

Hold, support, grip: fragments of different materials resting on wooden elements, structures hooked to vertical bars, steel frames, glass panes, welds. This is what the solo show *holds*, by Niamh O'Malley, comprises, while transcending the literal borders its name suggests. These "spatial paintings" – and by that, I mean both the sculptural and video works and their interaction with the space – create a sense of stability which is illusory. It finds its poetic language in exploring proliferation as an attempt to reach *something*, and in the reiteration of gestures, as though some of the artworks were expanding themselves through small crystallisations and progressive germinations. These objects are the result of minimal actions that "keep things together": moments of silent coexistence, evoking broken memories and rifts, but also episodes of a domestic and landscape microcosm resurfacing in fragments. These are sculptures that resonate with us because of their shapes and materials (wood, steel, glass), and yet open up to the reflective, powerful void they float inside, aiming to capture an elusive angle, a breath of light or air, a pause in space, a material perception, as well as moments of personal memory. To observe O'Malley's shows – and this one is no exception – feels like being inside a paragraph and witnessing the construction of a sentence, or its recalling, word after word. You can trace the connections between its fragile phonemes: shapes, colours, materials, echoes, tactile and visual sensations, but also images, reflections caressing the surfaces, and other minimal units of this language, interacting with the blank page represented by the exhibition space.

Niamh O'Malley In *Held, arrangements* (2025) a series of three glass compositions framed in stainless steel, absorb the natural daylight from the yard, emphasising the architectural rhythm marked by the gallery's windows. It's a play of visual and formal references: the *arrangements*, numbered 1, 2, 3, hold glimpses of tactile and material transparencies,

holds

inside which elements in copper foil and graphite are precariously resting. These sculptural paintings are an invitation to a more cadenced step, reflecting on their materials' literal and metaphoric values. In their everyday use, glass and steel are often used as barriers, shelters and reinforcements, creating a sense of care in "being a support" and "being supported". Here, in the gallery, however, they evoke a sense of absence: they become partial, precarious holds, invaded havens, fractured and unstable slivers. These three artworks are a focal point in the layout of the show, aiming towards what seems to be the compositional horizon O'Malley so often searches for, both in individual artworks and in their arrangement in space. And while her goal was never to "choreograph the audience in a didactic way", she enjoys how "the work provokes movement." [...] "I am always thinking that the work is really activated when it's in relation to the viewing body"¹, she claims. Thanks to a familiarity arising from materials that aren't so distant from our everyday use, these artworks encourage a sense of closeness between the gaze and body, expanding our relationship with the object and its shape by loading them with a web of haptic sensations.

Holds, ash (2025), also defines a compositional line in the show, producing a striking vertical on the high walls of the gallery. Three sculptural elements in polished ash have their concave side – the more "welcoming" one – facing the wall, while steel poles extend like stems, framing the wall's negative space. *Leafs, folded (floor, pair)* (2025), on the other hand, lies on the gallery floor – a sculptural object formed of two pairs of wafer-thin hot-rolled steel sheets whose sharp-edged folds skim each other until they finally meet. In a play of interactions, these shapes seem to "take care of each other"; and while one appears to contain the other, the latter looks like an extension or a double of the external one, yet both hold each other, as if they were origamis where folds and angles are fixed in the precise moment that shapes them into an apparently rigid yet emotionally fleeting new pose. The gallery and loft space are also punctuated by a series of sculptures created by O'Malley

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between 2023 and 2025 using coloured and textured glass and wood. Installed with a focus on the arrangement and placement of shapes in space – also in response to the gallery’s architectural prompts, the inclination of the light on walls, etc. – these artworks create a precise exhibition grammar, providing both moments of connection and precarious balance. It’s a series of formal references repeating themselves in sculptural compositions, hinting again at an almost biological process of propagation.

The exhibition closes with *Garden* (2013), a silent, black and white two-channel video displayed on horizontal monitors inside a small room at the gallery. Shot in O’Malley’s garden in the centre of Dublin, this artwork shows a series of images where mirrors are not just windows on reality but rather subjects and mediums. Through a paced montage overlapping and alternating between the two film frames, the hand-held mirrors redirect our gaze “outwardly”, encouraging the eye to expand and create a possible portrait of the garden which is never caught in its entirety, since its image (or, better, its image inside the image) is ever-changing. What is intimately reflected on the mirror gives back parts of the enclosure wall, a tuft of vines, scraps of sky and passing clouds, in a seemingly endless effort to reach for something, reassemble fractured wholenesses, or try to catch a certain glimpse of light. “I think a lot of my work is about trying to get close to things but ultimately becoming more aware of the distance. Or trying to make something still, which is ever shifting and slipping².” Supported by hands with no apparent body (except for some moments when legs and parts of the chest are visible), the mirror is the video’s scenic focus. It leans to the left and right, horizontally and vertically, converging our attention into specific borders, a frame inside the frame releasing and retaining at once – in an attempt to stabilise it – an image in space. Again, O’Malley’s focus is on the surroundings and the many fragments *Garden* – as well as the other artworks displayed – manages to insert one in the other by trying to freeze portions of space, surfaces, slippings, propagations, references: failed attempts of wholeness, similar to what is experienced by memory in its processes. A room inside another, enclosed in a high-walled yard: it is no coincidence the artist decided to position the video in a place where walls protect and obscure the view, just like in her garden. And it is no coincidence she left the round skylight open: a small gesture which creates a minimal variation in light, orienting our perception of the body and its process of becoming vision and memory, in the impossibility of inhabiting a fortified wholeness, since everything turns out to be fragile and precarious. And even when material revelations try to comfort us with their familiarity, they never cease to elude us.

Translation by Ida Amlesù

1. Niamh O’Malley in conversation with Maddalena Iodice, “L’Essenziale Studio”, Vol. 06, p. 55.
2. Ibid. p. 52.

Giovanna Manzotti (1988) is a curator and writer based in Milan. She was the editor of *Mousse Magazine* from 2018 to 2022. Recent and previous projects as curator, assistant curator, and researcher include collaborations with MADRE, Naples (2023 and 2024); Galerie Krobath, Vienna (2023); Renata Fabbri, Milan (2023 and 2024); Cassina Projects, Milan (2023); Associazione NEL, Lugano (2021, 2022, and 2023);

Clima, Milan (2021); Cloisters of Sant’Eustorgio, Milan (2021); The View Studio, Genoa (2018-22); ALMANAC, Turin (2018); Fondazione Fausto Melotti, Milan (2016-17); La Triennale di Milano (2016); Nouveau Musée National de Monaco, Montecarlo (2014-15); and Pro Helvetia, Milan, Zurich (2014-15). She writes for *Flash Art*, *frieze*, *artforum*, *ArtReview* and *QUANTS*.