

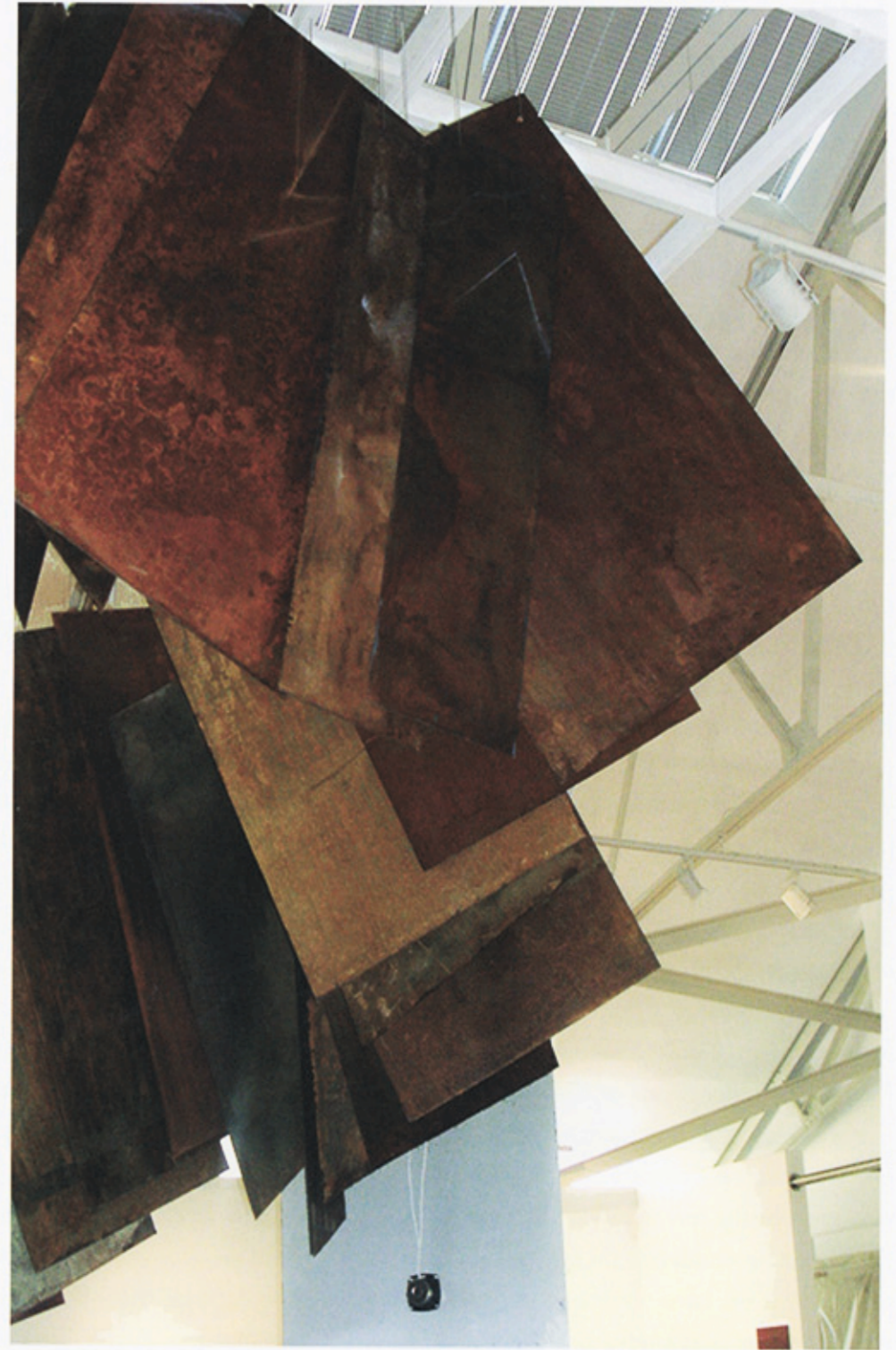


The Banks of the Bann

Barbara Freeman & Paul Wilson



'The Banks of The Bann' detail



'The Banks of The Bann' detail

Inverting Conventions

A Series of Four Exhibitions

Inverting: to turn something upside down or change the order of two things: opposite in relation to something else.

Convention: General agreement on or acceptance of certain practices or attitudes; a practice or procedure widely observed in a group, especially to facilitate social interaction; a custom: a widely used and accepted device or technique, as in drama, literature, or painting.

Millennium Court Arts Centre is proud to present 'Banks of the Bann' the fourth and final of four exhibitions in the series Inverting Conventions.

Inverting Conventions: A Series of Exhibitions Altering Perceptions is a project of extraordinary measure. There are two major segments to the project challenging people's perception about contemporary art and the intense creative development of Northern Irish artists.

The series brings five Northern Irish artists together to make weighty progress in altering perceptions and developing creativity, challenging the viewers' notions about contemporary art, about Craigavon and about their creative self. Misconceptions of Craigavon and mid-Ulster have been that it is an area of weak arts infrastructure, without a developed audience for the arts and with, traditionally, few avenues for artistic expression and creative endeavour. In reality, however, MCAC has found that we have scratched the surface of local subversive creators and innovators. With a

catchment area that includes Portadown, Lurgan, Craigavon and Armagh in the first instance, the series has been designed to be diverse, containing elements of the traditional and the contemporary, the challenging and the accessible in order to encourage viewers to see 'outside the box'

The Project aims to invert the idea of art conventions—from landscape and animation to urban space, architecture, digital images and sound. Contemporary artists working today are turning upside-down many of these standard art categories, concepts, movements and theories. They may be challenging viewers, but it may also be engaging to others. MCAC wants to take up the challenge of being a national leader for its innovative approaches to audience engagement with contemporary art.

Artists have been selected to underline the theme of inverting conventions as well as being representative of the different disciplines/mediums developed and promoted at MCAC. Increasingly, this ability to link

ideas from different disciplines and art forms is seen as a model for cultural institutions of the future.

An integral part of the Project is the artist-in-residency period of approximately 1-2 weeks. The MCAC artist-in-residency is a national studio programme located at the Centre, providing a studio space for up to a two-month period for an artist working in visual arts, verbal arts or multi-media. Additionally, all of the exhibitions will have a public, site-specific element which invert the viewer-participants' perceptions outside the convention of what is a gallery space. This element of Inverting Conventions underlines MCAC's aim to inspire and propel the creative potential of our community. By creating artwork that sits outside the gallery space, the artists and MCAC will demonstrate extraordinary appeal in the community and become a vital force for bringing new visitors inside the MCAC and building new audiences for contemporary art.

The MCAC is a catalyst for the creative expression of artists and the active engagement of audiences. We examine the questions that shape and inspire us as individuals, cultures, and communities. MCAC is becoming an Art Factory, producing new creative work. As an Art Factory, MCAC's Inverting Conventions is also an important project in the development of creative process for visual/multimedia artists, in particular from or working in Northern Ireland. 'Developing creativity' is one of MCAC's taglines. Our ambition is to promote artistic practice on a local level while simultaneously developing established and emerg-

ing artists on a national and international level. There are not many opportunities for artists to have a white box in which they can create. MCAC prides itself on the ability to encourage the idea of 'anything goes and anything is possible' in creating artwork. MCAC houses two purpose-built galleries and has been described as one of the premiere art spaces of Northern Ireland. In addition to this the centre includes a verbal arts room with a visual and verbal archive library, a sound/audio studio, a multimedia suite equipped fully with video editing. Within the complex there is also a darkroom, a visual arts workshop and an artist-in-residency suite.

The creation of new work is complemented by the intense individual artistic development of the exhibiting artist. MCAC works closely with each artist to develop the exhibition, a catalogue and a marketing plan. The overall project encompasses a vision that is particularly appropriate to the Centre's space and regional area. With Inverting Conventions, MCAC is playing an instrumental role in the cultural development and promotion of creative talent, not only within the local area, but nationally and internationally.

This project would not have occurred without the assistance of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's Lottery Fund. MCAC is indebted to their support.

Megan Johnston
Arts Centre Manager
March 2005



Work in progress



'The Banks of The Bann' Sheet steel, cables, speakers, etc...



The Bridge at Portadown
Photograph: Barbara Freeman

The Banks of the Bann:

Barbara Freeman & Paul Wilson

Notes by David Brett

In Tesco's

two lines keep interrupting me.

*Boys and girls come out to play
The moon is shining bright as day.*

Fragments like this are as impersonal and perfect as pebbles. The first line in which you can hear all the children that ever were in all the playgrounds of the world, followed by that mysterious second line. I can see the kinetics of it...the long OO of moon followed by the three bright open vowels of I, I, and A on a rising cadence. But it is best heard by the inner ear, through which a door opens into a world of wonder and joy. Heard silently, the line communicates straight through the nerve endings.

This is what I am looking for an expression that passes into the understanding without a screen of opinion, thought, or even concept; and certainly not through language. Like that in the Book of Job when a *spirit passed before my face; the hair of my flesh stood up.*

Standing between the aisles of cans and packages I am seized with the certainty that the real full experience of what an art can do is apprehended prior to any 'concept'



*

I was asked to write this catalogue and its essay; but since I am a participant – the same way as a roadie is a participant in a gig – there is no way I can write a formal essay. Formal essays I can do – as pompous as you like, full of allusions and pretentious claims. But that's out of place here. We have to have some actuality and humour

It was Megan Johnston who offered a suggestion that the exhibition should be 'something about Portadown' This chimed at once with the concerns of both Barbara Freeman and Paul Wilson, that their collaborations should be centred on particular places and spaces. This, they felt, is almost certainly better than working in and for a centreless and anonymous 'art world' which always in fact centres upon national institutions, museums and galleries that are generalised the world over. An attention to the local and particular is a way of focussing the mind. Barbara and Paul also had a special interest in responding to the physical space of MCAC, as an actual volume and as a sonic environment.

Thinking about this in more general terms, paying attention to the local and the concrete without ever losing sight of the universal and abstract is part of the main challenge of human life today; to be absolutely modern without losing a sense of history and time and

continuity. Modernity both liberates and bereaves us: as it wounds, it empowers. In the process we feel ourselves torn apart.

An image floats into the mind, of a shaft sunk through the mud and shale into bedrock far below. There, down under ground and into time are the faults and the fissures and the burning heart of history. For this river Bann is a marker, an epi-border of one of the great tectonic plates of human affairs.

It is necessary for the non-Irish reader of this writing to understand that for four hundred years the banks of the Bann were the boundary between, to the West, a notionally Catholic Ireland, and to the East, a loosely Protestant Ireland heavily settled by Scots and Northern English. Before that between Norman and Gael. And before that between – who knows what factions. That it has been the site of atrocity and murder for just as long. Some events, like the slaughter on the bridge,¹ have passed into folk history and grown malignantly, like tumours; but others are fresh wounds, unhealed and unhealing, made by neighbour upon neighbour in the past few years. At the time of writing none of us will speak about it, since it is like a crime in the family which no one can bring themselves to name. But it seems to this mere roadie that a precarious carillon of muttering steel may be a fitting emblem for this locality.

*

Barbara Freeman and myself have been making an extensive photographic survey of the bridges and

stepping stones of the river as a piece of background research. Everywhere and everyway of crossing from one bank to another – all the way from the first culvert to the broad fenny reach by which the river enters Lough Neagh. The idea has been not to make these



photographs picturesque or tasteful. This is very hard, because so many of these scenes are, in plain fact, very picturesque (boats, willows and stepping stones), and because the camera was itself invented and developed out of early forms of picture-making devices. The Claude glass and the viewing screens which tourists carried about with them in the later eighteenth century were devised to turn countryside into landscape, and their visual conventions have determined the formats of film-size, apertures and frame-proportions ever since. This has subsequently turned the 'picturesque' into the enemy of art and thought.

*

And what, after all, is an installation. Essentially, an artistic intervention into a particular place, usually, but not necessarily, a room; and usually, but not always, a temporary intervention. In one sense, any domestic interior may be an installation, in so far as it is also a kind of private domestic shrine to its inhabitants, which changes over the years: but the gallery installation has become an artistic genre in its own right, since it is a space intermediate between public and private; a special sphere that is not sacred, but it not quite secular either. To turn a gallery from a space in which art is placed, into an art of the space itself, is a challenge. To bring the room into the work as well as the work into the room. Barbara Freeman's preliminary sketches were all much concerned with the roof girders and they have prolonged themselves into the completed work.

Installation is also a chance to make large work.



Size matters. Genuinely artistic ideas, that have passed beyond mere 'concepts' include issues of scale and dimension because they have to be realised to be real. And since there is now so little truly shared public space and truly shared public mind for we are all privatised now or, what amounts to the same, sectarianised into ever-diminishing fragments if you want to make large work you have to devise a strategy.

The idea of a 'public art' is almost always a non-starter and most attempts at it cause the mind to sink at their banality. There is, indeed, a good case to be made for creative vandalism. This is particularly the case where sculpture is concerned, since sculpture takes up real space and we should be very chary about how we use real space.

I am reminded of a councillor in a Northern English town who, declaring his opposition to a piece of public sculpture, did so on the grounds that he was willing to support music because he did not have to hear it, and painting because he did not have to look at it, but he would be damned if he'd vote for public sculpture because he could not walk around with his eyes shut. There is a deep truth buried in this amazing remark.

Space matters.
Stuff matters, too, because the choice, use and

manipulation of materials in real space is itself a dimension of thinking and feeling. The struggle to give materials clay, stone, iron and the like (not to mention everyday sounds) a meaning, is nothing whatever to do with establishing concepts, but with encountering reality. I take this as a fundamental issue. Matter came before mind, and the encounters with stuff from the



Millennium Court Arts Centre; roof girders
Photo: Barbara Freeman

first sensation of another's flesh and the blankets in which we are first wrapped actually constitute the content of mind. Attempts to base an art on concepts rather than precepts are always, when fully unwrapped, found to be based upon philosophical idealism.²



from a digital sketch-book

*
The Banks of the Bann is the third of three works made by the visual artist Barbara Freeman and composer Paul Wilson. It also has a definite relationship to a previous collaboration with Michael Alcorn entitled 'Patina'. All these, and other collaborative ventures carried out by Freeman, have been concerned with sounds emanating in spaces.

Sound and Space are primal categories of human experience, which help to constitute one another. Sounds can only exist in spaces, and sounds propagating outward from their source create the space in which they are heard. These spaces may be real, as in the concert hall or church or bar, or they may be apparent as in the radio or the headphones, or in the virtual space of the communications web, or even purely in the imagination of the creator. But it is not surprising that in religious and mythic traditions the Universe is often imagined as created by sound, a cosmic tone uttered as a single syllable...OM...or as the WORD, and this word resounds through space, creating the conditions of its own reception. Let it be. *Fiat!* In merely human space there is the ancient craft and science of acoustics, with its emphasis upon enactment in theatres and churches. And here in a gallery.



*

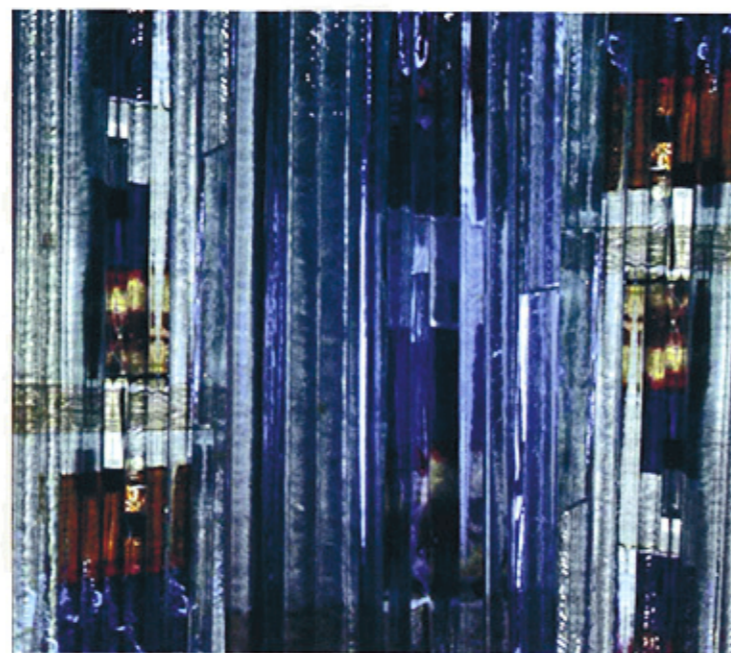
In Barbara Freeman's collaborative installations these sounds have either been musical in the conventional sense – notes, keys, themes and so forth or have been organised sounds that require a different language of description and different expectations of hearing. In every successful case she has shared with her colleagues a very clear idea by what she means by 'collaboration'. All participants have to be equally engaged from the start, which has to be agreed in common. This common start she calls 'the seed'. From this starting point the participants can diverge, but to it they must always refer. Collaboration involves a deal of trust and self-abnegation. You must be willing to play Herod to your own innocent good ideas.

*

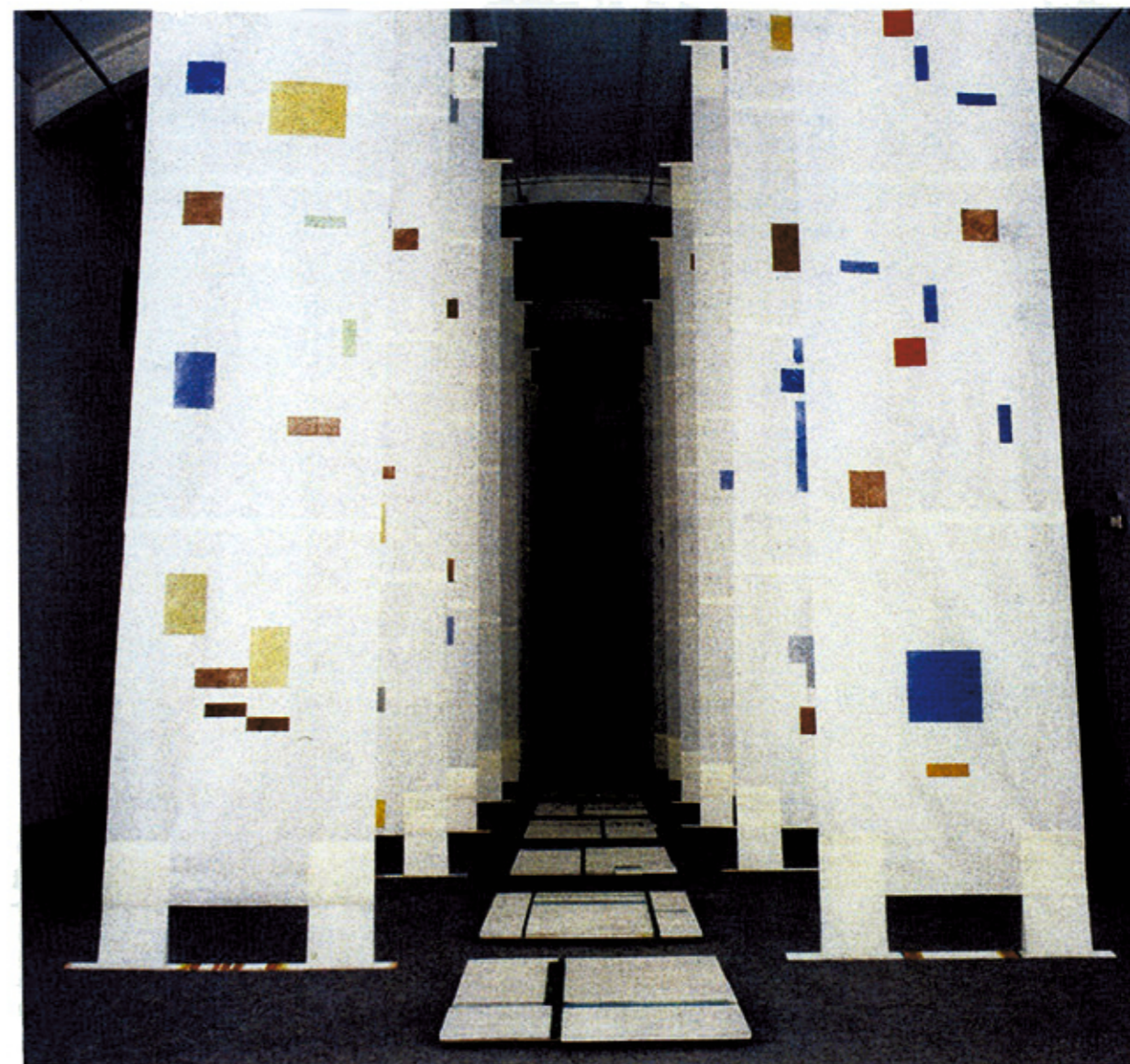
This ideal was first realised in two installation pieces – at the Ormeau Baths Gallery in 1998, with Nicola LeFanu and with Michael Alcorn.

The aural aspect for 'Gathering Paths' consisted of recordings made within one acre of Spanish hillside over twenty four hours, exquisitely realised by David Lumsdaine, and a very slow and distant percussion piece by LeFanu, written to accompany the tape. A third strand of music, which was composed jointly by LeFanu and Lumsdaine mingled and mixed the first two. The

gallery space was filled with swaying scrolls of paper and floored with an impossible walkway of sharp glass and friable plaster. LeFanu quotes Barbara as speaking of the exploration of 'that which is willed – that which is unwilled' and of herself as concerned with 'a music which did not move inexorably forward in the causative way of most European repertoire' ³



Detail, 'Gathering Paths'



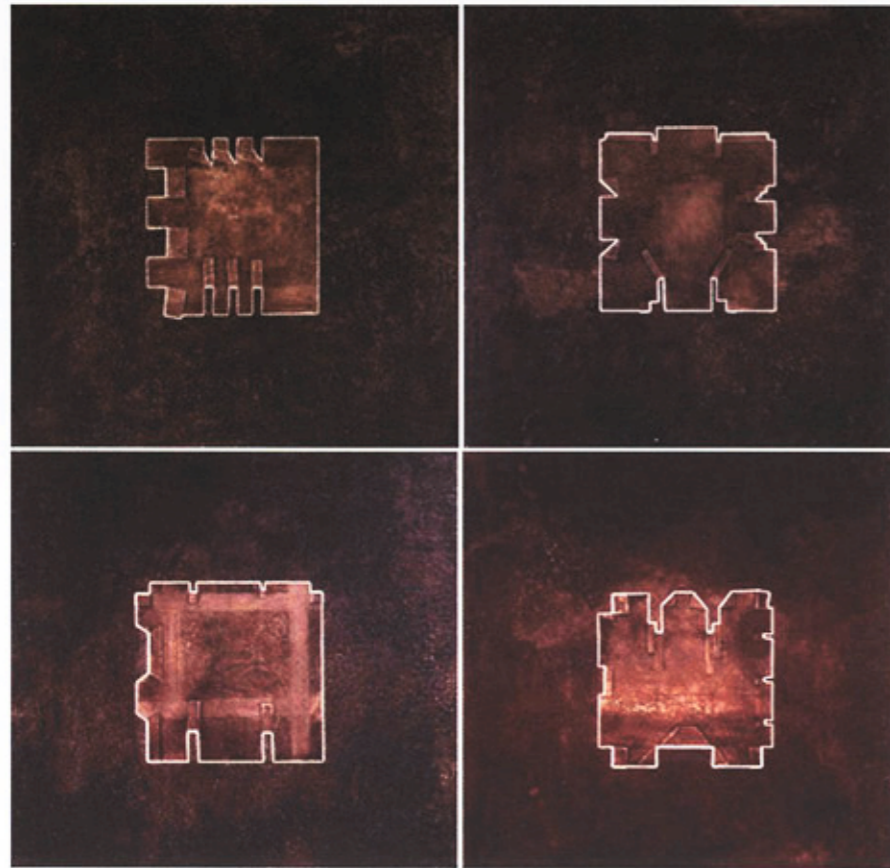
'Gathering Paths'
Hanging paper, plaster and glass: installation in collaboration with Nicola LeFanu and David Lumsdaine. Ormeau Baths Gallery, Belfast, 1998



*

In the piece 'Patina' the starting point or seed was the material of sheet steel. A number of rather comical photographs exist of Michael Alcorn stirring rusty

petrol drums or tapping away at old farm implements whilst Barbara lowers a microphone. Later, these sounds were transformed by way of computer facilities in Queen's University and in Vancouver. Meanwhile, Barbara, in defiance of rudimentary health-and-safety, was rinsing down sheet steel with very strong nitric acid, stabilising the results with shellac and printing directly from the raw rust. The result was a sinister suspended maze of metal plates which spoke with its own iron voice and a wall of prints.



Prints from 'Patina'
60 X 60 cms
Ormeau Baths Gallery, Belfast, 1998

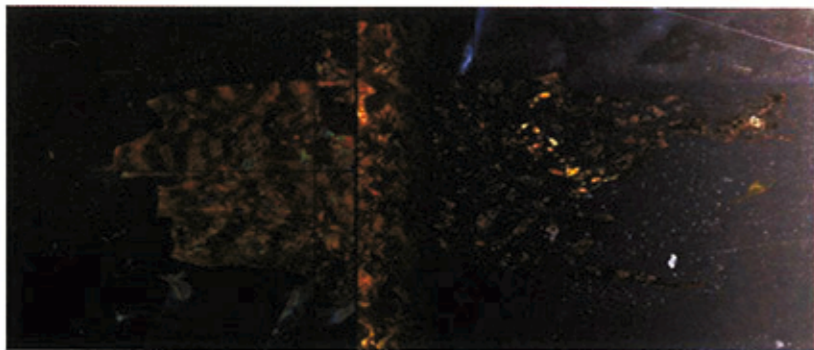
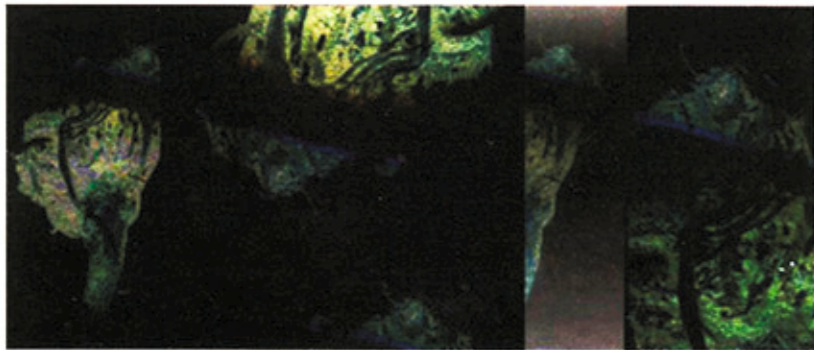


'Patina', Sheet steel, wood, line, sound system, etc...
Installation in collaboration with Michael Alcorn
Ormeau Baths Gallery, Belfast, 1998



*

This was followed by a project which was partly educational. Freeman was invited by An Gailearai at Falcarragh, Co. Donegal, to work with the students of the Foinn Chonallacha. This is a study centre which aims to foster high standards of traditional music by bringing together young musicians from all round the world. All the 'students' have to be already accomplished instrumentalists, but here they are



introduced to other traditional music and to modern music technology. The result is a spicy mixture of practice and people, of the ancient and the most contemporary.

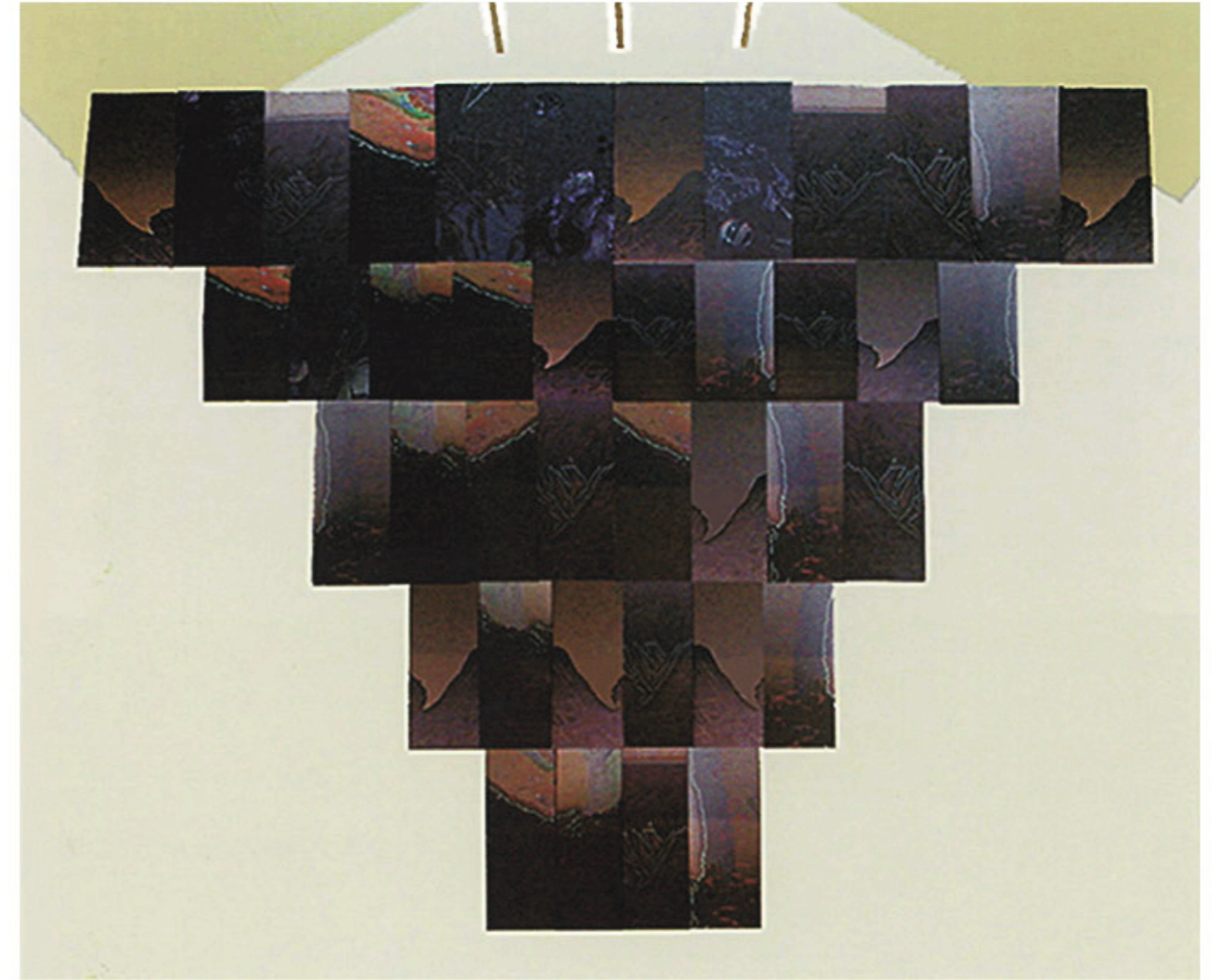
The 'seed' in this case was kelp (a material fascinating in its own right and of economic and historical significance in Donegal), and the discovery very early on, that the electronic commands and devices of image manipulation are almost identical to those used in the manipulation of sound. Sounds, like images, can be compressed, stretched and filtered. Indeed, there is so much one can do that the main artistic problem lies in judging which self-constraints are both necessary and sufficient. There is a horrible and artistically contemptible aspect to this technology which involves 'effects' and simulations, very easily achieved. Between Barbara and the students a process developed in which actual pieces of kelp were scanned directly (without the use of camera) whilst the underwater sounds of kelp were recorded. The resulting material was then treated (stretched, filtered etc.) to produce another body of material which in turn was subjected to a similar process. One result was a concert, another was a set of 12 prints, and a third was an installation wall of paper; not unlike a tapestry, which could be reassembled in different forms for different location. There was also a CD-ROM recording of the sounds and music that were produced.

'Ceilp/Kelp'

Two of a series of twelve digital prints

33 x 74 cm

2002



'Coastal'

Installation from 'Ceilp/Kelp'

4m x 3m; digital print on paper

Old Museum Arts Centre, Belfast 2002



*

Barbara Freeman met up with Paul Wilson through the Queens University Department of Music, when she was asked to make a piece for the Fenderesky Gallery in Belfast. It proved a congenial partnership, rather like a

tennis-match in which the skill lies in returning your collaborators service as hard and fast and cleverly as possible. In this way both players raise their game.

The piece was based on a theme derived from Beckett's play 'Waiting for Godot'. The result was box-like structure that muttered away to itself a stream of sounds deriving from a (by then) much transformed quotation spoken by women's voices. The surface of the box was covered with a fragmentary text derived from the original, still further transformed. Barbara Freeman made several prints at this time, using texts and fragments of texts.



'As is When'
Box with speakers, and tape by Paul Wilson
180 x 55 cm
2001



'Heaven on Earth' series
Digital print
60 x 60 cm
2002



*

Their second collaboration was a much larger affair; a room in the Fenderesky Gallery, Belfast, in February 2004. This, like the collaborations at the Ormeau Gallery was created as an adjunct to the Sonorities Festival of New Music which is run every year by the Music Department of Queen's University.

There existed a piano in the School of Music on which every pupil who had reached a high grade had played at one time or another, which had been a notable piece of Belfast's musical life for many decades; it was now irreparably defunct. There was another notable object

on the edge of the same condition; the Albert Clock (now elegantly restored). The two considered together seemed to both artists to present an image of two sorts of time; time as experienced and time as measured. The one existential, the other ideological. The one accessible only to the individual consciousness and what that consciousness could share; the other an essential support of modernity, imperial and despotic over all. Just think, for a moment, what it meant to establish the Greenwich meridian as the base-line measurement for all space and all time whatsoever. And how long seconds can feel. The seed of this collaboration lay in this contrast.

What emerged, after a long period of planning and experiment, was an anatomised piano surrounded by a grove of transparent rods and hung banners with muted photographic images of clock and piano mechanisms, plus an elaborate sound system which picked up movement in the room and triggered one or

more of a sequence of taped fragments. This was so arranged that out of quite a small number of sound fragments a vast and never repeating array of sounds could be conjured. Some of these sounds, resonating with the piano strings, caused those strings to play themselves, humming and booming.

Details, 'Time Frames'
Digital prints on paper
2004



'Time Frames'
Installation by Barbara Freeman
and Paul Wilson
Fenderesky Gallery, Belfast
2004



*

Both regarded this as a successful collaboration in that there was no sense of one medium leading the other. Visitors regarded it with some amazement.

It was with a third collaboration in mind that Barbara Freeman approached Megan Johnston some months ago. She had thoughts of not only another great rumbler, but a small selection of her paintings in which some similar ideas were pursued. Both Barbara and Paul were also looking to create a simpler and altogether more purified sound-and-space experience and one in which the objects of the installation were themselves the source of at least part of the sound. Paul had some definite ideas how this might be done which he wished to carry out as part of his broader musical ambition.

*

Dec. 21st.

Paul has been round for the evening with his lap-top, playing us some of the fragments out of which his sound is likely to grow. Noises deriving for the most part from the sounds of water, recorded, filtered and, as he describes it, 'granulated' In so far as there is a 'score' it appears on the screen as a flowchart of boxes

linked by arrows. I asked him whether he could not draw us a little diagram, in his own hand, to add a personal touch; but he felt he could not. He always conceived of the piece complete and whole in its finished structure and never made working drawings of the sort I imagined. Also, that I seemed to assume that the use of a keyboard and screen could not be just as 'personal' as hand and pencil. But it could be and it is.

New music always challenges our expectations; we find we have to learn new ways of hearing and listening. Though I should not like to press this analogy too far, the problem of hearing new music is like the problem people used to have viewing non-figurative painting they could not separate seeing, from seeing as. This is still a problem; one hears someone say 'It looks to me like a landscape'....or 'it sounds like a wave breaking'... or something equally crass. But this is a cognitive habit and, like all habit, an obstacle to experience and thought. Just so in new music; we do not know what to expect. Expectation has a very important role in music, because music unfurls in time; new music of any kind challenges our expectations.

This is particularly the case with electro-acoustic music, because we do not have the spectacle of it being played. It floats, whines or rumbles round the room without the visible support of players. (There is, actually, a certain drama in the sight of tape decks and mixers, and it is interesting to watch a piece being realised, but it doesn't usually command attention for long) As a result, you have to listen in another way. Way back in ancient Greece, Pythagoras required his

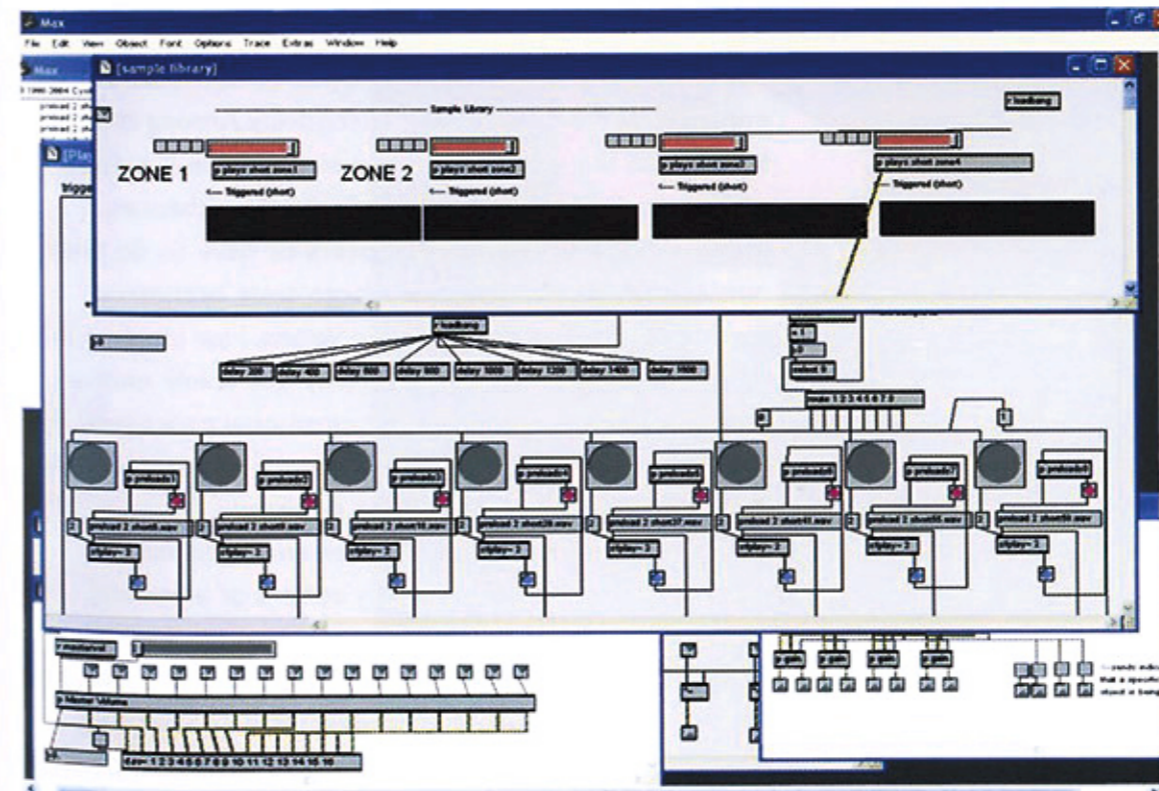
students to listen to sounds whose origins were hidden, because we never listen half so well as when we are trying to identify the source of the sound. Think of the fugitive at night in the forest.

Just as matter can be broken down into molecules, atoms and sub-atomic particles of ever diminishing size, so too can sound be dissected from the level of the audible note or tone, ever downward to the level of microsound which lies at or below the threshold of auditory perception. This scalar approach to sound compares very neatly with the scale of visual perceptions from visible things up and down to the un-visible vast or un-visible tiny, when we need

instruments to find our way. Where sound was concerned, musicians and acoustic scientists were always aware of the existence of microsound as a theoretical postulate of inaudible vibrations, but it only became distinguishable with the arrival of digital technology. Having been made distinct or 'granulated' microsound could be manipulated. It could thus become a material for music.

Nearly all natural sound, of course, is describable in this way, without regard to pitch or tone. Consider what happens when you sit under a glass roof when it begins to rain; an irregular scattering of sound gradually blends into a steady roaring. What you are hearing is a

random cloud of microsounds: which then disintegrates into dots and dashes of percussion as the rain goes away and is replaced by the ambient whispering or clattering of leaves and wind.



'The Banks of the Bann'
From Paul Wilson's computer screen



*

Jan 8th.

Paul is having to adjust his working schedule to make space for participation in the Sligo Festival of New Music; he is to collaborate with another composer (Simon Mawhinney) on music for the classic silent vampire film *Nosferatu*, which is to include, on his part, an electronic improvisation, and at the same time he is composing a piano piece for Mawhinney to play which also incorporates electronic sound. The piano notes will trigger a computer-created passage which in turn relates back to the piano and so the piece is to progress with piano and computer leap-frogging over one another.

At the same time he is teaching the trombone and other brass instruments, administering a Big Band ensemble, and teaching Music Technology at Queen's University (as well as numerous other musical activities of which I have lost track, and doing all those things that the younger composer/musician has to do in order to keep doing it.) He speaks with passion about the importance of working with several different kinds of music and several kinds of listener and performer, and about how much he learns, musically and humanly, from the diversity of his present life.

*

Freeman admits to no musical skill, though it is reported that she played the soprano saxophone in the jazz band of St. Martin's College of Art around 1960. Her informal musical education, however, is extensive and individual, and almost exclusively centred upon contemporary work. She dates this interest back to a concert given during 1967 in Washington D.C by John Cage and David Tudor; they were playing radios to one another and, through synthesizers, were building up a storm of electronic noise. Meanwhile the audience behaved as though at a string quartet recital, very politely. Barbara got up, walked down to the stage, and asked questions; eventually joining in. This concert is now a small part of musical history.

Subsequently she became a follower of new music concerts, and began to read extensively. Among the books that she carries with her everywhere is a study of Xenakis and a 'conversations' with Stockhausen. Many of her friends are composers or have to do with music in some way. There is a large-scale orchestral work dedicated to her by Kevin Volans. Her interest in new sounds, however, is not strictly and solely musical; she concentrates upon the compositional processes evolved by new music. Compositional processes do not have to be solely musical. Ideas of chance, improvisation, proportion, number and statistical methods are applicable in every sphere of invention. Freeman listens to, hears and studies contemporary music as a huge repertoire of possibilities. For several years she has been using this repertoire as a starting point or seed for paintings. A point of origin, not a terminus.



'Banks of the Bann'



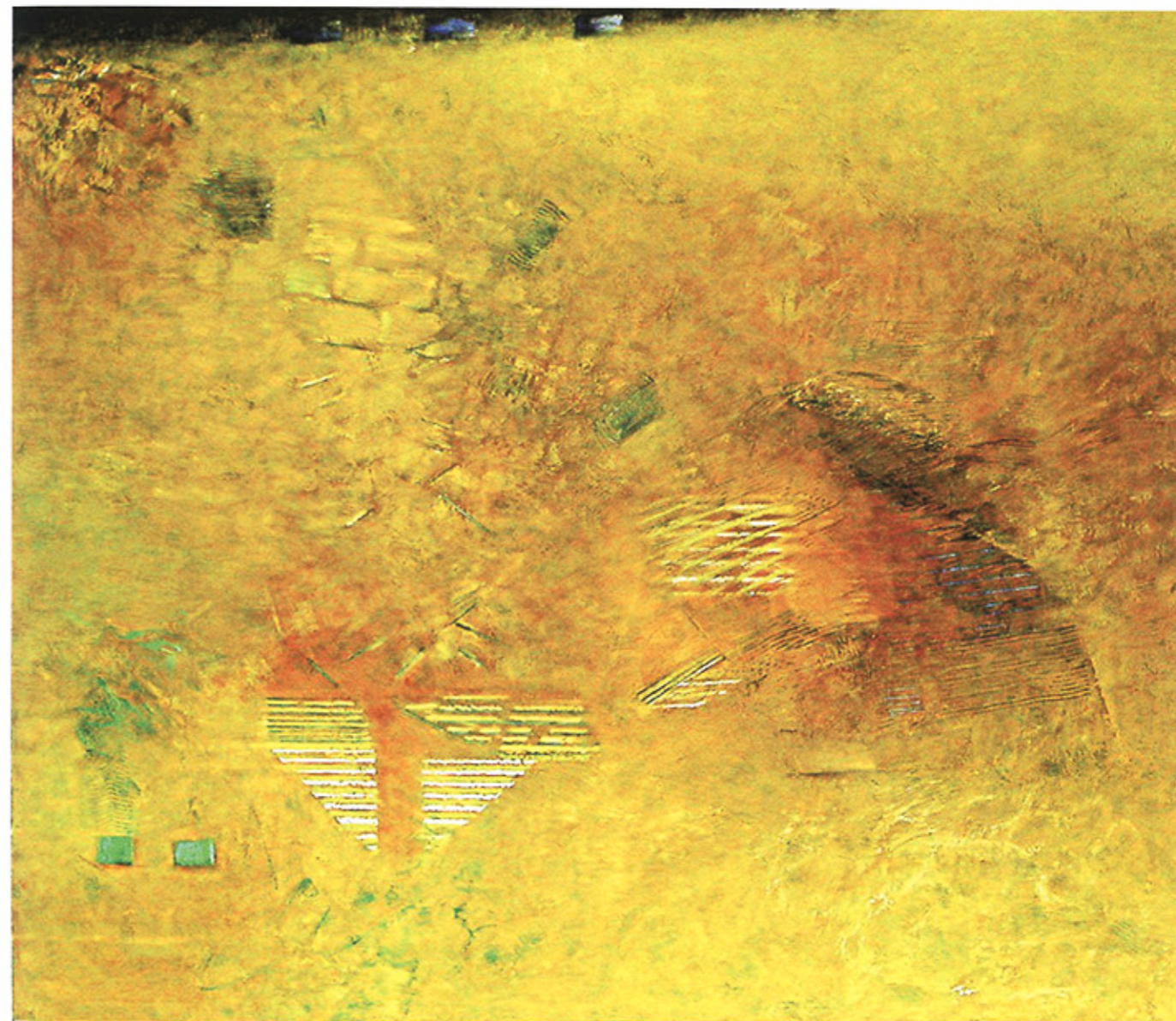
*

DIGRESSION.....A recent set of Freeman's paintings was all derived from an initial random distribution of lines and points which was applied successively to different layers of colour, resulting in a very dense and deeply coloured surface which, close-up, is a mesh of lines, but from further back is a colour field.

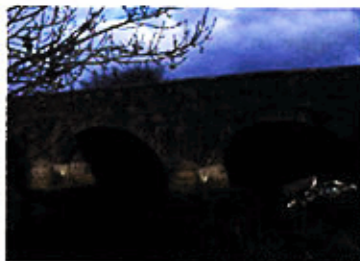
The drawing that underlies the paint surface and frequently emerges from it is itself derived from a series of what she terms 'rulers' strips of paper laid along the edge of the canvas which are used to mark out lines, proportions and divisions which in turn provoke a next stage of painting.



'Brandywine'
Oil on Canvas
107 x 122 cm
2004



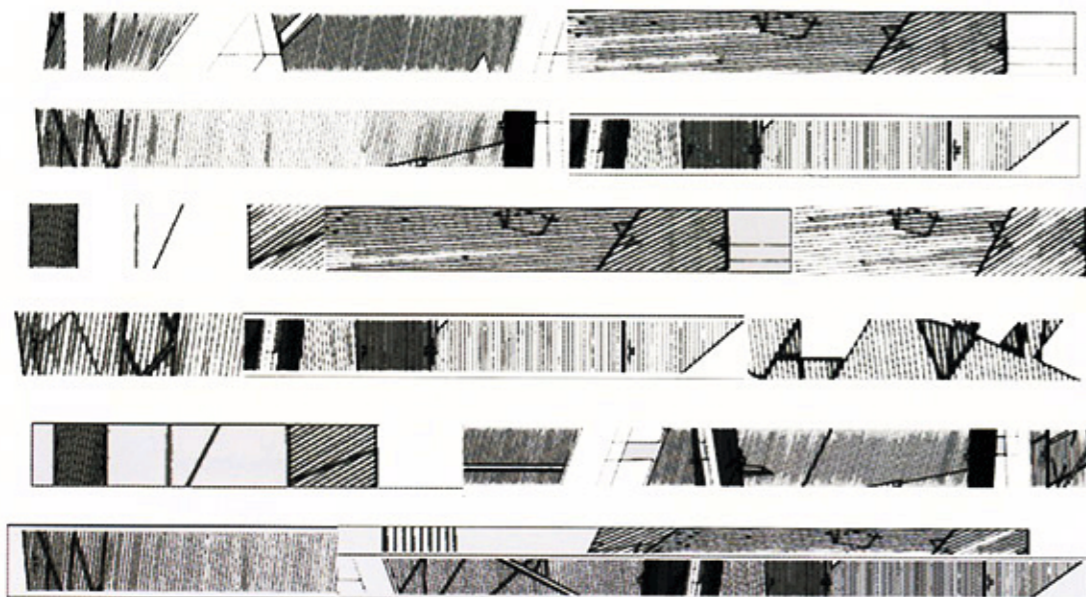
'Shenandoah'
Oil on Canvas
107 x 122 cm
2004



*

These 'rulers' (which can, at a pinch, be compared to harmonic keys), are themselves derived from a whole list of sources which include architect's drawings, prime numbers, and draughtsman's curves. They have existed in various forms over years of working, in paintings, prints, installations and constructions.

But, and this is the main point, a compositional procedure such as this is the departure, not the arrival. Once set in motion, the procedure has its own impetus and may invite interruption.



'Rulers'
Barbara Freeman
From a digital sketch book

Jan 25th.

There has been a discussion about sound sources, volumes and such matters. The MCAC space is by instrumental standards a 'difficult' acoustic echo times are very diffused. This could be turned to electronic advantage but there is a broad agreement that an intimate sound, almost a whispering, will be best. We are all aware, suddenly, of an archaic and violent aspect to the thing that is being made. Portadown voices have been stretched to snapping; raw vibrations are not friendly, sharp-edged steel is a threatening material; hanging from the studio roof it is positively dangerous to work with. But above all, the deep inner resonance, the tectonic vibrations of the theme, engender a need for reticence. Of what we cannot speak we should pass over in silence.

*

Quite independently of one another, both Freeman and Wilson step back from any possibility of rhetoric. In the circumstance of Portadown and the banks of the Bann, there is something deeply repulsive and bullying about imposing oneself on others or telling them how to feel.

*

Every stage of 'The Banks of the Bann' has used digital technology in one mode or another.

The term 'computer music' is, of course, a crude one; but Paul Wilson uses it to describe music that has required a computer to create the sound that is heard and which could not be made by any other means. The sounds may originate from the technology, starting as sound waves defined mathematically, or from recorded fragments of natural or instrumental or vocal sound which are then granulated and stretched and filtered into new sounds. At the time of writing, he is taking the phonemes of Portadown speech and making a distant muttering and moaning of them which remains a human vocal sound, but one as it were in another dimension. There are also quite distinct watery sounds which have been transformed to create some very odd spatial qualities. Then there is the use of the steel itself as a vibrating sound source, the quivering of which sets off yet more transformations. What this material will sound like in the real objective situation of the Millennium Centre is something this writer can only guess at now. But the complicated and unpredictable structure of what he is making is both clever and beautiful. This has to be described algorithmically and has to be done very

methodically; but the true skill lies in making the results natural and intuitive.



'Banks of the Bann'
Millennium Court Arts Centre



*

In this respect 'computer music' is no different from any other kind of composition for any other kind of instrument. But there is one important difference, which is speed. To get a string quartet together (not to mention an orchestra or a big band) takes time and organisation. The composer does not get to hear a new composition for weeks or months; only then to discover that this or that just can't work and needs improvement. With digital technology you get instant feedback.

This is by no means always an advantage. The friction of circumstances and other minds and hands are themselves a stimulus to new thoughts. So too are different levels of skill in the musicians. The objective constraints of a particular place or of particular people are a challenge to raise your level of invention. Ideas frequently benefit by having a slow maturation and many second thoughts. There is a very large body of 'computer art' (visual or musical) that is swiftly thought out, swiftly executed and swiftly forgotten. Such a medium requires a very acute and rapid sense of self-criticism, and a certain ruthlessness toward the material you have created.

The sculptural equivalent of this friction is the physical difficulty of getting anything whatsoever done

anywhere. 'Friction' by the way, is a central idea in Clausewitz's theory of warfare, where it means the sum of all the objective contingencies that have to be overcome, such as the weather, the breakdowns, and the conditions of FUBAR and SNAFU.



Composer Paul Wilson in the studio.



Freeman's Studio, Belfast (with roadie)

Early February

Barbara, meanwhile, is labouring in a freezing cold studio off Corporation Street. She is seriously wondering if she is not getting too old to be lifting and hanging sheets of steel. To be going up and down ladders. To be swinging timbers from girders. There is nothing virtual about a ten foot sheet of 22 gauge, still greasy from the yards.

Freeman has been using digital technology for several years, as an adjunct to her work as a painter and printmaker. Though 'The Banks of the Bann' is not in any sense 'computer designed' digital imaging has been an important part of its conception and construction: it has been used as a form of modelling tool, trying out different configurations, colour treatments and general arrangements. A procedure has developed in the past weeks, of taking sheets of metal and photographing them, then making an electronic montage of several such images, enlarging, stretching or inverting, working further on them and re-montaging or physically cutting and collaging sections; then cutting up the print-outs again to make real, rather than virtual models, photographing the model and so beginning again. The result of this procedure has been to leave the traces of each stage of modelling inscribed in the later stages, as profiles, angles, proportions and surfaces.

Over the years Freeman has become extremely adroit and inventive in such methods, and they have become second nature to her. They correspond to what might have been sketch-book drawings. Very few of these are ever saved on paper, but they continue on disc for



further reference and as starting points for other work. There is a line of descent behind 'The Banks' which includes not only 'Patina', but also several paintings and

unused or undeveloped drawings going back thirty years or more, which exist digitally and can be recalled very quickly.

later still a minor crisis and a sleepless night working out how to cram a spiral into a square lattice. The arrangement of the sheets has to balance and each sheet has to hang free of the next. Recourse to a geometry textbook and such objects as spirolaterals ('simple rules for generating a multitude of patterns from simple instructions') and such bizarre creatures as twenty-four cell polytopes. The aim is not to design by using geometrical means, but to get clues and hints as to the kind of object one is trying to make. It is actually far easier to make such a thing than to 'design' it, because it is essentially a sensuous object, not a concept. To think with the hands and eyes.

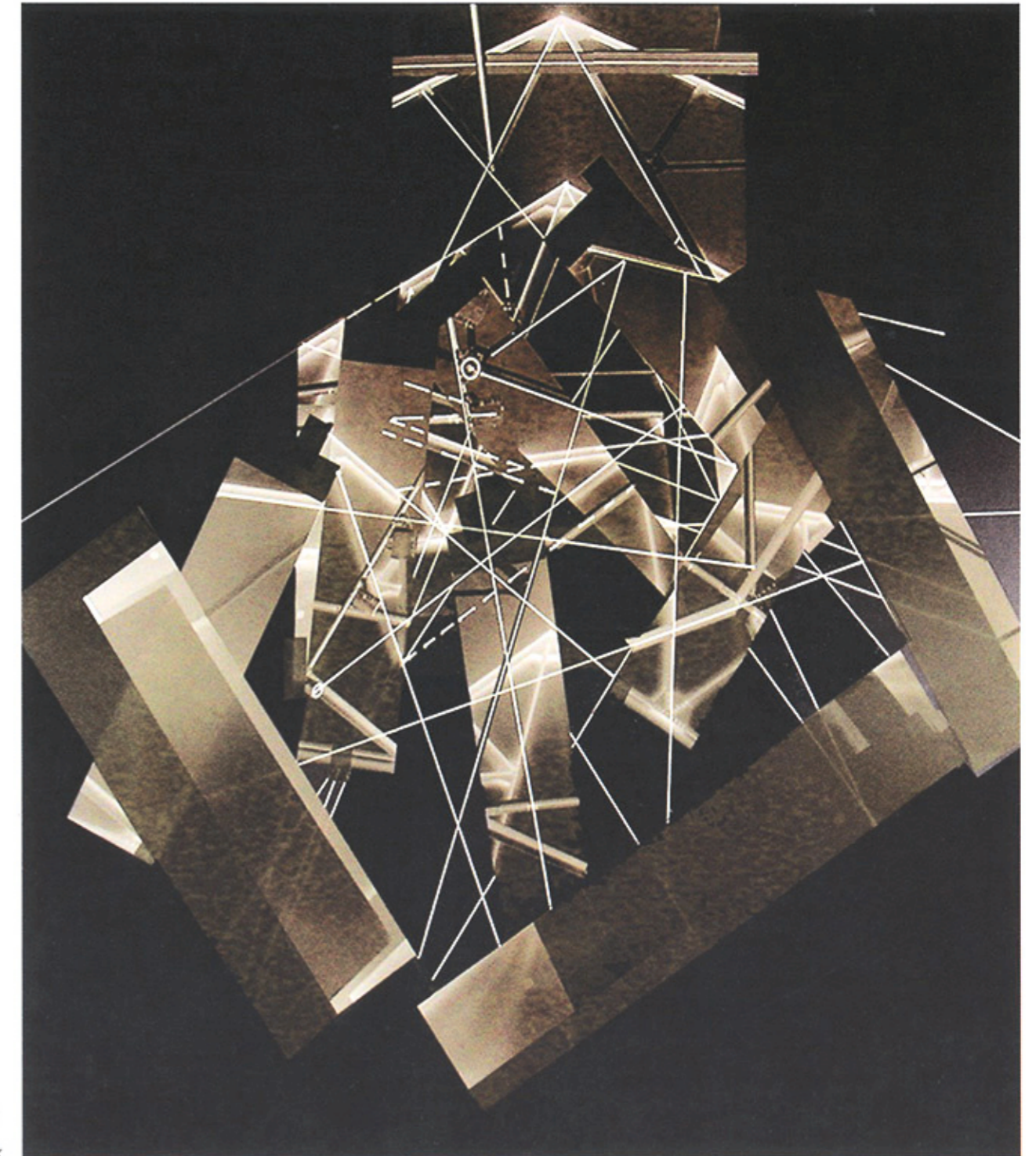
*

To think with the hands and the eyes and the ears is to draw upon that half occluded ocean of experience which Kristeva refers to as the chora.⁴ This is what we have before we have articulated language and developed concepts, and it is a realm of understanding which we never lose. If we were to lose it, we would lose any sense of play or possibility and therefore of freedom. The chora is almost speechless, except in so far as

speech and song are pre-conceptual. It is almost imageless, since an image requires a concept of something else to exist first, except in so far that an image is composed of a surface of voiceless figures on mute grounds. It cannot be explained, but can only be manifested in concrete form, and apprehended through the nervous system. Once more we return to the book of Job: *a spirit passed before my face; the hairs of my flesh stood up.* The physicality of this experience is the physicality of all primary understandings. This is the primary ground of delight and of horror.

In her book *The Optical Unconscious* (1993) Rosalind Krauss makes play with the psychological distinction between figures and grounds; what we see in a painting is always necessarily an arrangement of figures on grounds. This inheres in the nature of vision and is neurologically determined; it is hard to imagine how we could see any thing at all if we could not distinguish between figures and grounds. But we can, and frequently do, reverse the distinction and see one as the other; therefore the act of seeing is always in some measure, seeing as. There is a degree of intention in every perception. So the simple opposition of figure to ground is in real experience (outside the textbook of perceptual psychology) not simple at all.

Sound appears to be apprehended in a similar way to Surface. The sound lives in silence as the figure on the ground; if we listen closely to music what we are also hearing is the silence which it forms or wraps around itself and we can listen to that silence. Every music has a distinctive silence because a sound-world, like a surface-world is interchangeably



study of space, planes from a digital sketch book.



composed of figures and grounds. We hear this very strongly in unfamiliar music or in electronically manipulated sound because we don't know what our expectations are. The

question of what happens next becomes crucial because it changes the silence too, and thus the whole sound-world can transform, abruptly. This happens in musical space, the more so when, as in a great deal of contemporary music, time-bound concepts such as variation and development, give way to spatial ideas. The technical vocabulary of contemporary music has begun to fill with concepts that are spatial analogies, such as 'the sound-object', 'the wall of sound' and 'the cluster'. From what I have heard so far, at the time of writing, Paul Wilson's score for 'The Banks of the Bann' is to be an anthology of constantly transforming sound objects, but the ground of silence between them, and thus of the whole sound-world, will be unpredictable but characteristic, because the combinatorial system he has devised means it will never repeat itself, except randomly.

The transformation of a sound-world implies a transformation of the whole experiential world, because to paraphrase William Blake 'the ear altering, alters all'

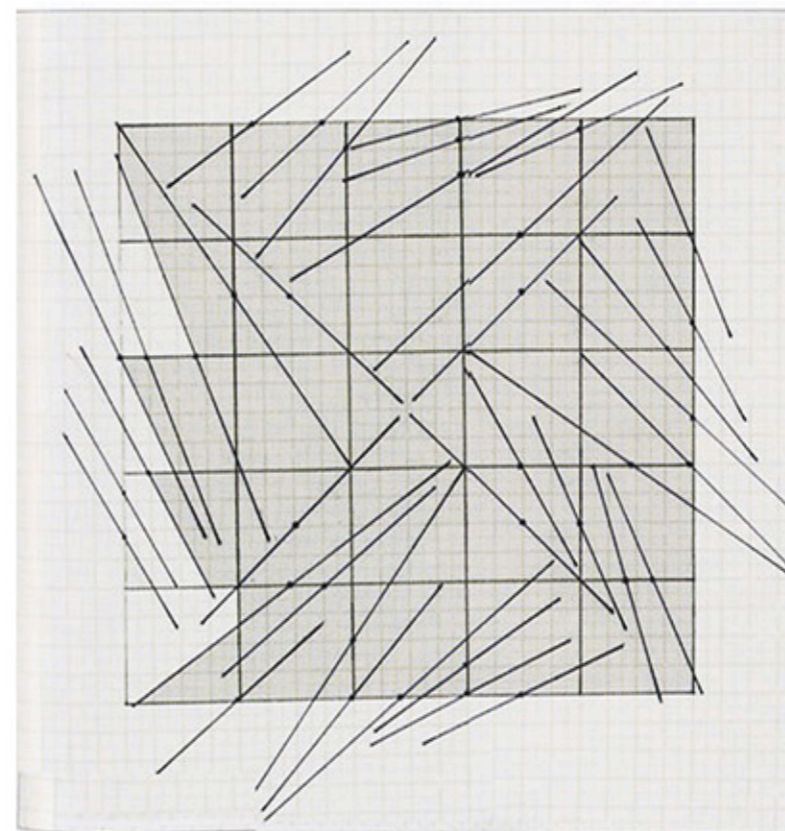
Perceived space likewise demands figures in the forms of objects for it to be perceivable, and those objects create and transform the space around them. A space without objects is conceivable only in very abstract terms as a universal medium (such as

Newton's), but this we can't experience because we are ourselves bodies in that space, creating it. This is an understanding common to everyone who performs in public, from the dancer to the orator, and it is a bodily understanding which requires a kind of self-visualisation as the propagator of a space that draws others in and compels attention. Both sculpture and architecture demand something similar. The character of the space created in 'The Banks of the Bann' is determined by the physical means; it consists of planes and enclosures. In this respect Barbara Freeman has been creating a



Colour study of plates

classical space of the sort we find in modernist architecture, determined by real or virtual orthogonal divisions, but this space-world is being transformed by diagonals and spirals into something far less 'rational' and orderly. I sometimes glimpse, in what is materialising in the studio, the art of the Russian revolutionary era; of Rodchenko and Tatlin. The thinness and sharpness of the steel, the exploitation of weight, suspension, edge and tension go straight to the heart of a sense of danger.



Hanging Chart

March 1st

There is something mysterious about collaboration; two minds working apart in totally different materials produce the consonance they were seeking. We have spent a day setting up the steel, hanging it from the girders of the studio which happily resemble those of the Millennium Centre. The roadie plays his part, with slings and wires and ropes and karabiners. Paul has arrived with his tool kit (immaculately tidy and complete and free of dust). Wires are soldered, speakers are bolted, leads are draped.

And suddenly the whole structure starts to come alive. It speaks and cries and booms.

What is always striking, when a collaborative effort in any field comes to completion, is the extra dimension that is generated. A fragment of verse that Paul had recorded is more or less randomly fed into the system coming out of the steel plate, taking on a special significance. The length of the vibrations is, as expected, producing a whole range of tones but they persist longer than ever anticipated.

Both artists appear to be overcome by relief: a bottle of Shiraz materializes before our very eyes.



*

A NOTE ON THE PAINTINGS

These are not in any sense collaborative pieces, but it is unlikely that they would have become as they are without Freeman's introduction to the world of 'granulation' and 'synthesis'. Each derives ultimately from the colour photographs that Barbara took of the Bann and its bridges; each digital image was broken down into its constituent hues (out of the 300 or more possible hues provided by the software); this 'colour-analysis' is hardly ever seen by anyone unless they are professionally interested in colour printing, but Barbara uses it as a source of ideas, recovering it on the computer screen and then manipulating it further. The results are then printed out on a prepared

NOTES:

1. I know of no reliable evidence that the slaughter ever took place; accounts are all in the language always used to describe atrocities, in every conflict.
2. My forthcoming book *Rethinking Decoration: Pleasure and Ideology in the Visual Arts* Cambridge University Press: New York (2005,) deals with this argument at some length.

paper and form the foundation-layer of the final painting which results when it has been extensively worked upon and almost obliterated by the application of pigment and glazes.

It seems they are going to come in pairs, in which one alludes to fluidity (and therefore, to the water that constitutes the river), and the other has an earth-like solidity and thickness like the banks the river creates. Banks and river both bring each other into being; the one ever-changing, the other notionally constant.

They also have another function, which is similar to the subtle liquid sounds that Paul Wilson has created; which is lyrical. Both allude, though obliquely, to the beauty of the natural scene through which this river flows. The countryside has, through Nature and History working together, become perfectly serene and orderly and fertile.

Almost without knowing it, we have, in cooperation one with another and all with the soil and the water and the rocks, created a wonderfully beautiful place in which to dwell.

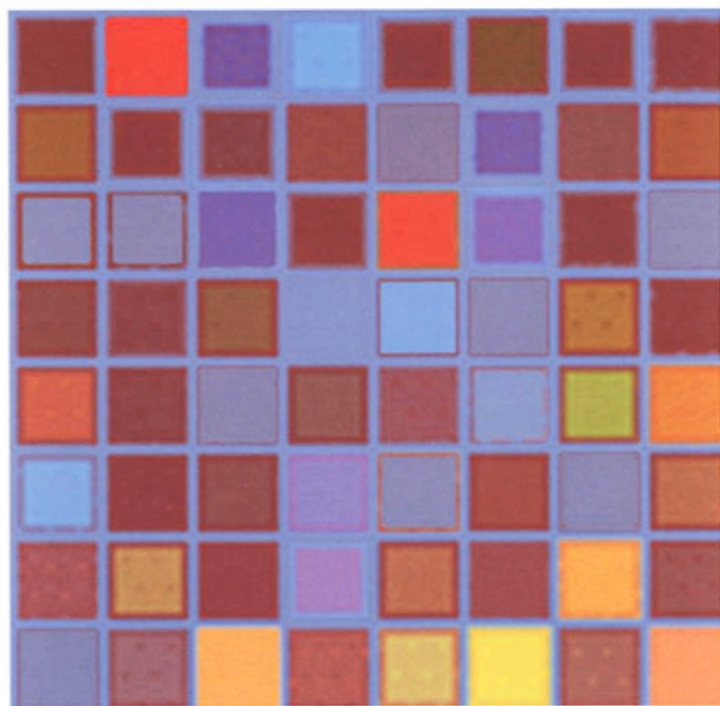
3. 'In Parallel' Ormeau Baths Gallery Catalogue : Belfast (1998). p.51.
4. As developed in the essay titled 'The Revolution in Poetic Language', as printed in Moi, T. (ed.) *The Kristeva Reader*, Oxford (1986)



In the studio, work in progress



Stepping stones near Hilltow
Photograph



Colour Analysis
2005



Bann I
Oil on Board
36 x 36 cm
2005



The Banks of the Bann
Sheet steel, cables, speakers, etc...



The Banks of the Bann
Sheet steel, cables, speakers, etc...

This publication is associated with 'The River Bann: Barbara Freeman & Paul Wilson' at the Millennium Court Arts Centre in April and May 2005.

The exhibition and catalogue are funded by the Craigavon Borough Council and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland Lottery Fund.

Millennium Court Arts Centre
William Street
Portadown, Northern Ireland
BT62 3NX
(t) 044 3839 4415
(f) 028 3839 4483
www.millenniumcourt.org
info@millenniumcourt.org

The Millennium Court Arts Centre wishes to thank the Board of Portadown 2000, and in particular Diane Hunniford, for their continued support and vision.

Organised and Curated: Megan Johnston, Manager and Steve Lally, Visual Arts Officer both at the Millennium Court Arts Centre in Portadown
Design Template: Wendy Williams Design, Dublin
Production: Megan Arney, Belfast
Printing: NewCreation.com 028 3832 9629

© 2005 Millennium Court Arts Centre



Millennium Court Arts Centre

April May 2005



The Artists wish to thank the staff at MCAC, particularly the technicians, for all their help and support on this project.

ISBN: