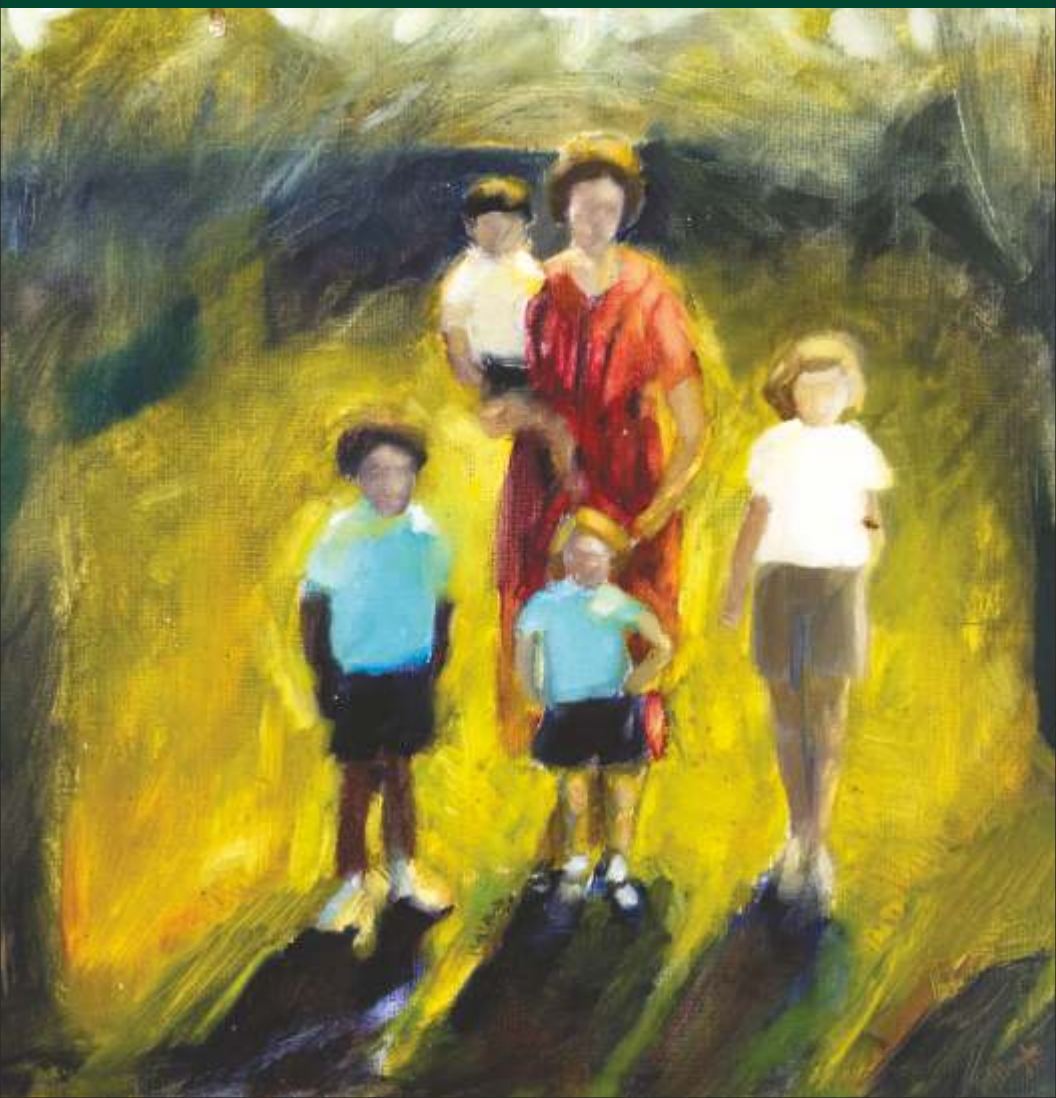


**Michelle Boyle**  
The Clothes on Our Backs





I am delighted to welcome the "Clothes on Our Backs", a wonderful exhibition of the work of Michelle Boyle, to the Jehangir Art Gallery in Mumbai.

It is very fitting that Michelle Boyle is the first Irish artist to exhibit at this iconic institution as her work reflects the sensibilities of her combined European and Indian visual inheritance.

The Jehangir Art Gallery has traditionally been one of the most prominent and renowned galleries in India and I am particularly pleased that it is playing host to a distinguished Irish artist such as Michelle, with her long and deep ties to India.

Ireland and India have always had close ties through arts and culture and I hope that this exhibition serves to deepen and broaden the cultural bonds between our two countries.

Gerry Kelly

Consul General of Ireland, Mumbai



*Forest, Puddle, Walk*  
oil on panel, 31 x 23 in

Following page: *The Woman Who Never Sits Down*  
oil on canvas, 45 x 24 in

भारतीय राजदूत  
**Ambassador**



भारतीय राजदूतावास

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I am delighted to learn that the prestigious Jehangir Art Gallery in Mumbai is hosting a solo exhibition "The Clothes on Our Backs" comprising artworks of Ms Michelle Boyle, a popular, multi-faceted Irish artist with rich Indian experience and strong personal India-connection.

India and Ireland have long-standing and vibrant literary & cultural ties. This solo exhibition by Ms Boyle in India is first physical exhibition from Ireland post-Corona and probably the first contemporary Irish art-exhibition to be organised entirely through private efforts and people to people cooperation.

I wish Ms Boyle's exhibition a huge success and hope it inspires broader India-Ireland mutually enriching partnership and exchange in the field of art, culture and creative industries. I would be happy to facilitate such two-way cultural interactions.

**(Akhilesh Mishra)**  
**Ambassador of India to Ireland**  
**26th May, 2022**





# The Clothes on Our Backs

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Michelle Boyle

Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai

14-20th June 2022

[www.michelleboyle-artist.com](http://www.michelleboyle-artist.com)

Michelle Boyle is a well-known artist who has been invited to exhibit her work this June in the internationally acclaimed Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai. She is the first Irish artist to exhibit in this landmark building which has shown works by leading Indian and international artists since its foundation in 1952. The solo exhibition with Jehangir Gallery *The Clothes on Our Backs* tells the personal stories of people, presented by the artist through her drawings, paintings and installation pieces.

## *Where do we meet?*

The past, the present and the post-future may be abstracted, represented in a single stroke of a brush, depending on the intention of the artist. How is this possible one may ask? To answer this one would require an open-minded approach since very often as a society we tend to dismiss art as fanciful without taking it as seriously as we should. We tend to accredit more impact to technology, engineering and science. However, it has been recorded time and again that the various branches of painting, music, literature, dance and other creative activities, have a significant impact on society, religion, and education, and they rightly deserve the same reverence bestowed upon the sciences. As society expands and grows, art changes to reflect its new developments. Art reflects our 'history', in fact prior to the invention of photography, painting was the only source of visually documenting crucial components of our lives. It still

remains one of the few platforms of expression where we may represent our mythologies, divinities, dreams and fantasies.

Now, having said that, let us return to the idea of painting and its ability to not only represent but also move *beyond* time and geographic allocation. When an artist like Michelle Boyle paints her own portrait, capturing herself in multiple ages and times, she immediately slices into time, she revisits her past, she documents her present status and then she imagines her future. In her paintings, Michelle often places herself standing to the center of the composition, as a child and as a woman, looking out to the viewer. In that simple act of presenting both versions of her self and hinting at the possibility of her future, Boyle ‘plays’ with time and in many ways dismantles its ‘linearity’. Through this series of autobiographical works the artist claims possession of her identity.

Next let us approach the aspect of geographical location. Michelle has lived most of her life in Ireland and she has always wanted to be an artist. Her birth father was from Maharashtra, India, and so her work and academic interest envelopes the contemporary visual art legacy of both India and Ireland.

For Michelle painting is one of the most personal of artforms, akin to letter writing which left an indelible history, ‘a paper trail’ of the 1970’s and ’80’s that predates emails and personalizes communication. She paints ‘the way she lives’ in the world; and invites the viewer to share in the space of her work. One may pull up a chair at her table and share with her a cup of tea, listen to her story of the past and look into her plans for the future, of visiting India and working with its culture, of discovering those invisible connections to her past, her ancestry and mixed race. Her paintings, drawings and installations hold all the cues to enter this cross-cultural journey, whether it is her family portraits, individual head studies, or landscapes . . . there is a tracing back of intermingling of these two cultures that rises above its post-colonial narrative, in a

lineage that is personal and almost like a whispered secret between friends.

She pays a special tribute to the water-lily pond where she used to swim during the COVID lock-down experiencing those moments of freedom and weightlessness. The artist makes a post-painterly reference to Monet and his water-lilies acknowledging that his paintings were painted during World War I. While this is not directly the focus of any of Michelle's work, it is made during times of isolation and reflection and it holds within it that essence of contemplation, alongside the sensuousness of the experience of swimming. For a woman the phenomenal body is encoded with all the subtexts of gender and Michelle's work deals with those factors as well. Her approach is not confrontational but gentle and subtle as she talks about the ordinary everyday nature of being a woman and a painter in troubled times and across geographies that are both distant and near in their own way.

The title of the show *The Clothes on Our Backs*, conjures up lines of the famed 1970s song '500 Miles' by Joan Baez that makes a reference to not having a shirt on one's back or a penny to one's name — here, of course, Boyle's characters do have the clothes on their backs, to give them comfort and satiate their basic needs but she does point towards that basicness that is required for survival and she brandishes it as a tool by which one can get by no matter how hard and challenging the circumstances. Interestingly *The Clothes on Our Backs* is also the title of a 2020 book by Anna Nyburg that looks at how the Jewish refugees from the Nazi camps revitalized the British fashion trade in the 1930s when they took up asylum and worked in British and Scottish companies and brought their new technology, new display methods, a different attitude to export. Yet another reference can be drawn from Linda Grant's 2008 book, *The Clothes on Their Backs*, which won the Orange Prize and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. It weaves an enchanting portrait of a



woman who, having endured unbearable loss, finds solace in the family secrets that her estranged uncle reveals. In many ways Michelle is unpacking secrets of her own family and her mixed ancestry through her painterly journey as we are by her insights and visions. She often works directly in painted lines and colours without drawings maintaining a spontaneity and freshness to her work.

In her body of works titled *The Edge of Urban* Michelle recalls growing up in the 1970s as a mixed-race child in the Dublin suburb of Ballymun. It was an undeniably dramatic decade, with economic, industrial and political unrest. The artist may be spotted in the painting, 'Way Back When', wearing a purple dress smiling away in the middle — an observation on the promise of childhood when . . . 'Way back when . . . everything was and is possible.' It was a time of social change with a 'new' level of consumer affluence and sharpened debates about religion, equality and the status of women in Irish life. Note the female figure in the backdrop adding a bit of drama with her hands crossed over her face in the way that children often do when they want to keep out something unwanted or when they would rather not share their identity with the viewer. It leads one to contemplate about the narrative of childhood that is not always easy.

In the work titled 'Family Portrait' Michelle singles herself out with a halo, perhaps a subconscious reference to the Virgin Mary, as the figure appears with her eyes closed and small smile upon her lips. She appears to be on an inner journey of self-discovery of her femininity and vulnerability that young girls are especially known for. There is something tender and secretive about these portraits of the artist as a young girl that one can relate to even if culturally one were living far away in India, because there is a certain universality to childhood, girlhood and adolescence. It is important to acknowledge that new approaches in psychology indicate that instead of just focusing on the storm and stress of youth and pubescence, a new understanding of adolescent girls that affirms

their strength and resilience ‘needs to be developed’. In many ways Michelle’s celebration of her girlhood and adolescence could be seen as an act akin to that reclaiming.

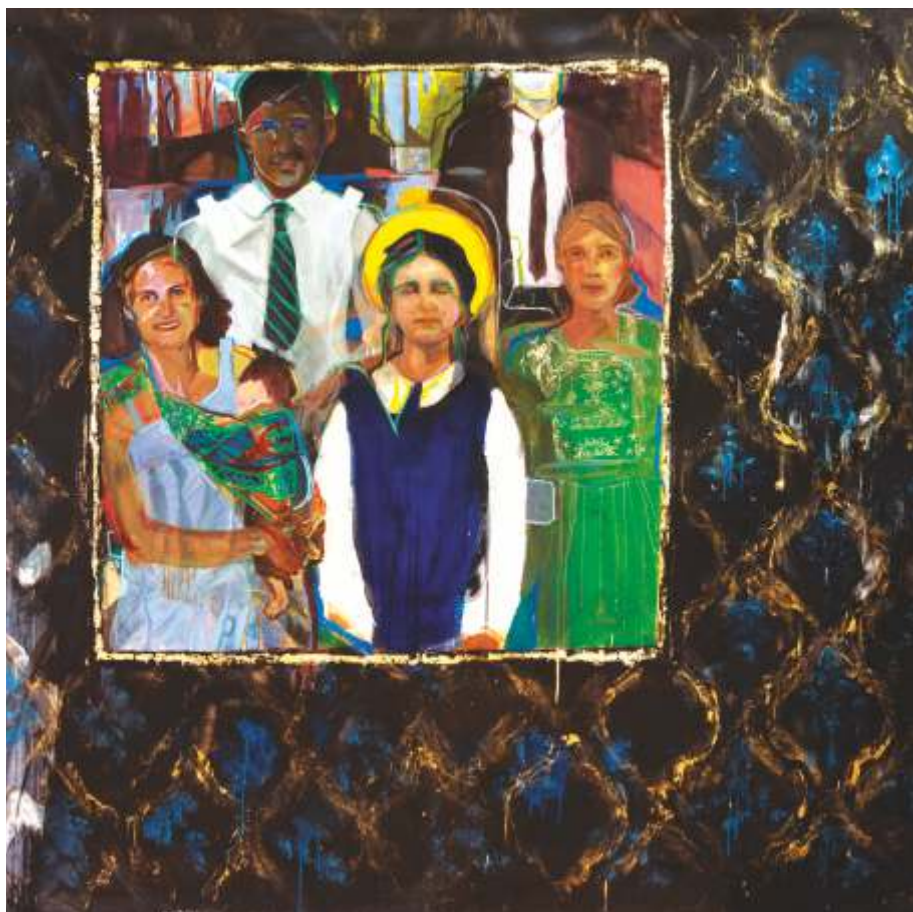
Another important work ‘Strangers Now - Foster Children’ hints at a very significant aspect of Ireland that is not often spoken about, this has been looked at in ‘The Invisible Unmarried Mothers of Ireland’, a 2017 essay by Sarah Laskow, where for seven decades (right up to the 1970s and ’80s), thousands of pregnant Irish women were ‘exiled’ by religious leaders into a kind of ‘captivity’, to hide out-of-wedlock pregnancy from public view. In these so-called homes like, Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, Ireland, it was discovered that the children were brought up under-nourished, half-educated and badly cared for. There was an even darker aspect to this ‘discovery’. Michelle’s work does not touch the darker aspect of this research but what she does capture is a harried care-giver with the foster children all bundled around her. Some children appear asleep and peaceful while some are awake and agitated, the caregiver herself though looks in a state of disarray. One could say that the work is layered with aspects of this slightly dark narrative yet it also possesses that hint of hopefulness that is characteristic of the artist’s other work as well.

‘Incidental Icons’ is a series made up of works on panel that moves away from talking of the personal and makes a sweep at the universal, where Michelle talks of her friends and of incidents and images from her local newspaper. Even here there is a sense of intimacy — whether it is the image of a boy in tears, a man lying on a bed or a father with his daughter in his arms there is an approach to masculinity that underlines the softer and more vulnerable side of the male character. One is greatly tempted to read a subconscious reference to her own father in these everyday boys and men. The overall emotion that one is left with in Michelle’s work is laced with aspects of love, loss and longing but also a sense

of hope and belonging, to a larger narrative, a grander sense of ‘family’ that embraces her identity as an Indo-Irish woman of mixed race and heritage who is discovering aspects of her Indianness through her artwork and her journey. One that she has finally undertaken now, after fulfilling her maternal ‘duties’ in bringing up her own children and establishing a home away from home.

— Georgina Maddox, Independent Critic/Curator

Georgina Maddox blurs the lines of documentation, theory and praxis by operating as a critic/curator and involving herself in over a dozen visual art projects, exhibitions, residencies and workshops. Currently she is writing for various publications, like *The Hindu*, *MASH Magazine*, *Studio International*, *STIR World*, *Art Dose* and *Art Amour*. She has contributed to *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Vogue*, *Elle Magazine*, *Open Magazine* and *India Today*, besides working full-time in the past, for the *Indian Express* and the *Times of India* as their resident art critic.



*Family Portrait*  
oil on canvas, 59 x 59 in



*Strangers Now - Foster Children*  
oil on panel, 35 x 35 in



*Would We Have Been Friends If I'd Known You Then*  
charcoal on paper, 15 x 10 in





*The History of Love 1*  
watercolour on paper, 35 x 27 in



*They Look Like Big Strong Hands*  
watercolour/24ct gold leaf on paper, 35 x 27 in



*The Bed I Made*  
oil on panel, 23 x 19 in



*The Bed He Made*  
oil on panel/gold leaf, 8 x 6 x 1 in

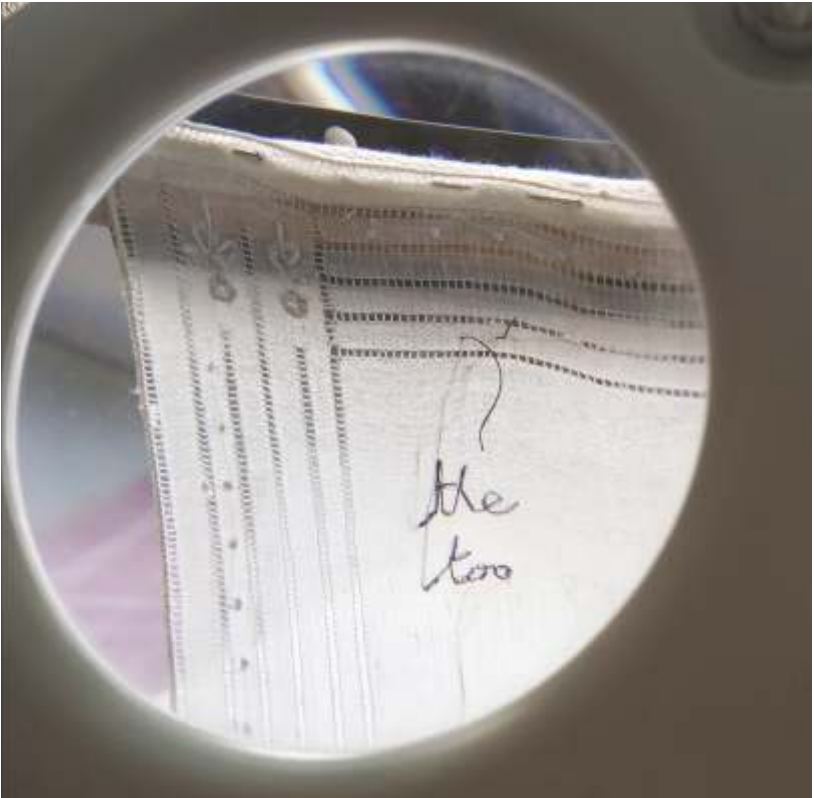


*From the Bedroom to the Field*  
oil/pencil on board, 7.5 x 7.5 in



*From the Bedroom to the Road*  
oil/pencil on board, 7.5 x 7.5 in





‘The woman with too much past’ from *The Ordinary Woman*  
Photo: Sally-Ann Duffy



‘The Indian woman’ from *The Ordinary Woman*

## About the Artist

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### **Michelle Boyle**

This solo exhibition by Michelle Boyle brings together new and previously exhibited works to Jehangir Gallery in Mumbai, India. The artist's figurative drawings and paintings come from her particular vantage place as a woman, mother and participant observer of contemporary society. The people represented include family, friends and strangers, their stories embodied through 'The Clothes on Our Backs'.



Boyle works from her studio in rural Ireland with a growing international recognition of her work through notable awards, international residencies, short-listings and incorporation into public collections. She works in oils and watercolours, — paint mediums which she feels express the sensibilities of her European and Indian visual inheritances.

In this exhibition she explores a developing installation piece inviting Irish and Indian women to respond to the poem 'The Ordinary Woman' by Irish poet Mary Dorcey.

### **Education**

BA Cultural Anthropology. MA Landscape Archaeology.

### **Collections**

UNESCO Paris France, The Next Generation Self Portrait Collection London UK, Microsoft International, The Drawing Institute Italy, Tartu Print and Paper Museum Estonia, The Irish Banking Federation, Price Waterhouse, The OPW Irish State Collection, The Contemporary Irish Art Society, Private Collections India, Europe, US & Australia.

## Selected Exhibitions

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### **Solo shows**

- 'The Shape of Place', Hambly & Hambly, N. Ireland
- 'Outside the Urban', Axis, Ballymun, Dublin, Ireland
- 'This Is Where I Belong. . . This Exact Spot', Farmleigh, Dublin,
- 'In My Father's House There Are Many Rooms', Cavan, Ireland
- 'Journey Towards a Likeness', The Hay Festival Kells, Ireland
- 'Family Biographies of Ordinary Lives' The New Gallery Space  
Helix, Dublin

### **Group shows**

- European Watercolour Symposium, Bilbao, Spain
- UNESCO Resilience Project, Andorra
- The Drawing Box, Groningen, Netherlands
- John Richardson French Residency Award Shortlist Hambly &  
Hambly, N. Ireland
- Watercolour Society of Ireland, Farmleigh, Dublin
- Ruth Borchard Self Portrait Collection, London, U.K.
- Sunday Times Watercolour Exhibition, Shortlisted Artist, Mall  
Galleries, U.K.
- Irish Consulate, New York, USA
- Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin
- Royal Ulster Academy, Belfast, N Ireland
- European Watercolour Society Annual Exhibition, Krakow, Poland
- United Nations Commission for the Status of Women, UN HQ,  
New York USA
- Irving Contemporary, Oxford, UK
- VUE Contemporary Art Fair, RHA, Dublin
- Kings Place 'The Next Generation Self Portrait Collection, London  
Gallery OED Kerala India
- Tartu Print Museum, Estonia

## Artist's Acknowledgements

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Gerry Kelly, Consul General of Ireland (Mumbai), Akhilesh Mishra (Ambassador of India to Ireland), Alison Reilly (Deputy Consul General of Ireland (Mumbai), Patil Rajendra (Para) and Mary Dorcey, poet.

The following women from India and Ireland for their contribution to 'The Ordinary Woman' after the poem by Mary Dorcey.

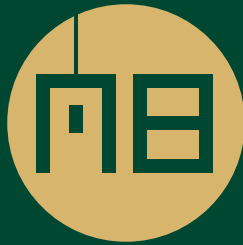
Anjali  
Durga  
Frances  
Gauri  
Georgina  
Lavanya  
Maggie  
Mary  
Melissa  
Mitalee  
Pamela  
Reeti  
Sally-Ann  
Sarah  
Sharmila  
Suella  
Veronica



Photo: Mitalee Joshi

Front cover: 'Cedarwood Road, Dublin', oil on canvas, 15x15 in  
Catalogue photography and design by Suella Holland, Ireland.

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Jehangir Gallery, Mumbai, India

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