

Great Work in Marginal Places

I DESCRIBE MYSELF first and foremost as a painter, where the substance of paint informs other processes in my practice as a visual artist. In 2003 I made the decision to leave my career in cultural heritage management to become a fulltime artist. I probably could not have picked a more difficult time with the responsibility of four small children and a move from Dublin to Cavan, which was then described to me as a 'cultural backwater'.

But I am reminded of a conversation between Alex Katz and Theo Dorgan in IMMA in 2007, as part of the 'Alex Katz: New York' exhibition. The artist said he learned to paint in a field on the outskirts of New York; he travelled there by train over a period of years to look at the same place and paint it continuously. This reinforces for me the belief that a field can teach you how to paint and that great work can be made in marginal places.

I do occasional studio residencies away from the responsibilities of home and to reconsider my work from a distance, so as to return energised by a new thought or process. I have been awarded international and Irish residencies over the years including: Carpe Diem in Kochi, India; the European Leonardo Programme at Tartu Print and Paper Museum, Estonia; and Cill Rialaig and The Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Ireland. On a self-made residency to the US, I was introduced to water-based mono-printing with master printmaker, Tony Kirk, who collaborated with artists I admire, including Wolf Kahn and Kiki Smith.

The work which started at the residency in Kerala, India, led to two solo exhibitions: 'This is where I belong, this exact spot' at Farmleigh, Dublin, in 2017; and 'Outside the urban' in Axis Ballymun in 2018, which was a return to my childhood neighbourhood. In both of these exhibitions, I explored my adoption and mixed race Irish-Indian inheritance through a series of paintings in oils and watercolours. I have been working in watercolours for a few years with group shows in The Bankside Gallery London,

the Palace of Arts Krakow, OED Kochi, and the Mall Galleries, with recent shortlisting for the Sunday Times Watercolour Competition. In 2019 my work received the Annual Watercolour Society of Ireland President's award.

Watercolour encourages a greater freedom for me to go with the paint, to work to a scale outside myself and to work into a three-dimensional and moving space. Under lockdown I began swimming in the local Lough Ramor. The feeling I have in the uplift and uncertainty of the lake water, is the same feeling I have when I paint. There is a lightness and lack of control inherent in watercolour and these qualities inform the new temporary installation and underwater photography processes I am presently exploring. These new ways of working also seem more reflective of the lost time we are living in at the moment. I call this work 'The Epilimnion' – being inside and also marginal to the lake, to the landscape and to myself; being both an immersed participant and an observer at the same time. A self-portrait of sorts.

I do self-portraits at significant times in my life and some are held in public collections including the OPW Dublin, UNESCO Paris, and the Ruth Borchard Self Portrait Prize, London. These are studio observations on myself as a painter, mother and woman in contemporary Ireland. I feel through the lasting medium of oil, these will go forward into time. Recently I saw two exhibitions by women artists which included powerful self-portraits – Maria Lassnig's solo show, 'Ways of Being' at the Albertina in Vienna, Austria, and Helene Schjerfbeck in the Royal Academy in London. In 2022 I will have solo shows at Hambly & Hambly in Dunbar House, Enniskillen, and at Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai, India.

Michelle Boyle is an artist and occasional curator with an academic background in Cultural Anthropology and Landscape Archaeology.

michelleboyle-artist.com



Michelle Boyle, *View to the German's house*, 2021, oil on canvas, 1.5 x 2.2 m, on location Lough Ramor, Cavan 2021; image courtesy of the artist.

Hoarder of Images



Brian Kielt, *History Repeating*, 2021, oil and charcoal on canvas; photograph by and image courtesy of the artist.

ONE BUILDING IN Belfast defines two important moments in my practice. The first was in 2012, two years after finishing a painting degree at Belfast School of Art, when a group of artists set up LOFT in the top floor of a neglected building on North Street. It was a dusty shell of a space that, with time and dedication, was welcomed into the wider artistic community in Belfast. This was my foot in the door. Having a studio space in the city centre and hosting events meant that the work being made was being seen. The second moment was the day in 2016 when we were given three weeks' notice to leave the space. Gentrification is leaving its mark on the city and LOFT was just one of many casualties over the years.

At the time, it was devastating. Leaving the artistic community and studio friends behind and moving my studio back to South Derry, all felt like major steps backwards. With hindsight, moving my practice back home allowed me to have space and time to develop the work in a more cohesive way than what was happening previously in Belfast.

Since moving home, my way of working has not changed. First and foremost, I must confess, I am a hoarder of images. From newspapers to magazines to online articles, even family photographs gathering dust in the attic aren't safe. This has always been the case. From here, sketching happens and happens quickly at first. The bones of the drawings are scuffed out in pencil and then adjusted and amended at a slower pace with pen. Removing the graphite once finished leaves a permanent image that looks immediate and spontaneous but has actually been carefully considered.

These sketchbook studies are then cloned onto acetate which are projected onto what will be the painting surface and marked out with charcoal. At any one time, there are three translations of the one image. Each with their own quirks and flaws that can't be helped in the movement from pen to marker and then to charcoal. Different beasts.

At this stage, there can be multiple images from differing sources projected up onto the blank canvas – creating new narratives that

otherwise could not exist with the drawings separated. Drawing elements go hand in hand during the painting stage. Areas of oil paint are applied and, when needed, the charcoal line sits alongside. At times, they complement each other and fit seamlessly together. At others, they jar and that can be just what the work needs.

As I said, this way of working, of collecting imagery and building up the image from page to canvas, hasn't altered much. What has changed is time. I feel that moving home to the countryside has allowed the slightly slower pace of the surroundings to seep into my studio space. There are moments for taking a breath. Of stepping back and considering a line, looking at hues. Of allowing a layer to dry before rushing onto the next. Maybe this has happened due to a few more years under the belt and so was going to happen naturally anyway.

In the space of six months, I had the fortune of having two solo exhibitions. The first, titled 'Bardo: An Unknown Country', was presented in October 2019 at the Ards Art Centre in Newtownards. The second, 'Confessional', opened in the University of Atypical Gallery in Belfast one week before the first lockdown of the pandemic in March 2020. Having shows so close together proved a challenge but when COVID-19 struck and the world slowed down, the chaos of the previous months seemed a distant memory. Being afforded more time in the studio was a silver lining that wasn't expected. It allowed me to continue my practice, aiming to keep the work open so that the viewer's own experiences complete any fractured narratives that may arise.

Brian Kielt is a visual artist currently based in South Derry.

briankielt.com