

North West

Material Encounters

Joanne Laws

JOANNE LAWS REPORTS ON RECENT EXHIBITIONS AND EVENTS TAKING PLACE IN THE NORTH-WEST.

GALLERIES IN THE North-west kicked off their autumn programmes in early September with some compelling exhibitions and a host of engaging public events, film screenings and talks. With construction of a new gallery space currently underway at Roscommon Arts Centre, curator Linda Shevlin has developed a series of offsite projects and exhibitions across the county. ‘Gateways’ by interdisciplinary artist Fiona McDonald ran from 1 to 27 September in King House, Boyle.

The local history and folklore of Boyle is permeated with stories of extraterrestrial activity, particularly during the mid-90s, when the UFO society of Ireland was established by Boyle resident, the late Betty Meyler, with the nearby Kingsland Observatory housing Ireland’s largest operational telescope. Following site visits to the region, McDonald – who recently undertook a residency in UCD’s School of Physics – created artworks to consider “the impact of live networks on real and fictional communication systems”. McDonald’s innovative sculptural apparatus combine custom-designed hardware and inbuilt sensor technology to track astronomical events like Gamma Ray Bursts, that cause black holes to form. Projections and LED displays alluded to a Sci-Fi influence, while automated movements were highly seductive. The sculptures were beautifully-crafted in a range of repurposed materials, including telescopic mirror. McDonald also developed an ingenious mobile app, which was launched during an ‘augmented reality’ event for Culture Night on the shores of Lough Key, allowing the assembled crowd to view a ‘UFO portal’ on the lake, allegedly discovered by Meyler near Church Island.

Also pursuing otherworldly themes, composer and artist Jennifer Walshe presented an ambitious solo exhibition, ‘Aisteach’ (meaning ‘strange’), at The Model, Sligo, based on her archive of fictional histories, ‘Aisteach: The Avant-Garde Archive of Ireland’, launched in 2015 (aisteach.org). Over the course of a three-day opening event, the gallery was activated with a performance installation, titled ‘The Worliding’ (31 August – 2 September). A series of embodied encounters and improvisations drew on Irish folklore, superstition and cultural practices: vocal group, Tonnta, delivered a Sean-nós-inspired musical arrangement; circus artist, Natasha Bourke, dangled from the rafters, lowering herself into an ancient stone circle, fashioned on the gallery floor; and a séance was conducted, with performers whispering into microphones. This ritualistic gathering called to mind the involvement of W.B. Yeats in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn which inspired Yeats to consider establishing an Order of Celtic Mysteries on Castle Island in Lough Key.

In The Dock, ‘The L Shape’ curated by Alice Butler, presents two immersive moving image works. Jenny Brady’s film, *Going to the Mountain* (2015) features studies of pre-verbal babies as they explore the complexities of gesture,

rhythm and movement. Considering the provision in cinemas of subtitled screenings for deaf audiences, or audio description for the visually impaired, Brady began to explore the complex relationships between sound and image, text and narrative. She developed a text-based video work, *Spikes*, which is connected to the film, and shown in tandem on a monitor mounted behind the projection screen. Also employing subtitles, Sarah Browne’s *The Invisible Limb* takes the form of a ‘Film Letter’ – a literary format that conveys a narrative sequence, requiring audiences to simultaneously observe, listen and read. The film offers insights into the processes of two female artists born in 1930 – Irish stone-carver Cynthia Moran and deceased German artist, Charlotte Posenenske – with the representation of women’s labour being a connecting theme. Footage of Moran at the Giant’s Causeway is interspersed with archival footage of Posenenske’s minimalist work, sold by the artist at material cost, as a political commentary on the “transience of art as a commodity”.

The exhibition’s supporting programme comprised two special public events, as part of part of Visual Artists Ireland’s new International Speakers Series. At Browne’s invitation, ventriloquist Nina Conti presented a screening of her award-winning documentary film, *Her Master’s Voice* (2012), on 22 September. Following the death of her mentor and lover, Ken Campbell, (who bequeathed his ventriloquist dolls to Conti) she embarked on a journey to Vent Haven – a museum in Kentucky described as a ‘graveyard’ for the puppets of dead ventriloquists. After the screening, she spoke with Irish actress Tara Flynn, about the innovative ways that she continues to push the boundaries of this contemporary artform.

On 13 October, British filmmaker, John Smith, showed three films, including his 16mm film, *Associations* (1975), which examines the relationship between text and images, based on the principles of word association games. Images stand in for common words, creating semiotic puns that satisfy the viewers’ impulse to “create meaning in the gaps”. Language is simultaneously deconstructed and regenerated, requiring audiences to actively engage, rather than passively consume. *Slow Glass* (1991) tracks the “constancy of change in the everyday landscape”. Underscored by the ontological perspective that “everything is in a state of flux”, the material history of glass is explored by the film’s narrator, a local glazier, who informs us that if a glass breaks, it oxidises and softens the sharp edge, subliminally changing over time. *Slow Glass* is permeated with nostalgia, as the narrator laments the demise of manual labour and craft industries under Thatcherite policies of the 1980s, admitting that he feels “more connected to memory and the past”, than to the present.

Joanne Laws is Features Editor of the Visual Artists’ News Sheet.

South West

New Hub for Wexford Artists

Daniel Cullen

THE ART EXPLORER DISCUSSES THE OPENING OF A NEW CREATIVE CENTRE IN WEXFORD TOWN.

I RECENTLY WENT to the opening of Wexford County Council’s new Creative Hub, to see what a ‘centre for creativity’ might look like. How would it feel? How could something like ‘creativity’ be contained and packaged? A term like ‘hub’ suggests such great promise. Would it be like a toolbox, full of oily rags and shavings, with smells and evidence of the craft of making? Perhaps a treasure-trove of shiny gems, all laid out? Would it contain the comfort and reassurance of pastoral landscapes? Would it entertain like a circus or challenge like graffiti? I brought all of these questions with me, my cynicism packed safely into my pocket like a loaded gun.

Situated in what was previously the Cornmarket Shopping Mall, in the heart of Wexford town, the Hub’s location could not be better. It consists of a single climbing arcade of shop units, joining the main shopping street below with Mallin Street above. Referred to as the ‘cultural spine’, this street links the library, Opera House, Wexford Art Centre and the historic Selskar Abbey. The location is therefore both practical and symbolic, reflecting aspirations to integrate cultural and commercial life within the town.

The space was originally opened temporarily to artists, in response to a need for exhibition space during the 2017 Wexford Opera Festival and Arts Week. This was a great success and prompted the council to lease the space from local businessman Eamonn Buttle for a three-year period, as part of their Arts Plan. The Hub is administered by the Wexford Art Centre and comprises a mixture of working studios, exhibition space and retail outlets. Rents range between €100 and €350 per month for individual and shared units, with 12-month leases currently being offered. Artists were selected through an open competition, with a broad spectrum of art practices represented, including visual arts, drama and music. Also included is the local FDYS Music Programme.¹

Entrance to the centre is through a set of wide glass doors, where a steep stairwell leads to the main hallway. Tiled surfaces and hollow sounds echo our ascent from the busy street, our expectations rising as we climb. A crowd is gathering, displaying that blend of rebelliousness and respectability found only in the arts. After the traditional round of speeches (thanking him, thanking her, thanking you and him again...) a gold-chained voice calls out, in the spirit of Wexford hurling, for STEAM – a poetic cry highlighting the importance of the arts in education. Scribblers hunch to get it all down. Stragglers lean against walls like Sunday mass and the show begins.

The hall fills with a wild, witch-like call, as Deirdre Wadding – the ‘Red-Blooded Green Woman’ wearing a black cape and wielding a bodhrán – prompts the crowd into action. Passive silence is not permitted, as we nervously mouth incantations between sideward glances of wonder and disbelief. Ordinary reserve is shattered, now that the artists are loose. Later on,

music takes a more traditional form, as 14-year-old musician Lauren Doyle, with the voice of an angel, plucked simplicity from her guitar to soothe the anxious crowd.

There then followed our forays into individual artist’s studios, some clean, precise and professional, others raw and full of hope. One very large space, called ‘The Makers House’, is packed with works by several artists, presented in the style of Kilkenny Design Centre. Next door, huddled groups convene in a low-lit space, where conversation itself is honoured through dramatic engagement. Strewn about this shared space are microphones and a large video screen, amidst the bewitching drapery of an ancient forest tent. On a blanket is the paraphernalia of a druid and storyteller. Here it seems, creativity is a currency that is freely exchanged.

As the atmosphere warms up and intimacy thickens, conversations are had between mingling artists who share hopes and dreams for the space. The aspiration to integrate art and commerce is widely discussed, including its implications for future arts practice and the potential for public engagement. We are reminded that this centre is the culmination of a long campaign by artists and others over many years. As with any shared creative space, there remains much to be explored.

Then unannounced, a poet steps forward, hesitantly pulling back a heavy black veil to reveal a large monochrome portrait by artist Peter Kelly of the deceased paedophile priest, Sean Fortune (nicknamed ‘The Monster’). With trembling voice, he delivers a deeply moving reading, a sharing of shocking truths and deep wounds. All present are hushed and respectfully attentive. This dark unveiling brought no celebration, just an honest sharing of our common, savaged past, still present.

The evening gently moves on again with poetry and song. Much later, as I walked home through Wexford’s streets, I vowed to pay tribute to the Hub, and the honesty and bravery encountered in this centre of creativity. Above all, the opening event was a moving and inspiring tribute to the courageous inhabitants of Wexford town and their energetic embrace of the arts.

The Art Explorer is a pseudonym for the artist and writer Daniel Cullen, who is currently studying Art Writing at the Gorey School of Art.

Note

¹ FDYS is the Ferns Diocesan Youth Service, located on Francis Street in Wexford.