

THE JOURNAL OF FINE ART, DESIGN, ARCHITECTURE, PHOTOGRAPHY, SCULPTURE, HERITAGE, DECORATIVE ARTS AND CRAFTS

IRISH ARTS

SPRING (MARCH - MAY 2021)

€10 (STGE9)

REVIEW



MAIGHREAD TOBIN

CIAN McLOUGHLIN
NEW WORKS

SKELLIG MICHAEL'S
GARDENS

BLAISE SMITH
STILL LIFES

CARLINGFORD
CASTLE

MIKE FITZHARRIS
INTERVIEW

BALLINGLEN
ART MUSEUM





Space to create

Residency programmes are the life blood of the Ballinglen Arts Foundation, with each participating artist donating an artwork to the museum, writes **Marie Bourke**



The small thriving village of Ballycastle is midway on the road between Killala and Belderrig on the north Mayo coast. It is a lesser-known corner of Ireland where the first settlers farmed the Céide Fields more than 5,000 years ago, leaving Stone Age field systems with megalithic tombs preserved beneath the bog. Robert Lloyd Praeger, the Irish naturalist, described it as ‘the very loneliest place in the country’, although he did add: ‘I find such a place inspiring.’¹ So too did two Americans from the east coast of the United States: ‘The founders of the Ballinglen Arts Foundation, Margo Dolan and her husband Peter Maxwell, comprise two gallery owners from Philadelphia with a background in art, design and museum education who, in 1984, established Dolan/Maxwell, specialising in modern and contemporary art.’²

Dolan and Maxwell first visited Ballycastle in 1982, falling in love with the people and the north Mayo landscape. In 1984, they bought a cottage and thereafter returned annually for long spells. In 1992, the couple set up the Ballinglen Arts Foundation to provide visual artists with a base and facilities to explore and create in the rural Mayo environment. They also wanted to contribute to the community in a way that would benefit the local economy.

The centre developed organically based on Maxwell’s understanding of the vernacular architecture of north Mayo. A courthouse was refurbished as a gallery for temporary exhibitions and, in 1996-97, the centre’s two-storey main buildings were renovated, comprising four first-floor design studios with natural light, running water and drawing porches. On the ground floor are print workshops, a curatorial space, an art library of some 6,000 volumes and administration offices. There is a common room at the heart of the centre where artists and their families eat, often joined by members of the local community.

Last year marked another milestone with the opening of the Ballinglen Art Museum. The museum and the Ballinglen foundation are on the main street of Ballycastle. The building’s elegant, sparse design is akin to a sophisticated New England aesthetic that reflects the founders’ sensibility, carefully interpreted by, among others, Ballina-based architect-engineer Stephen Maughan. Every element is functional with attention to detail, intelligent use of lighting and a low-key colour scheme.

The museum is a compact building on two floors. The first-floor gallery is a generous light-filled space spanning the



1 Ballinglen Art Museum interior gallery space

2 Ballinglen Art Museum exterior

3 CHRISTIE TAYLOR
BUNTARAHIR BAY
#2 CO MAYO 2018 oil
& graphite on board
34.2 x 38.9cm



width of the building and culminating in a mirrored glass conservatory, which has views of the sea, the landscape and the ruins of an ancient church. The light in this space allows each work to be seen at its best, with digital work viewed on a screen. An innovative glass insert in the floor enables a glimpse of the art below. Sliding doors divide the gallery in two, allowing the conservatory area, with its adjacent kitchen, to be used for discussion groups (Fig 1).

The new museum is important as the collection illustrates what has been achieved by artists on Ballinglen's residency programmes since the foundation's inception. It

THE BUILDING'S ELEGANT, SPARSE DESIGN IS AKIN TO A SOPHISTICATED NEW ENGLAND AESTHETIC THAT REFLECTS THE FOUNDERS' SENSIBILITY

was built over two years with support from the Town and Village Renewal Scheme, the LEADER Programme for Rural Development and fundraising by the foundation.

The core of the remarkable Ballinglen project is its fellowship programme – the artists' residency programmes have established a reputation for excellence, nourishing numerous artists over three decades. The year-round residency is extremely competitive and decisions about the residencies are made by the founding director and board. The programme is open to serious professional artists and younger artists of recognised ability, here and abroad. Four artists

can be accommodated at any one time between the foundation's three houses – two in a rent-a-cottage complex and one outside the village – and it rents two others.

Artist Una Sealy describes the residency: 'You disappear into the studio from early morning. Nobody disturbs you. After hours of intense work, you can't believe it's midnight. You resent anything that takes from precious time in the studio.'

Martin Gale found it a difficult enough environment for a landscape artist, describing it as 'a hard land', while others, such as Eddie Kennedy, see the landscape as a space within which things can happen, rather than an end in itself.³ American artist Randall Exon has been a frequent visitor since 1997, saying: 'There is something about that Ballycastle landscape – the presence of generation after generation, going back to ancient peoples, their histories all buried there. History is everywhere and it is deeply moving to me.'

A key feature of the residency programme is that it is free (returning artists pay 50% of the costs) but the artist is asked to leave a work for the collection. The artist is provided with a cottage, a purpose-built studio and access to the numerous facilities. All running costs are paid and the only cost left for the artist to cover is their food.

Another benefit of the programme is that the artists are invited to bring their families and companions, and most do. 'For every artist given a fellowship, the community receives a small football team of friends and family who stay in the local B&Bs, drink in the local pubs, buy from the local shops,



forging friendships with locals of all ages, from the artist's children to partners and friends,' says Pat Harris. Along with his artist partner, Linda Ruttelynck, and their children, he benefitted from several residencies, encouraging them to build a home and studios in the area.⁴

As most residencies run between three to six weeks, the artists like to bring their children and some attend the local primary school (the centre even keeps spare uniforms to help the children settle into school life). The project is funded by an annual grant from the Arts Council and Mayo Co Council, which covers the running and administration costs; income from workshops and donations form the balance.

Peter Maxwell passed away in 2016 but Margo Dolan

continues to work with the board and a team that includes Managing Director Úna Forde and Nuala Clarke, an artist and educator who helps to develop programmes at the centre. The foundation marked its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2017 with an exhibition at the Royal Hibernian Academy. That same year, Dolan was awarded the RHA gold medal.

'While north Mayo isn't for everyone,' says Dolan, 'its bleak loneliness is not a negative but an environment in which to think, let the mind expand, make work – a place for artists. In fact, its deep spirituality is inspiring in a powerful way for making conceptual, abstract or reality-based work.'

Artists' residencies are an essential part of the structure that sustains artists, providing them with uninterrupted space in which to work so that the making of artwork remains the priority. A residency can challenge the artist but, as Dolan has observed: 'Being forced to work hard, to go inside oneself, that's when the great work happens.'⁵

The Ballyglenn Art Museum's collection comprises more than 800 contemporary artworks. The portraits, landscapes, seascapes, still-life, animals and subject paintings in different styles and media, inspired by the local people and landscape, demonstrate different facets of life in north Mayo. The works have been created by more than 400 artists who have participated in the residencies – evenly dispersed between Irish, American and international artists. The permanent collection will continue to be displayed in a series of alternating group shows throughout the year, while loans from the collection will be available to Irish museums, international art organisations and universities.

The rich selection of works on display in the museum's inaugural exhibition have been created by some of the visiting Irish and international artists over the past three decades. The exhibition includes works by Christie Taylor (Fig 3), Stuart Shils (Fig 4), Ronald Rumford, Linda Carey, Jane Proctor (Fig 5), Ruth Fine, Bill Freeland, Barbara Rae, Ed Milano (Fig 6), Gwen Davidson, Jacobien de Rooij (Fig 7) and Mick O'Dea, who comments: 'The foundation has been responsible for opening up north Mayo to artists, resulting in an increasing amount of landscape-inspired works appearing at art exhibitions, including the RHA.'

The Ballyglenn artist residency programmes and the Ballyglenn Art Museum are significant sources of education, inspiration, community engagement and wellbeing for artists, the local community and visitors, just as they are a vital part of the cultural infrastructure and economy of the West of Ireland. ■

Marie Bourke is an art and cultural historian.

- 1 Robert Lloyd Praeger, *The Way that I Went*, Dublin 1937 pp206-07
- 2 John Mulcahy, 'Artists' residencies East and West', *Irish Arts Review* vol 32, 1, 2015 p18
- 3 Aidan Dunne, 'Points of Departure', *Irish Arts Review* vol 37, 3, 2020 pp69-71
- 4 Pat Harris, 'Ballyglenn, A Personal Account', *RHA Annual Exhibition Catalogue 2020* p42
- 5 The conversations with Margo Dolan and the artists took place in November-December 2020.

4 STUART SHILS
VIEW OF BALLYCASTLE FROM THE BOG ROAD 1994
oil on paper 46.7 x 50.9cm

5 JANE PROCTOR
UNTITLED 1999
watercolour, gouache & graphite
54.8 x 29.8cm

6 ED MILANO
LOOKING IN/LOOKING OUT BALLYGLEN LIBRARY 2017
oil on canvas 117 x 91cm

7 JACOBIE DE ROOIJ
Z.T. 2016
charcoal & pastel
drawing on paper
48 x 64cm