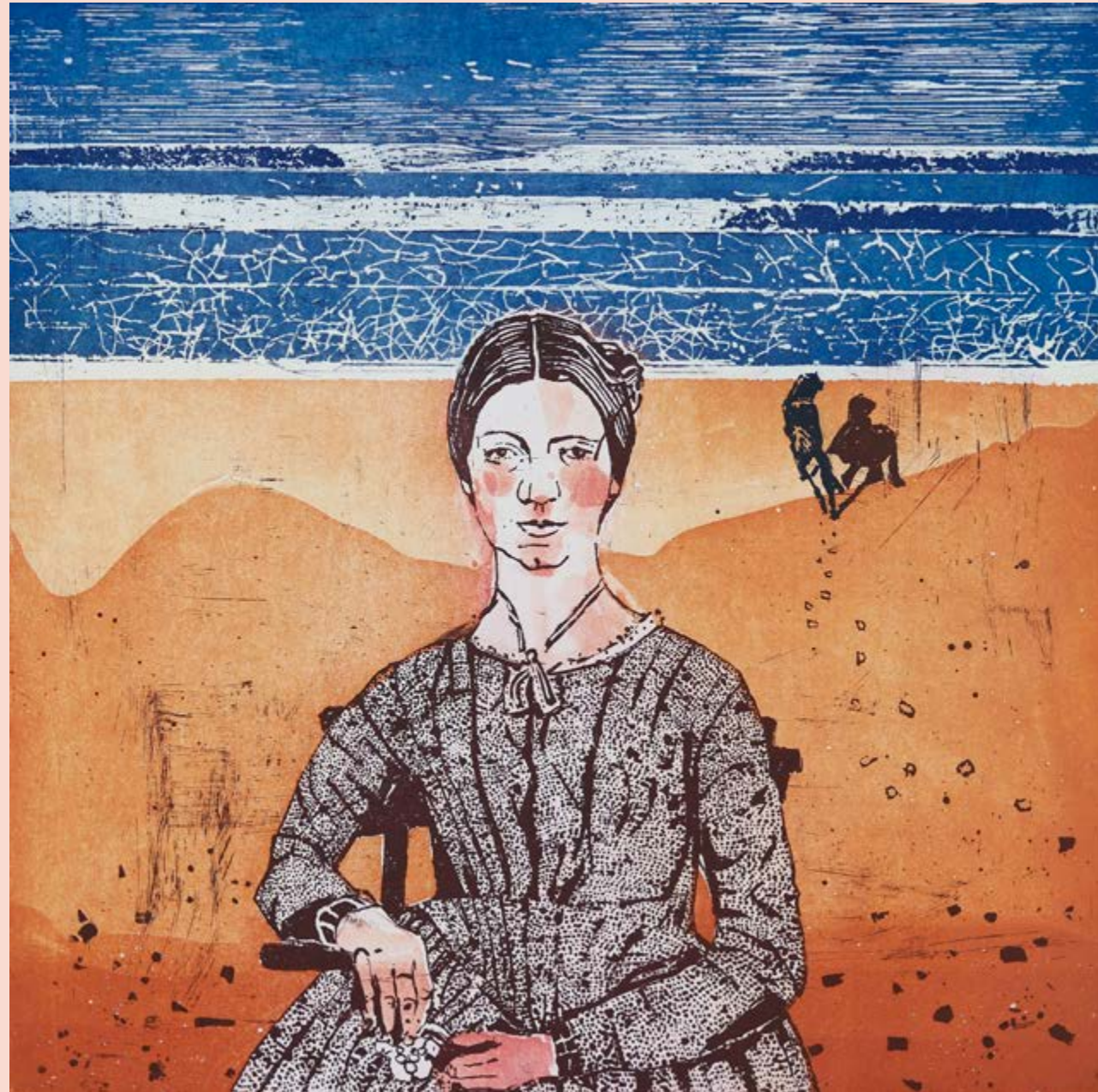
Square in format and stabilised by horizontals, the large computer drawing *China Dogs and Components of a Showery Day* is suspended between multiple viewpoints. On the window, and characteristic of what the artist calls ‘veils of interference’, a constellation of raindrops and a single tiger moth intercede between inside and out. In the middle distance, the sea draws down a rainbow over the heads of the porcelain dogs, who seem suitably entranced. The moth is also emblematic, waiting for the rain to subside, a changeling of another sort.

The twinning of artifice and the natural world is most vivid here, along with a certain nostalgia, set against the fleeting conditions of the ever-present tense. Seeing these artworks, in all their aspects, makes the rainbow, that gap in the clouds, worth waiting for.

John Graham
August 2025

Notes

1. All works are mixed media and 2025, unless otherwise stated.
2. The show at An Gailearaí in Gweedore (2023) was titled by the Irish language poet, Cathal O’Searcaigh, *Ar Imeach an Iontais/The Edge of Marvelous*.
3. From a conversation with the artist.



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*I started Early-Took my Dog-And
visited the Sea- E.D., 2025.
Etching on Zerkall, 40 x 40cm.*

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I STARTED EARLY— TOOK MY DOG

I started Early – Took my Dog –
And visited the Sea –
The Mermaids in the Basement
Came out to look at me –

And Frigates – in the Upper Floor
Extended Hempen Hands –
Presuming Me to be a Mouse –
Aground – upon the Sands –

But no Man moved Me – till the Tide
Went past my simple Shoe –
And past my Apron – and my Belt
And past my Boddice – too –

And made as He would eat me up –
As wholly as a Dew
Upon a Dandelion's Sleeve –
And then – I started – too –

And He – He followed – close behind –
I felt His Silver Heel
Upon my Ankle – Then My Shoes
Would overflow with Pearl –

Until We met the Solid Town –
No One He seemed to know –
And bowing – with a Mighty look –
At me – The Sea withdrew –

Emily Dickinson



REVERIES OF AN ARTIST IN THE NAESSENS LANDSCAPE

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I started early, took my easel, and visited the sea. Mist shrouded the Atlantic grandeur that has backdropped my life since earliest days. Having first painted from this precipice as a boy, on the same spot I was now growing old. Mermaids came out to look at me. Frigates long rotted into the pulp of the past reappeared on the horizon. The sea followed me on my homeward trudge, dripping from the canvas strapped to my back. Noon burned away the last of the fog; in the distance the town stood solid. The post van was pulling away from the trees that hide our house. A package awaited. From its hard shell emerged a tenderly cocooned etching by master printmaker Niall Naessens.

This print, held to the window by my scrubbed hands, was *Artist Painting in the Poison Glen*. Naessens's outdoor painter belonged to the cast of artists, poets, and philosophical men depicted observing natural phenomena in his wide-ranging solo exhibition, *The Last Man in Europe*, which had recently graced the Graphic Studio Gallery in Dublin. Figures in the Naessens landscape frequently strike viewers as archetypes, rather than portraits, yet I was experiencing an unmistakable frisson of recognition. The easel, diminutive in the vast lunar landscape, under a quarter moon, was my own. The pictured painter wore the same coat and hat in which I stood holding the etching, a chill having entered my bones. The stance was mine. A half-hour car journey would bring me to the Poison Glen, yet I have never visited, and it lies outside the 5km ambit within which I habitually paint. Naessens, however, soars beyond facts. The eye of the Naessens landscape centres around the artist's West Kerry home and studio, overlooking Brandon Bay, yet vertiginously it swoops the western coastline of Ireland, setting foot on such extremities as Loop Peninsula, and islands that are the westernmost parts of Europe.

Artist Painting in the Poison Glen, 2023
Etching, 20 x 20cm.

The daily presence in my home these past two years of a window onto the Naessens landscape has made me eager to embark on *Walk in the Sublime: An Adventure in 21st Century Romanticism*, the artist's keenly awaited new exhibition at the RHA Ashford Gallery. One might elect to set out from *Early Morning Studio Lights*. The anticipatory light of a new day bathes the building inside which the image was created. A sonata in the air, directly above the roof, swallows wheel. The artist's eye floats free, harmonizing with the birds. Traditionally, landscape artists have viewed avian domains from below and afar. Our walk in the sublime promises to encompass ascents and flights.

The font sprinkling this excursion is Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, published in 1757. Defying the enclosures of chronology that shepherd our steps from generation to generation, we come upon our guide, *Mister Burke and His Hound*, the thinker contemplating the passage of living water through a ravine carved by deep time. Is the solitary dog of *Hound and Near Gale Winds* also Burke's companion? While human figures in the Naessens landscape are seen from behind or in profile, unaware of the viewer, this hound turns away from the spectacle of the storm to meet our gaze. Are we standing next to the creature's master, shoulder to shoulder in our meditations over the raging sea? Or have we *become* Burke? We move on, into the weather and into time, not knowing.

The horseback rider of *Botticelli Roses*, and occasional boaters, apart, seekers of the sublime in the Naessens landscape travel on foot. In common with many artists and writers through the ages, walking forms an integral part of my creative process. The pedestrian, moving at human pace, ear free of the distractions of hoof or wheel, experiences a merging of the self and its surrounding. Even Naessens's visual ode to the people who emigrated from the Great Blasket in the 1950s, the haunting *Letter to Springfield Massachusetts*, concerns a lone walker, all thoughts of ships or locomotives held for the time being in abeyance, as islander and island poignantly meld. William Wordsworth, whose poetic peregrinations covered an estimated 175,000 miles over the course of his writing life, was a born wanderer, a prototype of the Naessensian figure. Among the pages of *The Prelude*, the Lake Poet eulogises the commonplace road, crossing 'The naked summit of a far-off hill / Beyond the limits that my feet had trod, / Was like an invitation into space / Boundless.' Gesturing towards this boundless space, Naessens invites us to walk. Behold the lightning-watcher on a breath-held beach, or the *Farmer with Working Dog Above Sás*, on the verge of a sheer drop. A boundlessness of awe with an element of fear awaits Naessens's pilgrims. On feet that have hiked and climbed, they stand face to face with Burke's classification of what distinguishes sublime scenes from ones merely beautiful.

Since first stepping into the world in the spartan Dresden studio of Caspar David Friedrich in 1818, *The Wanderer above a Sea of Mists* has continued wandering, across magazine covers, T-shirts, and coffee mugs. Naessens offers the Wanderer what is perhaps the most Wordsworthian of journeys: a quarter of the way into the 21st century and to the very edge of Europe. Across centuries, the Irish printmaker's conversation with the German Romantic flows. Naessens's *Two Poets Observe Dying Storm* embodies the spirit of Friedrich's companions contemplating moons. *The Wanderer in Technicolour* has walked westward over Ireland to reach the land's limits. The mist that lay before the 1818 Wanderer has cleared; the offshore helicopter, and playful paper planes, evoking the boundlessness of space, are clearly visible. The world of cinema lay in the distance the year the Wanderer commenced his epic walk. Purveyors of colour, the company Technicolor by the 1930s had developed a camera capable of recording not one but three negatives, this synchronization revolutionising coloration. *Artist and Cine Camera* shows the Naessensian artist of old swapping tools. Challenging the veracity of the scene, a pattern of dots inspired by raindrops focuses the eye viewing *The Wanderer above the Atlantic Ocean*. Not unlike the drifting blossoms of *Botticelli Roses*, this superimposition of imagery calls to mind the layering of negatives employed by Technicolor to create miracles.

Fishermen on Rügen, the island to which Friedrich sailed for seven hiking tours between 1801 and 1826, thought the artist was voluntarily seeking a watery grave, so reckless did he navigate the perilous precipices of the cliffs, dashing towards sea storms at the sound of thunder. Naessens's research trips to western isles are undertaken in a similar vein: this testing of peripheries and the unknown. Immune to the pleasant appearances of places, and those charms of the picturesque that satisfy many artists, in harmony with souls such as Friedrich or Wordsworth, the pilgrimage undertaken by Naessens passes through the veils of landscape, the endless fogs, and ultimately there is no journey's end. The Wanderer will continue wandering.

An artist buffeted daily by the huffs of the Atlantic, most often I am alone, although occasionally I have as a companion Emily Dickinson. The well-nigh 800 pages of *The Complete Poems* mark with colour those verses to which I most frequently turn. *I started Early – Took my Dog* – sits almost illegibly on its page, behind a murk of dried paint and turpentine. Retracing my *Walk in the Sublime: An Adventure in 21st Century Romanticism*, I find myself returning to Naessens's exquisite set of portrait etchings. These historical personages pose at a slight remove from the faceless artists, poets and wanderers in the Naessens landscape, their countenances revealed. Here sits Dickinson, her dog already setting off towards the sea. I lower my paintbrush, seeing through a gap in the mist Niall Naessens and the poet of Amherst observing the morn.



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A Philosopher in a Landscape; E.B., 2025.
Etching on Zerkall, 40 x 40cm.



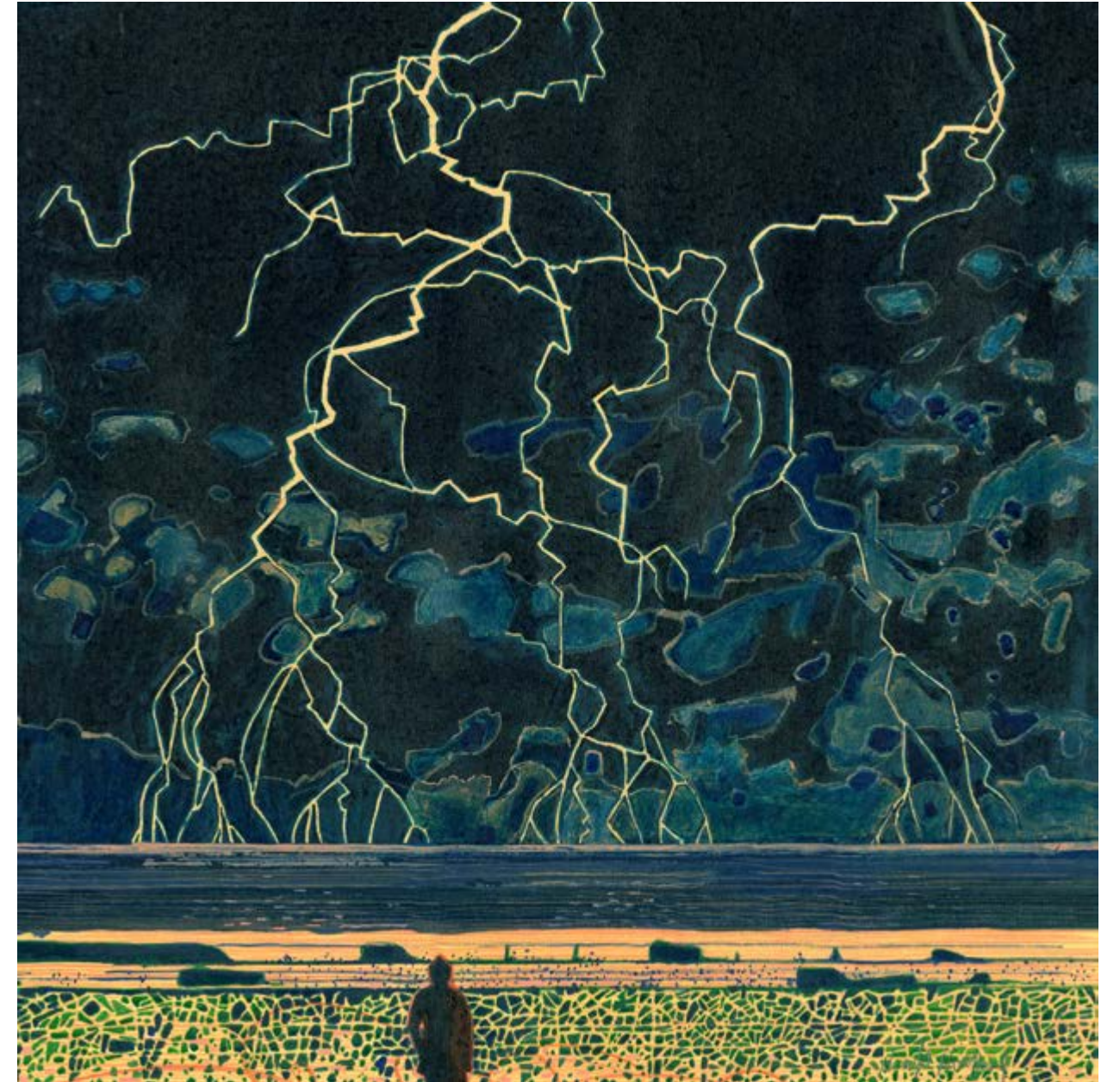
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An Artist's Conversation: Self and J.C., 2025.
Etching on Zerkall, 40 x 40cm.



The Sun is God J.M.W.T., 2025.
Etching on Zerkall, 40 x 40cm.

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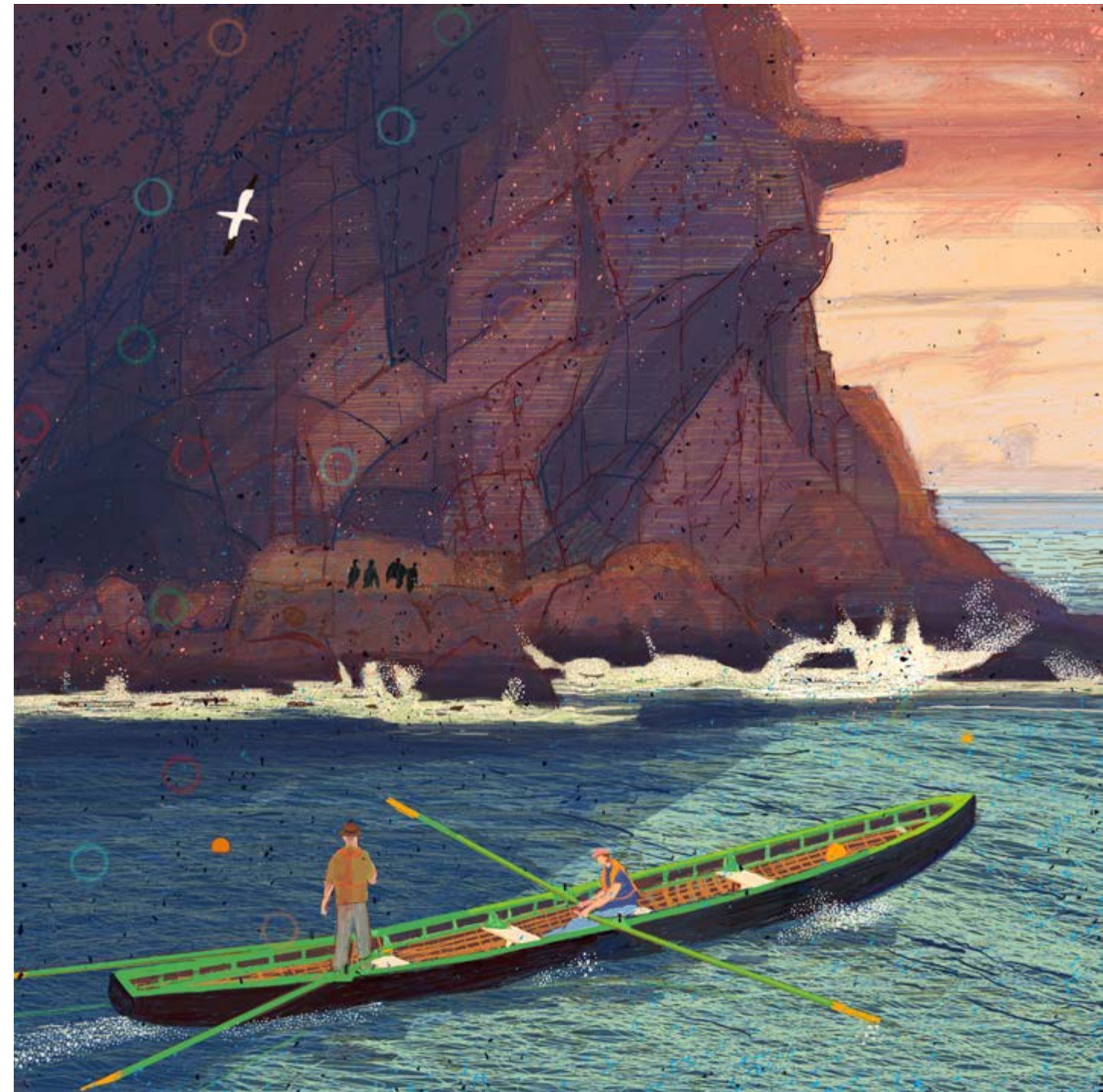
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Artist Observing Lightning, 2025.
Acrylic ink, etching ink and
coloured pencil, 50 x 50cm.

Artist Observing Landscape from the Sea, 2025
Digital drawing. Archival inkjet print on bamboo paper, 95 x 95cm

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Landscape with Botticelli Roses, 2025.

Digital drawing. Archival inkjet print on bamboo paper, 95 x 95cm.

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China Dogs, Components of a Showery Day, 2025.
Digital drawing. Archival inkjet print on bamboo paper, 95 x 95cm.

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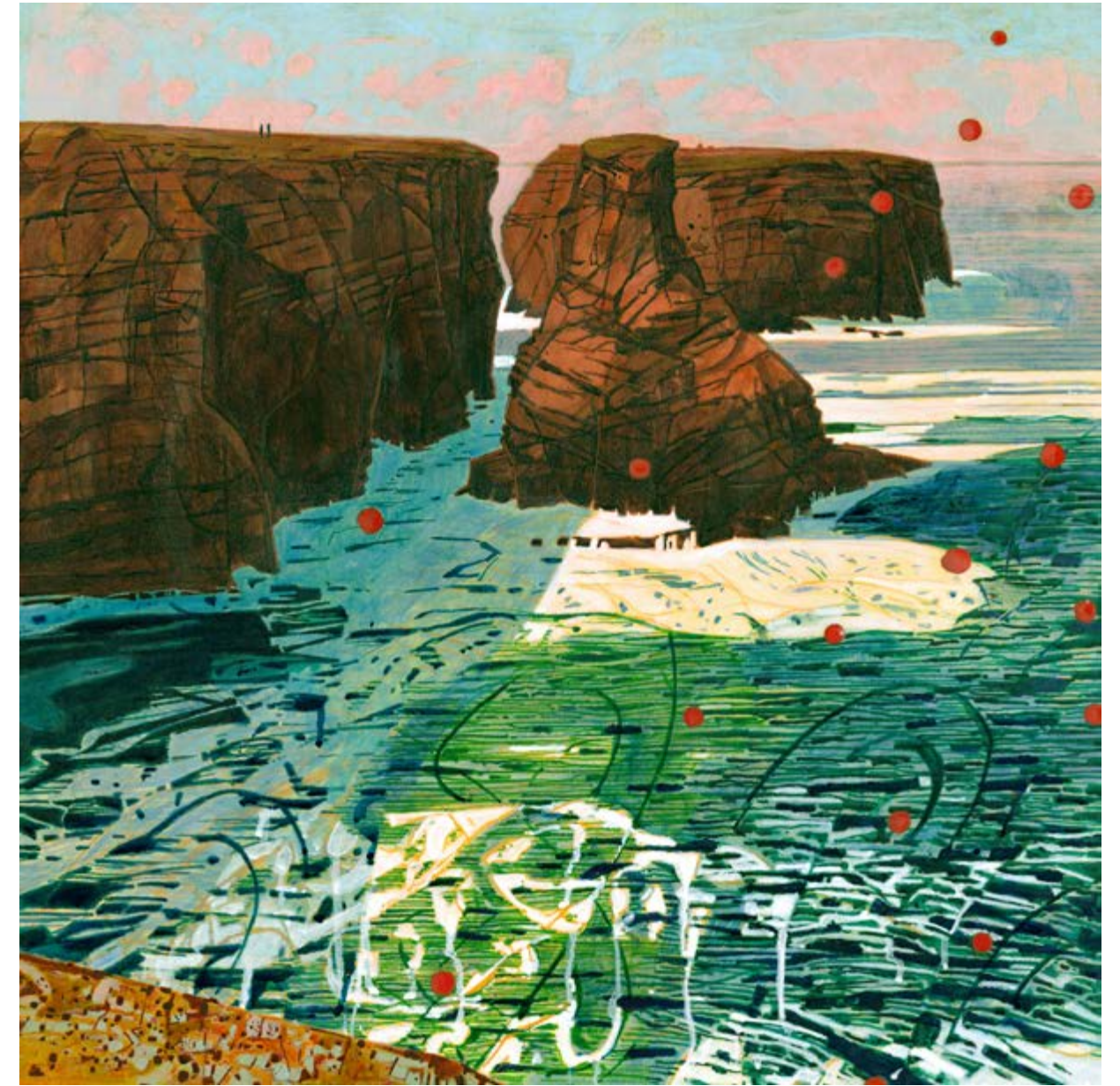




Full Moon with Moths and Midges, 2025.
Acrylic ink, etching ink and coloured pencil, 50 x 50cm.

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Landscape with Cliff Walkers, 2025.
Acrylic ink, etching ink and coloured pencil, 50 x 50cm.



Artist and Cine Camera, 2025.
Acrylic ink, etching ink and coloured pencil, 50 x 50cm.

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Poet Observing Dying Storm, 2025.
Acrylic ink, etching ink and coloured pencil, 50 x 50cm.



Photographing Bishop's Island, 2025.
Acrylic ink, etching ink and coloured pencil, 50 x 50cm.

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Farmer with Working Dog, 2025.
Acrylic ink, etching ink and coloured pencil, 50 x 50cm.

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Little Red and Harvest Moon, 2025.
Acrylic ink, etching ink and coloured pencil, 50 x 50cm.

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Letter to Springfield Massachusetts, 2025.
Acrylic ink, etching ink and coloured pencil, 50 x 50cm.



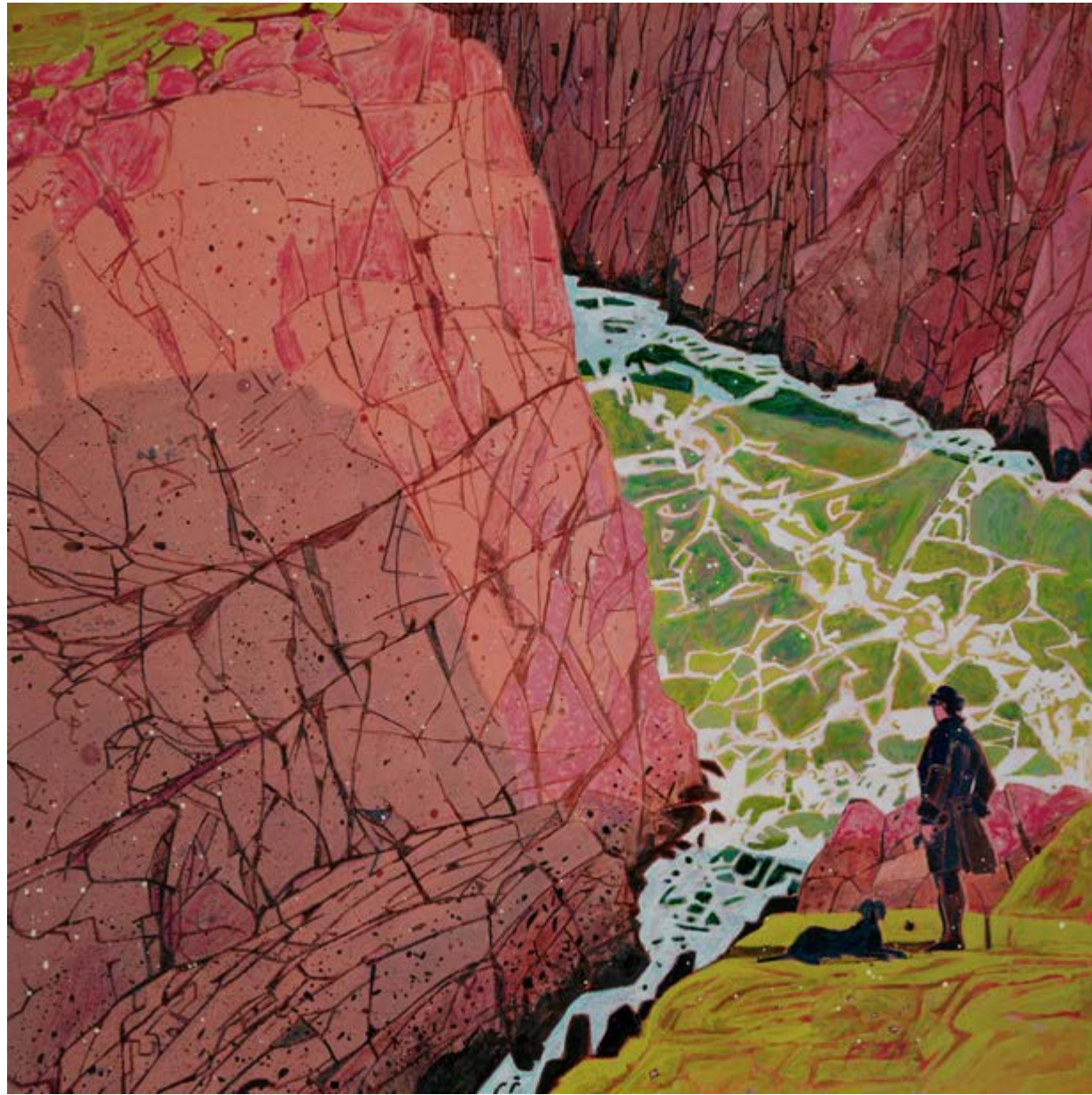
Hound and Near Gale of Wind, 2025.
Acrylic ink, etching ink and coloured pencil, 50 x 50cm.

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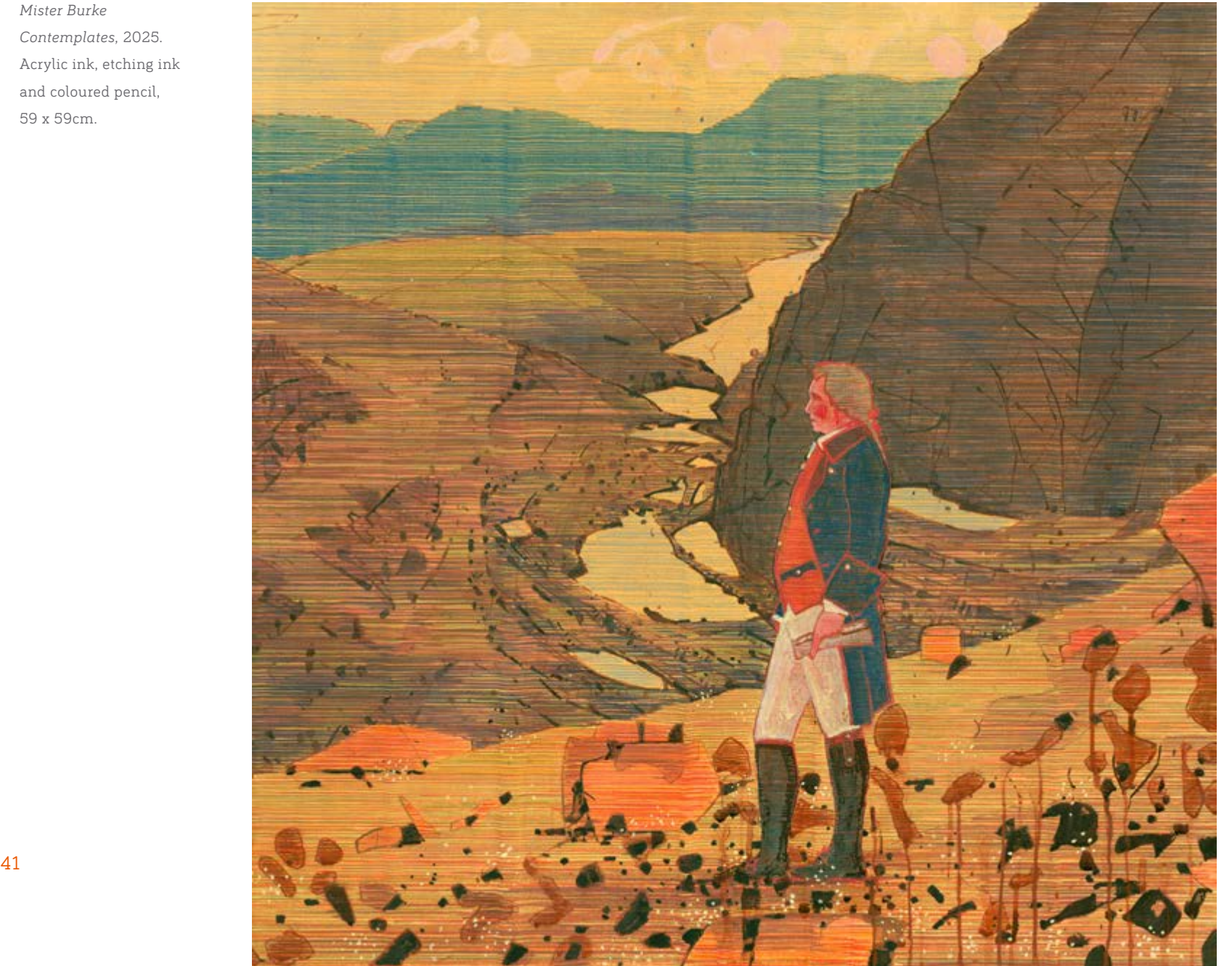


Masatiompan and Brandon Ridge, 2025.
Acrylic ink, etching ink and coloured pencil, 50 x 50cm.



Mister Burke and His Hound, 2025.
Acrylic ink, etching ink and coloured pencil, 50 x 50cm.

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*Mister Burke
Contemplates, 2025.*
Acrylic ink, etching ink
and coloured pencil,
59 x 59cm.

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The Wanderer in Technicolour, 2025.

Digital drawing. Archival inkjet print on bamboo paper, 95 x 95cm.

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The Wanderer Above the Atlantic Ocean, 2025.
Acrylic ink, etching ink and coloured pencil with painted Blick stickers, 59 x 59cm.

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*Landscape with Sea Stacks
and Lobster Boat, 2025.*
Acrylic ink, etching ink and
coloured pencil, 59x59cm.

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Studio lights at Dawn, 2025.
Acrylic ink, etching ink and
coloured pencil, 50 x 50cm.

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NIALL NAESSENS

Naessens (born in Dublin, 1961) graduated from the National College of Art and Design in 1983. He returned to NCAD and graduated with an MFA in Fine Art Print in 2013 as a mature student.

Naessens is a master printmaker with a long history with the Graphic Studio Dublin where he learned the art of printmaking and established a fine art career. He worked there as a professional printmaker for the Visiting Artist Scheme, and had major role in initiating and producing *Art into Art* at the National Gallery of Ireland in 1998, *Holy Show* at the Chester Beatty library in 2002, and *The Cracked Lookingglass* for ReJoyce Bloomsday 100 at Graphic Studio Gallery and the Old Print Shop, New York. He was a GSD studio director from 1999 to 2005. He moved to West Kerry in 2004. In 2007 he set up Cló Cill Rialaig, a print workshop at the Cill Rialaig Project in Ballinskelligs, County Kerry, which he managed for two years. He built his own studio at Lios na Caolbhai in 2008.

Although principally known as an etcher he also makes drawings, paintings and digital works. His work is a commentary on aspects of an artist contemplating landscape.

He has had 26 solo shows in Ireland and abroad. Most notably *Good Morning Mister Turner* at the National Gallery of Ireland, 2018, a response to the Henry Vaughan J.M.W. Turner watercolours. Naessens was recently elected a member the Royal Society of Painter Printmakers in London. He was awarded the Aberystwyth University Art Museum Tessa Sidey Purchase Prize and the Mike Brennan Award at the 2022 members show at their Bankside Gallery in London.

Recent solo shows include *Áiteanna Iargúlta* at Greenlane Gallery, Dingle 2024, *Ar Imeach an Íontais* at An Gaearaí, Gaoth Dobhair 2023, *The Last Man in Europe* at the Graphic Studio Gallery 2023, *The Edge of Marvellous* at Grisle Gallery, Kilorglin 2023, and *The Wanderer* at SO Fine Art Editions, Dublin 2021.

CORNELIUS BROWNE

Cornelius Browne is a Glasgow-born painter and writer based in Donegal. He studied Fine Art at the National College of Art & Design in Dublin and worked for many years at the Irish Museum of Modern Art. His most recent solo exhibitions are *A Garden a Stone's Throw from the Sea* at Cashel Arts Festival and *All Nature Has a Feeling* at Regional Cultural Centre in Donegal. He has published fiction, non-fiction and poetry. He is a contributor to *Sunday Miscellany* on RTÉ Radio 1. Since 2019 he has been writing a regular column for The Visual Artists' News Sheet, published by Visual Artists Ireland.

JOHN GRAHAM

John Graham graduated from the NCAD with a BA in 1993 and MFA in 2006. In 2024 he received a first class honours MA (Art in the Contemporary World), also from the NCAD. With a foundation in drawing and printmaking, his practice has included video and sound installations, writing and curatorial projects. His most recent solo exhibition *Familiar Things* was presented at Highlanes Gallery, Drogheda, November 2024/January 2025. His artist's book, *Titles, Etcetera* was launched at Highlanes Gallery in January 2025. Public collections include the Irish Museum of Modern Art, National Gallery of Ireland, Arts Council of Ireland, Chester Beatty Library, University College Dublin, Trinity College Dublin, OPW State Art Collection and New York Public Library. His writing and exhibition reviews are published by the Visual Artists' News Sheet, Paper Visual Art Journal and Mirror Lamp Press, among others. After lecturing for more than twenty years, he finished teaching in the Yeats Academy of Arts, Design and Architecture (YAADA) at the Atlantic Technological University, Sligo, in 2023. He lives in Dublin.

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