

How modern art changed a Mayo town

A remote Mayo town is an unlikely venue for an international art organisation, but Ballinglen Arts Foundation has thrived in Ballycastle

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Ballinglen Arts Foundation: from one of Cora O'Brien's paintings of a local mart



Ballycastle is a most unlikely venue for an international art organisation, especially one that houses one of the largest contemporary art collections in Ireland. This remote, one-road Co Mayo town of 19th-century facades has been in gradual decline since the 1980s, and for centuries before that it survived principally on subsistence-level farming and fishing. It lies on the edge of an abandoned wilderness of Neolithic fields that lost most its inhabitants during the Famine, when a third of Mayo's population was wiped out.

A contemporary art institution should never have worked in such a location. But for the past 25 years [Ballinglen Arts Foundation](#) has thrived here, with a residency programme that has attracted prestigious international artists to work and stay in this remote rural idyll, as well as a series of specialist workshops for international artists interested in lifelong learning.

Ballinglen was envisioned by an American art-dealing couple, Margo Dolan and Peter Maxwell. Their quixotic idea was to boost local confidence and economic security by bringing international art practitioners to stay and work in the area. No economist could have dreamt up such a plan, but it appears to have worked: hundreds of painters, printmakers and sculptors have stayed here with their families and friends over the quarter-century. Not only have the local shops, bars, schools and community services benefited, but some artists have bought homes in the area, and many return frequently, as the landscape and people of north Mayo influence their work.

It began in the late 1980s. “The town was dying,” says Dolan, who had been holidaying locally with her husband for a decade. “People had no confidence; the place was negative and depressed. We wanted to help but had no independent money and no expertise in starting factories or whatever. All we knew was the art world. Peter always said that artists would love this place, but we had galleries in New York and Philadelphia at the time, and I told him that I needed one month of the year without artists.”

Everything changed for them in 1990, when the economic crash hit their business hard. “We lost our shirts. We had to close the gallery in New York and become private dealers in Philadelphia, but even then there wasn’t enough business, so I decided we would just go to Ireland, as at the time we could live here for virtually nothing – which was all we had.

“We realised that we had to do something to help Ballycastle. Originally, we were going to just create a printmaking workshop, but we gradually developed the idea of providing studios and living accommodation too. We invited five

different artists to come for a month, and it turned out to be an unqualified success. So we kept going, and it grew.“

Funding

Arts Council

“Some people arrive and dive right in, picking up on the work they were doing, but they usually ditch that soon after. And then they go out and look.”

As each artist is given a three-bedroom house and encouraged to invite family and friends to stay, the impact on Ballycastle has been profound. Last year 4,300 people stayed a night in the area, and the children of some artists were enrolled at the local school. On any night of the year there'll be a selection of professional artists in the pubs, and in winter time, especially, their economic input is vital to local businesses.

Mary Munnely was able to open her Cottage Kitchen Cafe in 1997, assured that the artists' families would provide a core customer base year round. Polke's bar and grocery store became a focal point for the artists, with Brian Polke, until he retired, sourcing everything from rabbit glue to ochre pigment and having it delivered from Ballina for them that evening. In return Polke amassed an unrivalled art collection, gifted to him by artists for whom he had done favours over the years.

“What's really amazing is the affinity the artists have with local farmers,” says Úna Forde, a Ballycastle woman who is managing director at Ballinglen. “It's the same attitude of keen observation and recording. For both their work entails constant, repetitive care and awareness. They recognise this in each other. Artists often say that their encounters with farmers are one of the inspiring things about their stay here.”

For locals, seeing their area reproduced so often by artists from all over the world has increased their confidence in it and reminded them of its beauty. “It's such a small community that if a field or a farm is featured in a work we'll immediately recognise it,” says Forde, “and news will get back to the owner, who'll come in to see it. The 550 artworks in our collection represent a unique artistic testimony to a single

location as seen through the eyes of hundreds of artists over decades.”

Last year Cora O’Brien held an exhibition based on her paintings of marts in Ballinrobe, Ballina and Balla – and farmers who had never before set foot in a gallery flocked to see the work.

“Cora purposefully made the figures unrecognisable, but still the farmers identified each other by their stance and demeanour. At the launch we had a packed crowd, with as many Mayo farmers as there were stalwarts of the Dublin art world.”

Maxwell, Dolan’s partner, died in March, and Ballinglen is currently in a period of transition, with the Arts Council having cut its support in recent years. To ensure the foundation’s future viability they began to offer workshops on specific aspects of printmaking, watercolours, art-book making and oil painting directed at artists who wish to expand or hone their skills. They also offer a two-week masterclass each year.

As a way of ensuring that they remain engaged with the local community they run an education programme in which schools are invited to spend a day in Ballinglen for free. The students get to visit the artists in their studios, with a private tour of whatever exhibition is on in the gallery and a full printmaking workshop, where every child gets to design and print their own artwork on rag paper.

Looking back over a quarter-century, Dolan is proud of what has been achieved. “It’s exactly what we knew it could be 25 years ago, but it was hard won,” she says. “The purest and simplest vision that Peter and I had was that Ballinglen was going to support the village, and help keep it viable, while also helping artists develop their work. That was the core. It was always focused equally on supporting the community as much as the artist. Every time I see an artist referring to Ballinglen in an exhibition catalogue I know it has all been worthwhile.”