

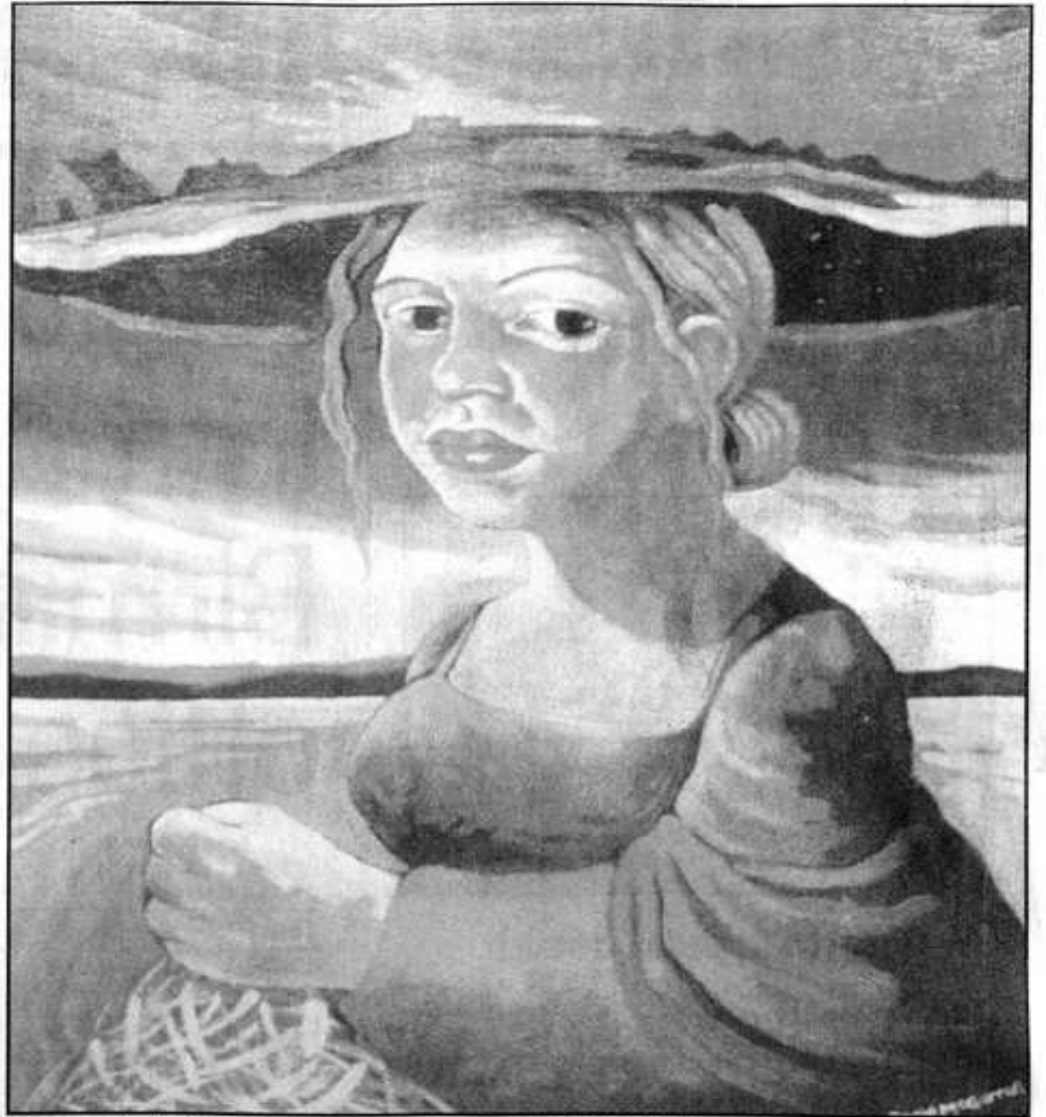


Muralist Rosie McGurran runs the Northern Star Gallery in Roundstone PHOTOS RCS DRINKWATER

Muralist Rosie McGurran and other artists in the Atlantic Art Co-operative are producing work inspired by their Connemara surroundings



The Atlantic Artists Co-operative: clockwise from left, Bernie Dignam, Margaret Irwin, Kate Minnock, Alannah Robins and Eithne Griffin. Right, Inish Lacken on the Head (after Gerald Dillon) by Rosie McGurran



Big art from a small island

The only thing to be said for dining out *toute seule* is that you get to eavesdrop. In the Bang Cafe recently I overheard a young blade utter the following gem: "My bedroom measures 2,000 square feet. Finding art for that kind of space is a helluva problem."

I have a suggestion. He should commission a muralist, and I have a particular artist in mind.

A native of Belfast, Rosie McGurran grew up well aware of the Irish mural tradition. After graduating from the University of Ulster in 1992 she was commissioned to paint a series of non-political murals for a community project, and is one of the few artists whose murals have adorned both the Shankill and Falls Roads.

In 1997 she was awarded the prestigious Arts Council Fellowship to the British School in Rome and has been painting full-time ever since.

In 2000 a three-week stay at an art residential course in Connemara turned into a permanent move, and this year she opened the Northern Star Gallery in Roundstone, where she shows her work and that of other contemporary artists.

McGurran is best known for her paintings of women, including a number of surrealist self-portraits. One critic was spot on when he described these as being depictions of "a well rounded Celtic Venus mermaid rising unusually fully clothed from the Atlantic's nets".

McGurran sees them as "semi-autobiographical stories – stories are what interest me".

An elected associate of the Royal Ulster Academy, McGurran is the recipient of a number of awards, includ-



Fine arts By Ros Drinkwater

ing the Mills Selig Award and the Victor Treacy Award. Since the move to Connemara she is drawn more and more to landscapes, in particular Inish Lacken, the island off Roundstone where Gerald Dillon lived with his ginger cat in the early 1950s.

"It was reading Three Men on an Island, James McIntyre's account of his life there with George Campbell and Dillon, that first inspired me to visit the island," she said.

In 2003 she completed a series of paintings entitled *Inish Lacken on the Head*, a personal homage to Dillon.

Inish Lacken has been uninhabited since the 1970s, when the powers that be declined to provide electricity, but it continues to work its magic on artists and will be the subject of McGurran's next major project, an exhibition entitled *Owning the Island*.

To be held at the Atlantic Art Gallery in Clifden, it will be not merely an exhibition, but an ongoing event.

The huge windows of the gallery will be painted white leaving peepholes where passers-by can observe the work in hand.

The work will be a mural covering a wall 10 feet high by 25 feet long. McGurran will start it from scratch on opening day and complete it over two weeks.

McGurran feels she does her best work in the studio. "That's because there's an element of imagination that

goes into the work – the magic is between me and the canvas," she said.

Atlantic Art is very much a happening place, a combined gallery and studio run by the Atlantic Artists Co-operative. It began in 2002, when Margaret Irwin, Alannah Robins and four other artists rented the foyer of a derelict hotel for an exhibition at Clifden Community Arts Week.

"It seemed a pity to let it all fall apart," said Irwin, "and so the co-operative was born."

Today it is housed in spacious premises across from what was once Clifden railway station. It showcases the work of a group of like-minded artists trained in a variety of disciplines and working in very different mediums.

There are powerful black-and-white etchings by Irwin, who trained at the studio of Andre L'Hôte in Paris and lectured at Dun Laoghaire School of Art and at the National College of Art and De-

sign before settling in Connemara, where she has a modern print studio with an etching press.

"I enjoy the medium of etching for its tactile qualities, its chiaroscuro possibilities and the surprises of the process," she said.

In dramatic contrast are paintings by Kate Minnock, who graduated from NCAD last year. These are large-scale ethereal studies of seaweed and lichens given an added dimension by Minnock's method of working on partly primed canvas so that the raw canvas reacts with the paint to give depth.

Eithne Griffin from Bray goes for what she describes as juxta-patternism, with depictions of tribal symbols inspired by time spent in Southern Africa, executed with acrylic on bamboo paper.

Dubliner Bernie Dignam trained as a furniture designer and came west to supply design services to the Furniture Technology Centre.

For the past several years her preferred medium has been textiles. "My father was an upholsterer, and so there were always textiles around the house," she said.

Today she specialises in delicate works utilising techniques such as batik on chiffon and felting with merino wool, mixed fibres and silk.

Alannah Robins is represented by abstract paintings and sculptures. Stonecarving was her first love, but she now finds herself drawn to painting – "partly because of the birth of my daughter – I found I had to work quicker, so carving had to go on the back burner – and partly in response to the Connemara landscape," she said.

The final member of the co-operative is German printmaker Sabine Springer, whose delicate depictions of animals betray her training as a zoologist.

The project has been a success, to the degree that last April Siobhán Ní Ghallchoir was hired as gallery administrator to handle publicity, marketing and fundraising.

"I'm here because of the quality of the work," she said. "These are artists with something to say, artists who make people think – and that, after all, is the function of art."

In a hectic market, artists' co-operatives make sense. Kate Minnock said: "They provide not only studio and showcase space, but a support system for the artist."

The other side of the coin is that with prices ranging from €150 to €1,500, the novice collector can get in on the ground with works by artists who might well be major names in the future.

Rosie McGurran can be observed painting *Owning the Island* at Atlantic Art from September 14.

Details from 095-22871, www.atlantic-art.com



'owning the island'