

Art school with a difference at Kylemore Abbey

Denis Farrell created the Lodestar school at the stunning Connemara location out of frustration with the drift of art education

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Aidan Dunne



Student Francesca Alexander working at Lodestar School of Art. Photograph: Nora Duggan

The Lodestar School of Art is a summer school with a difference. This 10-day painting and drawing marathon, which kicked off on August 18th at Kylemore Abbey in Connemara, is the brainchild of artist Denis Farrell, and could be described as an interruption and a temporary alternative to conventional academic art education.

He aimed to attract artists who wanted to develop their work – to shake it up and move it on – and who wanted some informed critical input and real conversation about making art and about the theoretical underpinning that informs its making.

The nature of the professional input reflects the dual emphasis on doing and thinking. There are established, practising artists, including Farrell himself, Alice Maher, Dermot Seymour, John Brady, Squeak Carnwath and Chuck Webster, but also writers including the critic Barry Schwabsky, poet and critic John Yau and art historian Aisling Molloy.

The idea is that no one is a passive or conventionally authoritative participant. Everyone works, whether that means painting, drawing, talking, writing or thinking, and everything is up for grabs. At the start of the 10 days, Farrell relished that he was not quite sure what was going to happen.

He has substantial experience of art education as both student and teacher. He studied first at Limerick School of Art, and then attended the New York Studio School on a Fulbright Scholarship before completing a master of fine arts degree at Yale University School of Art in 1993.

He has gone on to teach at Galway-Mayo and Sligo institutes of technology, and has exhibited in the US. He shows with Taylor Galleries in Dublin, and has had solo shows in public spaces including Limerick City Gallery and The Dock in Carrick-on-Shannon.

Bingo in Brooklyn

Farrell wasn't quite happy with the way the art world was structured, academically or commercially. In 1997 he opened Bingo Hall, an alternative contemporary art venue in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. He felt the gallery system did not reflect the worth of the art that was being created. He and his wife, Connie, moved back to Ireland in 1999 (she teaches at NUI Galway's Huston Film School). In time they settled in rural Co Leitrim. It was an unlikely location for an artist pursuing a cosmopolitan practice, and counter-intuitive in terms of pursuing a career, but Farrell has always measured his work against the best international exemplars and has never taken a limited, parochial view.

Given the opportunity to reside for a time in Co Clare, in a substantial space, he and Connie saw it as a means of advancing the alternative vision that first manifested itself in Bingo Hall.

Reconnecting with poetry

The title this time out was The Big Peach. He had in mind not just an exhibition venue but a place that would accommodate students – “specifically,” he says, “students of painting and drawing. Because I really felt, and I still feel strongly, that painting and drawing are getting sidetracked and undermined in art education.”

Farrell is by no means an artistic conservative. His own work, made in series of paintings and works on paper, is conceptually rigorous and generally audacious in form, ranging from minimally stated, layered, watercolour washes to densely textured, thickly painted oils, both usually built up on the armature of a right-angled grid.

While open to a plurality of practice, he feels that academic and curatorial culture has become unduly prescriptive, so that students who want to address painting in a serious, systematic way often don't have the space, figuratively speaking, to do so.

When it comes to the moment of actually making a piece of work, he feels, there is a huge gap between the academic apparatus and the nature of the experience.

“It's fair to say that the Lodestar has come out of a certain frustration with the drift of art education,” he says. “It's as if the educational infrastructure has lost touch with the language of poetry. But contact with that language is essential; otherwise you're starting from a point that is foreign to painting.”

The purpose of Lodestar for him is not to optimise your portfolio for school or gallery, but to create a space for reflection and possibility, a real creative space.

He's not alone in holding such views about art education. Debate has raged since a fundamental shift in emphasis and curriculum at the beginning of the 1970s. Since then, innumerable students have been dismayed to find that, for the most part, art school scarcely acknowledges the value not only of technical skills but of the associated conceptual skills needed to address the nature and history of core artistic disciplines.

Artists all seeking a transition

The Big Peach was stymied when the Farrells' occupancy of the Co Clare base was curtailed. They live now in Oughterard in Co Galway. “At some point it occurred to us that the idea we had for The Big Peach was not specific to a place. We looked at a possible space in Oughterard. But it was sold to a speculative investor (and, by the way, it is still lying idle). Then, by chance, we were introduced to some of the Benedictine nuns at Kylemore.”

The idea that Kylemore might be a temporary venue for a summer school sparked into life. “We went and talked to the nuns. They were immediately receptive and accommodating. We got on beautifully together. Their attitude has been amazing, incredibly helpful.”

It all came together fairly quickly. “It was a bit of a rush,” he says with a smile. There are 13 participants. “They are at various stages of engagement, including mature artists who are looking to extend themselves in some way or other.” It is, as he says, quite a personal, intimate process, and it would be unfair to spell out specific examples, but the common denominator is that everyone is looking to a kind of shift, a transition.

The commitment of the participating artists and writers is impressive. “I didn’t know how people would react when I put the idea to them, but they’ve been incredibly responsive.”

He looked for particular qualities in those he approached. “For example, I’d noticed that Dermot [Seymour] says very little, usually, but when he does, gosh, it really means something. I liked that. And Aisling [Molloy]: you might think, Well, she’s a pure academic, an historian. But I realised she has this very compassionate approach, which is quite rare.”

The Farrells spend summers in a village in northeast France, Aubepierre-sur- Aube. It is a lovely place to be, he says, and a nice place to work. But, quite by chance, it has become something more. Locally, someone launched a contemporary art centre, Le Maison Laurentine. “It was completely unexpected,” Farrell says. “It’s now like a non-stop summer arts festival.”

Next year, he aims to add to that festival. The intention is that the next instalment of Lodestar will be in Aubepierre-sur-Aube, as a collaborative venture, in another capacious venue. “It might sound terrible, but what we’re trying to do is create an art school in which there’s room for failure; where people can just get together and feel free to try to create something beautiful.”

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