

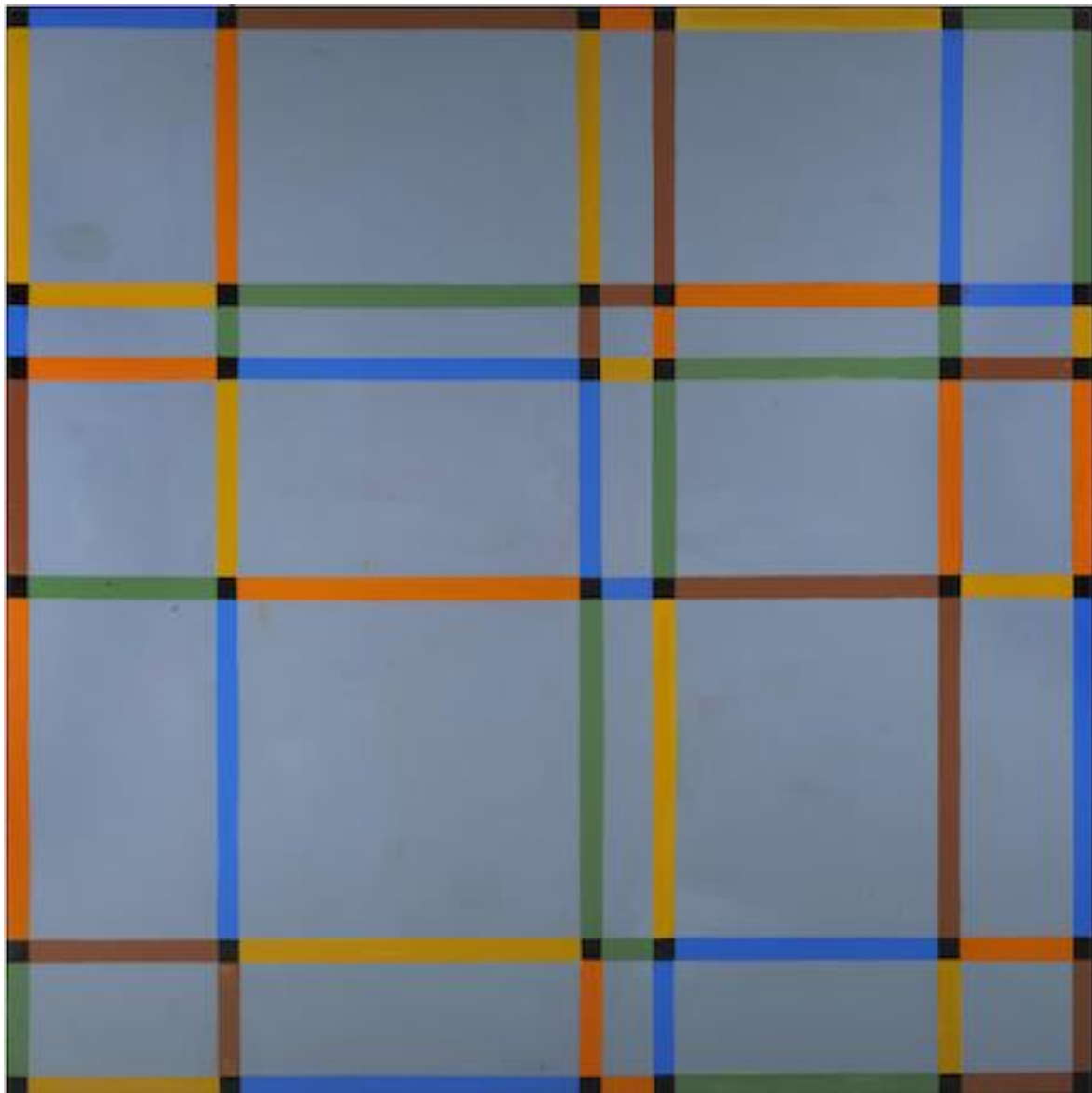
THE BROOKLYN RAIL

A TRIBUTE TO BRIAN O'DOHERTY

May, 2023

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Portrait of the Artist as an Artist



Brian O'Doherty, *Ogham on Broadway*, 2003. Acrylic on canvas, 183 x 189 x 5 centimeters. © National Gallery of Ireland.

Brian O’Doherty (or Patrick Ireland, the name he took as his artist persona from 1972–2008) was not your typical painter nor your typical conceptualist—something he had in common with other conceptual artists who painted, like Mel Bochner, Sol LeWitt, or Dorothea Rockburne. Even though these artists were associated with people who actively disparaged painting, they did not hesitate to bring it out of their artistic tool box when they needed it. O’Doherty’s practice was especially wide-ranging—from conceptually-derived objects (like the Duchamp cardiogram portrait), to performance, sculpture, installation, drawing, mural, and easel painting. The common thread for O’Doherty was concept undergirded by language. It played a role in almost all of his mature work, not least in the paintings. Not wanting to “speak modernism,” as he put it, he was drawn nonetheless to the aesthetic perturbation, displacement, and the inevitable summoning of metaphor that occurs when paint is applied to a two-dimensional surface. This effect existed independently from the underlying concept, and yet, if done properly, could still be tethered to those idea sets – putting in play a suitably ambiguous “both/and” dynamic. The resulting tension, which pushes against the niceties of logic, can yield an invigorating brashness, a willingness to forgo the formal closures and resolutions of what Duchamp referred to as “retinal” art.

O’Doherty worked with language (both as a writer and an artist) and he took special pains in his art to exploit language’s inherent abstraction as well as its nascent purity. Reluctant to employ straight English text—elements of that do appear in some works—he needed another linguistic base. After investigating an array of sign systems—pre-Columbian languages and calendars, hieroglyphs, Scandinavian runes, Greek alphabets, and more, he finally settled on something quite close to home, Ogham, an Irish written (but not spoken) form, dating to the fourth century, and consisting of a series of horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines centered on a long, linear spine. As he wrote:

Here was the purest sign system ever devised, clean as a whistle, as logical in its four registers as the four sets of serial music ... returning a faint echo from fifteen hundred years back, but for all purposes

(except mine) buried in silence. A dead language? Yes, but what a language. It spoke to the idea of language, to serial music, and to minimalism's reductive paradox.

Ogham's geometry and, to O'Doherty, its musicality, became the foundation of many years of artistic work. The paintings—the “Rope Drawings,” the murals, and the later easel paintings—were able to build on his finely honed drawings, and make something bluntly emphatic, yet visually ambiguous and shifting.

O'Doherty's series of “Rope Drawings”—large, complex polychrome geometric wall paintings augmented with taut, space defining sections of rope attached to the walls, ceiling, and floor—began in the 1970s, and continued well into the second decade of the twenty-first century. They pushed abstract painting into an ambitious set of new perceptual readings, as well as a refiguring of ideas of scale, perspective, point of view, permanence, and painting's implicit and explicit relation to architecture. The “Rope Drawings” were typically conceived of as temporary installations, although, as with Sol LeWitt's wall work, they could be purchased and recreated. A permanent site for a group of stand-alone wall paintings and “Rope Drawings” is the Casa Dipinta, O'Doherty's and his wife Barbara Novak's home in Todi, Italy. The house, now open to the public, was transformed, beginning in the 1970s, by the large, intensely colored murals that fill its rooms and turn the entire living space into a work of art itself.

O'Doherty set to work on easel paintings in the 1990s after a hiatus of thirty years. The implicit gridded structure of Ogham—its focus on corners, lines, and edges—gave a linguistic rationale for a group of 6-by-6-foot square geometric paintings. Two of them—*Ogham on Broadway* (2003) and *Ogham on Upper Broadway* (2003/04) are composed of thin colored bands of equal width set on subtly toned grounds—gray for *Broadway*, reddish violet for *Upper Broadway*. The bands are oriented vertically and horizontally, with their intersections marked by squares. As with Mondrian (how can we miss the echoes of *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942–43)?), these paintings are not

only orthogonal, but asymmetrically composed. Each band is divided into five sections (corresponding to the five vowels), punctuated by small squares, with no color repeating in a band. While a color might turn a corner, it does not continue past the square intersection. The band colors are muted, yet declarative. In *Ogham on Broadway* they are orange, golden yellow, sap green, dark teal, and golden brown. The small squares are black. In *Ogham on Upper Broadway* both the bands and squares are crimson, yellow, ochre, jade green, sky blue, teal, and light violet. In both paintings, bands run along all four of the paintings' edges, elegantly framing them. These paintings are open and airy, filled with a sense of quiet contemplation and light. They are conceptually grounded, but this in no way undercuts their visceral appeal. The same could be said for a group of language-related paintings from 2003, 2004, and 2005—*One, Here, Now*, and *AOU, The Broad Vowels*. These four paintings, six-foot squares as well, are more somber in tone than the Broadway Oghams, with nested Albers-like internal squares, punctured by thick, mostly vertical lines. Symmetry plays a bigger role in these works and they seem imbued with an almost incantatory hum. The same could be said for *Vaughan's Circle* (2004–05)—another six-foot square, marked with a wide circular band divided into pastel sectors (representing the Ogham vowels), floating on an ethereal ground of sky blue.

It is remarkable how much Brian O'Doherty accomplished over the course of his long life. Whether it was artmaking, writing about art or publishing novels, university teaching, arts administration, public broadcasting, or his first vocation—medicine—he approached everything with dedication, imagination, and immense skill. Painting was just one of his *métiers*, but he pursued it with a thoroughness and a productivity that would have been enough if that were all he did. But how much more satisfying it is to link the painter up with his other selves, and by looking intently at that work, get a better measure of the man himself.