

Richard Malone On The Importance Of Cultivating Irish Craft

BY LAURA HAWKINS

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Where some fashion designers revel in the acclaim operating an eponymous label can bring, Richard Malone rather enjoys the opposite. The London-based Irish designer's label is focused on creative community and the cultivation of like-minded collaborators, who champion craftsmanship, slow production, skill-sharing and sustainable manufacturing. “I’m focused on protecting a creative language that is very female-led, like weaving and lace-making,” Malone – who often cites his seamstress grandmother Nellie as an inspiration – explains.



Making and Momentum installation images, courtesy of Richard Malone

Last summer, the legacy of female creativity – one often overshadowed by that of men (see Charles and Ray Eames, Charles and Margaret MacKintosh, Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich) – encouraged Malone to stage an exhibition in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin on the French Riviera. *Making and Momentum* was a celebration of the

output of renowned maker and architect Eileen Gray – who was born in Malone’s birthplace, Wexford – which invited beacons of Irish craft including ceramicist and Loewe Craft Prize finalist Sara Flynn, sculptor and Ireland's upcoming Venice Biennale representative Niamh O’Malley, and artist Laura Gannon to exhibit pieces in dialogue with Gray’s multidisciplinary spirit.

Malone learnt about Gray’s radical output – which pioneered Japanese decorative arts like laquering and modular metalwork – from his grandmother, and her work is weighted with mythic significance. “For me, she was a creative force that can’t be defined by studies,” he says. There’s folkloric meaning for design and architecture buffs too. Famously, Gray’s E19027 villa, a cult symbol of modernist seaside design – situated close to the location of Malone’s exhibition and reopening to the public in June 2021 – was defaced with graffiti in the late 1930s by her contemporary Corbusier. *Making and Momentum* was staged first inside E19027 and then a stone's throw from the renowned seaside home, at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin's town hall.

Making and Momentum moved onto Dublin’s National Museum of Ireland, Decorative Arts & History in August 2021 (home to a significant Gray archive), and now Malone’s exhibition has touched down for its final instalment in his and Gray’s home town at Wexford County Council in Carricklawn. Here, Flynn’s organic pots and vessels, tactile rugs by Ceadogán and geometric fabric sculptures by Malone himself exist in dialogue with one another, a contemporary conversation between Gray and Ireland’s innovative creative class. “The show is really dominated by queer and female working class people, which never happens in Ireland,” Malone says. “It’s really about the work speaking for itself.”

Education lies at the heart of Malone’s brand, be it by collaborating with larger labels like Mulberry to amplify conversations regarding sustainable practices and manufacturing methods, or ensuring that those coming through his London studio hone practical design skills. “People learn tailoring and draping. You need to be skill sharing,” Malone says. Hailing from a working class, rural background, Malone is conscious that he was privileged to attend Central Saint Martins before higher education tuition fees tripled in 2017. “I’m kind of the last generation of people in my environment that can go to university,” he says. Today, aspiring artisans, makers and students work and study under immense financial constraint – a pressure further exacerbated by the cost of living crisis sweeping the UK.

Malone’s final stop on the *Making and Momentum* tour also sees the launch of a series of Artist Prizes, aimed at supporting the next generation of Irish makers. The prize – which will see the €1,250 awarded to eight winners – is creative constraint or category free, open to those defining their own practice by virtue of their output, and broadening dialogues around art and making, from queer poets to performance artists, ceramicists to club night creators. Malone aims for this cash injection to facilitate an experimental creative project, which can be in early stage development or part of a design study programme. The award supports solution-based design

created by and for disabled people, and does not require those applying to have any formal art training. “You don’t have to be a student, if you put that binary on a prize, you’re already limiting who can apply for it.”

For Malone, *Making and Momentum* emphasises the possibility of innovative, restriction-free creative evolution, from Wexford and beyond. The Gray-inspired project has amassed €170,000 in fundraising, an amount used to invest in the craftspeople that worked on the exhibition, including the creation of one-off recycled wool Ceadogán rugs, and Mourne textiles screens and hand-appliquéd blankets, a new residency programme and now, Artist Prizes. “It shows younger people from the town that I’m from that it doesn't matter what sexuality you are or what background you come from,” Malone says. “It’s really about the work and taking time to develop a language.”



Making and Momentum installation images, courtesy of Richard Malone