

Reflected distortions

I learned to trust my instincts and it gave me permission to get things wrong,
Sinead McKeever tells **Brian McAvera**



Brian McAvera: There is a cool, almost industrial formality to your work. It's a balance between the dramatic and the theatrical. How conscious is this?

Sinead McKeever: I'm aware of this balance. When I go into a room, I see how light travels around it and interacts with the architecture of the space. I'm prepared, but the piece I am working on can either go as I imagined it, or else go off into a totally different direction. If something isn't working, you can't push it.

BMcA: You were born in Northern Ireland in 1962. What impact, if any, did growing up in Northern Ireland have on your later work?

SMcK: Growing up in the countryside between Dungannon and Portadown, I was well aware of the politics. I was aware of the civil rights marches and areas where you were not allowed to go. The North is always there in the background. You don't realise its impact or its influence until someone else points it out. Some people say that my *Powder Works* were like dried blood, like a grave... but there are domestic references there as well.

BMcA: Tell us about how you developed your art career?

SMcK: I applied to the University of Ulster's foundation art course. After doing the foundation year, I made the decision that I would have more chance of making a living from fashion so I studied it. However, my father got cancer and I couldn't go back to art school. I worked on the farm for three or four years. I also made clothes and wedding dresses and started to make my own collection. A job came up in a shirt factory, designing shirts – my own range – so I took that. Then I moved to Belfast, married and worked for MN

1 SINEAD McKEEVER
Left: *STAR CROSSED*
(I & II) 2018 dibond,
LED lights, 147(h) x
144(l) x 434(w) cm
Right: *K. W.*
ANTENNA 2018
dibond, mirrored
plexiglas, butterfly
wing nuts, reflective
tape, LED lights
550(h) x 1060(l) x
962(w) cm

2 Sinead McKeever in
her studio

Williams, also a shirt manufacturer. The job entailed travelling to London or Manchester at short notice to problem solve. It was hard finding babysitters, so I left work. I made clothes for the children, took art classes – life drawing and ceramics, and printing with Sophie Aghajanian, who was amazing. At that time Neil Shawcross was doing children's workshops at the Ulster Museum. I got talking to him and he invited me to the art college, where he said: 'Why are you putting your life on hold? I'm going to march you down to the office and get you an application form' – and he did.

Fashion elements are present in my artworks by way of traces of intricate lace patterns and the use of dressmaking tools for mark making. Pattern cutting is helpful for the construction, de-construction and re-construction of sculptural artworks.

BMcA: You did your BA in Fine & Applied Art at the University of Ulster in 2003-06, followed by an MA in 2006-08. Were any of your lecturers influential and what kind of work were you producing for the degree shows?

SMcK: David Campbell (artist and professor at Northumbria University) was my tutor in the final year of the BA. He was pivotal. He opened my eyes to contemporary art practices and helped me push ideas forward. All of the exciting work was happening in sculpture, but I wanted to be a painter! At that stage, however, I realised that painting wasn't what I thought it was. In my degree show I used canvas and cling film; layers of cling film, painted on a wooden support – but people thought it was a canvas. The artworks relate to anticipation as a key element in life; the essential human condition is shrink-wrapped in complex layers of culture, context and history. This 'packaging' colours the way we view and experience life and art in any given setting. By emphasising plastic packaging and making explicit the illusory nature of painting, it is hoped that the viewer might pause, question and experience the paintings; leave behind consumer culture; strip away layers of preconceptions; and take time to breathe, experience and reflect.

While doing by masters in fine art I explored other materials. I learned not to have preconceptions and not to worry how work was evolving – learning through the processes would highlight directions to pursue. I learned to trust my instincts and it gave me permission to get things wrong. David Campbell was my main tutor again. I also consulted with artists Alistair MacLennan and Alistair Wilson.

In the first year, I displayed artworks on the gallery floor and a couple of pieces were walked on and destroyed. My peers were horrified, but I thought that, if I made work that was temporary, it would be interesting to see how the work would be received and that's how the pigment works came about. I was deconstructing painting to its raw elements. It was painting without the liquid element. I created pigment artworks for the MA exhibition, using lace stencils to create them (Fig 6).



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BMcA: In 2009 you had your show 'So Low, So High' at ArtTank in Belfast. How did this come about and how useful was this show for your subsequent career?

SMcK: It was very useful, as it was an opportunity to scale up. During an interview with gallery owner Adam Jaffa we discussed ideas concerning the space and what the logistics of it were. I was delighted when he gave me a solo show



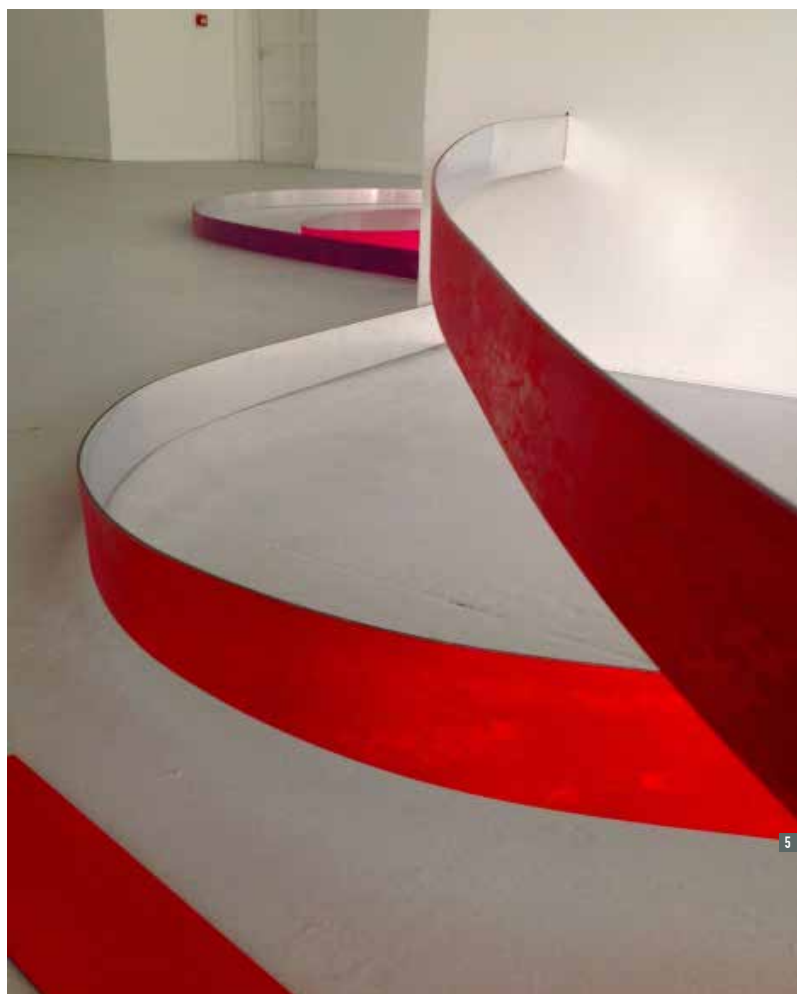
and I received an Arts Council Northern Ireland grant that enabled me to be ambitious with the project. I planned to make one big mound that would merge into the concrete slabs. I used organic pigments and I had to put plastic sheeting over the doors so that the powder wouldn't percolate through. It took about forty attempts to do the peak of the mound. It transformed the place. People thought of it as being solid but it was charcoal, pigment and whiting. You didn't know where the artwork started or finished. They had to walk through it. I wanted to disorientate them and make them think.

BMcA: Between 2010 and 2015 you were in group shows at Queen Street Studios, Catalyst Arts, the University of Ulster Gallery and the Golden Thread Gallery (all in Belfast). In the Republic you were at the Linenhall Arts Centre in Castlebar and the Leitrim Sculpture Centre in 2012, where you produced the *District and Circle* series. Was this the point where your tendency towards sculpture was becoming dominant?
SMcK: The sculptural element in my work was definitely dominant. In the *District and Circle* installation, I used dibond, a pliable light aluminium, as a sculptural material (Fig 5). Depending on how you view the artworks, it could be described as drawing in space. The material is also painted, so you could consider it painting, in the expanded field, and not constricted by boundaries.

In my second-year MFA February show at Catalyst Arts, I put in *Threshold I & II*, which were dibond pieces (Fig 4). I enjoyed paring things back to the bare basics. If you look closely at them, you'll see that there is a lace pattern stencilled onto the dibond. Alongside these, I had started doing the pigment works and I was excited because people can't resist touching things – and they did!

I relished the space available in the gallery at the Leitrim Sculpture Centre exhibition. I liked the idea of the artworks playing off each other. I instinctively wanted to put the dibond *through* the walls. By exploring the architectural constructions and inserting the ribboned lengths directly into the wall, it disrupted the space. The walls were incised: these were both entrance and exit points, punctured, and the strips of dibond were fed through. I embraced the distortions that occurred as it disappeared and reappeared on the other side of the wall. The artworks also have domestic lace imprinted on to the surface and are then worked on. Industrial and mathematical references were transferred using vellum and tinted sellotape. These were torn and scuffed, alluding to traces and memories.

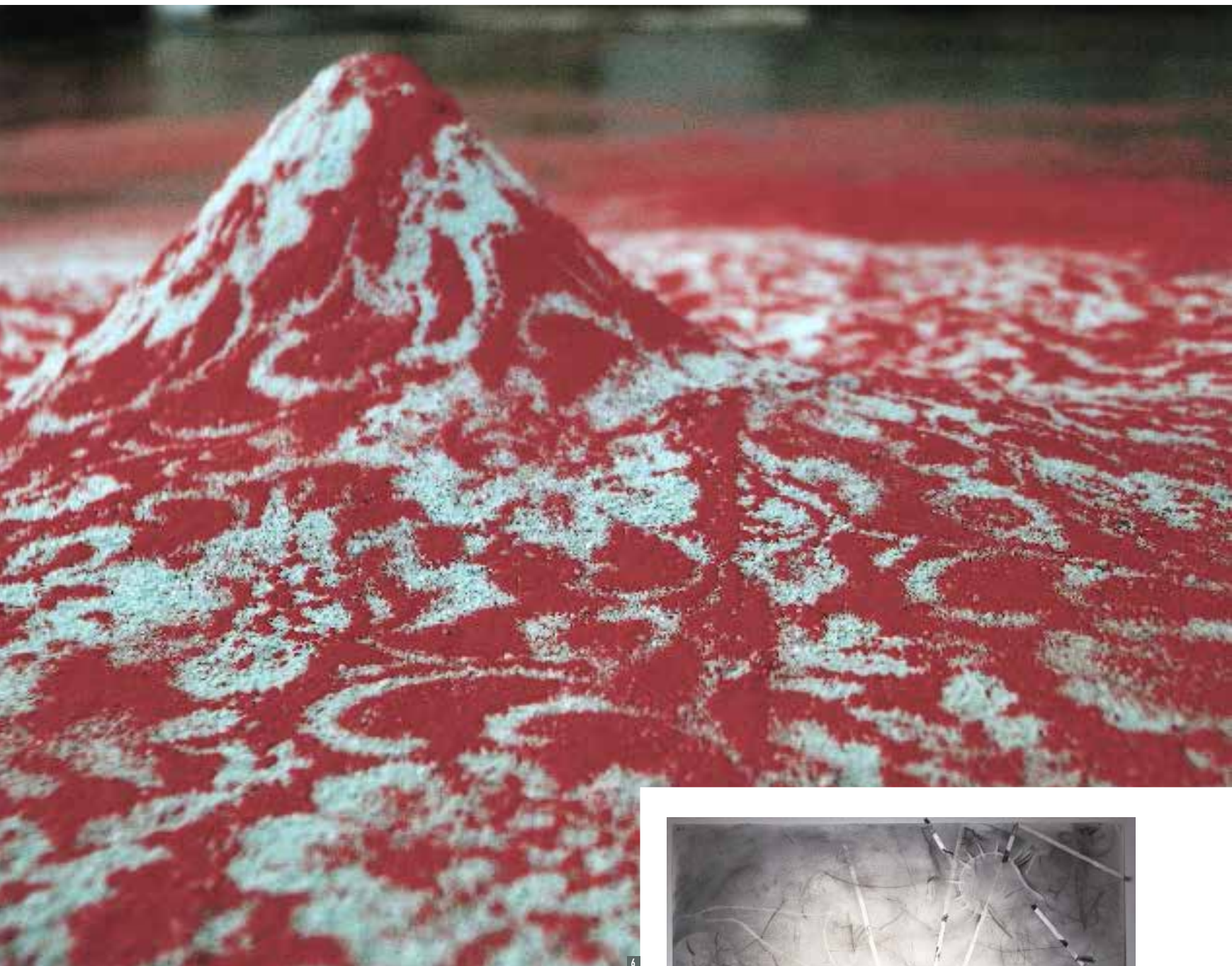
The title *District and Circle* is borrowed from Seamus Heaney's 2006 anthology. The poems reference the circle of your immediate and extended family and friends to the wider community, and national and global shared experiences and concerns. How he perceived modern anxieties, trauma and violence are considered. The artworks were conceived with these themes in mind.



3 CIRCUIT (detail)
 2016 mirrored dibond, mirrored plexiglass, silver foiled ceiling tiles, halogen spotlights, LED spotlights, aluminium screws, spray paint, nail varnish, markers 300(h) x 526(l) x 150(w) cm

4 THRESHOLD II 2008
 dibond and spray paint 163(h) x 128(l) x 28(w) cm

5 DISTRICT & CIRCLE SERIES (detail)
 2012 dibond and spray paint 570(h) x 310(l) x 750(w) cm



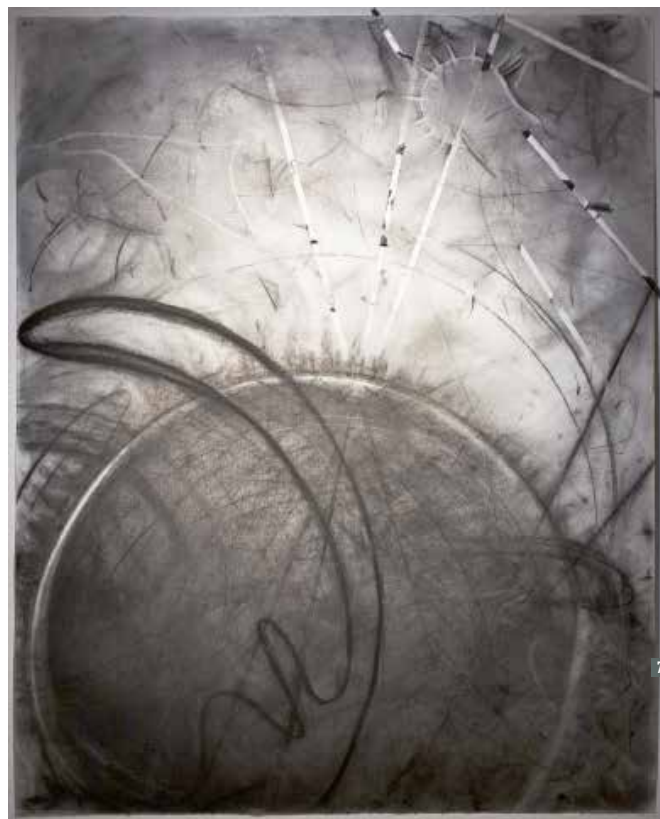
**6 BRUSHED WITH OIL,
DUSTED WITH POWDER**
2008 pigment, whiting,
charcoal 8(h)x55(radius) cm

7 GRIDLINE 2017
watercolour paper,
charcoal, coloured film
152x122 cm

8 IN-BETWEEN 2015
dibond and meat hooks
145(h) x 110(l) x 25(w) cm

BMcA: In 2015, you had a show at the Radnorshire Museum in Wales. What did you produce?

SMcK: I was working with geometric forms and finding how they could be translated to dibond. I tried out maquettes in cardboard, manila, plastic and wire. I found I could twist the geometric form in on itself. My sister and I put in a proposal for a two-person exhibition at the museum, where there was a Sheela na Gig stone work. Sheela na Gig carvings



are found throughout Wales and Ireland, and we thought it was an interesting starting point for an exhibition. I used frottage techniques to try to rethink the cultural myths that surround these carvings, by putting markings on the sculptural objects and producing collages, all of which were first coated in powder so when they were rubbed away intensely at various points on the sculptures, the shining aluminium underneath would emerge, like hidden treasure. Sheela na Gig carvings have been linked to fertility, good luck and the celebration of womanhood. They were possibly placed up high on buildings as symbols of protection, for the warding off of evil spirits. I hung mine high on the walls from meat hooks (Fig 8).

BMcA: In 2016, at the QSS gallery in Belfast, you produced a major work, *Circuit*, an immersive installation of remarkable perceptual complexity, which also used rather unusual materials. How did it develop?

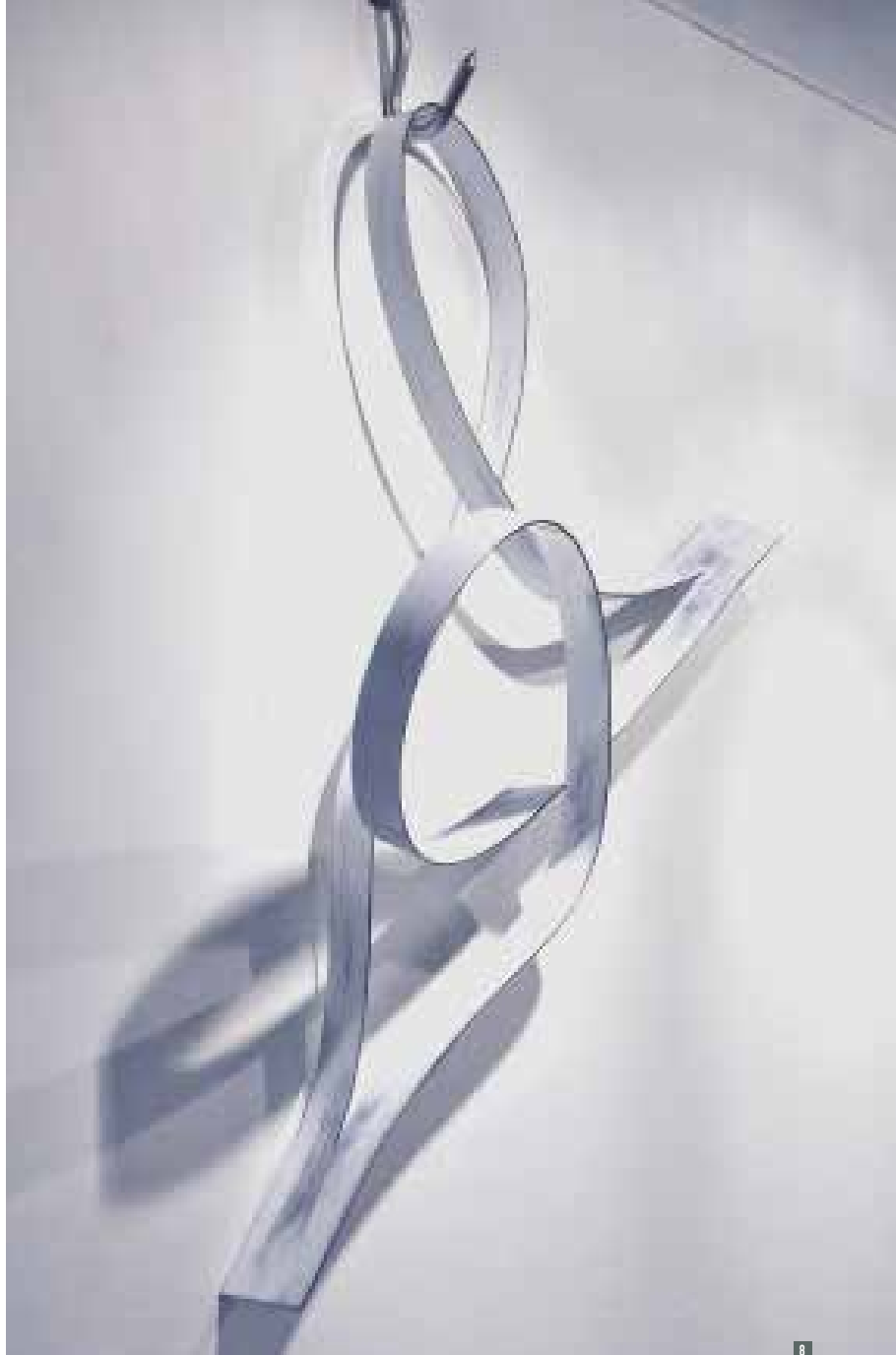
SMcK: It developed from putting in proposals! I had a budget that allowed me to be more adventurous. My idea was to use one continuous 'cut' of the dibond. I originally tried making the pieces in card, but the cut lines would not hold in shape, so it was hard to visualise how the precision-cut dibond would sit in the space.

I also wanted to work with mirrors, to see how different types of reflective surfaces would work together in the space. Plexiglass mirrors have a strange reflective quality: reflections are distorted and bent. The dibond sheet had a milled surface that dulls the reflections, like a thin layer of tissue with a satin finish. The reverse side has a mirrored finish, not quite a silvered glass finish, but very close. It is not until all the pieces are installed that I know the result. When the viewer stands at the centre of the installation, the 'circuit' is complete (Fig 3).

BMcA: In 2018, you took another jump forward with 'Antenna' at the Millennium Arts Centre in Portadown; another installation, this time on a huge scale, responding to the complex. What were you trying to achieve?

SMcK: I was just playing with the existing architecture: the idea that you would not know where the artwork started in the gallery or where it ended. The purpose of using mirrors was to directly subvert and displace our perception of the gallery space. When the violet-coloured LED bounced off the geometric-shaped artworks and the cast-iron internal roof structure, the space was transformed. The decision-making processes of the installation flowed very easily as the ceiling is full of triangular shapes (Fig 1).

In Gallery Two, I showed charcoal drawings (Fig 7), paintings, sculptural objects and an assemblage piece, *GEO Star E*. In a third, smaller gallery, I installed a sculptural, pigment work. The title of the exhibition comes from Kraftwerk's 1975 song *Antenna*. It's about receiving and transmitting information, which correlates with the dual aspects of mirrors.



I WAS JUST PLAYING WITH THE EXISTING ARCHITECTURE: THE IDEA THAT YOU WOULD NOT KNOW WHERE THE ARTWORK STARTED IN THE GALLERY OR WHERE IT ENDED

BMcA: To what degree does trial and error control your working process and how do your ideas form?

SMcK: You have to know the limits of your materials and push them. For example, I realised that if I drilled holes at the end of each 'line' of dibond, it was less likely to tear when you moved it – and I was doing a lot of moving, twisting the strips into shapes.

As for ideas – they come from everywhere. Sometimes I start with a sketch. Sometimes it's about picking a material and playing with it. When I walk into a particular space and see, for example, a wall, several ideas will emerge. It starts from the space really, rather than from drawings. And working with mirrors and reflective materials highlights the possibilities and limitations intrinsically involved in the art of looking. ■

Sinead McKeever, 'The Dark' (group exhibition), Centre for Contemporary Art, NI, to 7 March

Brian McAvera is an art critic.