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The enduring magic of art in Mayo

Ballinglen Arts Foundation celebrates its 30th year and actress Michelle Pfeiffer was a recent student in the 2022 summer programme.



Ballinglen Arts Foundation and Museum Ballycastle Co Mayo

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The pandemic prevented American artist Randall Exon from visiting the remote village of Ballycastle on the northern Mayo coastline, for what would have been his 23rd year in a row. Winner of the 2004 Thomas Benedict Clarke Prize, an award running since 1883 for the best American figure composition at the National Academy of Design in New York, the painter, who has travelled extensively, says Mayo was “beyond any expectations” he had experienced before. He is referring to his residency fellowship at Ballinglen, the charity, arts foundation, gallery and museum that now celebrates its 30th year since its formation in 1992.

The brainchild and dream of husband and wife team Margo Dolan and the late Peter Maxwell, it was created to bring both established artists and younger emerging artists of recognised ability from all over the world to live and work in the wilds of North Mayo.

Funded by the Arts Council, Mayo County Council and Creative Ireland, the scheme sees on average of 40 artists take up residency each year from about 400 applications. The marked difference with Ballinglen compared to other artists programmes, is that along with warm, brightly lit studio spaces, artists are given a cottage where they can bring family and friends for the duration of their residency.

Currently in residence is American artist Roger Chavez, who arrived from Philadelphia with his wife and two children - who have in the past attended the local school while their father captures the vagaries of north Mayo's skies: "It's not just the landscapes, which are dramatic, but it's the people of Ballycastle, they go hand in hand with the art".

The foundation, which is a registered charity and does not sell work (instead it refers queries to artists' agents and representative galleries) also runs educational courses, with about 30 operating on an annual basis. On site and a super resource for reference is the Dolan Maxwell Library, from the founder's gallery space in New York, alongside a large selection of books donated by former President of Ireland, Mary Robinson.

A fortnight ago actress Michelle Pfeiffer shared her attendance at a Lineage Painting course run by artist Catherine Kehoe at Ballinglen on Instagram, along with a video of the locality which she describes as "perhaps the most beautiful place on earth".



The remote Mayo village perched on a blanket bog rolling down to the remarkable sea stack at Downpatrick Head has a population of about 300 people. At its peak each year, the foundation has about 30 people engaged in its day to day running, giving local employment and visitors taking art courses - normally twelve at a time - are housed locally.

In response to the successful residency programme, the foundation has built up a body of over 850 contemporary works - whereby visiting artists donate a piece of art. These are shown on an annual basis at specially curated shows in the Ballinglen Museum: "It was a goal for about a decade to have a proper exhibition and storage area" explains Una Forde, Managing Director of Ballinglen, "and it is a privilege to see how artists produce a body of work in response to a place I love and call home".

Currently running at the museum is Norman Ackroyd, *Painting with Acid*. Made over five decades, the body of 62 works show Ackroyd's relationship with the west coast of Ireland and include watercolours and his signature etchings. Running in tandem, are two short BBC films, in which the artist demonstrates how he works to capture his enigmatic west of Ireland scenes.



Familiar names such as Diana Copperwhite, Tom Climent, Comhghall Casey and Donald Teskey also form part of the impressive contemporary collection, as does work by Dublin born artist Nuala Clarke. After finishing in NCAD, Clarke headed for the lights of New York. But in 2007 after her first residency at Ballinglen, she began returning a few times a year and in the end decided to move to the north Mayo shores where she is now engaged as Learning Curator at the foundation. “The artist network here is amazing. I know more artists here than I did in New York, and there is a great quality to conversations. I think it’s because it’s a creative rather than commercial space that the artists in the collective are so open”.

Along with artist residencies and adult courses the foundation also runs about 30 educational courses for children, which are held in the new print studio. The Ballinglen Gallery, a further exhibition space currently has a solo exhibition, *Signifiers* by American printmaker and Ballinglen fellow Claudia Fieo whose work is held in public and private collections worldwide.

While its location on the Wild Atlantic Way has helped bring visitors to the village of Ballycastle, there is no doubt that the magic of Ballinglen Arts Foundation in this tiny Mayo village on the precipice of Europe will continue to attract and enthrall artists from around the world. ballinglenartsfoundation.org

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