

# MidlandsArts andCultureMagazine

A REVIEW OF THE ARTS IN LAOIS, LONGFORD, OFFALY AND WESTMEATH **WINTER** 2018

VISUAL ARTS  
MUSIC, DANCE  
THEATRE, FILM  
THE WRITTEN WORD

ISSUE  
**30**



**FREE**



# MidlandsArts andCultureMagazine

## A Word from the Editor



**Two farmers, a librarian and a musician are among those featured in this issue who have brought out books recently. Despite all the hand wringing about the future of books and book stores, our appetite for reading is still healthy, whether in the traditional printed form, or digitally. In some cases, the big publishing houses are getting behind titles and in other cases, scribes are opting to self-publish.**

It's generally accepted that most authors don't make a lot of money. Award-winning Donal Ryan made headlines when he went back to his day job in the public service. In an interview with *The Guardian*, he recalled feeling like a fraud 'just making stuff up and writing it down and you're actually enjoying it.' Writing, he remarked, is like being gloriously drunk, and it's always followed by a hangover of guilt.'

While he was fortunate to secure a post as a lecturer in creative writing at the University of Limerick, many writers – and indeed others in the arts – continue to find it challenging to literally balance the books, despite the economic upturn. Local authorities provide much-needed support and space for struggling authors, through bursaries, residencies and events. These need to be maintained and enhanced to encourage our growing army of literary talent.

The library system which has undergone a huge amount of change in recent years, continues to play its part in fostering a love of books among children and providing reading opportunities for authors. The open libraries scheme, piloted in Offaly, was controversial but offers benefits in additional access to the library service and the general feedback is that it is working well.

Writers will write as long as people continue to read, in whatever format. As Stephen King said: "Books are a uniquely portable magic."

**Caroline Allen**  
*Guest Editor*

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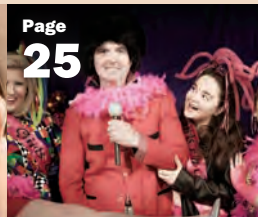
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# School sale hits high note

**New life is being breathed into the old Scoil Mhuire primary school building on Church Avenue, Portlaoise, which is now a new home to Laois School of Music and Laois Youth Theatre.**

Bought by Laois County Council for €350,000, the school had been vacant for a year. It was built on the site of the town's 16th century garrison inside a stone fort the walls of which are still largely intact. The fort protector was the first English fort in Ireland, built to quell Laois rebellions.

Laois Music Centre is a new base to provide music and performing arts education to over 700 young people involved with Music Generation Laois and Laois School of Music. Weekly music classes, ensembles, bands and orchestras under Music Generation Laois and Laois School of Music will be housed in the centre, as will the Laois Youth Theatre.

Reacting to the news, Music Generation Laois co-ordinator Rosa Flannery said: "We are absolutely thrilled to have secured a premises for ourselves and Laois School of Music. Thank you to Laois County Council, Laois Arts Office, and Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board.

"The new home for Music Generation Laois and Laois School of Music will continue to build upon the strong partnership between Laois County Council and Laois Offaly Education and Training Board. It is onwards and upwards for the future of music in Laois."

## MUSIC GENERATION LAOIS members light up Monaco stage

**Four young musicians from Music Generation Laois lit up the stage in Monaco with their mentor Zoë Conway in October, where they performed for an audience of international delegates at an event hosted by The Ireland Funds. Delegates at the event included Prince Albert II.**

These four young musicians were invited to perform at The Ireland Funds event as 'Music Generation young ambassadors.' Joined on stage by their mentor and celebrated Irish musician Zoë Conway, were: Izzy Donnery, bodhrán and voice; Fiadh Fitzpatrick, pipes and voice; Conall Nevin, button accordion; and Naoise Kettle, fiddle and guitar. They performed a selection of tunes arranged with Zoë especially for the evening's event.

Between them, the four have amassed a slew of All-Ireland championship titles. They have performed for dignitaries on international stages, including President Michael D. Higgins; An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar; Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau; and former US Vice-President Joe Biden.

They have played alongside renowned Irish musicians including Sir James Galway; Ed Sheeran collaborators 'Beoga'; and Donal Lunny. They have composed original works together with some of Ireland's most highly respected trad artists including Martin Tourish of Altan and Ryan Molloy.

They are members of the Music Generation Laois Trad Orchestra, directed by Laois musician Siobhán Buckley. The group is a representation of 3,500 young people currently accessing all genres and styles of music tuition through the Music Generation Laois programme, under the leadership of programme director, Rosa Flannery.

Speaking after the event, Naoise Kettle, said: "As my first time in Monaco, it was amazing to experience the culture and meet the local people, including Prince Albert. Playing for him was the highlight."

Following the event, Rosaleen Molloy, national director of Music Generation congratulated the four young musicians on their performance. "It is a privilege for Music Generation to have the opportunity to perform at such a prestigious event, and we are very grateful to The Ireland Funds for providing this platform for our young musicians to showcase their own music on an international stage."







# Birr plans to transform courthouse into artists' hub

By Michael Hanna

**The town of Birr is rich in built heritage from the Georgian era. Its courthouse dates from the first decade of the 19th century. No longer in use, its ownership is being transferred to Offaly County Council from the Courts Service.**

The County Council, in partnership with Birr 2020, the town's civic forum and a company limited by guarantee, is leading a scheme to transform the courthouse into a creative arts and performance centre that will complement the Birr Theatre and Arts Centre.

Art residencies and other cultural activities will be accommodated in the many smaller rooms of the courthouse. The courtroom itself will become a rehearsal, performance and workshop space for the arts. The theatre and courthouse will be administered under a complementary governance arrangement.

Other community cultural centres have been successfully established in midlands towns where they contribute significantly to the local community and connect more widely to the national and international arts scene.

A number of these have been visited in the course of developing our plans and have been

generous in offering us time and advice. In recent weeks, Louise Browne and Associates, funded by Offaly Local Development Company (OLDC), has been engaged to carry out a scoping exercise and Offaly County Council have submitted a grant application under the Rural Regeneration Scheme for funding to make good the fabric of the building. The Trustees of the Trench Trust have already indicated their willingness to support this project.

## FOREFRONT

In October, Offaly Film Festival celebrated its ninth anniversary in Birr. At least two of the films shown – 'Katie' and 'The Lonely Battle of Thomas Reid' – were previewed in our national newspapers after the festival, showing how our Offaly towns can be at the forefront in drawing creative talent locally and nationally.

Birr's cultural calendar already includes successful festivals of music and voice; poetry; vintage and arts; film and children's art, with others in the

conception stage. It is by such activities that our rural towns can claim for themselves a strong and clear voice in the arts, every bit as good as our urban centres.

## SPORTS

The courthouse has a large yard at the back, adjacent to the old ball alley. As the courthouse project progresses we will be fund-raising for a stand-alone indoor sports facility in this space. This will become a home for the Birr Boxing Club as anchor tenant and will also be available for a whole range of physical fitness activities that have taken off in recent years and that are so important to the health of our whole community, young and old.

This courthouse yard facility will enable us to access totally different sources of funding, specific to sports and recreation.

*\* Michael Hanna is Chair of the Courthouse Steering Group.*



# Longford hosts spectacular contemporary dance performances

By Jessica Thompson

**Longford's dance scene is probably one of the most colourful and energetic in the midlands with world-renowned choreographers and spectacular festivals to strike awe into the souls of those who step into a local dance performance.**

So dynamic is the dance scene in Longford that the county was chosen as the location for the world premiere of choreographer Marguerite Donlon's latest work of contemporary dance art, 'The Last Lifeboat'.

The world premiere took place in early September and crowds were utterly spellbound by the performance of Francesco Vecchione and Claudia Ortiz Arraiza. Through their beautiful art of contemporary dance, they portrayed the characters of Marguerite's grandaunt, Katherine Gillnagh, and James Farrell, the man who saved her life when the Titanic was sinking.

Both Katherine and James were from Longford and so it seemed only right that their story be shot onto the world stage via a small stage in their home county.

"She was lucky enough to survive," said Marguerite of her grandaunt. "She said that James gave her his cap just as she got on the lifeboat. He threw it down to her and said: 'I won't be needing this where I'm going.' And she kept that cap on her mantelpiece all her life."

## HEARTBREAKING

This heartbreaking moment is beautifully portrayed at the end of the dance, which, as a whole, is energetic, thrilling and emotional.

And after something so deep and touching, a second of Marguerite's spectacular works of art was performed by a troupe of five dancers. 'Heroes' features the music of David Bowie and sees a young group of friends come together to tell parts of their own biographies.

"Sometimes it's very touching; sometimes it's funny," Marguerite explained. "But I invited the dancers to really come up with a story – something that really represented them. Some of them talked about their journey to becoming a dancer and how that happened."

Heroes is not the only song, but Marguerite took it as the title. She also includes 'Fame' and 'Ziggy Stardust' along with several other great Bowie hits.

## STANDING OVATION

Energetic, hilarious and beautifully performed, Marguerite's duo of works received a well-deserved standing ovation. But this certainly wasn't the only contemporary dance performance to bring audiences to their feet.

Earlier this year, Michael Keegan Dolan's enthralling adaptation of 'Swan Lake' had international crowds mesmerised by the characters and the storyline, which was so redolent of 'The Children of Lir' and steeped in Irish history. With a strong connection to Longford, 'Loch na hÉala' had even more appeal for theatre-lovers in the midlands.

Michael Keegan Dolan produced this particular work of art with Teac Damsa and it's still touring the world, astonishing crowds from the Pavilion Theatre in Dun Laoghaire to the New Vision Arts Festival in Hong Kong.

There's plenty more dance where Marguerite Donlon and Michael Keegan Dolan come from. Longford is bursting at the seams with young talent, thanks largely to Anica Louw and Philip Dawson, who own Shawbrook LD Dance Trust in Legan.

## DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Contemporary dance is extremely popular among young people, with children and teenagers coming from across the county to learn how to dance at Shawbrook, a resource organisation that provides dance training and development opportunities to young students in preparation for professional training.

With such a strong interest in contemporary dance, it's no wonder there is such a plethora of talented and graceful dancers around the world who call Longford their home.





Dave Thomas



# Neil Delamere to feature in Offaly-made film

**Pre-production has commenced on a new film titled 'Aretha,' funded by the FilmOffaly bursary award. The film's multi-award winning screenplay tells of a teenage girl 'Aretha' starting out in life as she applies for her first ever job at a restaurant.**

Aretha faces opposition from the restaurant's manager Jim because of her lack of experience as well as having Down Syndrome. The bubbly young woman won't allow that to stop her. Feeling under a little pressure, Jim gives Aretha a trial week where she displays her fun-loving personality and her abilities. Aretha gets the job. However, soon things take an unexpected and dramatic turn.

The film's team is led by Jason Forde, with Four Quadrant Films producing. Hannah Quinn will direct; Tim Fleming is cinematographer; and the story and screenplay is by Dave Thomas. The role of Aretha will be played by Orla Casey, with the manager Jim Laurel taken by television personality, comedian and Offaly local Neil Delamere. The entire film will be shot on location in Offaly.

On winning the funding to make the film, Dave Thomas said that he knew there was a lot of competition to win the funding. "We are thrilled and grateful to receive the offer. Without the financial support of the FilmOffaly bursary award, we would not be making this film. The whole process has been amazing and a positive one, so I am delighted to set this story in this great county," he said.

"As a person with a disability, I wanted to tell a story that highlights the abilities of someone, not to focus on their disability," said Dave. "Unfortunately, life is not always like this. Many people with disabilities experience immense difficulties in accessing employment and equal opportunities," he said.

"I wanted Aretha to be a strong-minded and determined young woman who won't let the grass grow under her feet. Aretha will be an inspirational character that will make you laugh, cry and understand what it is like to

have extra obstacles placed in your life's journey that are unfair and unnecessary."

"The story takes place in Offaly, so we are currently exploring locations, local crew and talent," said producer Jason Forde. "The film will show Offaly in a very positive light as it highlights an important issue - giving opportunities to people with disabilities while recognising their ability. We are very excited to be holding a premiere of 'Aretha' in Offaly next year and then we will bring this film to a global audience."

The film also has a distributor on board, along with a casting agency. As the production team prepare to set up camp in Offaly on the provisional dates of January 28 to 30, it is interested in hearing from anyone wishing to be an extra to local crew. All the latest news and developments can be found on the Facebook page @ArethatheFilm and you can make contact directly at arethathefilm@gmail.com placing 'Crew' or 'Extra' in the subject line.



Orla Casey

## On the money

**Laois County Council arts service is inviting applications for a number of awards and opportunities to individuals, groups and organisations.**

They include arts act grants for 2019. Grants will be given to Laois arts organisations and individuals meeting the artistic and financial criteria set down by the local authority. Adequate information will be required on the proposed activities and the maximum amount paid will be €1,000.

The Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Monaghan is a place of inspirational retreat for writers, and a bursary is available to enable two Laois artists to spend one week working at the centre. The

bursary is open to artists in all fields and is selected on previous achievements and projects in hand.

Schools will be interested in the artists in schools scheme 2019. Grants are available for all art forms. The scheme gives primary and post primary schools the opportunity to select and work with professional artists and explore new arts media.

Culture Night is eagerly awaited every year and expressions of interest are invited from arts



Tyrone Guthrie Centre

and culture groups and individuals interested in organising events to be included in the funding application process for September 2019.

Details and application forms available from the arts office at Laois County Council, Áras an Chontae, Portlaoise, Co. Laois, on: 057 8664033 or: artsoff@laoiscoco.ie, www.laois.ie. The closing date for receipt of completed applications is Thursday, February 14.





# Athlone art expo sees 'eyesore' transformed

**Students from St. Mary's National School and users of St. Hilda's Services recently unveiled an art expo titled 'Time to Think.' Their sculptures were part of an anti-dumping initiative on a piece of waste ground in Grace Park Road, Athlone, and complemented October's national reuse fairs which urged people to 're-think, re-use and re-imagine.'**

Cathaoirleach John Dolan said that the field involved was abused by people dumping in it. "With a relatively small investment, it has been transformed into a beautiful natural area where both St. Hilda's service users and St. Mary's students can showcase their work," he said.

## AWARENESS

"The importance of this project is that the participants who made the art exhibits have an awareness of the impact of litter and waste on our environment. They are the next generation that will shape our country so it is vital that they understand the importance of their actions," the cathaoirleach said.

Aengus O' Rourke, Leas Cathaoirleach, also commended the work. "The art features are fantastic and bring life to a field that was once an eyesore. Now it's an area that people will be going out of their way to visit, to photograph and show to their friends and family," he said.

The project was funded under the anti-dumping initiative scheme run by the Department

of Communications, Climate Action and Environment. Project Manager was Darren Fulham in the Athlone Municipal District.

Ruth Maxwell from the environment department said the area of land that was prone to fly tipping, illegal dumping and anti-social behaviour over a number of years. "The funding allowed for the clearance of the site and the installation of the art pieces," she said.

## WORKSHOP

"Both St. Hilda's Services and St. Mary's National School agreed instantly to coming on board and a workshop on litter, waste and illegal dumping was delivered to the schools. From this they worked on the sculptures to reflect the message of upcycling, recycling and waste prevention."

Artist Rosemarie Langtry worked with the users of St. Hilda's Services to recreate and reimagine three mannequins. "I love recycling and reusing items and I was very excited when I heard about this project," she said. "I loved working with the St. Hilda's group and they all played their role

in adding to the features to make them into the fantastic creations they are today."

The sculptures made by the users of St. Hilda's Services consist of three mannequins that were given a makeover. 'Toy Soldier', a mannequin dressed in an army uniform, had plastic toys attached. 'Autumn Lady' saw the body of a mannequin attached to a wooden barrel. The body is laced with leaves and topped off with flowers. 'Jewels' consists of a mannequin adorning tyres but both are covered with recycled jewellery and bags.

Standing on the west side of the sculptures is the art feature by students of St. Mary's National School. "The school created one metre litter bins that form the word 'Think' and the children decided to fill the bins with recycled bottles from their lunches," said teacher Joanne Croughan.

"Being aware of what we need to do to protect our environment is vital and starting at a young age, like the children involved here today is so important".







# Write up her Street

**An 18-year-old originally from Riga, Latvia, now living in Athlone, who has been commended for her mature evocative writing, has her mind set on a literary career.**

"I am passionate about books and all aspects of writing," said Mia Samovich who has written children stories, novels, poems and scripts. "I enjoy experimenting with genre and playing with my writing style," she said.

## MESSAGES

"I believe that although books are entertaining, they also have the potential to pass on messages, to enable us to become better human beings. That is what I am hoping to achieve through my writing," said Mia.

"I enjoy experimenting with genre and play with my writing style," she said. My book 'Penguin's Success' is available in Westmeath libraries. The book was published with the aid of a grant from Westmeath County Council.

She also has her own YouTube channel 'Mia's Stories' on which she posts her audio books, mainly for children, touching on themes such as water pollution, friendship and kindness. Apart from being a writer, Mia enjoys storytelling for children at various events.

## EXCEPTION

While readers see the themes of exception and the unexpected coming through her books, she said she just allowed her imagination to take hold and followed it, rather than setting out with definite approaches. "I always liked reading and imagination was always a part of me. I was and

am surrounded by lots of books," Mia said. "My parents and grandparents used to read books to me when I was a child. I often had ideas or images floating around my head and therefore I decided to write them down."

When it comes to her favourite authors, Mia has plenty in both classics and modern books. "Cornelia Funke left an everlasting impression on me when I was a child. I also like 'The Hunger Games' trilogy by Suzanne Collins and 'Wonder' by R.J. Palacio along with 'Me Before You' by Jojo Moyes.

"William Shakespeare and J.D. Salinger's 'Catcher in the Rye', along with William Golding's 'Lord of the Flies' will always have a special place in my heart," she said. "At the moment I am reading 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' by Oscar Wilde."

## SCRIPTS

Mia hopes to study drama, film studies and English in the future. "I am interested in writing scripts. Therefore, I would like to know how movies are made since this will give me a better understanding of possible limitations or secret possibilities.

"Also with the necessary knowledge of movie making, I will be able to understand if something from my script is difficult or easy to turn into reality."

In the meantime, Mia is editing a novel. She plans to publish more books in the future. "Some day I wish to produce a play or a movie. I am open to suggestions and eager to explore writing and everything there is to it."







# ‘I always work with real people, stories and events’

**Abbeyleix native Louise White has taken over the running of Laois Youth Theatre. The theatre practitioner, facilitator and educator trained at the Oxford School of Drama and Trinity College Dublin. She also holds an MA in socially engaged art, further adult and community education from NCAD.**

With many years’ experience facilitating groups in formal and non-formal contexts, she is “really excited” to bring that learning into practice with Laois Youth Theatre, a role she took on in October.

Louise also facilitates for Mountrath Youth Theatre. “I’ve been with them since July. That is a smaller but also very committed group,” she said.

“There are over 40 young people across two groups in Laois Youth Theatre. We meet every Friday evening. For 12 to 14 year-olds it’s from 5pm to 6:30pm and for 15 to 18 year-olds it’s from 7pm to 8:30pm.

“Right now we are establishing the group dynamics and creating a good working relationship through drama games and exercises. We will work towards a big production by the end of the school year, all going well,” Louise said.

She has delivered workshops for The National Festival of Youth Theatres; Dublin Youth Theatre; The Y Factor; the youth initiative of the National Women’s Council of Ireland; The Abbeyleix Bog Project; The SAOL project; and The Lantern Centre’s International Women’s Group.

## CORE ETHIC

“I always work with real people, stories and events in my practice, and this is a core ethic of the way I approach my process with Laois Youth Theatre,” Louise said.

“I am invested in harnessing the potential of every participant’s own story, to figure out what interests them, what they are connected to and what is important in their social sphere,” she said.

“This will be explored throughout the year and I am very cognisant of the correct boundaries for working with young people. It is important to learn what the young people care about but it is also essential to adhere to best practice guidelines,” she said. “I work this way as means to help the young people find their own creative voice in a safe and respectful environment.”

## VENUES

As a theatre artist, Louise makes performances for arts venues and off-site spaces. These have included black box theatres; abandoned warehouses; a psychiatric hospital; and a crumbling Georgian mansion.

Her most recent show ‘This is the Funeral of Your Life’ premiered to a sold out run in Project Arts Centre, Dublin, in November 2017. It is scheduled to tour nationally in early 2019 and will visit both VISUAL Carlow and Dunamase Arts Centre as part of the tour.

‘This is the Funeral of Your Life’ was developed as a response to Louise’s father’s death. It explores her personal grief as well as asking the audience members to reflect on their place in the world and the legacy they might leave behind.

The Irish Times described it as: ‘An unexpectedly funny and uplifting play about your own death’ ‘Elegant, dignified, skillfully put together.’ Exeunt magazine said that her ‘eclectic exploration of mortality’ was ‘ebullient and profound.’

The Laois Youth Theatre is funded by the Laois Arts Office and the Arts Council. Further details from the Laois arts office: [artsoff@laoiscoco.ie](mailto:artsoff@laoiscoco.ie) [www.laois.ie](http://www.laois.ie)





Photo: Shelley Corcoran

# Courageous Longford dancer fights back from serious illness

By Jessica Thompson

**Life is for celebrating and nobody understands that quite like Longford dancer, Clodagh Gray. In August, the Longford town native celebrated her 21st birthday, surrounded by all of her friends and family in the Longford Arms. But this birthday party was so much more special than your average 21st because, if a few things had gone differently this year, it might not have happened at all.**

UCD physiotherapy student and dancing addict, Clodagh Gray, was diagnosed with stage four lymphoma in January of this year, bringing her whole life to a standstill so she could focus on just one thing: living. “I knew I was putting myself under a lot of pressure in the last two years, just in terms of dancing and college, social life, work – just trying to balance everything,” Clodagh explained.

Approximately four years ago, Clodagh’s cousin, Lisa Cullen, passed away tragically in a car accident. Lisa ran the Stanley Carroll School of Dancing, which Clodagh, along with her mum Pauline and dance instructor Annette Doolan, took over, renaming it the Doolan-Cullen School of Irish Dancing. “It was a really tough time. But Irish dancing has always been a part of my life, ever since I was three and it was actually Lisa who introduced me to it,” said Clodagh. “So when she passed away, it was never an option not to keep the Irish dancing going in Longford.”

On top of teaching kids at the dance school, Clodagh was involved in Catherine Young’s contemporary dance production, ‘Welcoming the Stranger’, which was staged in the Backstage Theatre before Christmas last year – around the same time as Clodagh’s UCD exams.

In the middle of everything, Clodagh became distressed by an incessant itching in her skin – an itch that was keeping her awake at night and leaving her exhausted and unable to function as a result.

It was Clodagh’s GP, Dr Kevin Flanagan, who initially noticed something was very wrong. A virus in her blood tests and the fact that she had suffered a chest infection over Christmas prompted him to insist she get a chest x-ray. This ultimately revealed a growth on Clodagh’s lung, which turned out to be lymphoma.

Everything was a whirlwind for Clodagh from that moment onwards. She was diagnosed with stage four lymphoma and everything had to be quick to ensure she would have a fighting chance.

Soon, Clodagh started on the difficult road to recovery with an aggressive form of treatment that would end in a stem cell transplant in St James’ Hospital, Dublin. The stem cell transplant meant she would have to stay in the hospital for a month in isolation.

It was during this month of solitude that Clodagh really hit her low point. With her stem cells removed and five days of high-dose chemo under her belt, she was weak and exhausted. “I wasn’t able to eat, wasn’t able to drink, wasn’t able to talk sometimes. It was just... it came to a point where I was just like ‘I need to be here; I don’t need to be anywhere else. I’m happy to just lie in this bed and get better,’” she said.

“I’ll never forget the day that my dad came to bring me home. It was amazing to get fresh air. I hadn’t been outside in over a month. It was just such a new world. I think out of everything that happened, just learning that appreciation was the most valuable lesson that I ever learned.

“And I feel like I’ll never take anything for granted again because I’ll just know to think back to that time that I was isolated and think back to that time that I couldn’t do anything for myself when I was relying on everyone else around me. And I’m so thankful for those people who kept me going through the whole thing.”

In January, the Irish dancing enthusiast was diagnosed with a deadly stage four cancer – something many wouldn’t have survived. But, against the odds, Clodagh battled through it and, in September of this year, she found out that her most recent scans came back clear – something she’s simply “over the moon about”.

And it’s certainly given her a new lease of life for dancing. At this year’s Electric Picnic, Clodagh joined UCD Dance Society. She even joined aerial dance troupe La Fura dels Baus, where she was attached to a crane and suspended high in the air to take part in the spectacular dance performance.

“Electric Picnic was one of the highlights of this year by far. I’m still not over it. Aside from being a great weekend, it was just such an amazing opportunity to perform and something I’ll never forget. I have my ticket bought for next year already,” she said.

It’s been a difficult year for Clodagh and her family but, with all the hardship behind her, the Longford dancer can get back to what really matters: living her life.



# Mullingar artist gets to art of the matter

**A change of direction by a Mullingar artist known for his portraiture depicting the world of music, art and film, was rewarded when his new work 'Life Scales' was recently selected for the Royal Ulster Academy annual show.**

"'Life Scales' was a complete change of direction from my previous so doing something like this has opened a more creative side and I am excited to try and put more new ideas on canvas," said David Dunne.

"This painting depicts life's balance; how our lives are unbalanced spending time on the things we have to do as opposed to what we like to do," said David. "The use of the children's blocks is a reflection of childhood and how, the older we get, the more unbalanced the life scales become," he said.

"The reaction on the opening night was very positive and I was very fortunate for the painting to have sold then which was a nice surprise."

Painting with both oils and acrylics, David has been interested in art since early childhood. "I was always drawing, growing up, but started painting in my early twenties and I am now 35 and have always been self taught," he said.

## INFLUENCE

"For the most part, painting portraits is where my

interest has been, particularly portraits of people who have had an influence in my life from the worlds of sports, music and film."

Painting as much as he can in his spare time, David sells his work for prices ranging from €300 up to €1,500, depending on the scale of the painting and the work involved.

*'The use of the children's blocks is a reflection of childhood and how, the older we get, the more unbalanced the life scales become'*

"What inspires me most is trying to improve as an artist. I am constantly striving to improve my technique and find enjoyment in the process," David said.

"Losing myself in the detail and seeing a painting come together and continually trying to develop my work is what keeps me painting and inspires me to try new things," he said.

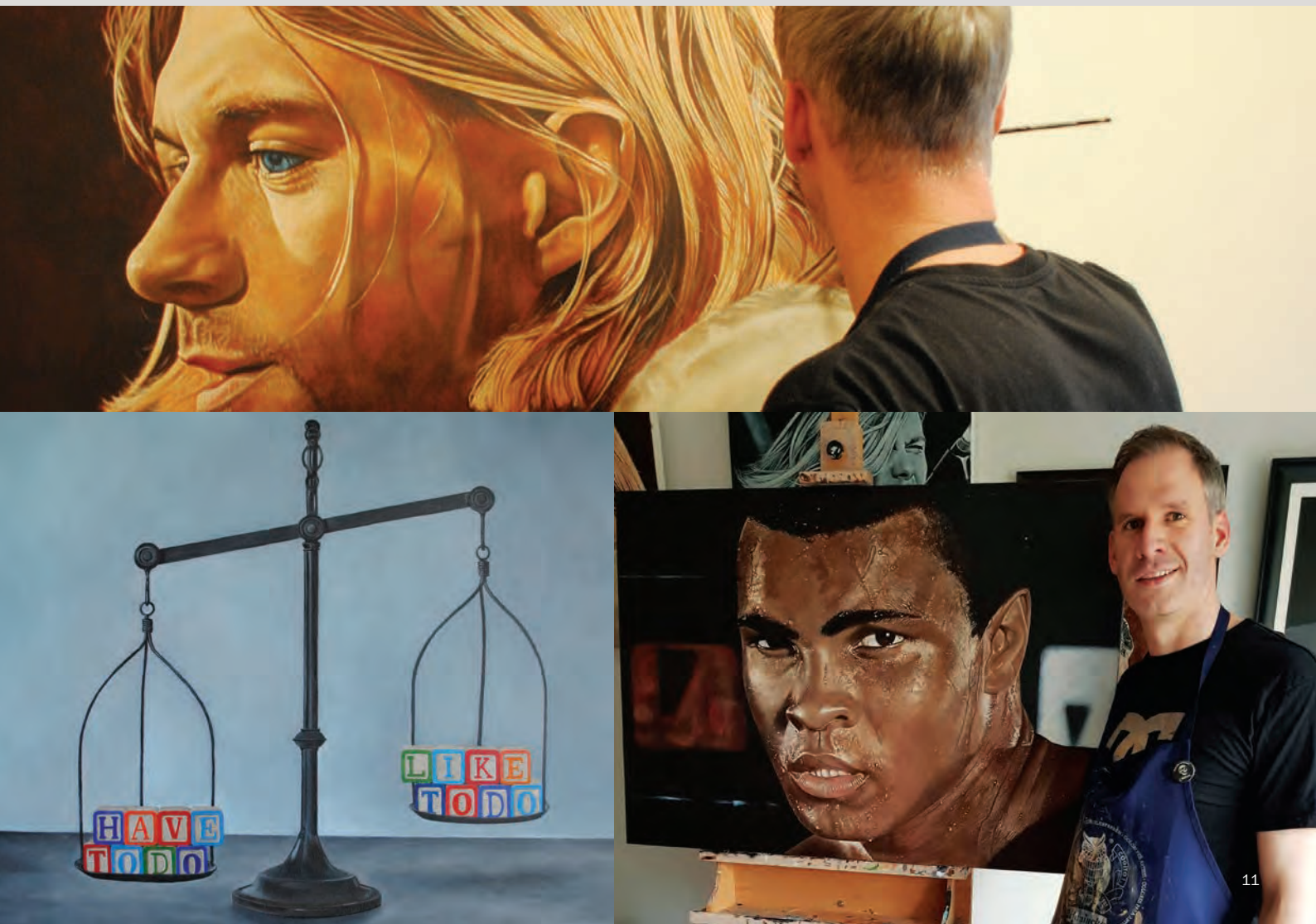
## SELECTED

David's portrait of his dad, 'GD Engineering', was selected for the RHA annual show in 2012. His work has been exhibited in the Bad Art Gallery, Dublin, from 2008 to 2011.

"My first solo exhibition titled 'Icons' opened in March 2010 and consisted of 25 new pieces of work, portraits of Irish American icons and Irish icons, in the Bad Art Gallery in Dublin," he said. 'Icons' went on display in Westmeath County Council in November 2010 and in Belvedere House, Mullingar, in 2014. He also had a solo show in Westmeath County Council for two weeks in April 2017, consisting of 30 new portraits

"I was delighted that my painting was selected for the Royal Ulster Academy annual show and it means so much to have my work on display among so many amazing artists. The show opened on October 18 and will run until January 6, 2019, in the Ulster Museum, Belfast," David said.

"My plans for the future are to continue painting as much as possible and continue to explore new ideas."







# Fabric icons of wool and linen inspire Birr production

**‘Weave’, a weaving of dance and visual art - a collaboration between contemporary dance artist and choreographer Siobhán Ní Dhuinnín from Cork, and visual artist and writer Rosalind Fanning, Birr. The show premiered during Birr Vintage Week and Arts Festival at Birr Theatre and Arts Centre.**

Their work together was inspired by Ireland’s fabric icons of linen and wool. The artists and their mentor Nick Bryson share ancestral connections to north and south. However, what also transpired, to their surprise, was the connection to the production of linen; family members’ use of Irish-made fabrics in their crafts and careers; and a love of the Irish language.

## VOICES

Siobhán provided an insight into that first performance, which was produced by Legitimate Bodies Dance Company. “As the audience entered the theatre, our voices could be heard. This was part of a recording from several months past, when we had first met.

“We had been sitting around the dining room table, chatting, sharing stories and finding woven threads of connection and interest, with jazz playing softly in the background. This conversation was played before our performance; our voices echoing through the theatre. Once all were settled in their seats, David Weymes, the excellent technician-in-residence, faded the sound.

“Entering from stage right, I stepped slowly along my imagined tightrope, holding a thin cord of Aran wool high above my head, played out invisibly from behind the wing curtain. Turning to walk along a narrow path of bronze linen, connected from one of the suspended artworks

and down over the edge of the stage, I reached the end and looked out.

## TANGLED

“As I began to move, Rosalind emerged on stage, feeding out the taut line as I wove the wool around my hands and feet, as if in child’s play, then appearing to become tangled. She stepped closer to unravel me, freeing me from my wool web. The music picked up.

“I danced across the space, circling hand over hand, dropping and falling. In my mind’s eye I saw and echoed the movement of weaving machines: back and forth, back and forth. I sprang from side to side as the music heightened, rolling on the floor and then coming back up onto my feet.

“The atmospheric music dipped and shifted, and then a sweet air signalled Rosalind’s arrival on stage again. She was carrying a parcel of white cloth tied with a green satin ribbon and presented it as if a gift to me, and placed at my feet. In a symbiotic, almost ceremonial way, we began to unfold it.

“Once fully open upon the floor, we lifted it by the corners, and billowed the square of pure white, damask linen upwards, time after time. Small blue petals rose up - a visual reminiscence of fields of flax flowers - floating upwards from the cloth and tumbling to the floor.

“Gathering the corners and refolding the fabric again, we gifted the parcel to each other, then turned to stand in quiet contemplation of the two spotlight artworks, as the lights faded.”

*★ Rosalind Fanning has run Tin Jug Studio in Birr for 18 years. Previously, she worked as a materials specialist with leading architects and designers in New York and London.*

*‘Weave’ was funded by the arts office, Offaly County Council. Support was also provided by Birr Vintage Week and Arts Festival and Birr Theatre and Arts Centre.*

*Hanly Woollen Mill facilitated the artists with a special tour of its weaving room while Ancient Music Ireland generously gave permission for the use of selected pieces from their CD.*







# 'Celebrating our community' at the Aisling children's arts festival

By Jessica Thompson

**It's been 20 years since the establishment of the Aisling children's arts festival and the celebrations at this year's festival attracted large crowds of children and parents alike. With a theme of 'Celebrating Our Community', this year's festival really got down to the important aspects of local community groups and organisations, proving that when people work together, they can create something spectacular.**

"The people who started the festival 20 years ago had a dream to bring the arts to the children of Co. Longford and to make it possible for every child in Co. Longford to participate in the arts," said chairperson of the Aisling children's arts festival, Marie Fennessy.

"That is still its purpose and we make sure that we have lots of free events throughout the festival, so the cost is not a barrier to taking part."

There is a lot of negativity about Longford in the media, according to Marie who believes that the people of Longford can be 'our own worst critics.' However, there is so much going on in the county in terms of the arts that festivals like this one can really shine a light on.

"As an antidote to all the negativity about the county, this year the Aisling Festival celebrated all the positive aspects of our community in Longford," said Marie.

## TALENT

"There is so much talent here in Co. Longford – musical talent, dramatic talent, artistic talent, sporting talent – and a wonderful community spirit, so let's celebrate it," she said.

This year's festival included a short story competition in collaboration with Longford Writers' Group and Creative Ireland Longford, inviting local writers to write a children's story, with the finalists being judged by the children themselves.

Also on the bill this year was a visit from Dr Norah Patten, a scientist and aspiring astronaut who spoke to children about the importance of getting involved in STEM subjects, as part of Children's Books Ireland's 'Bold Girls' initiative.

There was also a hugely busy theatre programme with a new production of 'The Velveteen Rabbit'

among other top class performances taking place in the Backstage Theatre. As always, there were plenty of workshops and other events for children to enjoy over the week-long festival.

With 20 years already behind the committee, it's looking like the Aisling children's arts festival isn't going anywhere just yet.

"The longevity of the festival is a testament to the hard work of the committee members over the years and continuing support of the various sponsors and the local community in Co. Longford," said Marie.

"I would love to see more children experiencing the festival, attending the workshops, the free family day and the theatre shows. We love working with local artists and creatives. The festival has had a wonderful first 20 years and I would like to build on that and see it survive for many more years to come."





# Birr residencies facilitate writers 'in want' of a break

**Karen J McDonnell recalls her inspirational midlands stay**

To paraphrase Jane Austen, it is a truth universally acknowledged that impoverished writers must be in want of a break.

Well, look no further than the Birr writers' residencies, awarded by County Offaly's arts office. Four places are provided every year: two each in July and October.

I was one of the lucky four in 2018, choosing an October residency. I grew up in the west, spent years in Dublin, and now live in north Clare. October, I reckoned, would be a wonderful time to explore the midlands. So many deciduous trees! In autumn! Exclamation marks are allowed when one lives at the edge of the Burren.

Don't get me wrong: I love where I live, but the landscape lacks venerable oaks and beech groves. And so, to Birr. The closest I came to a holiday during the year. I brought my poetry notebooks and work I was prepping for a children's project.

My collection, 'This Little World', was published in 2017. In the months following, I focused on readings, interviews, expanding my experience to include workshops and reviewing. I looked at old poems, revising again and again

before submitting to journals and competitions. I began planning the project that – eventually – will be my next collection. But I was anxious to experience new stimuli, to create something now – or at least to begin something.

The moment I arrived at the Tin Jug Studio, I knew that would happen. Rosalind Fanning welcomed me and my fellow poet Jean O'Brien with tea and scones by the fire in the drawing room of her lovely home. Folders of information awaited us, and vouchers to use in local cafés and restaurants. The OFFline Film Festival was on – we were invited to the opening.

## EXPLORE

Best of all, Rosalind encouraged us to explore Birr and the surrounding areas; to find some inspiration there, rather than working to pre-planned timetables. We had the run of every desk in the house, and the Tin Jug Studio.

One magnificent, blue-sky day I drove around the Sliabh Blooms and across Laois to visit Muireann Ní Chonaill, the Laois Arts Officer. I read my poetry at the previous year's Leaves Literary Festival, so it was lovely to catch up with Muireann at the Stradbally Arthouse. I got a tour of the studios and the gallery – a fantastic resource for artists and writers who can both


stay and work there. Another day, a chat with Rosalind about stained glass saw me driving down narrow bog roads, looking for Harry Clarke windows in small rural churches.

While we went our own creative ways during the week, Jean and I had time together to discuss 'the work'; and with Offaly's Arts Officer Mary Brady, who dropped in to see us.

Rosalind's gracious hospitality has to be experienced to be believed. It is integral to the Birr residencies. I left Birr with new poems and radio pieces, and the happiest of midlands memories.







# 'I have faith that art has the power to prevail over differences'

**A Laois-based artist who was born in Pakistan, plans to take part in several group shows in the coming years.**

Hina Khan, a mother of two, is based in Abbeylax where she lives at The Hibernian with her fiction writer husband.

"Having done my BFA (Bachelor in Fine Arts) from F.G. Degree College, I have completed my MFA (Masters in Fine Arts) from FJWU (Fatima Jinnah Women's University), Pakistan, in 2003, with miniature painting as my major," Hina said.

## CONNECTION

"I came to Ireland in 2015 and started living in Co. Mayo. While living in Mayo, I had a good connection with the local artists' group along with the most helpful Mayo County Council," said Hina.

"I participated in several group shows in Co. Mayo. My solo exhibition by the title of 'Visible and Invisible' was held in Ballina Art Gallery in

2018. I also did an artist residency with create. ie and Fire Station artists' studio Dublin in June," she said.

In Laois, Hina has received support from Laois Partnership, Laois Migration and Integration Service and the Laois arts office.

"I got admission to NCAD this year and I moved to Co. Laois, since travelling from Ballyhaunis to Dublin is not easy on daily basis, especially when you have two small children to look after," Hina said.

## HARMONY TO CULTURES

"I have used art as a medium to articulate myself since I have faith that art has the power to prevail over the differences between religion, culture, language and race. It has the power to bring harmony in the cultures and to craft peace

in our only inhabitant planet," said Hina.

"I am inspired by the work of Michelangelo; Anselm Kiefer; Imran Qureshi; and Shazia Sikandar," she said.

The scale of her work varies from miniature pieces with delicate lines and patterns, depicting deep stories to larger scale creations with the same details.

"Art is not an activity for me but a medium to express my ideologies," said Hina who particularly enjoys working with pencil.

With plans to bring her work to a wider audience and to do a PhD, it's busy times ahead for this artist. Hina looks forward to her forthcoming solo exhibition in the Laois Arthouse, Stradbally, Co Laois.





Still shot from Seedbolt's short film 'The Show Lives Here' that has appeared in multiple American film festivals.



# Athlone is the 'reel' deal for U.S. film and video game studio

**A film chronicling the story of a few disaffected young people who have built their social lives around an Internet game, and who are facing the prospect of meeting for the first time, is to be set in Athlone.**

Filming for the Athlone scenes of 'Call Me Isaiah' will seek to use local actors. SeedBolt has done virtual and augmented reality work for major tech companies and a recent major Hollywood film release. Its film work has appeared in various festivals.

Michael Middleton, creative director and co-founder of SeedBolt Studios, settled on Athlone as the filming location following his most recent visit in 2018. "I have a lot of connections in Ireland, and come every year to see friends. Athlone is one of my favorite towns, and on my most recent visit, I decided it was the right one for the footage we need," he said.

"I was pretty sure we'd settle on the midlands. It has got a great mix of history; I like the people, and it is within easy reach of my friends around Ireland. It also gives me an excuse to spend more time here, which I am happy to take."

Michael is also an outdoor and portrait photographer, and originally got to know Ireland through doing photographic work around the country. "My friends joke that I have seen more of Ireland than they have," he said.

The firm is, he said, hoping to make filming in Ireland a regular occasion. "Ireland's rich acting and theatre tradition make it a natural spot for us

to want to build up our connections further, and given my family connections to the island, I see myself coming here as often as I can," Michael said.

"We would love to continue to build our relationships here, and see ourselves collaborating with Irish actors, writers and filmmakers on a routine basis in the years to come."



SeedBolt creative director Michael Middleton, photographing in Ireland, 2015.



# Exploring mental health through the lens

By Jessica Thompson

**Art has always been a fantastic outlet for expressing inner turmoil and emotion and, in Longford, mental health has become the focus for a number of photographers who encourage those suffering with depression or other mental health issues to open up.**

Antonio Simones, a photographer who expresses his own mental health issues through his art has called depression a “silent killer”, saying it marginalises those within our society who are unfortunate enough to suffer.

“I don’t know how long I was depressed,” the local photographer said. “One day I attempted suicide. I wanted to end the unbearable misery I felt.

“My children asked me to explain how I felt, but I could not as I didn’t fully understand myself. Photography came to me as a way of self-expression when I was recovering – a way to get out and walk around the town.”

Being out in nature and taking photographs has helped Antonio to explain to the outside world how he was feeling, and to help him to heal himself.

## DESTRUCTIVE

“My photographs mirrored the mood I felt while taking them. Photography gave me confidence. I use my camera to take me away from destructive thoughts.”

Shelley Corcoran has also been exploring the issue of mental health as a fine art photographer and was delighted to be selected by DotArt Art Association Urban Photographic Awards, to have her photography appear in Trieste, Italy, as part of the association’s photography festival and awards this year.

## URBANISATION

“The entire festival was on urban photography, on which there was many individual concepts,” the Longford photographer said. “Mine delved into urbanisation and mental health. Urbanisation, defined as the increase in the number of cities and urban population is not only a demographic movement, but also includes social, economic and psychological changes.

“Urbanisation affects mental health through the influence of increased stressors and factors such as overcrowded and polluted environment, high levels of violence and reduced social support.

“When we refer to psychiatric disorders, anxiety and depression are more prevalent among urban women than men. Socioeconomic stress

is considered to be affecting mental health of women. Stress caused by transition from rural culture to urban culture cannot be denied as one of the factors leading to stress-related problems.”

## STUDENTS

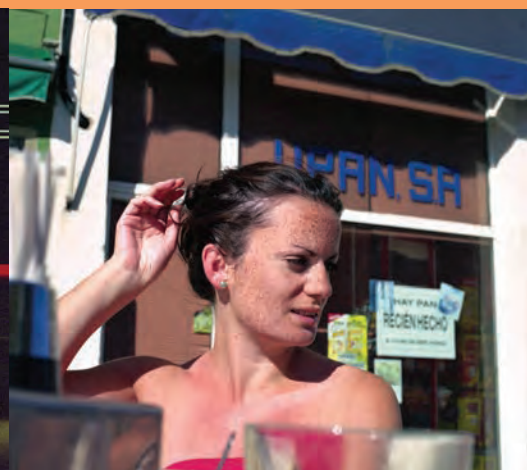
Shelley has also been working with transition year students from across Co. Longford, exploring the issue of mental health through the eyes of teenagers.

The Longford Schools’ Photography programme produced a book of photographs, ‘Connections’, which showed the students’ exploration of their perception of mental health in today’s society.

It was a fascinating insight into how 15 and 16-year-olds understand mental health and their mature representations of many issues that are very prevalent in today’s world.

Schools involved included: Meán Scoil Mhuire; Moyne Community School; Mercy Secondary School, Ballymahon; Lanesboro Community College; St Mel’s College; Ballymahon Vocational School; Cnoc Mhuire and Ardscoil Phadraig, Granard.

The themes that the students explored ranged from depression, anxiety, loss, isolation and fear to the positives that can improve mental health. They included: friendship; help; connecting; noticing; support; family; love; happiness and guidance.





# TAKEN AS

## NIAMH BOYCE

**'It's in the finishing that you really learn your craft'**

Having taken a year's leave from the library services, award-winning Ballylinan-based author Niamh Boyce is dedicating her time to writing as well as leading workshops in the Irish Writers' Centre in the spring.

Niamh's debut poetry collection 'Inside the Wolf' was published this summer through her own imprint Red Dress Press. Themes of death, memory and transformation run through the collection. Her second novel 'Her Kind', based on the Kilkenny witchcraft trial of 1324, will be published by Penguin Random House in April. Penguin also published her first book 'The Herbalist'. Another book is now in the pipeline.

"I worked as a branch librarian in Ballylinan library for 12 years. This year, in August, I began a year's leave from work to concentrate on my writing fulltime," Niamh said.

### CREATIVE TIME

"I always wrote, mostly poetry and journal writing – my degree is in English literature and history – so I have always loved books. My first poems began when I was pregnant with my middle son. There was something about that pregnancy – it was a very creative time – and I made a lot of art back then. That was in 2002, while I was living in Galway."

Numerous accolades have come her way. "Winning the Hennessy New Irish Writer of the Year for my poetry was hugely encouraging for me and my writing. That was in 2012, and it was the same year that my novel 'The Herbalist' was an Irish Writers' Centre novel fair winner, and was taken on by Penguin. So that was an exciting year to put it mildly. It came after a lot of work, and just as I was wondering whether I should give up," said Niamh

The highlight of her writing career so far was when 'The Herbalist' won 'newcomer of the year' at the Irish Book Awards. "It was wonderful, especially as it's an award that is part voted by the public. It means everything to get such support, especially for a book inspired by a true story and set in my own home town."

Niamh is now working on the first draft of a new novel. She has taught workshops in the region. I taught one for Leaves a few years ago in the Dunamais Theatre, Portlaoise, and through Kildare libraries. I also teach and mentor through the Irish Writers Centre, and am leading workshops there next Spring

Her advice to aspiring writers is to be prepared to work incredibly hard. "Novels in particular take persistence and stamina. Write what you love to write. And finish everything you start. Beginning is easy, it's in the finishing that you really learn your craft."



## TOM McGAHON

**A Westmeath farmer who cites his favourite authors as ranging from Ernest Hemmingway to Walter Macken and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, has published his first book.**

Tom McGahon launched his collection of stories and poetry before a huge turnout in Milltown Community Centre, Rathconrath on November 9, with long queues of people eager to buy the book. 'Fleeting Memory', published by Topic newspapers, portrays the essence of farming life in the past.

Born in Co. Louth in 1942, the writer, poet and storyteller relocated with his wife Margaret and two daughters Deirdre and Maria, to a farm in Westmeath, drawn by the cheaper land available. Tom has now passed on the farm to his two daughters and runs the farm for them.

Having always had a love of reading and writing, he set about gathering up his collection two years ago. "I got very fond of some of the characters," said Tom. Among the topics covered in the paperback which is brimful of vernacular sayings, are: rationing; the big houses; the vagaries of the weather; hiring fairs; and emigration.

"The stories are based on real life situations but are fiction," said Tom.

"I always wrote about what I liked and I could find a story in a remark that I heard years ago. I can remember a lot of the big things, such as the ending of World War II."

Ideas popping into his head cause him to burn the midnight oil but he happily combines writing stories and poetry as well as some storytelling, with farming. Tom is already working on his second book. He describes it as a comedy about a group of people who wanted to put together a milk buying co-op and it is set in 'Ballysin.'

Copies of 'Fleeting Memory' at €13.50, are available from: Just Books and Easons Mullingar; Finn's Centra, Ballymahon, Longford; Cormicans, Athlone and Roscommon and Newsround, Longford.





# READ

The midlands is brimful of literary talent, with several books by local authors on the shelves. We look at some of those recently published.

## JOHN CONNELL

**Longford author enjoys success for captivating 'Cow Book' memoir**

Unless you've been living under a rock since March, you'll be more than familiar with Longford author John Connell. Bestselling author of 'The Cow Book'; recipient of a Longford People of the Year award and ambassador of Movember, John is causing quite a stir, especially in the farming community.

'The Cow Book' was officially launched at Longford library in March and, within the week, shot up to number one on the book charts, much to the author's delight. And there it stayed for several months. At the end of November, 'The Cow Book' won the popular non-fiction book of the year accolade at the An Post Irish Book Awards 2018.

The best selling book tells the familiar story of rural Ireland and, more specifically, the farming families that are the pillars of Ireland's midlands.

"It was a very enjoyable book to write," John said not long after his hugely successful book launch, which saw all copies of the book sell out before the launch even kicked off.

### WELLSPRING

"It's been a really lovely thing to be able to talk about my real passion for farming, because I didn't think people were really interested in that. Farming is really the backbone of our whole culture. I think it's the wellspring of who we are as a people and the backbone of our economy in many respects."

More recently, John has expressed his gratitude to everyone who has bought the book, read the book and talked about the book, helping it to stay in the spotlight for the majority of the year.

'The Cow Book: A Story of Life on a Family Farm' which tells the tale of the author's return to the family farm in Soran, Co. Longford, after his travels in Australia and Canada, was published by Granta.



## HELEN CULLEN

**Portlaoise-born author revels in home book launch**

A Portlaoise-born author is revelling in an enthusiastic response to the recent publication of her debut novel, with the TV rights to the book being optioned by Mainstreet Productions, the producers of Downton Abbey and Broadchurch.

Helen Cullen, originally from Harpers Lane, Portlaoise, was among the line-up at the recent Leaves literary festival, organised by Laois arts office.

Helen who is now based in London, had a local launch of 'The Lost Letters of William Woolf' during the festival. Set inside the Dead Letters Depot in east London, the book focuses on William Woolf, one of 30 letter detectives who spend their days solving mysteries from missing postcodes to torn packages.

When William discovers letters addressed simply to 'My Great Love', his work takes on new meaning. Written by a woman to the soulmate she hasn't met yet, the missives capture William's heart in ways he didn't know possible.

The novel meditates on the lost art and power of letter writing. "It explores the juxtaposition that often exists between the portrayal of romantic love in the media and the arts and the pragmatic reality of sustaining a committed relationship over time," said Helen.

"It was such a pleasure to launch my debut novel at home in Portlaoise and to have an opportunity to thank everyone for supporting me," said Helen whose sister Patricia is vice-principal at Portlaoise College.

"I was really touched to see so many much loved faces in the room - my family; friends; and even my much beloved sixth class primary school teacher, Mrs Wall-Coughlan from Scoil Bhride who came along," said Helen.

"I was delighted to host a workshop with some wonderful aspiring writers who came along on Saturday morning with such open minds and hearts and really threw themselves into the workshop. I hope they all keep going now with their writing as there was a lot of talent in that room," she said.

"Participating in the Saturday programme alongside Brian Keenan, Dermot Bolger and the beautiful music of Kathleen Loughnane and Sean Ryan was an absolute honour and there was such a special atmosphere on the evening. It was such a privilege to experience it."

Helen expressed "huge thanks" to Laois Arts Officer Muireann Ní Chonail and everyone at the arts office and the Dunamais Theatre for creating the opportunity. "I appreciate all of the support so much and think the people of Laois are so fortunate to have such a creative, passionate and dedicated team making the arts such an important part of life in the community," she said.

It's a busy time for Helen. "We will all be keeping our fingers crossed that William Woolf makes his way on to the television in the future," she said.

Helen was thrilled to have been shortlisted in the Irish Independent 'best newcomer' category at the An Post Irish Book Awards.

"I was also delighted to be selected as the Irish Times Book Club 'book of the month' in October and a series of features in relation to the book were published as a consequence. Readers can find them all online now on the book club page," Helen said.

The next step is the publication of the paperback edition of 'The Lost Letters of William Woolf' in May 2019. In the meantime Helen will be supporting the publication of the book in translation in foreign markets and continuing to work on her second book for Penguin.





# ‘Music is a great bond’: CUA on life on and off the road

**Fresh from its Scottish tour, Laois-based trio Cua is looking forward to playing at the Celtic Connections music festival in Glasgow which begins on January 17 and runs until February 3. Cua, which comprises Shane Booth, John Davidson and Ros O’Meara, returned to Laois on November 4, after eight nights of touring arts centres, folk venues and halls in Scotland.**

“We were delighted with the response we received from the Scottish crowds and it was great to see such a strong support for music and song in every place we travelled to,” Shane said.

“It was great to tell stories of Laois and where we come from throughout our shows and promote our music video which was recorded in the Sliabh Bladhna Mountains,” he said.

“The tour was so successful we have been invited to play at this year’s Celtic Connections festival in Glasgow on January 26 in the piping centre. The festival is one of the biggest folk and traditional music expos in the world. We look forward to it very much as well as some other major announcements in the coming months,” said Shane. The tour was supported by a Creative Ireland grant through Laois County Council.

Ros is from Portlaoise town; Shane is from Killeen, near Emo; and John, originally from Aberdeenshire, has married into the Laois music, dance and art communities in Shanahoe through his wife, Aisling Walsh. “It certainly was music that brought us together,” they mused.

“We are all avid members of the rich Laois music community and have been playing together for well over a decade now through several musical groups and creative ideas,” Ros said.

“Cua has become a culmination of our individual songwriting skills, musical experiences and pushing the boundaries of what we can achieve as composers of music,” said John.

## TOGETHERNESS

“Music is a great bond to share with fellow songwriters and also a vital bond, perhaps, for communities across Laois and the midlands. We would like to encourage the rural and urban communities to fill their community and village halls with all kinds of vibrant activities to create stronger social structures and togetherness,” Shane reflected.

He has been around music all his life, with his father, Richard, having been an integral part of his musical upbringing as folk choir leader and music teacher. “All my life I have been thankfully surrounded by music to the point where it seems to be major part of my DNA,” he said.

John’s grandfather began passing the fiddle and all its beauty on to John when he was just six years of age. Since then John has brought his talents to every corner of the globe.

Ros has been a core of the Laois music community from an early age, bringing tradition of music from his father’s Tipperary and his

mother’s Leitrim. He has interwoven intricate styles to bring a fresh new sound to the modern folk scene as well as working as a music therapist.

John and Aisling met while rehearsing an Irish dance show in Dublin that went to tour the US. After a couple of years they both moved to Nashville where Aisling helped in the setting up of a new Irish dance school and John worked as a session musician. Since returning to Ireland Aisling has followed in the footsteps of her late aunt Maura Shanahan, in setting up her own dance school, the Aisling Walsh Dance Academy.

“The name Cua was taken from the place name for Shanahoe – a village in Laois – which is ‘Seanchua’ as Gaeilge, and meaning old hollow. We decided to take Cua and use this as our Irish for hollow. Our latest album is also entitled ‘Songs of the Hollow.’ ‘This is where Cua began in John and Aisling’s amazing studio circa 2010,” Shane said.

“I guess we usually pigeon hole ourselves into the genres of folk, world and roots music. However, it really is much broader than that with elements of many genres, styles and geographical areas coming together to influence what we sometimes like to call Atlantean.” he said.







# Audiences drawn into Offaly arts

**Six professional artists came together in Offaly County Council's contemporary exhibiting space for a morning of education through creativity on October 12 last. A workshop and talk with 30 second year students from the Sacred Heart School, Tullamore, was held as part of Offaly Crafty's 'Gratitude' exhibition in the atrium.**

Students and their teachers were welcomed by Offaly Crafty's chairperson Elma Lawless to view the exhibition and discover how every participating artist responded to the theme of 'gratitude' individually.

## **ENTHUSIASTIC**

Elma, along with other artists, Hazel Greene; Olive Cuskelly; Paula Finlay; Kay Murphy; and Rosemarie Langtry all worked with the students to demonstrate their craft, receiving an excited and enthusiastic response from the students.

Elma Lawless is a textile artist specialising in children's clothing, soft furnishings and decorations. Hazel Greene is a visual artist and textile designer specialising in figurative paintings which are then used to create the designs she prints onto her silk scarves.

Elma and Hazel worked together with the students to design and create personalised headbands. With textile markers, the students 'painted' their own design either freehand or using stencils to create a pattern. Once the design was completed, they used the sewing machine, learning how to fold, pin, sew and turn the fabric to form their own unique headband.

Olive Cuskelly is a visual artist and designer working mainly in oil and acrylics. Her paintings

can be characterised by both her delicate fine brush detail and textured palette knife work. Paula Finlay is a self-taught contemporary artist best known for her realist depictions of still life compositions, open landscapes and romantic seascapes.

Olive and Paula delivered acrylic fine brush and oil palette knife demonstrations, explaining how they create art from initial concept stage, to finished visual pieces. Research, exploration and a willingness to keep an open mind were factors they encouraged the students to be mindful of as they consider themes for their own art projects.

Artist Kay Murphy's work alternates between landscape, still life and figurative. Inspired by life's surroundings, her preferred mediums are acrylic and encaustic. Rosemarie Langtry is a contemporary visual artist working in various mediums, mainly painting with encaustic.

## **ENCAUSTIC PAINTING**

Kay and Rosemarie began their presentation with an informative discussion on the history, care and ancient technique of Encaustic painting. They explained how it is a combination of beeswax, pigment and resin, which is fused layer upon layer, creating texture and translucency as it flows.

They then gave a demonstration on different techniques and showcased the tools of the trade.

Students were encouraged to view, touch and smell some encaustic paintings along with the waxes used.

## **NEW MODEL**

This new model for audience participation and development proved to be a meaningful way of introducing a fresh young group of people to the arts.

As the students completed the workshop they discussed what they were grateful for in their own lives on a given day. They responded by writing it on a tag which hung on the 'gratitude tree' situated in the exhibiting area until the show concluded on October 26. It was a positive thought provoking exercise to end an inspiring morning for all involved.

## **INSPIRING**

Holly Arnold from the Sacred Heart School, reflected on the workshop, remarking that she learned so much from the experience. "I will definitely use all the new things we were shown in my school art projects. I found talking to the artists inspiring and creative.

"The whole experience was fun, especially because I was trying something new and as I worked I became more aware of my own abilities. I would definitely come again."



# Backstage

**The Atrium Gallery in the Backstage Theatre has been a busy spot over the past few months with a wide range of art and photography exhibitions taking place within the brightly lit space.**

Well known Longford lady, June Belton, for example, was delighted with the turnout for her art exhibition in September. June was inspired by her late son, Derek, to take up painting and has been painting ever since.

Her exhibition featured a number of her paintings and proceeds from the sales went to Friends of St Luke's, where her son Derek was treated so kindly.

November saw the opening of an art exhibition by Ballymahon native Allison Moorhead in the beautiful Atrium Gallery. Allison's photographs represent regular snapshots of ordinary people going about their lives, every photo so different and yet carrying the mnemonic power of ordinary snapshots.

## **TIME-TRAVELLING**

The archival process of the images includes some dating back to 1949, so the images have a time-travelling feel to them, with the dates and handwritten notes left on the photographs giving Allison an indication of how these people lived their lives. Allison herself has no connection with any of the people in the photographs.

Allison's work is composed from the archive. She reimagines the people in

the found photographs and she illuminates the once forgotten memories. The images are from a different time and it was important to Allison to keep this aspect of the work.

Using her amplified colour palette and geometrical shapes to make up her characters, Allison creates her own unique personal archive.

## **'BLOOD SISTERS'**

Looking forward to spring 2019, local photographer Shelley Corcoran is already preparing for her next exhibition. This time, she's teamed up with artist Maria Cribben to create a striking exhibition 'Blood Sisters.'

'Blood Sisters' is an exhibition of fine art photography by Shelley and paintings by Maria Cribben. The concept of the exhibition is 'sisters' but in the broadest sense. 'Blood Sisters' can be defined as sisters related by blood or two or more women not related by birth who have sworn loyalty and friendship to each other. They share anything and everything and have no secrets from each other.

From the time we're born, our sisters are our collaborators and co-conspirators; our role models and our cautionary tales. They are our scolds; protectors; goads; tormentors; playmates; counsellors; sources of envy and





# Theatre

## showcases art and photography

By Jessica Thompson

objects of pride. They help us to learn how to resolve conflicts and how not to; how to conduct relationships and when to walk away from them. Our sisters can be a friend; aunt; cousin; niece or mother, but they are the women in our lives.

These relationships are complex and rich and have their own rules and rituals. They may not always be pleasant, but you know it if you grew up with one; you know it if you're raising some; and you'll always feel the impact of them.

"As I don't have a biological sister, my photography deals with the complex relationships I have had with the women in my life – the permanent mark they have left on my identity and the impact I have had on theirs," said Shelley.

"As a fine art photographer, I am using photographer's subjective influence in this work to expose the dialects between privacy, presentation and intimacy in photography, which will complement Maria's multi-layered acrylic paintings." Maria's art showcases her own perception of sisters, including their layers, vibrancy, boldness and complexities through the medium of acrylic paint, which allows her to work quickly and expressively onto the surface of the canvas.

"Each layer is important to the overall effect of the portrait and, by using acrylic paint, each layer remains visible," Maria said.

### IDENTITY

"My work is an expressive construction of identity in the contemporary world. Through my process of deconstructing the portrait and reconstructing it in an expressive, fluid manner, I began to ponder society's concept of identity in more depth.

"We exist in an ever-expanding world where communication has never been as easy. Technologies enable us to relate to far more people and institutions than ever before in a multiplicity of forms, providing a stage for those who wish to perform."

Each of these, Maria added, demands a different conception of ourselves: "Thus each of us is not one self, but many. We are malleable.

"The images we present to the world are best interpreted by those who know us best. In my case, that would be my three sisters. My sisters can see through the layers and constructs of my personas. They can reach the core of who I am," she said.

'Blood Sisters' promises to be a fascinating exhibition, and will open in the Backstage Theatre in February.

For more information on any of the events at the Backstage Theatre, visit: [www.backstage.ie](http://www.backstage.ie).





# LUAN GALLERY

## lines up busy schedule



Westmeath Arts Officer Miriam Mulrennan; The Arts Council Director, Orlaith McBride and Manager Carmel Duffy in conversation at the Elevate opening in May 2018.

Eamonn Maxwell, Collections Advisor, The Arts Council in conversation with Katriona Gillespie, Curator, at the Elevate opening last May.

**Mullingar native Eoin Butler's first major exhibition 'Here and There' currently showing at Luan Gallery, Athlone, and running until February 9, provides a fascinating survey view of his work. He is renowned for painting plein air landscapes, nudes and portraits.**

Eoin graduated from the National College of Art with a diploma in painting in 1965 and an MA in fine art in 2004. He was the head of Dun Laoghaire School of Art and Design in 1971. He also worked as a senior lecturer in art at St. Patrick's College of Education, Dublin.

Over the last number of years, the bogs in the midlands have provided rich source material and inspiration for Eoin's work. The exhibition was opened and accompanied by written contributions by Ciarán Benson, professor of psychology, UCD and member of the international association of art critics.

Prof. Benson highlighted Eoin's commitment to imaging his own most intimate connections to tree, bog and sky – his 'home' – and said it was 'a gift to us all.'

### LANDSCAPE

Next up will be the hosting of an Office of Public Works (OPW) curated exhibition '[Untitled] Landscape,' the latest in a series of joint art exhibitions organised by the Department of Finance and the OPW. Both departments have been working in partnership, organising art exhibitions since the late 1990s.

This year the exhibition focuses on the theme of landscape, and the 30 artworks chosen reflect the variety of this genre in each collection. Artists were invited to provide information about their selected artwork for the catalogue. It will tour

four venues, with Luan Gallery hosting it in February.

Over 14,000 people visited Luan Gallery this year. To date, the gallery has programmed 34 exhibitions of emerging national and international mid-career and established artists.

Among the highlights was 'Elevate', a loan showcasing and celebrating contemporary Irish art drawn from the Arts Council of Ireland Collection 2008 to 2018. The Arts Council collection was established in 1962 when the Council first started acquiring work from living artists and continues this policy of supporting artists.

This collaboration with the Arts Council presented a selection of print; paint; photography; drawing; video and sculptural works featuring works by 13 of Ireland's most prominent artists from the past decade.

Artists presented in the exhibition were: Jenny Brady; Willie Doherty; Damien Flood; David Godbold; Katie Holten; Jesse Jones; Eithne Jordan; Clare Langan; Eoin McHugh; Julie Merriman; Richard Mosse; Sonia Shiel; and Daphne Wright.

### NEW WING

Luan Gallery opened in 2012, and the building consists of the older part, a former public library built in 1897 as a temperance hall, combined

with a newer wing, designed by Keith Williams. The building was named best cultural building of 2013 and received a Civic Trust award in 2014.

The gallery, built at a cost of €3.4 million, extends the well-known 1897 Fr Matthew Temperance Hall, which over the years has held many roles including cinema; town hall; library; and concert hall.

Athlone Arts and Tourism is a management company established by Westmeath County Council in 2014. The company operates three of Athlone's landmark cultural tourism assets: Athlone Castle Visitor Centre and museum; Luan Gallery Municipal Visual Art Gallery and Abbey Road artists' studios and community space.

The company plays a crucial role in the development, promotion, appreciation and engagement of the cultural landscape of Athlone, Westmeath and the greater midlands region. Two of the sites managed by the company, Athlone Castle and Luan Gallery, are located on the west bank of the River Shannon overlooking the bridge of Athlone and are immersed in rich heritage, cultural and architectural history.

The Abbey Road building housing the artists' studios and community space is situated on the east bank of the River Shannon, opposite Abbey Road graveyard. This too is a building steeped in history, having many different functions since its origins as a workhouse in the 1800s.



# Tullamore musician releases debut single

**Lost in a house of mix-tapes and stacks of old blues, folk and soul records, Hubert Murray sifted through every one, decomposing melodies under the wings of his older siblings.**

By the age of 14, he was performing on stages in pubs, lying about his age just to get on stage. Having ten years of gigging and busking under his belt – as well as a nursing degree – he moved to London, immersing himself in the folk and bluegrass world.

Fronting two genre bending bluegrass bands, Hotrock Pilgrims and Lands End, they continue to tour Ireland, UK and Europe. They have, Hubert said, gained the reputation as some of the finest players and performers on the bluegrass scene.

## GOODBYE NOTE

Hubert's newest musical venture is departing the familiar territory of bluegrass and is developing his voice as an acoustic singer-songwriter. His sound bows a head to the masters of melody and word such as Tom Waits; Van Morrison; Laura Marling and Bukowski.

"While thumbing through some old lyrics I found the phrase: 'A 'goodbye' note fell to the floor.' A few months and notepads later, a song emerged. 'Courage, you can't find it in everyone. Courage, don't leave me here on my own.'

The song features Paddy Kiernan on banjo; Niall Hughes on double bass and Alec Brown on cello. Producing the track was one of the country's most in-demand producers, Gavin Glass. He has worked with the likes of Lisa Hannigan; Declan O'Rourke; Paul Brady and Villagers.

## NEW VIDEO

It was released in October along with a new video recorded in the magical workshop of bog oak sculptor Brian Gorman. This was followed by a two-week tour of Ireland and the UK.

Hailing from Galway but now residing in Tullamore, Hubert's future plans are to keep writing and performing. "I work day-to-day on my songs, chipping away, practicing, planning gigs and staring blankly into Google maps".



Hubert Murray  
Photograph by  
Ruth Connolly  
Photography

# 'Comedy is the universal language'

Tapping the potential in her local community, Ballyfin, Co. Laois playwright, Frances Harney continues to tick all the boxes in the world of community theatre. Now in their seventh year, her plays are firmly on the annual events calendar in Laois and keep the long tradition of drama in Ballyfin alive.

Following the success of 'The Inspector', locals eagerly await a new offering from Frances' pen. This year's comedy is called 'The Enterprise' and with almost 40 original characters, its sharp-witted language and amusing situations aim to appeal to all ages.

Frances' work is being noticed locally but increasingly it is connecting with a wider audience, judging by the sell-out shows for every performance over the past number of years. "This surely throws the spotlight on the growing appeal of community theatre which has, at its heart, the purpose of bringing people together," Frances said.

## ENTERTAINING

"If it's true that communities experience moments in a similar way, then comedy is the universal language, ensuring an entertaining experience for all members of any community."

So what's different about her work? "Unlike many modern plays that focus on concerns relating to central characters, at the heart of my full-length big cast dramas are community issues. Rather than shining the light on an individual to draw universal parallels, I expose the motivations and agendas of individuals within rural societies to community affairs, at different points in history," said Frances.

"Since individuals exist in communities, it is important to reflect this in theatre. Further, it is important to draw attention to and explore the agendas brought by members of a community to any issue. In this way, people can come to a better understanding of the dynamic within their own communities. The primary aims of the plays are through comedy, to entertain, to question and to inform."

## MIDLANDS SETTING

'The Enterprise' which has received support from Laois Co. Council, is set in the midlands. The action spans a two-week period during Lent in 1994. The Flanagans, the village publicans, must find a new enterprise when Bishop Murray prohibits the sale of alcoholic beverages on the premises for the entire 40 days of 'the season of fast and abstinence'.

Mountmellick Arts Centre, with its 475-seat auditorium, is the perfect venue for the play which will run on March 22 and 23 at 7.30pm each night. Tickets, at €10, will be available from mid-February and may be purchased from O'hóráin's Shop in Mountmellick. In Ballyfin, tickets will be available from The Deadman's Inn, Ballyfin National School and from members of the Parish Council and Ballyfin Athletic committee. All funds raised will go to three separate causes, the Cuisle Cancer Centre in Portlaoise, Ballyfin Parish and Ballyfin Athletic Club which celebrates its diamond jubilee in 2019.

Follow the progress of 'The Enterprise on' Facebook @ BallyfinParish from February 2019.

'The Inspector': Emma Phelan, Seán Connolly, Shannon Ward, AnneMarie Colgan and Josephine Kelly.







## New book puts Laois writer in the picture

**A book of portraits of Laois writer Arthur Broomfield, accompanied by poems from his recent publication ‘Cold Coffee at Emo Court’ was launched at Dunamais Arts Centre, Portlaoise, on November 22. ‘The AB File’ contains 12 chapters or ‘clusters’ based – loosely in some cases – on a poem from Arthur Broomfield’s publications, with photographs from members of Portlaoise Camera Club illustrating the theme.**

Cluster three, ‘The Trip to Tipp’ is a series of photographs taken on a recent visit to Semple Stadium, Thurles, based around the poem ‘The Poetry Reading at Semple Stadium.’ Cluster eleven, ‘Enjoying a Coffee at Emo Court’ is based around the theme from the poem ‘Emo Court’ and contains photographs taken on location by Sean Wynne and Pat Ahern of Arthur Broomfield having coffee at the team rooms in Emo Court.

An exhibition of twelve photographs and twelve poems, all taken from the book, hung at the Dunamais Arts Centre throughout November.

Said Sean Wynne: “As members of Portlaoise Camera Club we were advised to have a ‘project’ – an ongoing, open-ended idea or ideas for those days, weeks, months – even years – when our creativity levels would be stagnant.”

### CULTURAL LIFE

This ‘project’ started in 2014. “The idea came

from my involvement in the Portlaoise Camera Club exhibition ‘Laois, its people and its land.’ Arthur Broomfield featured significantly in this exhibition of environmental portraits of persons who played a role in the cultural life of the county,” said Sean.

The book hails Ballyfin man Arthur Broomfield as a ‘poet, writer, academic and Beckett scholar.’

“Not only was he a subject but he also opened the exhibition. Hence the title, ‘The AB File’ – AB standing for Arthur Broomfield. The purpose of the title was to preserve the anonymity of the subject until the project was completed,” said Sean.

“Needing some guidance and feedback, I sought this from the club’s chief mentor Pat Ahern. Fascinated or just pitying the efforts of a floundering novice, he came along, as he would say himself, to carry the ‘gear’; but soon he too was totally hooked,” he said.

“With several hundred images to choose from, selecting the ones for inclusion in the book proved to be difficult and time consuming. Pat and I loosely applied criteria to come up with a selection of 100 images. A final cull resulted in 83 of these being included in the book.

### ENVIRONMENTAL PORTRAITS

“We decided the book would be a collection of, in the main, environmental portraits accompanied by poems from Arthur’s poetry collection ‘Cold Coffee at Emo House.’ As far as possible, the poems chosen had to have something to say about Arthur. We clustered these portraits around a theme or topic with an accompanying and where possible a related poem,” Sean said.

“The finished article, became a reality through the involvement of Terry Conroy, another club member who unsparingly gave of his time and expertise in its design and digital production. The book was produced by PhotoBox.”

## THANK YOU FOR THE MUSIC: St Mel’s Musical Society celebrates 40 years

By Jessica Thompson

It’s been a milestone year for many of Longford’s arts groups and organisations, with almost every performance organisation celebrating a major anniversary. But perhaps the most significant one this year is the 40th anniversary of St Mel’s Musical Society.

Established well over 40 years ago, the musical society was revived in 1978 and has entertained the masses in Longford every year since with this year’s ‘Sister Act’ really taking the biscuit in terms of top class performance and an incredibly high standard of production.

To celebrate the milestone birthday, St Mel’s Musical Society held an anniversary ball in the Longford Arms, which was very well attended. It was a fantastic opportunity for members of the society past and present to get together and reminisce about musicals gone by.

There’s no sign of them stopping just yet. In fact, the 2019 musical has already been announced for the Backstage Theatre. This year, the society is preparing to produce the spectacular Dolly Parton show ‘9 to 5’.

Follow St Mel’s Musical Society on Facebook to keep up to date.





# Midlands Maven

**Ruth Illingworth tells the fascinating story of a Westmeath-based writer who played a major role in saving the Gate Theatre.**

The playwright, novelist and theatre manager Christine Longford who lived for many years at Tullyally Castle in Castlepollard, Westmeath, made a major contribution to Irish cultural life.

Born Christine Trew in Somerset, England on September 6, 1900, she graduated from Somerville College, Oxford. While an undergraduate she met Edward Pakenham, Earl of Longford and they married in July 1925. They moved to Co. Westmeath to live in Edward's ancestral home, Tullyally Castle. They also had a house in Dublin. Both were enthusiastic supporters of the new Irish State and learned Irish, which they spoke with Oxford accents. They attended Irish cultural events such as the Midland Feis and were friends with politicians including Eamon De Valera.

## 'SNAPPY TREATMENT'

Christine's first book was published in 1928. A biography of the Roman Emperor Vespasian, it was praised by critics as 'a fresh snappy treatment of ancient Roman history.' She also wrote 'A Biography of Dublin' in 1936.

Christine then turned to writing fiction. She became a prolific author of plays and novels over the next three decades. Her first novel, 'Making Conversation' was published in 1931. Three other novels followed. The most famous of these was 'Mr Jiggins of Jigginstown' which was published

in 1933 and which she later adapted for the stage. This novel was based on the life of the famous eccentric Westmeath landlord, Adolphus Cooke of Cookesborough.

In 1930, the Longfords became involved with the newly established Gate Theatre in Dublin. They became close friends with the founders of the Gate, Micheál Mac Liammóir and Hilton Edwards, and wrote plays for the Gate, including an adaptation of Aeschylus's drama, 'The Orestia.'

## PLAYERS

In 1936, Christine and Edward set up a theatre company called the Longford Players. In winter, the Players toured the country, putting on a wide variety of plays including some written by Christine. The midlands always featured on the tours. Christine not only wrote plays for the company but also looked after the box office on tour. During the summer months, the Players were based at the Gate and the Longfords had their own two seats on the right hand side of the front row.

Christine wrote about 20 plays, making her one of the most prolific female writers in the history of 20th century Irish theatre. Her plays included historical dramas such as 'Patrick Sarsfield' and 'Lord Edward.' Her comedies included 'The Hill Of Quirke' and 'Tankardstown.' She also wrote adaptations of novels by Jane Austen

including 'Pride and Prejudice' as well as Sheridan Le Fanu's 'Uncle Silas' and Maria Edgeworth's 'The Absentee.' Her plays were popular with audiences and critics.

## DONATED

In 1957 the Gate Theatre ran into severe financial difficulties. The Longfords donated very considerable amounts of their own money to help save the theatre and also organised street collections in Dublin. Without their generosity the Gate would probably not have survived. After Edward's death in 1961, Christine served as managing director of the Gate until ill health forced her retirement in 1964. She remained a member of the board of the theatre until her death. After closing down the Longford Players, she moved from Castlepollard to live permanently in Dublin.

Christine wrote book reviews for the Irish Times and also appeared on a number of Radio Eireann arts programmes. She was granted life membership of Irish Equity and received an honorary doctorate from the National University of Ireland for her services to Irish theatre and literature. She died on May 14, 1980 aged 79.

In November 2015, a bust of Christine Longford was unveiled in the foyer of the Gate by her nephew, historian Thomas Pakenham.

# Ballymahon musician sets sights on Calcutta

By Jessica Thompson

**Katie Gallagher has really made a name for herself in recent years with her charm, wit and incredible musical talent. Even President Michael D. Higgins got the opportunity to enjoy her beautiful voice when she performed at the opening of a new students' union building in DCU.**

She's certainly achieved a lot to date but now has her sights set on some charity work with HOPE in Kolkata - formerly Calcutta - India. With that in mind, Katie is now a woman on a mission to raise a sum of €3,500 before June.

"I suppose I've always wanted to do work abroad and this year I started looking at which group I was going to go with. I think the fact that HOPE works with mainly children who were raised in the slums and streets of Calcutta

kind of resonated with me because I love little kids and would be better working with them as opposed to adults," said Katie.

"Some of my friends have done similar work in Africa and they loved it. They don't want to leave when it comes to it, so it will hopefully be a very good experience."

There are 60 projects with Hope in Calcutta and, because the charity is fully aware of Katie's background in music and education, the Ballymahon musician is planning to bring her guitar to India and have a bit of fun with the children who she says love to sing and dance. She will also be teaching English through games, drama and music.

For updates on Katie's fundraising journey or to keep informed of her latest musical ventures, follow @KatieGallagherMusic on Facebook.





# Leaves Festival of Writing celebrates 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary

**The annual Leaves Festival of Writing and Music in Laois celebrated its tenth anniversary from November 6 to 11 this year with a myriad and diversity of writing, spoken word, music, theatre and film.**

The packed weekend programme included performances by spoken word artist Stephen James Smith and musician, Enda Reilly at the Dunamaisé Arts Centre. Stephen was the Laois artist-in-residence earlier this year. Commissioned by the Laois arts office, he facilitated poetry workshops in Laois second level schools, the prison, and youth services.

Stephen's poetry has been recently added to the Leaving Certificate syllabus and has been translated into multiple languages.

London-based writer Helen Cullen hosted an adult writers workshop. A double book launch took place including the launch of 'Growing Pains and Growing Up', an anthology of essays and articles by John Whelan, and the launch of Helen Cullen's debut novel 'The Lost Letter of William Woolf.'

At St Peter's Church of Ireland church, Portlaoise, the audience was captivated by a discussion with Brian Keenan and Dermot Bolger, giving an insight into Brian's time as a hostage in Beirut as well as his work as a writer.

Writer Helen Cullen gave a wonderful reading from The Lost Letter of William Woolf and the evening was interspersed with the wonderful music of Seán Ryan on whistle and Kathleen Loughnane on harp.

Other highlights included an Irish event at the Laois Shopping Centre, 'Gaeilge Tamagotchi', a performance installation by Manchán Magan. People were invited to adopt an endangered Irish word and become a guardian of Gaeilge.

Barry Keegan, the creator of the graphic novel, 'The Bog Road' visited a number of secondary schools and children's writer Caroline Busher visited primary schools.

New reader-in-residence with the library service, Simone Schuemmelfeder, hosted a master class and workshop session on storytelling in Portlaoise library, helping participants to improve their storytelling skills. She held a children's storytelling session in Rathdowney library.

There was an evening of remembrance in Mountmellick library for those who lost their

lives in World War 1 that included poetry, prose, newspaper articles and narratives about those who fought.

The Dunamaisé Arts Centre, Portlaoise also scheduled events for Leaves, including cinema. 'The Happy Prince', which chronicles the last days of Oscar Wilde and a play by Eoin Colfer entitled 'Holy Mary' were on the bill.

At the launch of the Leaves Festival Festival, curator, Muireann Ní Chonaill said: "Celebrating its tenth anniversary, the Leaves Festival is a great opportunity to enjoy hearing contemporary writers and musicians, the art of conversation, film and theatre."

Follow the event on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/leavesliteraryfestival/>

For more information please contact the arts office, Laois County Council, Portlaoise, Co Laois.

E: [artsoff@laoiscoco.ie](mailto:artsoff@laoiscoco.ie)

W: [www.laois.ie](http://www.laois.ie)



## Longford's Brave Giant STAND TALL

By Jessica Thompson

It's no secret that Brave Giant have been taking the country by storm these past few years. The four north Longford lads have only gone from strength to strength, especially this year. It saw the release of new music; massive sold out gigs; a performance for 83,000 people at Croke Park for the All-Ireland hurling final day; and a number of festival appearances that knocked the socks off those who came out to see a good Irish band.

2019 is looking like it'll be another whopper year for Brave Giant who are preparing to release their debut album. It will feature several original tracks.

The lads entertained at the 3Arena for the RTE 2FM Christmas Ball on December 14, where Brave Giant performed alongside the likes of Hozier; Walking On Cars; Chasing Abbey and Keywest. Brave Giant will play their biggest headline gig to date in the Olympia Theatre, Dublin, on November 9, 2019. Tickets on sale [viaticketmaster.ie](http://viaticketmaster.ie).





# Birr artist gets in the international frame

**Nothing has stopped Birr artist Martina McAteer from drawing and painting - not working in a cash office nor supervising students.**

The Offaly woman is renowned for her highly imaginative work with ethereal qualities.

As a self-taught artist, she has stayed true to her individual expression.

"I worked mainly at night as a painter and it was challenging to juggle a teaching job and be a parent to two young children but in some ways, obstacles made me more driven. I think I was looking simply for a way to continue to paint," she said.

"After many years, I began to get into some galleries in Dublin and up north but it is very hard for any artist to sustain a living like this. I always painted even in the day jobs. I once worked in a cash office where I would sketch images of the notes and the customers whenever I got the chance," she recalled.

As a teacher, the students knew her as the teacher who would draw a student during a supervision class. "It often kept them so quiet as they were curious to see the outcome," Martina said.

## **'PEOPLE'S CHOICE'**

Eventually she was awarded recognised artist tax exemption status and went on to win the Kells studio prize for painting. She was also selected for

many solo and group shows. She exhibited with Pen and Brush Inc. in New York where she was selected as 'People's Choice.'

"This was a real boost to me at the time. It was a group dedicated to promoting women in the arts. The group had many historic people as their founder members like Eleanor Roosevelt. I couldn't believe it," said Martina.

Recently she was selected to exhibit again in New York with the Liner gallery for its holiday show. She is currently working on a body of work called 'Fool's Gold' which explores the idea of values and identity.

Her work can be found on Facebook and Instagram@martinamcateerartist as well as on: [www.saatchiart.com](http://www.saatchiart.com).





# Longford steps it out with flamenco

By Jessica Thompson

**A little bit of Spain was experienced at the Backstage Theatre in September as Ballinamuck native John Walsh brought the passionate art of flamenco to the county, invoking a hugely positive response in Longford.**

So enthusiastic was the reaction that the County Arts Office has taken Longford's love of flamenco on board while it devises a three-year strategy for music in Longford.

John is Ireland's leading flamenco guitarist and is aiming to brought all the excitement, energy and emotional depth of authentic flamenco straight from Spain to Longford with a spectacular performance of traditional flamenco palos – song forms – as well as some of his own instrumental compositions for guitar.

On the night, John performed alongside traditional flamenco singer, Maria Delgado; top percussionist from Toledo, Gines Pozas; and Remedios Heredia, a dancer from a gypsy family of Madrid whose members include legendary musicians such as the guitarist Sabicas and the great singer Estrella Morente.

Ballinamuck is a part of Longford well known for its love of country music but it was Spanish music that caught the ear of John when he was working in Dublin.

## DIFFERENT

"I bought a lot of CDs – I was into guitar music," said John. "I became obsessed with flamenco and gave up my day job and went to Spain to learn it. I did a classical guitar diploma before going, but flamenco is a completely different style – it can't really be classified as western music."

John started playing the guitar around ten years ago, during his Leaving Cert year and he's had a very colourful and successful career to date.

"There have been a number of highlights. I played at a lot of festivals when I was starting out," he said. In 2014, John was involved in writing and performing for Ballet Ireland's production of 'Carmen'. He also performed in the National Concert Hall and at prestigious flamenco festivals and venues in Spain. There's been a lot of interest in this kind of music here in Ireland, he said.

"I've played a lot of concerts and festivals in Spain to an audience that are ery familiar with the music, which was a bit nerve-wracking," he laughed.

But people in Longford have been reacting positively to this very different style of performance so far, probably because it's the type of music they would hear on holiday in Spain.

"It's very up-tempo, exciting, passionate music," said John. "There's an appetite for thing kind of thing in Longford. It's so different but generally I think people in Ireland – and Longford is no exception – are interested in something different."



## Shinrone designer collaborates with Clare metalsmith

An Offaly artist and designer responded to a challenge from the Council of Irish Fashion Designers (CIFD) and the Design and Craft Council of Ireland (DCCI) to members to merge fashion and traditional craft skills in co-designed garments which was shown at the CIFD annual fashion show in August. It will also feature in the ARC fashion show, a cancer fundraiser, which will be held at the RDS in March.

Hazel Greene, an artist and designer from Shinrone, was paired with Jane Murtagh of the Blacksmiths Guild, from Cratloe. Their challenge was to create a piece using both the lightest and heaviest of materials, silk and metal.

They took the neckline as their starting point; one side silk the other metal. Hazel used a heavy high sheen silk while Jane chose a light, matt finished metal. Jane had previously used the harts tongue fern leaf in her large scale sculptural

pieces. It was decided they would base their design on the leaf, accented with gold, aiming to create a single piece that faithfully reflected their individual disciplines and personalities.

Hazel designed a silk wrap with a single sleeve that attached to the forged copper leaf. She began with a series of paintings and from them the textile design was created, then digitally printed on 100% silk twill.

Jane forged copper to form the shape of the harts tongue leaf, which she finished with verdegri patination, and for the neck band she forged solid copper round bar gilded with varied leaf. The finished piece was hailed as easy to wear and stunning.

All 15 looks were showcased in an exhibition in the RDS as part of the Knitting and Sticking Show in November.







# **‘A Time For Everything’:** **Celebrating Longford Through Choral Music**

By Jessica Thompson

**There’s nothing quite like the full, angelic sound of a choir, singing its heart out in a place with acoustics to perfectly complement the music. St Mel’s Cathedral was treated to just that in September as the Lassus choir made its way to the midlands town from Dublin.**

Choral music is extremely strong in Co. Longford, with a choir in every parish, not to mention the very talented St Mel’s Cathedral Choir, County Longford Choir, and the Innyside Singers, all renowned around the county and further afield.

There was something special about the Lassus event, which drew spectators from all of Longford’s

local choirs, enthralled them with the beauty of sound, and leaving them smiling and grateful as they walked out the door, thrilled to have witnessed the beauty of choral music from the pews. What a special treat, they said.

## **HISTORIC EVENTS**

Titled ‘A Time For Everything’, this particular performance was a celebration of significant historic events in Longford, with a number of beautiful choral pieces chosen to complement a collection of poetry by local poet, Noel Monahan.

“Because it’s a collaboration with a local poet, the whole dimension of the concert changes,” said Dr Ite O’Donovan, who directed the choir. “Everything is integrated and there is a continuous flow. All the music was chosen specifically to work well with the poetry by Noel Monahan.”

Between choral performances, Noel Monahan read a number of works about the Lough Ree Islands, as well as works about St Mel’s cathedral itself.

“It was a privilege for me to be working with Dr Ite O’Donovan and working with the Lassus choir because the polyphonic sound of the choir is really something phenomenal,” said Noel.

The beautiful acoustics of the cathedral greatly enhanced the music of Bruckner, Lassus, Palestrina and Byrd, among other choral composers, both old and new. The cathedral’s organ, played by Simon Harden, punctuated the entire performance with spectacular solos throughout the night.

A truly enriching experience for the people of Longford, ‘A Time For Everything’ integrated all aspects of St Mel’s Cathedral, while celebrating the true beauty of Longford and its historical locations.

## **OFFALY ARTISTS RESPOND TO HEALTH LITERACY CHALLENGES**

By Ann Lawlor

**‘Health literacy’ - a project initiated by Anam Beo in collaboration with Offaly’s Public Participation Network - facilitating creative workshops and consultation with a range of elderly groups, agencies and forums, concluded with an exhibition at Áras an Chontae in October.**

Anam Beo artists Julie Spollen and Rowena Keaveny responded to the challenges of health literacy, a growing phenomenon faced by elderly people navigating their way within Ireland’s health system and health care facilities. Health literacy is defined as the degree to which individuals can obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate decisions regarding their health.

This Community Foundation for Ireland ‘Advocacy for Older Persons’ project on health literacy poses the question: ‘What is the best way to clearly communicate necessary information?’ A common response from older people is that there is too much information crammed into leaflets and not everyone can read the font. Even for the most capable person, health information can be

particularly difficult to understand and act upon.

Artist Julie Spollen advocates for special considerations when developing written materials and visual aids for older people. “When we get older, our learning and memory may affect our ability to absorb content, and therefore the way information is presented needs to accommodate the cognitive and physical changes that often accompany age,” she said.

## **ARTWORKS**

The project culminated in an exhibition with a series of artworks. They were informed by conversations and the collaborative expression of participants during creative workshops which involved print making; stencilling; graffiti; portraiture; painting; collage; the written word; reminiscence; music; dance; and movement.

Through dialogue and creative practice, barriers to health literacy were explored. Working with art and design media, the project offers interpretations and visual representations of what it can feel like to be disempowered when information on health becomes inaccessible.

Artist Rowena Keaveny said that Anam Beo strongly advocates health literacy accessibility for older and vulnerable people and how a picture combined with minimal text may counteract information overload, creating simpler narratives with more focused messages.

This project which started in September 2017, was supported by The Community Foundation for Ireland ‘Advocacy for Older Persons’ Fund. Anam Beo is supported by Offaly Council Council and HSE Dublin Mid-Leinster.







# Light touch

## Tree covered with anti-bird spikes prompted exhibition.

Artist Martina Coyle who has been living near Castlepollard, Co. Westmeath, for the last decade, is currently developing new work for a solo exhibition 'Paradise Is Too Far'. The exhibition, which will run in early April, will showcase an installation of sculptural elements, drawing, photography, and light.

"This work relates to how we seek to control the freedom of, in this case, birds to access locations to nest or rest. The initial impetus to research and develop this work came about by seeing a photo on the internet of a tree covered with anti-bird spikes," Martina said.

"We are familiar with the presence of anti-bird spikes in urban landscapes and, for the most part, they go unnoticed and are deemed acceptable. However, an anti-bird spike on a tree is not," she said.

Her work seeks to generate a dialogue around anthropocentrism, our relationship to our environment and the other species that also inhabit it. "My work is an exploration of the transformative aspect of light, a consideration of the nature of substances, an inquiry into how we engage with the built and natural world. I am sensitive to the utilisation of materials and their impact on the environment," Martina said.

### SHELTER

"Although the work refers to man's attempt to control wildlife, it aspires to create an imaginary link to the universal instinct to seek shelter."

Martina, a Dubliner, moved to Westmeath after spending many years in France.

She is a multi-disciplinary artist whose practice is made up of three inter-related strands: studio-based artwork/ installation, public artwork and art facilitation.

Her studio practice deals with our relationship to and how we engage with the built and natural world, the consideration of the nature of substances and the transformative aspect of light.

Martina has exhibited extensively in this country and France. Solo exhibitions have included "The Silver", Lavelle's car showroom, Black Sod Bay, Co. Mayo; 'in light', Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin; and sculpture and works paper, Logan Gallery, Galway.

Group exhibitions have included 'Point of View in Transition', the Solstice Gallery, Navan; 'Lumière Noir', La Forge, Paris; 'Entre les Deux', Gallery Artna, Marseille; 'The Garden', The Model Art and Niland Centre, Sligo; 'The Persistence of Memory', Galway Art Festival and the Green on Red Gallery, Dublin.

### RESEARCH-BASED

Her many commissioned public artworks, which range from permanent to ephemeral, include collaborative and residential public projects around the country. These are often research-based work utilising many different mediums and modes of fabrication including installation, sculpture, drawing, video and sound.

Martina has worked extensively with groups and individuals on projects including the 'In Your Own Words,' ephemeral rural installation, Wexford; children's art workshops, La Forge, Paris; inter-generational workshops, Maugherow Project, Sligo; 'In My Head' and family workshops, The Museum of Modern Art, Dublin.

Martina graduated from NCAD in 1990 and is currently undertaking a masters in art, research and collaboration in IADT.

# Filíocht

## AN CHATHAOIR (THE CHAIR)

This poem was composed for Culture Night 2017 where the chosen theme was the chair. The poet, Mary O'Connor from Offaly, describes her father sitting in his armchair beside the fire. At the ripe old age of 84, he sat with his spectacles perched on his nose, cigarette smoke spiralling, as he selected a long list of horses for the following day's racing. The list lengthened as the cigarette shortened and the smoke swirled magically. The armchair beside the fire is empty now, but is filled with precious memories.

Samhlaím fós é:  
m'athair,  
ina shuí cois tine sa chathaoir uilleach,  
in aois a cheithre scór 's ceithre bhliain.  
Toitín ina bhéal,  
deatach ag árdú, ag leathnú scamallach;  
spéaclaí socruithe ar a shrón,  
nuachtán 's peann ina láimh,  
ag roghnú na gcapall don lá amáraigh.  
Liosta á scríobh aige,  
an toitín ag giorriú,  
scamall á thimpeallú, draíochtach.  
Cathaoir uilleach cois tine fós,  
folamh,  
ach lán de chuimhní seodúla.

## NIDA

This poem was written for the legendary Edenderry cancer campaigner Nida Collins while she was still battling her fatal illness. In the poem Nida is likened to a great woman warrior, but in her case, she was fighting an invisible, suppressing enemy. Yet she remained determined and positive. Nida founded the charity 'Little Wishes' and selflessly offered love, support and encouragement to her fellow sufferers.

This poem was given by the poet to the late Emma Mhic Mhathúna when she was first diagnosed.

Mary sent a copy of the poem to the late Emma Mhic Mhathúna – one of the women at the centre of this year's cervical cancer controversy – when she lived in Edenderry. They met at the Ciorcal Cainte in Byrnes. "She met me later and said it meant a lot to her and she invited us down to her the Confirmation of her two sons in the Kerry Gaeltacht," said Mary whose poetry has featured in various publications.

Banlaoch cróga calma  
ag troid an námhaid do-fheicthe  
ag coimhlint le cumhacht ceansúil;  
dearcadh daingean, dearfach aici de shíor.

Aingéal na carrthanachta 's na féile,  
ag tál cneastacht 's grásta Dé  
ar an lucht lag, lagbhíoch;  
á suaimhniú le focail dhóchais 's le guíonna beaga.

Sprid na saoirse 's na síochána  
ag séideadh leoithneach, in ár measc;  
ag scaipeadh dhuaireas, éadóchas 's brón,  
's í ag breith dhóchais 's misneach 's muinín.

Go gcúmhdaigh Dia thú, a Nida.

Máire Ní Chonchúir





## Longford Culture Night



## Offaly Culture Night



## Culture Night in Westmeath



## Culture Night in Laois







Dunamaise Arts Centre 2018  
open submission prizewinner,  
Paul Bokslag.  
Photo by Evelyn McNamara.



Paul Bokslag, 'Walking on sunshine', marker and acrylic on board, 60x60cm, 2018

## 'Walking on sunshine' after Dunamaise win

**Fifty-two artists, with work in a range of media, are represented in the 2018 open submission show at Dunamaise Arts Centre, Portlaoise. At the opening reception in November, guest selector Claire Behan named Paul Bokslag as winner of the coveted prize - a month-long residency in Laois Arthouse, Stradbally, supported by Laois Arts Office.**

Born in The Netherlands and now living in Co. Kilkenny and working at KCAT Arts Centre in Callan, artist Paul Bokslag has previously concentrated on large scale paper cuts, but submitted the striking 'Walking on sunshine' to this exhibition.

Paul has previously been awarded residencies and exhibited widely in Ireland and Holland, in solo and group shows. "I feel very honoured to have been awarded this residency and look forward to the focused opportunity to create new work for upcoming exhibitions," he said.

This year's Dunamaise Open presents exciting visual dialogues from the breadth and depth of artistic expression by emerging and established artists from all over Ireland. The exhibition continues at Dunamaise Gallery until Saturday, January 5. [www.dunamaise.ie](http://www.dunamaise.ie)

## BRESSIE ON MAKING IT WITH MINDFULNESS

**Westmeath's Niall Breslin or 'Bressie' as he is better known, has had his children's book 'The Magic Moment', published by Gill, nominated for an Irish Book Award. The story incorporates a mindfulness technique to help children explore difficult emotions, face their fears and return to the present moment.**

Illustrated by Cork native Sheena Dempsey, 'The Magic Moment' aims to encourage children to feel the fear and jump in anyway. It is musician and producer Bressie's second book. 'Me and My Mate Jeffrey' was a number one bestseller and winner of an Irish Book Award. To coincide with the publication of his new book, he visited St Mary's School, Raharney. "It was great to visit the school and share the book with students," he said.

"Currently I'm doing a master's in mindfulness-based intervention and a lot of my work in my course is with kids and their minds and what they are aligned with," Niall said. "I've an unbelievably vivid memory of my own childhood and while I've been studying for my master's, I got very interested in how young kids navigate life. I wanted to see if I could help kids and their parents find the language to describe and navigate emotions," he said.

"One of the biggest reactions I've been getting is when we visit schools

with the book, and seeing the kids connect with 'The Magic Moment' trick. With the book, you're giving kids a physical cue to go along with their breath and their thoughts. What mindfulness does is to anchor you if you're feeling a bit scattered or overwhelmed.

"With kids, if you give them a physical cue - which in the book is Freddie pressing the finger and thumb together on both hands - and get them to think a happy thought and really engage with that and how it makes them feel and where they feel it in their body.

"Lots of kids will say, 'Oh, I feel it in my tummy', and that's a lovely physical connection to how they're feeling and they immediately grasp that. They could be in a room full of people and they might get a bit scared, but if they're able to do this little trick, they can settle themselves down and anchor themselves," Niall said.

"I think at the moment young people are slightly overwhelmed. I think

they're consuming a lot. There's a lot of information for them, for their senses and you know, you can notice young people are a bit uneasy. The world is moving very fast and can feel really overwhelming to them sometimes.

"When I was six years old, I was eating worms covered in muck in the garden, and the world beyond my back garden and house didn't exist for me. Now kids take in so much information that they are often pulled from the present moment continually throughout their day - it's a sensory overload for their young brains, from which mindful techniques can provide respite," he said.

Currently in the second year of completing master's in mindfulness-based intervention in UCD, he is working on a new album with The Blizzards, which will be launched in the New Year.

'The Magic Moment' is on sale at €16.99.







'Townscapes' exhibition launch at the Irish Architectural Archive, Merrion Square, Dublin 2.



Mary Burke, Artist, Muireann Ní Chonaill, Arts Officer, Karen Ó Leary and John Mulholland, CEO Laois County Council.



Members of Stradbally Active Retirement Group viewing 'Townscapes' exhibition launch at the Irish Architectural Archive, Merrion Square, Dublin 2 on May 8.

# Curtain comes down on 'TOWNSCAPE' EXHIBITION

**The Laois Arthouse will present the finale of the 'Townscape' exhibition, by Mary Burke, after a nine-month tour, from January 15 to February 22. The event will be opened on Saturday, January 26 at 3pm, by Justice Minister Charles Flanagan, with a keynote address by Professor Mary Corcoran.**

'Townscape' opened in the Dunamais Arts Centre in March 2018, with a seminar 'A Dialogue with Architecture: Reinterpreting the Irish Town.' It was exhibited over the summer at the Irish Architectural Archive, Merrion Square, Dublin 2, and a series of lunchtime talks entitled 'Town Talks' took place. It then toured to Maynooth University and closed with a seminar at the library on the theme of the arts and community engagement.

## WORKSHOPS

In January, children and young people will be invited to explore the exhibition under the direction of Jenny Papassotirios of Dublin Castle. Some of the workshops will be filmed and presented at a special event marking the 'Townscape' exhibition on Saturday, January 26. All are welcome.

Mary Burke is a critically acclaimed Irish artist whose life's work up to this point dealt with painting suburban surroundings. On the invitation of Laois Arts Officer and Curator Muireann Ní Chonaill, Mary visited Laois Arthouse to see if Stradbally, Co. Laois, would be suitable and appealing subject matter. Over a twelve-month period she visited twelve homes selected and 'Townscape' was born.

"The built environment has always been central to my work. Most of my work has been Dublin-situated. 'Townscape' has provided me with the opportunity to explore homes in the rural midland town of Stradbally," said Mary.

## ELECTRIC PICNIC

Being a rural, planted town there were a great variety of homes from which to choose. Mary included paintings of Stradbally Hall, ancestral home of Tom, Gesa and the Cosby family, which is central to the story of the town. These days it is probably best known for the annual Electric Picnic festival.

Featured is one of the estate cottages in Court Square, built by the Cosby family for their workers in the early 1880s and now home to Mary Hegarty and Brian Flanagan. Also on Court Square is the home of Christine and James Hewitt.

On Main Street, the homes of undertakers John and Anne Lynch to the rear of their business and of Christine Mulhall and David Kennedy are included. The Parochial House, residence of Rev Jim O'Connell, the then parish priest, is featured. Also in 'Townscape' is John and Irene Delaney's house in Brockley Park, a development designed

by renowned architect Frank Gibney for Laois County Council in the 1950s and indicative of Gibney's careful consideration of site, aspect and orientation.

Houses within the recently built estates of Cillbeg Manor belonging to Rita and Pat Scully and Siobhan and Sean Kane's home in The Glebe are included. Further examples of modern abodes are those of John and Rachel Conway and Geraldine and Seán Delaney and the homes of Dick and Katie Dillon in Woodview, to the rear of Laois Arthouse which are also featured.

## SOCIOLOGIST

The involvement of sociologist Professor Mary Corcoran enriched the project. She documented what living in Stradbally means to the home owners. 'Townscape' brings sociology, the community and the arts into collaborative practice. Consisting of 18 paintings in oil pastel on canvas, 'Townscape' opened on May 8 in the Irish Architectural Archive.

A companion book 'Townscape', documenting the project, with essays by Mary Corcoran, Jenny Haughton and images of the paintings, is available for €10 from the Irish Architectural Archive. Details from: [artsoff@laoiscoco.ie](mailto:artsoff@laoiscoco.ie)





# Spirited away

**Tanya Bond, a self-taught artist working in Offaly and Tipperary, is creating a new spirit animal oracle deck, merging art, writing and spirituality. Originally from Belarus, she has been living in Ireland for the past 15 years.**

An oracle deck, she said, is a collection of visual cards with assigned meanings. "As someone picks a card, the idea is that synchronistically the meaning might help the person understand their situation better or get a different angle view on it, or validate their feelings. Some oracle cards are used for predicting the future, while others are for introspection."

This will be Tanya's second crowd-funded oracle deck that she has illustrated, written the accompanying text for and published, using printing companies in Ireland.

Following the success of Duality Deck, the spirit animal deck will also get its funding via a Kickstarter campaign.

Tanya's main body of work revolves mostly around portraiture and her spirit animal deck will represent human totem guardians with their animals. The cards meanings are drawn from meditation and observation of life cycles and 'programmes' that we go through in everyday life.

The main purpose of this oracle deck as well as her previous Duality Deck will be self-inquiry, contemplation and integration of shadow aspects of our subconscious mind, she said.

Tanya intends to complete the images and writing for this spirit animal deck next spring, after which she will hope to find international support for its creation via Kickstarter.

Meanwhile, she continues to teach art at the Family Resource Centre, Birr, on Mondays from 5pm to 6pm for children, and from 6pm to 8pm for adults.

Tanya's progress can be followed on her Facebook page, Tanya's Charming Creatures.

## MidlandsArts andCultureMagazine

A REVIEW OF THE ARTS IN LAOIS, LONGFORD  
OFFALY AND WESTMEATH

