

PRESS RELEASE

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Ashmolean NOW
Daphne Wright: Deep-Rooted Things
13 June 2025 – 8 February 2026



***Daphne Wright: Deep-Rooted Things* is the latest in the Ashmolean NOW series of exhibitions of new works by contemporary artists that relate to the Museum's historic collections.**

This exhibition by Irish artist Daphne Wright (b. 1963) created in partnership with Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin, features several new sculptures including the major new work *Sons and Couch*, in which she returns to the subject of her children, now on the brink of adulthood, that she last portrayed on the cusp of adolescence in 2014. It is presented alongside *Fridge Still Life* (2021) and other recent works, which are placed in dialogue with works from the Ashmolean's collection.

Wright's sculptures meditate on passing time, the transience of life and, in the sculpture of her two sons, the forging of male identity. The work continues a series that started in her work *Sons* (2011), the earliest of the sculptures of her children when they were on the brink of adolescence, and continued in the subsequent *Kitchen Table* (2014). In *Sons and Couch* the centre of domestic life has moved from the kitchen table to the living room couch where the bodies have grown, perhaps out-grown their space, and are once again on the brink – a moment of latency, anxiety and possibility captured and rendered solid.

Whilst spending time at the Ashmolean, Wright was drawn to the plaster casts in the Museum's Cast Gallery where the sculptures frequently take the young adult male as their subject, representing ancient and pervasive ideals of masculine beauty as epitomised by athletes, heroes and Gods. The show opens with a cast of the surviving fragments of a metope from the Temple of Zeus in Olympia from the Ashmolean's collection, showing a young beardless

Hercules defeating the Nemean Lion in the first of his Labours, just starting out on his violently heroic journey through adulthood.

Wright also places one of the few paintings by a woman artist in the Ashmolean in the gallery space alongside her own works. Rachel Ruysch's '*Forest Floor*' *Still Life of Flowers* features a seasonally impossible combination of poppies, marigolds, convolvulus and fruit blossom, all captured on the cusp of dropping their first petals, with a butterfly – another emblem of life's fleeting nature – alighting momentarily on a bloom. An even more evidently deliquescent bunch of flowers sits on top of Wright's *Fridge Still Life* (2021), a recent work shown here for the first time. In contrast to the hard and robust jesmonite of Wright's casts, this is one of the latest in a group of works made by the artist in unfired clay, a material with which she has been working for the last fifteen years. Fridges are intended to slow down the effects of time but they are also strangely intimate and revealing personal spaces. Here Wright invites the viewer to consider what is revealed by the oven-ready chicken, drinks bottle and five asparagus spears that sit forlornly in the fridge's interior.

Several works, or series of works, in the exhibition speak directly to both the domestic and the museum, and in doing so continue the exploration of time, memory and identity. The way in which domestic objects carry memories and meaning is central to Wright's series *Plates* made by pressing clay between two plates, with each plate decorated with ghostly, faded memories of familiar patterns. A different response to the museum is suggested by the group of wall-hung sculptures of animals taken from collectible posters that once came free with the Guardian newspaper and hung on the bedroom walls of Wright's children. The urge or need to collect and to categorise is as much the preserve of the child as it is the museum curator, and Wright's carefully arranged *Pet Amphibians and Reptiles* and *Pet Rodents and Rabbits* squirm off the page in their low relief three dimensionality as if trying to escape such categorisation while also realising the familiar childhood fantasy of the image come to life.

The last work in the exhibition pulls together many of its recurring themes. The mysteriously named *Ugg* (2019) presents eighteen strange amorphous objects on three shelves. These might be a museum display of ancient artefacts and vessels, models of internal organs or the maquettes of a modernist sculptor. In fact, they are based on a collection of small plastic figures – Moshi Monsters – collected by the artist's son when they were the current playground craze, only to be discarded when a new trend came along. The strange lumpen presences of *Ugg* sit on their shelves suggesting some lost, forgotten and only partially understood world.

Xa Sturgis, Director of the Ashmolean Museum, said: 'The exhibition title *Deep-Rooted Things* most obviously suggests the importance of history, time, inheritance and memory in the forging of identity. These, together with the fragility, vulnerability and mutability of those identities, are indeed among the preoccupations of the works in the show, which centres on a major new sculpture of her two young-adult children. We are thrilled to be working together with Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin on this showing of Daphne's work and look forward to seeing the different resonances that her works will have within our two very different institutions.'

Daphne Wright said: 'I visited the Ashmolean often with the children when they were young, and we had many discussions about objects and artworks in the collection. The opportunity to exhibit in the museum and to reflect upon how one's children and young men in general are shaped and reflected by ancient and contemporary culture is amazing.'

Barbara Dawson, Director of the Hugh Lane Gallery, said: "We are delighted to work with the Ashmolean Museum on this exhibition by Daphne Wright, one of Ireland's leading artists. She delves unflinchingly into issues of parenthood, family and mortality. In an extraordinary body of work, which is both monumental and domestic, Daphne peels away at facade and image to reveal the complexities and emotions beneath the surface."

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Image credits:

Daphne Wright, *Pink Dinner Plate*, 2019 unfired clay & mixed media. Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London. Photo credit: Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Daphne Wright, *Fridge Still Life*, 2021 unfired clay & mixed media, 132 x 48.5 x 52 cm on freestanding plinth. Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London. Photo credit: Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

Daphne Wright, *Ugg*, 2019 unfired clay & mixed media, 85 x 116 x 20cm. Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London. Photo credit: Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

Exhibition: *Daphne Wright: Deep-Rooted Things*

Dates: 13 June 2025 – 8 February 2026

Venue: Gallery 8, Lower Ground Floor, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, UK

Admission: Free

Ashmolean NOW

Ashmolean NOW launched in 2023 to engage and support new artistic voices based in the UK and encourage critical conversations with, and creative responses to, the Ashmolean's collections. Ashmolean NOW is curated by Dr Lena Fritsch, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, and presented in Gallery 8. To date, Ashmolean NOW has invited very different artists and perspectives to exhibit:

- Flora Yukhnovich x Daniel Crews-Chubb (8 July 2023–14 January 2024);
- Pio Abad (10 February–8 September 2024);
- Bettina von Zwehl (18 October 2024–11 May 2025).
- Daphne Wright 13 June 2025–8 Feb 2026)

About the artist

Daphne Wright (b. 1963, Co. Longford) makes sculptural installations using a variety of techniques and media, including fragile materials such as plaster, tinfoil, unfired clay, sound and video. She is curious about how a range of languages and materials can be used to probe often unspoken human preoccupations, and her visual vocabulary is inspired by suburban life, literature, theatre and art history. The warmth and subtle fragility of the objects she makes bear witness to the importance of ritual and care in daily life and the borderlines between life and death.

Daphne Wright's work has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions including at: Crawford Art Gallery, Cork; Davies Museum, Wellesley College, Massachusetts; Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin; Arnolfini, Bristol & National Trust, Tynesfield; New Art Centre Sculpture Park and Gallery, Roche Court, Wiltshire. Important group exhibitions include: *Art as Agency*, Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA), Dublin; *Acts of Creation: On Art and Motherhood*, Hayward Touring, Arnolfini Bristol, Midlands Arts Centre (MAC), Birmingham, Millennium Gallery, Sheffield and Dundee Contemporary Arts (DCA), Dundee; *Hotspot*, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome, Italy; *Portals*, former Public Tobacco Factory – Hellenic Parliament Library and Printing House, a collaboration between the Hellenic Parliament and NEON, Athens, Greece; *Infinite Sculpture*, Musée des Beaux Arts ENSBA, Paris and Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon; *Presence: The Art of Portrait*, The Holburne Museum, Bath; *Garden of Reason*, Ham House, Richmond upon Thames. In 2018 Wright curated the exhibition *The Ethics of Scrutiny* at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA), Dublin. Wright is an Elected Member of Aosdána, an Associate Academician of the Royal Hibernian Academy and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Sculptors.

She has been the recipient of significant funding including from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and most recently a Major Project Award from the Irish Arts Council to support the production of the work for this exhibition. In the making of *Sons and Couch*, Wright worked with master modellers and casters at Arteffects and with Fine Art Painter John Brennan to paint the surface of the casts.

About Hugh Lane Gallery

Located in Dublin's City Centre, in Parnell Square, Hugh Lane Gallery, (originally named Municipal Gallery of Modern Art), houses one of Ireland's most exciting collections of modern and contemporary Irish and international art. It is also the home of Francis Bacon's Studio. The gallery was founded by Sir Hugh Lane in 1908 as part of the dynamic and pioneering Celtic Revival Movement in Ireland at the turn of the 20th century. hughlane.ie

Supporters

The creation of new artworks is made possible thanks to the financial support of the Arts Council of Ireland. Exhibition also supported by Culture Ireland.