

## Art: What Lies Beneath

# 'We have ignored the inner city's problems'

Inspired by her family background in politics, Yvonne McGuinness' work explores belonging. She tells Niall MacMonagle why she thinks Ireland is a classist society



Citizen's assembly - McGuinness's 'Schoolyard' film installation. Picture by Ros Kavanagh

The Kilkenny McGuinnesses go back generations. Yvonne McGuinness's grandfather was mayor of Kilkenny a number of times, her uncle is a TD - "elected time and time again", who "stands up for the voiceless, the dispossessed, a good man, [but] too outspoken to become a minister".

As a child, visiting her grandparents, who ran a shop on O'Loughlin Road, "you could feel the engagement of the community. I feel it started with that shop, its long wooden counter providing a service to people." A credit book meant "people could get tick" and for McGuinness, "perhaps that's where political engagement grew from".

She remembers "talk of Fian-na Fáil, Haughey, a sort of god in those times, and religion, the sacred heart light, photos of my grandfather as Lord Mayor and Haughey. All of that now feels slightly corrupt but it was the time. We were in a hole as a country in the 1970s and 1980s and run by the Catholic Church.

"We'd been ravaged by the coloniser, were finding our way to become ourselves. Perhaps we are still acting like tenants in our own country? Multiculturalism is a real test for us and I'm interested in that."

Her grandparents, "at the centre of the community", led to McGuinness's art practice today, including her new show *Rehearsals* at The Butler Gallery. "I usually work from the ground up. I go into communities, meeting people, chatting, going to schools, understanding the context. I want to understand how things work or don't, how people are, how they belong or don't."

McGuinness is interested in "change and how we cope with that, in situations that are arising. I don't think our politics reflect

that change, it's stuck in something old, white, male, and does not represent the society that exists now." She thinks the government "is full of politicians who want to stay in power so they don't rock the boat".

McGuinness is not interested "in preserving the status quo, especially if it's only working for the few and not the many".

She doesn't see "the dissatisfied people, mostly all young men activated by the far right", who recently rioted in Dublin as racist. "I think they're disenfranchised. We've ignored the problems of the inner city, ghettoised people for years, ignored the heroin and crack problem. We are a classist society, we've used the word kn\*\*\*er to describe people of a lower class and where does that word come from? It was originally used for Travellers."

**The multimedia Rehearsals** exhibition features film, installation, soundscape.

McGuinness's own childhood was creative and her father was "creative and a businessman, reading, gardening, antiques, he was searching. My mother was creative in gardening, cooking and she was open."

"Curious, questioning, a bit of a dreamer," the future artist knitted, made hutches for her rabbits, was brought to the theatre "so maybe my first experience of art would have been through performance. Sean O'Casey plays at the Abbey, and I suppose the creativity was in how I thought". And "our parents never got involved in our decisions, they trusted us".

At secondary school she loved art and creative writing but didn't do well in Leaving Cert art. "I walked out of the art history exam after half an hour. Exams were not my thing. I always did poorly in comparison to the effort I put in." She found out years later during her MA that she was

"severely dyslexic so it made sense then".

At Crawford, "a beautiful place to go to college", she "grew up" [and soon met future husband Cillian Murphy]. Cork "an exciting and creative place to be, was small so it felt like a community. It was good to leave Dublin". There was "an excellent dance music scene, Sir Henry's, loads of new bands and clubs, it's where I really got into music."

McGuinness remembers making Joseph Cornell inspired boxes, printing images on perspex. She studied printmaking, but never made editionable prints, always one-offs, and when she organised the diploma show in a city-centre multi-storey car park. "I saw then that art for me should not be confined to galleries, that I wanted it to be in the public sphere".

Her degree show was an installation with TVs in trolleys with films of baggage reclaim belts, printed books and T-shirts, a comment on consumerism. Her first exhibition was "a text work on the baggage reclaim belt of Cork airport".

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After Crawford, she went to the Royal College of Art, London, but "didn't do well. The facilities there were amazing, you had technicians available just to assist you, the funding was great - but I just got lost."

She made prints but was told "these are not you" and "finding out who was me took the rest of the MA and a lot of time in the college bar". For her, the best part of the MA was the creative writing classes with poet Sue Hubbard. She also used film and video in her work and still likes the collaborative nature of it.

"I don't think I'm a solitary artist, I'm a social one."

*Fabric*, also included in the Butler Gallery exhibition, "has always been there on the margins of my practice. I had a sewing machine very young but it's come more and more to the fore and often when I start a new project I go out and buy fabric that feels right for it."

For the film *Schoolyard*, she worked for 10 weeks with children in the same school and the same building her father attended in the 1950s. "I had them misbehaving a lot - the poor teacher - standing on tables, upending the classroom, speaking out of turn, building a fake fire, protests outside. There was a lot of play.

"One girl said 'You just come here and create chaos and leave' but the chaos enables moments of pure expression."

Another film, *Priory*, in collaboration with Equinox - a theatre ensemble whose members are neurodiverse or have physical needs - has "multiple things going on, in different time frames" and "surprising connections occur". Her first meeting with Equinox was "joyous. Cindy Cumming and Janice De Bróithe who work with the members are incredible. I left feeling thank f\*\*k we've moved on as a country and people are allowed to be themselves."

In the accompanying soundscape by Nina Hynes, McGuinness wanted a meditative and soothing piece but with a hint of peril and panic.

"My note to my brother-in-law Pádraig Murphy, who worked on the piano element, was 'Think what you might play when the ship is sinking.'"

A third powerful film, *What's left us then*, focusing on different structures, ruin, restoration, a stone quarry, an abandoned hotel, and McGuinness's newly-built house, was made to reflect that: "This is what we have, we can't ignore it but how can we make it better?"

For her the film is about "the bucolic meets the brutalist, how we are flawed but there's hope and it also has an auto-fiction element to it, a lot of my work does. I love our country, the land holds so much and I like putting my voice to it and some of my story, making myself implicated, and not a bystander."

**Fra Angelico murals and Clio** Barnard's films influenced *Rehearsal*. She reads a lot, is re-reading Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, admires Flannery O'Connor and Kevin Barry for their social realism, loves Yorgos Lanthimos films (*Dogtooth* is one of my favourite films"), and Agnes Varda and Herzog ("I particularly love their use of voiceover"). Music?

"William Basinski, endlessly. Lankum and Jon Hopkins."

Ever passionate, ever-challenging herself, ever involved and inclusive, McGuinness looks ever deeply. Her next project, *The Unit for Radical Belonging*, is a performance intervention and film work set in Tyrrelstown, Dublin 15, one of the most multicultural places in Ireland.

'Rehearsals' is at The Butler Gallery until January 14. [butlergallery.ie](http://butlergallery.ie)