

THE IRISH TIMES

Mayo children shine a light on the wonder of the Wild Atlantic Way

New exhibition articulates how seascape is integral to local children's lives and identities

Mon, May 2, 2022, 01:00

Áine Ryan



Growth is made up of a series of illustrated light boxes evoking spring. Video screengrab: Angela O'Kelly of Wildatlanticimagesaok

It is all about art as the pupils of a small national school on Co Mayo's Wild Atlantic Way shine a light on how land and seascape is integral to their lives and identities. With a backdrop of the dramatic sea stack Dún Briste, at [Downpatrick Head](#), and the neolithic Céide Fields, inspiration and interpretation was assured during the seven-week artist residency for Cass McCarthy and [Francesca Scott](#), the collaborating teacher at Scoil Naomh Bríd, [Ballycastle](#).

The culmination of their work – which was mainly with fifth and sixth classes but included all 68 pupils – was launched in a darkened gallery at the [Ballinlen Arts Foundation](#) in the village on

Friday. The foundation is an internationally renowned initiative dedicated to the artistic reflection of “the environment, heritage, community and soul of this part of north Mayo”.

Entitled Growth, the children’s exhibition evokes the new light of spring through 70 illustrated lantern light boxes, painted and curated by them, and enhanced by an audio stream of their observations.

Speaking about the project, Francesca Scott explained that she and McCarthy completed a Teacher-Artist Partnership (TAP) course last summer and were lucky then to be chosen by Mayo Education Centre for a partnership for this project.

“It has given the children the opportunity to have a multitude of hands-on experiences with a variety of materials and techniques. We also explored personal growth through the identification of favourite things, places and memories, hopes and dreams for the future and more abstract representations through colour. It was wonderful to see their varied responses,” says Scott.

Sense of place

Meanwhile, artist Cass McCarthy says she was struck from the outset at the children’s strong sense of place.

“From early in the project a strong geographic sense of place was coming through in their artwork that was related to a robust sense of belonging and self-identity, grounded in the local land and seascape. In the first few weeks I remember Francesca turning towards me during one of the art sessions and saying: ‘The sea, the sea, is big in our lives.’”

McCarthy explains that the exploration of the theme of spring and its many symbols and metaphors was enhanced during the process by a visit to a landscape-based exhibition at the Ballinglen gallery, entitled The Way That We Went, as well as an introduction to the work of artists William Crozier, Cy Twombly, Vincent van Gogh and Keith Haring.

“Inspired by all these ideas, the young artists created drawings on translucent panels addressing a number of strands such as landscapes and identity – local, personal, social. Finally, with our guidance they curated their own display of panels which were then transformed into lanterns,” says the artist.

The children articulate themselves beautifully, talking about dreams of Mayo winning the Sam Maguire, and objects found in the bog in Belderrig

For Sean Walsh, the director of Ballina Arts Centre, “the project is a great example of how art can be used to help young people understand and articulate their own sense of place, which in turn feeds into their identity.”

Walsh, who officiated at the launch, said: “These are young people living on the very edge of Europe in a place where there has been civilisation for over 5,000 years, with the Céide Fields just out the road. This project gives them an opportunity to explore who they are, in the context of the surrounding bogs and cliffs jutting up from the Atlantic. And they articulate themselves beautifully, talking about dreams of Mayo winning the Sam Maguire, and objects found in the bog in Belderrig. It is always heartening and wonderful to hear young people given a platform to express themselves, and art is among the best of all platforms for that.”

The exhibition runs until Friday May 6 ballinglenartsfoundation.org