

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

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My cultural life: Writer Mark O'Connell  
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18 October 2020

## Independent.ie

### My cultural life: Writer Mark O'Connell



Image: Mark O'Connell

Mark O'Connell lives in Dublin with his wife and two children. His most recent book, *Notes from an Apocalypse*, is a non-fiction exploration of apocalyptic anxieties and the people preparing for the end of the world. He was awarded the 2018 Wellcome Book Prize for his previous book, *To Be a Machine*, and the 2019 Rooney Prize for Irish Literature. He doesn't have any pets, but he and his family have spent so much time throughout the lockdown vacillating on whether to get a dog, and what kind of dog to get - or maybe a cat - that it has become its own kind of strangely fulfilling pastime, which they would probably miss if they did end up getting a dog, or a cat.

### Movie: Barry Lyndon



Image: Barry Lyndon

I can't explain why I only saw *Barry Lyndon* for the first time a couple of months ago. I love Stanley Kubrick's films, and I grew up in Kilkenny, where Kubrick shot some of this film, so my avoiding watching it for so long seems like the result of some dogged perversity on my part. I'm not, generally, a big fan of lavish costume dramas, maybe that's it. But in any case, I'm not sure I've ever had as much fun watching a film as I did when I finally got around to watching *Barry Lyndon*. It's just so absurd and gripping and funny, and incredibly beautiful to look at. Even thinking about how much I liked it now just makes me want to watch it again.

### Music: Ulla Straus

I've been working from home since the pandemic hit, which has mostly been fine. But I live in a small house, which contains two even smaller children, who have very big voices which they like to shout with all the time. So I've been listening to a lot of music on my noise-cancelling headphones while I work. And I've been listening endlessly to two beautifully weird albums by the Philadelphia ambient musician Ulla Straus: 2019's *Big Room*, and *Tumbling Toward a Wall*, which she released earlier this year. Her music is dreamy and restless at the same time, both immersive and quietly disorienting. Listening to it feels like being on a meditation retreat inside a broken hard drive, and I can't get enough of it.

### Art: Lisa Brice

This time last year, I went to London for a week to write about Frieze Art Fair for the magazine *1843*. I saw more art in five days - at the fair, at gallery openings around town - than I had probably seen in the entire rest of my life. I saw lots of things I liked and lots of things I found interesting, but almost nothing that hit me on an emotional level. And then, at Stephen Friedman Gallery, I saw an exhibition of new work by the South African painter Lisa Brice, and was just blown away. Her untitled portraits of women in dark blue oil on tracing paper, I found especially hypnotic and strange and beautiful. These figures -

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often naked, and smoking - are resolute and strikingly self-possessed; they're also completely anonymous, and racially ambiguous, their expressions and features rendered opaque by a dense wash of blue. I am still thinking about these enigmatic and powerful images.

## **Design: Fondazione Prada Milan**

I'm struggling to remember much of the art I saw when I visited Milan's Fondazione Prada last year. But the experience of the museum itself has stayed with me. It's a totally unique and somehow a vaguely hallucinatory place, located in a vast former gin distillery in an otherwise fairly unremarkable post-industrial neighbourhood a short metro ride from the centre of Milan. Designed by Rem Koolhaas, it's more a collection of varied architectural gestures - a 24-karat gold leaf tower, a brutalist concrete pavilion, a ghostly white rectangular structure - than a single architectural space, and yet it coheres into something strange and magical.

## **Book: Brian Dillon, Suppose a Sentence**

Brian Dillon is, I think, one of the great contemporary essayists, and maybe the most consistently interesting and stylish of Irish writers. Suppose a Sentence seems like the book he was always destined to write: a collection of short essays, each of which takes as its subject a single sentence that intrigues and provokes him. I found it joyful and inspiring, and it's a book I will be returning to again.

## **Television: Bored to Death**

I ignored this show when it came out first about 10 years ago, because it starred Jason Schwartzman as a struggling Brooklyn writer, based on the show's creator Jonathan Ames, who moonlights as a private detective. I avoided it because this sounded awful to me. But it is, as I recently discovered, not awful at all. It's actually very fun. Ted Danson, who plays Schwartzman's editor at a publication clearly based on New York magazine, is just incredibly great in every scene he is in, and he's in a lot of them. Also Zach Galifianakis. It'll probably take a sharp nosedive in season two, but for now I'm loving it.