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THE ART OF MARK FRANCIS: A STRANGE, UNCANNY SENSE OF TIME AND MOVEMENT EVOKES FRANCIS BACON

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Installation view of "Tracing Echoes," 17 January - 14 March 2026, Solstice Arts Centre, Navan, Ireland.
Photo courtesy of the artist.

Mark Francis: "Tracing Echoes"
Solstice Arts Centre, Navan, Co Meath

The writer Michel Leiris once described Francis Bacon's portraits as creatures already attacked by decay. Like Oscar Wilde's picture of Dorian Gray working in reverse, the painter's distortions did not so much freeze time as animate its passage; faces seen in a blurry transition from cradle to grave.

At first glance the intense, formal abstractions of Mark Francis seem to have more in common with Gerhard Richter than with Bacon. Large-scale works in oil on canvas or aluminium, such as *Oscillator I* (2025), consist of tight vertical lines with blocks of colour laid down and meticulously dragged to create remarkable stuttering effects in the paint that seem simultaneously precise and indeterminate. In a series of charcoal works on paper, narrow verticals again dominate, soft-focus forms flowing through them like frequency outputs, in *Acoustic Expansion* (2025), or profiles of the moon, in *Linear Mass I, II, III* (2025).

Yet they do share with Bacon that strange, uncanny sense of time and movement apparent within the experience of viewing the works themselves.

Francis, who was born in Newtownards, in County Down, handles his materials extraordinarily well. His palette seems to have expanded over the years, moving from monochromatic paintings in the early 2000s to a considerably broader spectrum of tones in recent years. As the colours jostle with each other within strictly controlled lines, a remarkable sense of movement and undulation is produced, as if the paintings themselves were real-time data readouts of the very experience of their own viewing.

As titles such as *Sonic Swell* and *Audio Field* indicate – and as does a curated playlist accompanying the show – music and sound are central to Francis's practice. This is not necessarily to say the artworks are inspired by or about music. Rather, it is again a question of time and movement, the paintings and drawings producing something of the durational experience of being immersed in the auditory environment.

This is nicely emphasised in *Listening Field* (2025), a seven-minute audiovisual work commissioned by Solstice Arts Centre. Francis's first foray into film, it will also feature as part of his representation of the Republic of San Marino at this year's Venice Biennale.

Lines of coloured light form and shift over and back across a darkened screen, moving to a score of electronic tones and whining feedback. As well the lateral movement, the lines produce a sense of forward momentum, like watching a road disappearing endlessly under headlights.

The piece is remarkably effective at transposing the artist's vision from easel to moving screen. Nonetheless, in so literally animating his lines and integrating them with an audio score, *Listening Field* in a strange way dissipates some of the power of his paintings and drawings.

The fluidity Francis achieves with brush and charcoal is compelling enough in its own right and maintains a touch of mystery that risks being lost in the clarity of the film.