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Clouds in a church and other sound moves at Kilkenny Arts Festival

Aidan Dunne

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Clockwise from far left, a work from 'Circle in the Square' by Marilyn Lerner; Cloud Tyvek by Max Streicher at St Mary's; O by Karen Donnellan; and Róisín de Buitléar's blown-glass musical instruments

Eugene Downes's first year as director took the Kilkenny Arts Festival back to its musical roots. The scale and ambition of the programme would have been unimaginable 41 years ago. But while music rules, the visual arts strand is much more than an afterthought. **In fact, there's evidence of joined-up thinking in the inclusion of the abstract painter Marilyn Lerner at the Butler Gallery, sonic glass work by Róisín de Buitléar and Karen Donnellan at the National Craft Gallery, and Max Streicher's celestial cloud installation in the former chapel of St Mary's.**

The intricate rhythms and harmonies of Lerner's poised compositions feel closely related to music, and she has acknowledged the influence of the ritualised patterns of the Javanese gamelan orchestra. Working closely with Liam Ó Maonlaí, de Buitléar has devised and produced a series of elegant blown-glass musical instruments. Donnellan explores the curative potential of sound in ingenious sonic pieces. Streicher's clouds could be seen as a visual evocation of great sacred music soaring through the church interior.

[...]

A sense of wonder

Just up the road, in Kilkenny Castle Park, the Architects of Air have another pneumatic

installation. This year's luminarium, Pentalum, characteristically marries geometry with an air of fairground fantasy, leading visitors through a network of tunnels to a series of luminously coloured domes. The artist behind it, Alan Parkinson, aims to instil "a sense of wonder", and, judging by the general audience reaction, does that very well.

More often than not, geometric abstraction leads painters towards a tighter, narrower visual vocabulary. Think of Mondrian's right-angled grid, Josef Albers's squares, or of stripes in the work of Agnes Martin, Bridget Riley and Sean Scully. Marilyn Lerner has followed a different path. As *Circle in the Square*, her Butler Gallery show, demonstrates, she looks on abstraction as an infinitely flexible visual language and feels no need to confine herself to one motif or structure.

Lerner was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and went to New York to study. As she points out, she qualified in printmaking and went on to make sculpture before gravitating towards painting because of her interest in colour. She uses it in an amazingly free way, drawing on an extensive palette with some audacious colour pairings, including the combination of giddy complementary colours. She is primarily an instinctive artist and she doesn't close off any possibility when she embarks on a painting or, more accurately, paintings: she prefers to work on several pieces in tandem.

That's partly because she likes oil paint, which takes a long time to dry, and her often complex compositions are built up from precisely defined areas of flat colour. They are geometric, but painted freehand, with the sensitivity of the human touch evident up close. In fact, Lerner is all about that sensitivity. She is acutely attentive to the quality of the surface and doesn't, she remarks, overpaint. The nearest she comes to that is to sand away an area of colour she is not happy with and redo it.

Her art is meditative in terms of both its making and its reception. Some works are relatively simple in form, but mostly they require some time so that one can get a sense of their underlying rhythms and patterns. Spells in North Africa and Asia have influenced her. A spiritual dimension has been important to abstraction from the beginning, and Lerner's work is unmistakably close in feeling to that of the Swedish painter and mystic Hilma af Klint. It's a lovely exhibition, beautifully installed, and it runs well beyond the festival, until October 5th.

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