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Art and archaeology: Reflections of an Artist/Curator

I come to this session wearing two hats – that of an artist whose work has been influenced by archaeology and the artefacts of Ireland and Europe as well as a director/curator of a sculpture park located in Lough Boora, Co. Offaly. My responses will be based on my own experience as an artist/practitioner and the experiences gained from working with both Irish and international artists who have created new artworks that respond to the rich environmental, archaeological and industrial history of Lough Boora in Co. Offaly. Hopefully I will be able to shed some light on artistic practice and the processes in which artists develop their concepts.

Artistic practice, like archaeology and the sciences, is based on research as well as life experiences and our interactions with our environment. My personal view as an artist is that the essence of art practice is the process by which the self is made visible - the self, being a complex of multi-dimensional snapshot of both past and present generations of human existence. It is through the physical, spiritual and intellectual experience of human existence that the world is comprehended and expressed.

Over the past 25 years, my artwork has explored the subtleties of ritual and imagination.¹ It is influenced by a childhood that was divided between the old world and the new world, by written and oral research, as well as man made interventions in the landscape. In archaeological terms, I may be classified as a hunter-gatherer. I hunt, gather and process finds through drawings and maquettes that form the visual vocabulary that I use in my studio. I take from both worlds and create work that is timeless and responsive to the human spirit.

The combination of textured surfaces of flowing lines that has resonance with our past and the strong austere forms of modern architecture speak to me (see Figures 1-3). My forms are stripped down to the bare essence of what responds to my aesthetic, which has been both simulated consciously through observation and trial and error as well as sub-consciously in an instinctual way. I create in the three dimensions, and although the scale of the work I am presenting could be classified as artifacts, I see them in the landscape as easily as I see them in a museum display case.

I am an object maker. The ritual of creating in my workshop is no different to that of an artist creating in the bronze-age. We explore the tactile qualities of the material as well as the forms that speak to us. We are inspired, challenged and influenced by the past as well as our experiences and interactions with the world around us. I am continually taking note of the relationship between the man-made and the natural. I observe how forms on

our landscape interact with each other; how light changes this relationship and human interaction creates yet another dimension to artwork.



Figure 1. *Vessel*, sterling silver and gold, (2004) by Kevin O'Dwyer.



Figure 2. *Party Teapot*, sterling silver and Kilkenny limestone (2005) by Kevin O'Dwyer.



Figure 3. *60 Degrees* (2002) by Kevin O'Dwyer. Sculpture in the Parklands, Lough Boora, Co. Offaly.

As director and curator of Sculpture in the Parklands I have been an observer of artistic practice as opposed to directly involved in it.² Lough Boora Parklands is a large unencumbered landscape that has a history that dates back to Mesolithic man with a rich monastic history from the 6th century and a landscape that has been used for the industrial harvesting of peat from the 1940s until the 1990s (see Figures 4-5).³

The sculpture park is located in a cutaway bog that is a 'brown field' site that has been brought back to life over the past 10 years through the introduction of lakes and wetland habitats. The sculpture project was initiated in 2001, and the first artworks were installed during the International Sculpture Symposium in 2002 when six Irish and international artists came on site to create eight large-scale site specific sculptures. The success of the symposium led to the formation of Sculpture in the Parklands, a fifty-acre sculpture park, which continues to invite artists to create significant site-specific works of art during the residency programme.



Figure 4. Lough Boora Parklands, Co. Offaly.



Figure 5. Mesolithic site, Lough Boora Parklands, Co. Offaly.

Besides permanent and time-based work, the project has a commitment to commissioning video artists, composers, writers and performance artists to interpret and document this unique landscape, archaeology and industrial history. Invited artists visit the site 6-12 months in advance of their residency for research purposes. They return to the studios to continue to research and develop the concept for the sculpture park. The artists then work on site for three weeks to create permanent or temporary work.

I have selected some artistic responses that are interesting studies on how artists respond to this landscape and heritage and provide future opportunities for collaborative projects between archaeological and artistic practice.



Figure 6. *Boora Pyramid* (2002) by Eileen MacDonagh. Sculpture in the Parklands, Lough Boora, Co. Offaly.

Eileen MacDonagh's work, which is made from the glacial stone of 10,000 years ago was unearthed during the reclamation process (Figure 6). During this reclamation process, the landscape is actually deep ploughed and glacial stone is brought up from over 10,000 years ago. Eileen wanted to use this stone in her sculpture and created a large pyramid that reflects the timeframe when Mesolithic man was found on this site over 10,000 years ago.

Jorn Rennau a Danish sculptor came over in 2002 to work on a special project, and his piece is entitled *Boora Triangle* (Figure 7). This is a piece that is made of the bog oak, ewe and pine, that has been carbon dated to over 4,000 years ago when the country was covered in forests. He was influenced by the monastic sites around the area including Clonmacnoise and St Manchan's Cell in Lemanaghan. He created a place for contemplation as per the earlier sites.



Figure 7. *Lough Boora Triangle* (2002) by Jorn Rennau. Sculpture in the Parklands, Lough Boora, Co. Offaly.

Marianne Jorgensen work is influenced by the Clonmacnoise grave slabs and is contemporary message in reaction to the invasion of Iraq (Figure 8). The words that surround the actual grave slab cross installation -are 'Love', 'War', 'Hate' and 'Peace'.

Caroline Madden was influenced by the early kingship of Ireland the cyclical nature of land and mankind and their interaction with it. Her piece is entitled *Cycles* (Figure 9).



Figure 8. *Secret Garden* (2005) by Marianne Jorgensen. Sculpture in the Parklands, Lough Boora, Co. Offaly.



Figure 9. *Cycles* (2006) by Caroline Madden. Sculpture in the Parklands, Lough Boora, Co. Offaly.



Figure 10. *Bog Track* (2005) by Johan Sietzema. Sculpture in the Parklands, Lough Boora, Co. Offaly.

Johan Sietzema, a Dutch artist, was taken by the large bogwood finds – the tree trunks that were found underneath the peat (Figure 10). His piece relates to the great forests of Ireland, which were there over 4,000 years ago. The trees come out of the ground, reaching the level of the landscape before the industrial harvesting of the peat complex. They stand in the landscape like Neolithic standing stones that were placed in the landscape thousands of years ago.

Mike Bulfin's work is more about the industrial heritage of the landscape (Figure 11). He has childhood memories of watching the trains go by with the peat that was brought to the power stations during the electrification of Ireland in the early 1950s. His piece *Sky-train* is made of parts of trains that were found and memories of his time as a child in the Boora area.



Figure 11. *Sky-train* (2002) by Mike Bulfin. Sculpture in the Parklands, Lough Boora, Co. Offaly.



Figure 12. *Boora Convergence* (2006) by Dave Kinane. Sculpture in the Parklands, Lough Boora, Co. Offaly.

Dave Kinane's *Boora Convergence* is more a reaction to the loss of the wonderful iconic cooling towers that were found in the landscape (Figure 12). The Ferbane cooling towers were blown up a number of years ago, and his piece is a celebration of the memory of this great industrial complex that no longer exists.

In June 2008, Sculpture in the Parklands invited Patrick Dougherty to create a large-scale environmental piece. Patrick Dougherty, world-renowned environmental artist, is well known for his views on sustainable materials and he created a large walk-through sculpture out of 18 tonnes of willow.

Over the coming years we will further explore the relationship between archaeological and artistic practice as part of an EU cultural project entitled Land Art Transformation. This is a collaboration between Sculpture in the Parklands and UCD School of Archaeology. Exploring the themes of landscape transformation, human agency and environmental and ecological sustainability, which will provide an opportunity for land art interventions within the rich and diverse cultural landscape of the midlands of Ireland. Allowing for academic and artistic investment in local communities in Offaly through the provision of public lectures, research and residencies. Our first artist in residence for 2009 will be Alfio Bonanno, and he will respond to this rich Mesolithic site that is found on the Lough Boora Parklands.

NOTES

¹ For more information on Kevin O'Dwyer's artwork and design, see:

<http://www.millennium2000silver.com/>

² For more information on Sculpture in the Parklands, see:

<http://www.sculptureintheparklands.com>

³ For more information on the Lough Boora Parklands, see:

<http://www.loughbooraparklands.com/>