

An abstract painting with a vibrant, textured background. The central area is dominated by bright yellow and orange hues, with bold, expressive brushstrokes. To the left, there are large areas of deep red and magenta. On the right, there are patches of blue and green. The overall effect is one of intense energy and dynamic movement.

DMK

Donnagh McKenna





"Akhbars Garden" (2)  
2009 Acrylic on cardboard 61x54cm L20

## Donnagh McKenna (1936 – 2011)



DMK photographed in 2004 at an exhibition by Sir Anthony Caro  
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Donnagh McKenna was born to Irish parents on the 7<sup>th</sup> January 1936 in Manchester. He studied from 1956 at the Manchester College of Arts, at the Extra-Mural Department of Manchester University and, later, at the Slade School of Fine Arts in London. He taught in London's art schools from 1962 to 1970.

During his lifetime Donnagh produced over 1,100 paintings until his death in London on the 16<sup>th</sup> August 2011.

In 1956 Donnagh started with naturalistic figure drawings and caricatures but soon went on to paint portraits in subtle grey tones in oil on canvas.

He made his first abstract charcoal drawings in 1958 and slowly left figurative designs behind to concentrate on abstracts. Donnagh's first colour compositions appeared from 1961.

A review by Cissie Lodge for an exhibition at the Warwick Arts Trust in Pimlico, London in 1986, classifies him as "one of a group of painters who have developed abstract expressionist work in this country, especially over the last five years. McKenna's work has a powerful immediacy and visual impact. But the apparent ease and effortless spontaneity of his paintings has very definite firm roots and discipline."

When Cissie Lodge met Donnagh he was very conscious of the living history of his art, as established in Britain since the 1930s by Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore, Naum Gabo, and even Oskar Kokoschka, who was working temporarily in the country. "We haven't got the pressure of the pioneers. We can do it without worrying about whether or not abstract art is acceptable", he stressed in an interview.

Meanwhile Donnagh had become opposed to figurative art. "Figurative art is visual fiction. It requires you to believe an illusion, to believe that things are something other than they are; what you are really looking at is paint on canvas. Abstract art is a visual fact because what it creates and produces is the product of paint on canvas."

He based his work on the 'orthodox' abstract expressionist ideas of **Hans Hofmann** (1880 - 1966) whose 'push-pull' theory, which constantly seeks to exclude the illusion of space on the surface of the painting. The composition of the painting counteracts the tendency of colours to produce the illusion of space.

The intention, therefore, is to start and finish with a flat surface, to keep colours under control and forbid them to recede or dominate. "Paintings are objects and not pictures of things. They are

expressions of feelings - like music. It needs a trained eye to accept abstract paintings."

"People are looking for recognition of something they already know. They are embarrassed by what they do not understand, and they say they don't like it. When they say 'I know what I like' they actually mean they like what they know, and for 'know' read 'recognise'."

Donnagh McKenna rejected the idea that only the elite can understand abstract painting. He said if people would just look at a work of art, not just glance at it, but stand and look at it, then they would begin to appreciate it's quality. It requires time, study and appreciation. "If you cannot give such things, you cannot expect art to leap off the wall and grab you", he insisted.

His paintings were produced as the result of experience, not the other way round. It may be a recent or a childhood experience, or an experience with another painting. But that idea has to be broken down and reconstructed in terms of the logic of the painting, so that the original idea is both held onto and recreated.

This is why the working of paint on the surface exists simultaneously with a feeling of the unexpected, the mysterious with a familiar memory - creating a poetic ambiguity. His ability to retain the original sensation prevents the work from turning into a pedestrian assertion of "the facts" or academic formalism.

McKenna's work retains the vitality and power of abstract painting - alive into the future.



DMK photographed in 2004 with Sir Anthony Caro  
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2005 Acrylic on hardboard 61x51cm N11



2009 Acrylic on hardboard 40.5x36cm N69

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Ballinteer, Group of Four Exhibition, London, 1986  
1986 Acrylic on hardboard 151x99cm

N81



Abbey News, Group of Four Exhibition, London, 1986  
1986 Acrylic on cardboard 121x100cm N84





Winter Morn  
1980 Acrylic on canvas on stretcher 51x61cm O063



1980 Acrylic on canvas on stretcher 102x152cm O061



1980 Acrylic on canvas on stretcher 107x91.5cm O066





1956 Black pencil A01



1958 Black pencil A09



1957 Black ink A37



1957 Black pencil and white crayon  
on orange, yellow paper A43

## Early drawings



## Donnagh McKenna (1936 – 2011)

This brochure contains a few examples of Donnagh McKenna's work; to see all his art, details of past and planned exhibitions, etc, please go to:

**[www.dmkart.com](http://www.dmkart.com)**

Donnagh McKenna had several exhibitions in the 1980s but is now largely unknown. After his death a small group of people, led by Charles Boyd, decided to champion Donnagh's work. The DMK Arts Trust was founded in 2011 by The Worshipful Company of Founders and Charles Boyd to establish a legal framework for the preservation of Donnagh's works. The Trust is very grateful to the generous time and effort given by Friederike Hammer, Paul Brewin and friends of the Trust who have catalogued and photographed over 1100 works, produced a website, a detailed guide and this brochure. Without their intellect and hard work this would not have been possible and would have led to substantial delays and considerable expense.

If you would like to contact us regarding the DMK project, offer support and/or information, or anything else to do with Donnagh McKenna please go to the website contact page or write to:



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c/o Mr Charles Boyd  
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Note: Most of the works are for sale, please contact Charles Boyd.

Left: Bayern Garden, No. 4, 1985, U02

Front cover: Waiting at "Hero" "Kwinana" "Freeway" (detail), 2011, Acrylic on canvas, O211