

'New Work' for Rosie McGurran

By Joanne Fleming

THE Connemara landscape has played a pivotal role in the career of Belfast-born artist Rosie McGurran. Her move from the Ormeau Road to the Galway village of Roundstone in 2000 inspired richly-coloured portrayals of a beautiful, yet isolated shoreline, and the opening of her own successful gallery. Back home for her latest exhibition, 'New Work', at the Cavehill Gallery, this is Rosie's first exhibition to focus solely on scenes from Connemara. Since graduating in Fine Art from the University of Ulster in 1992, Rosie has made major inroads into becoming one of Ireland's most important artists. The recipient of many awards and bursaries, including The Victor Treacy Award, The Mills Selig Award, and The Daler Rowney painting prize, she has exhibited across Ireland and Europe, most recently in Glasgow's Provanhall house, and the United States' Indiana University.



What is different about 'New Work'?

It's all based on Connemara landscapes. We had two months of unbroken sunshine at the time and a lot of colours in the paintings reflect this. Some are more extreme, though, very moody and strangely lit. A few years ago my work was mostly figurative, but work for this exhibition is also narrative, it tells a story. One is simply called 'Dunne's Bag'. I was out sketching the road into Clifton near Roundstone, and an old man, who had been out shopping rode past me with his Dunne's Bag – little does he know that he made it into the exhibition.

'New Work' seems to have left behind the apron-clad, pig-tailed girl who featured so strongly in the landscape of your other paintings. Who did she represent for you?

My earlier work had a very strong autobiographical narrative. It was largely about what was going on with me at the time. Now it's more from without than within. I am growing up more and it's all about taking responsibility - I'm catching myself on!

How long are you planning to stay in Roundstone?

I couldn't really say at this stage. I originally came down for a week and I'm still here five and a half years later!

What impact has the move to Galway had on your development as an artist?

It's moved me onto a different level as an artist. It's a lot to do with the lifestyle and the daily access to beautiful surroundings. Before, I was floating along, but the move gave me a strategy and the confidence to do something with my work.

What has been the most defining moment in your career so far?

The time I spent in Rome back in 1997 was an amazing experience. I had been awarded the Arts Council of Northern Ireland Fellowship to the British School out there. Also, looking back on it, the exhibitions at the Temple Bar Gallery in 1999 and the Old Museum Arts Centre in 2000.

You have won many awards over the years. Which one means the most to you?

The Victor Treacy Award back in 1997. I was definitely the outsider so it was a nice surprise. Also, I was thrilled to be elected as an Associate member of the Royal Ulster Academy in 2002. It was a really huge honour.

What are you working on at the moment?

My most recent commission is from the Arts Council of Ireland. I'm working on a book with the Galway writer Ursula Rani Sarma. It's a tribute to the nearby island of Inishlacken.

You recently worked on another tribute to the now uninhabited Inishlacken Island. What form did that take?

I'm so proud of what we have achieved and what we have put together so far. 'Beloved' is a 20ft by 8ft mural, a depiction of the entire landscape of Inishlacken. It's a tribute to the island and the impact it had on me and Belfast artist Gerard Dillon, though there are 50 years separating us. I was invited to show it in the University of Galway and the University decided to buy it, their biggest ever spend on art.

How important is it for you to participate in educational projects?

They matter a great deal. I was a community artist throughout the 1990s all over Belfast, and an artist in residence at the North and West Belfast Trust. I am still involved in adult education and do a lot of teaching in Connemara.



Where is the most unusual place you have travelled to as an artist?

Reykjavik was a pretty interesting experience - very different. They have a very strong sense of themselves and their traditions. There is a real sense of 'Icelandishness' in their work.

Where are you off to next?

I'll be working in my gallery in Roundstone over the summer season and then on the Greek island of Skopelos to work at their Centre of Arts. I also have a residency to Bundannon in New South Wales, Australia during October.

Do you have advice for any struggling young artists out there?

It's a tough profession, but every profession is tough nowadays. It has to mean everything to you. During any economic crisis the first people to suffer are the artists, though in many ways it is a great environment now for artists in Ireland. It can be difficult to get your name about at the start of your career but thankfully I have been able to keep myself in work. Running the gallery here in Roundstone can be hard work and there is such a small window of opportunity in the summer - 90 per cent of people walk in off the streets and don't know a thing about you. I don't compromise my style, though. I have just been lucky that people happen to like it.

For more information on Rosie's work contact the Northern Star Gallery & Studio, Roundstone, Co. Galway. Tel: 00 353 95 35076

