

weekendvisualarts



Rosie's Island People

TAKE a journey to the island of Inish Lacken at Belfast's Linenhall Library and experience a wide and varied range of artists responses to a bygone era and life in rural western Ireland.

Belfast artist Rosie McGurran's affection for the work of Gerard Dillon and the Roundstone area of Connemara grew from her reading James McIntyre's book *Three Men On An Island*. It told the story of his life on Inish Lacken from the 1950s with George Campbell at the home of Gerard Dillon.

"I had been visiting Roundstone for a long time. It was really special artistically, but the first time I really seen Inish Lacken I had a strong feeling and desire to put artists back on the island," said McGurran.

What developed was the Inish Lacken Project in memory of infamous Belfast artist Gerard Dillon. Set up by McGurran and her friend and fellow Roundstone resident Sheena Keane from Galway, the project began in 2001 and was expanded this year.

In May a group of 10 invited artists spent two-and-a-half weeks in the village of Roundstone and on the island of Inish Lacken in Co Galway. The work they produced in response to their time on the island is currently being exhibited in Belfast's Linenhall Library.

Many of Ireland's leading artists were involved in the project alongside McGurran and Keane, including Susan McKeever (Belfast), Marie-Claire Cassidy (Belfast), Pearl Kinnear (Glasgow), Elaine Callan (Belfast), Lol Hardiman (Galway), Brian Brennan (Galway), Amanda Montgomery (Belfast), Cyril O'Flaherty (Aran Islands) and Mick O'Dea (Dublin).

"The work made was a response to the awesome beauty of Connemara and the sadness of the abandoned island,"

she said.

"It's the same island that Gerard Dillon lived on. It hasn't changed any, except there is no roads on it now. There is no roads, no phones and no electricity.

"There is absolutely none of our world out there, so I thought it would be an amazing place for artists to go and be completely away from their normal circumstances and be transported to a different time and era."

There are already plans underway to further expand the Inish Lacken Project next year to incorporate other art forms, including music and to work with the local schools to make it a truly multi-faceted community project.

Other artists will be invited to rejoin the current Inish Lacken converts. "The thing with this project is that once you are in it, you don't really leave it," smiles McGurran.

"Also, it's interesting to see how the artists have developed and how Inish Lacken has changed their work."

Every opportunity she has McGurran goes to the island that Dillon once lived on. Though the weather and access to boats at this time of the year is limiting, she can't wait for the spring time to arrive.

"I see a lot of honesty in his work and really admire his colouration. He was never afraid to attempt any subject," said McGurran reflecting on the work of Dillon.

"I found the way he painted landscape very interesting as well. He did-

Irish artist
Rosie McGurran
chats about
about the
Island People
exhibition of
work in
memory of the
late great
artist Gerard
Dillon.
Jenny Lee
writes...

n't go for the normal landscape, he tried to do something a bit different."

McGurran mainly paints figuratively, but landscape paintings are creeping into her work more and more.

"You can't help be influenced by the colour, the shape and the light around there. At all times of the year it is so beautiful. Even if its a misty, damp day and you can't see anything it is still a really special place."

Rosie graduated from the University of Ulster in 1992 and has been working as an artist ever since, including a time working in community arts as a mural painter, having left her mark during previous West Belfast Festival's."

McGurran was awarded the prestigious Arts Council Fellowship to the British School in Rome in 1997 which she says was "the turning point from being an artist who worked in community arts to painting full-time. I've been painting full-time ever since.

"At that time I was very much finding my feet, but in working with people who were far more experienced than me I learnt an awful lot about professionalism."

She made the move to Roundstone in September 2000 when a three-week stay on an art residential turned into a permanent move.

McGurran now has her own house, studio and gallery within the village and is extremely happy with her lifestyle there.

This love for Roundstone is reflected in her paintings which she explains

capture how lucky she was to live there. "There have been so many positive things happening. It's been a completely positive experience," she said.

"You become so close to the elements and tied up with that. It's a really different life."

The Island People exhibition was first shown during the three-day in May festival in Roundstone after the residential, which also there was also poetry readings, music, workshops, island walks and landscape sculptures. So much work was produced that three exhibition spaces were used to display the work.

"The artists got a lot of feedback from local people and genuinely enjoyed it. It was a great compliment when the Linenhall Library asked to host the exhibition.

"It was good to be reunited with all the artists, it was like literally winding the clock back six months. The banter was still there."

The final exhibition also reunited the three original men on the island, Dillon, Campbell and McIntyre, with a painting of Dillon's original cottage being finished especially for the exhibition by McIntyre, the only surviving member of the trio who is very supportive of the project.

"The link between Belfast artists and Connemara, especially Roundstone, is long standing and we hope to continue to foster this visual tradition and to provide a platform for artists to make work in this beautiful place. We are delighted to have the opportunity to bring Island People to Belfast.

"Gerard Dillon reflected the magic and joy not only of the landscape of Connemara but also of the people he knew and the life he loved, it is fitting to remember him in a spirit of creativity and fun and to bring a piece of Inish Laken to his and my home town of Belfast," concluded McGurran.