

CULTURE

Irish artists left well alone

Sarah Kelleher hears from contemporary artists like Alice Maher and Maud Cotter about coping in the time of Covid-19

Sarah Kelleher

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Back in the early days of social distancing, in what seems like the remote past of a month ago, it was regularly stated on social media that artists — who are used to working alone — were uniquely qualified to cope with our strange new reality. A quaintly 19th-century idea, I thought; the solitary life of the artist seemed as relevant as

the stereotype of a poet in the attic, or the tortured genius sealed in their studio and locked in single combat with a canvas or lump of stone. These days the reality of contemporary visual arts practice is more extrovert and diverse, collaborative and interdisciplinary. Artists are active participants in the world, working in shared studio spaces, or with the assistance of teams of technicians in specialist facilities.

Yet, as the New York art critic Jerry Saltz recently argued, art is an intimate practice: it requires time and space to be receptive to ideas, to sit with them and examine, before turning them into words, paint or form. So, is it true that artists need isolation, and if so, how is the lockdown affecting their work?

“Enforced isolation is just as tough for artists as it is for anyone else,” says Alice Maher. “It is just as difficult to be confined, to be fearful and to be dictated to. But in the studio you need time alone to open a clear channel for your ideas.”



Joe Neeson's The Cut

Maher lives in rural Mayo with her husband, the painter Dermot Seymour, in a house designed around their studio needs. However, her most recent projects have been intensively collaborative and involved a punishing schedule of travel. Last year her film *6Skin*, made with artist Aideen Barry, involved a commute between Mayo and Galway for its production, followed by weeks of travel to America for their joint exhibition, *Fair is Foul & Foul is Fair*.

This year Maher has been working on the visual design for an original dance piece, *The Misunderstanding of Myrrha*, with the dance company Junk Ensemble, developing sets and costumes with theatre-maker Ger Clancy. The work had its premiere in Bray's Mermaid Arts Centre in February, but the pandemic has resulted in its run at the Dublin Dance Festival being postponed. Despite these difficulties, Maher argues that "the great thing about being an artist is that you become good at processing things and at developing a set of strategies for not being overwhelmed. Artists will still make work." She continues to collaborate, albeit remotely from her home studio, where she is working with artist Rachel Fallon on a new project, sharing progress on Skype.

This mental resilience is echoed by Cork-based sculptor Maud Cotter. "If art practice teaches one anything, it is how to move ahead positively," she says. Cotter is working towards a big solo exhibition, which has been in development for several years. Although its opening date has been shifted to January, she sees this as a positive and the extra time as a gift, allowing her to concentrate on the publication and documentary work that accompanies every exhibition.

"In a way, the pandemic has forced this stripping back of the complexities and busyness of normal life, which is itself a model for the discipline required for studio work," she says.

Until recently Cotter was making work in the National Sculpture Factory, a studio and fabrication space in Cork. "In the factory, my mornings can be quite busy with chats and collaborative work, but my afternoon is more contemplative. I need to put on my earphones and seal myself into my inner space to generate that particular endlessness of studio time when my mind is free of constraints." This routine, she argues, is similar to that of any self-employed person. "It requires discipline to carve out space for work, to draw boundaries between home life and work life."

Sometimes, however, the work of an artist does require large teams. Joe Neeson has built a career through public sculpture and has been working on Per Cent for Art Scheme projects since 1998. He is probably best known for *The Cut*, a piece just outside Fermoy on the Cork-Dublin road. Large-scale public sculpture is a complex undertaking and Neeson works with engineers, architects and road planners, along with specialist fabricators and foundries in Europe. Out of this practice has grown a business, Sculpture Form Limited, a specialist sculpture-fabrication firm. Work has ceased for the moment, but for Neeson the break in activity has had positive aspects. The silence of working alone without the constant noise of power tools and metal-working equipment is a welcome relief. A quiet space has opened up for him to work on smaller pieces, to get back to

basics. “An artist needs to be able to spend time alone,” he says. “I long for it at times.”



Mental resilience: Alice Maher often finds it tough

So, isolation is a discipline and solitude can be a balm. It is also something of a privilege, and one not easily come by if you have a family. “Being a mother to young children, there really isn’t any room for solitude,” says Linda Quinlan, a painter in Dublin who is working towards a two-person show in the Oonagh Young Gallery this year. “I don’t really think of my work in terms of solitude. Contemplation and focus, yes, I definitely require that, but so do most other activities. I work in a very immersive manner that requires concentrated and extended moments of time, creating work in a series rather than piece by piece. That process is not facilitated by uneven access to studio time, so securing the resources for childcare and making that financially feasible is always a challenge.”

Quinlan balances the studio solitude with mental stimulation from her peers. “I definitely need time to ripen my inner world, but it is always in conversation or in relation to something else,” she says. “The conversations and exchanges I have with other artists are deeply important to my practice, and this year I made a commitment to work on two-person exhibitions specifically to foster and ripen these exchanges.”

The need for flexibility and balance is echoed by painter Kevin Mooney, who until recently was working in Sample-Studios in Cork. “I always thought that having children would present serious

challenges to maintaining a studio practice,” he says. “But it has also benefited my practice, as there is always a time deficit. Studio time then becomes precious, and is more focused and concentrated as a result. It can’t be wasted. When you do get into the studio, the brushes are out; there’s no time for daydreaming.

“While solitude is important and necessary for art-making, there’s also a flipside. I think the work is only ever as good as all the other inputs, conscious and unconscious, that go into it. This can be research and skills developed, or whatever, but just as important is conversation around the work and feedback. So friends and a professional network are vital to an artist too.” Sample-Studios is closed for now, and Mooney plans to clear a corner to work from home. “Even if it’s just reading or drawing, I’ll see what’s possible.”

Isolation can be a trial, and solitude difficult to find — contrary challenges thrown up by the present radical changes to how we live and work. Cotter sees the potential in our demanding new reality for a more expansive kind of empathy. “As we learn to protect people on a global scale, and distance becomes a way of caring, the value of solitude might be reinstated,” she says.