Leaving it all behind

By Cristín Leach
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What happens when an artist, still under the age of fifty and making brilliant new work is suddenly gone, too soon and, for those around them, entirely unexpectedly? It happens, and when it does, one of the biggest challenges for those left behind is what to do with the art. In 2011 and 2012, within the space of three months, two of our most significant mid-career artists passed away. William McKeown died by suicide at his studio home in Edinburgh, aged 49. Patrick Jolley had a fatal heart attack while filming in New Delhi. He was 47.

These two men, one born in Tyrone, the other in County Down, worked in different mediums: one predominantly paint, the other predominantly film. Both had achieved a certain level of international recognition which, despite artworld globalisation, continues to elude the vast majority of the most talented, provocative, productive or even self-promoting artists born on this island. In general, the wider world does not pay much focused attention to visual art by Irish or Northern Irish artists. It's not where our creative reputation as a nation lies, yet.

William McKeown, Cloud Cuckoo Land, Kerlin Gallery, October 2015.

Neither Jolley nor McKeown were the self-promoting type. Both made quietly powerful work that grabbed the eyes and minds of certain pockets of the artworld, certain curators, more than it did those of big-shot collectors, although McKeown was and continues to be successfully represented by the Kerlin Gallery in Dublin. Yet, in two very different ways, after their deaths a timely and organised effort was made to continue to promote, preserve and show their work. In what appears to be

an unprecedented occurrence in the history of Irish art, both have continued to exhibit regularly, almost as if they were still alive.

This June, *The Drowning Room*, a 2000 film by Jolley and Reynold Reynolds is part of a show in Sweden. Earlier this year, *Burn* (which Jolley co-directed with Reynolds in 2002) was shown in Turko Art Museum in Finland, his photographs were at the Butler Gallery in Kilkenny and *The Door Ajar* was screened at the Crawford Gallery in Cork. In 2015, Jolley's work was shown at Solstice Arts Centre in Navan, the Irish Film Institute and in Amsterdam, Montréal, Barcelona and Paris.

In 2017, *The Dayroom,* McKeown's painting/room installation will open at the Dallas Museum of Art. Last year, his work was the focal point around which the group show The Untold Want unfolded at the Royal Hibernian Academy. He had a solo exhibition offsite at Lismore Castle Arts in 2013.

The artist Dorothy Cross was a close friend of McKeown's. She feels the sensitive management of his estate, in particular, was down to the artist himself: “I think maybe a big difference is that he planned his own death. He knew he wasn't going to be around, even though we wanted him to be. He went through his studio and got rid of all the paintings that weren't good enough and had everything completely organised, as Willie always did."

Patrick Jolley, solo show, Limerick City Gallery of Art, April 2013

After his death, the William McKeown Foundation was established and a dedicated curator, Caroline Hancock, put in place. “It's like his work is being held," says Cross. “I think with Caroline he's lucky he has someone with a very good eye, who was very sensitive to him and knew him very well." “He has left them [the paintings] in arrangements that are very definite, whereas a lot of other artists would not have had that." McKeown articulated very clearly what he was leaving behind and how it might be managed. Jolley's estate is more complicated. The legalities of it are still being unravelled. The artist Linda Quinlan is the administrator.

Seán Kissane, curator at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, has worked with estates in putting together major exhibitions, including last year's outstanding Gerda Frömel

show. Frömel was 44 when she drowned in 1975. Soon afterwards her work essentially disappeared from public view.

Kissane says what's required are “people with a high level of professional knowledge and practice… With Caroline [Hancock] and Linda Quinlan they're on-message all the time, that's the difference." As an artist, Cross agrees. “How something is presented, words, are part of it. Willie's work, with Caroline around, she has the tone right. “Problems occur, Kissane says, “when family relationships begin to push in, when money is involved, or sharp practice on the part of the galleries." He points to the estate of Scots-Irish painter William Crozier, who died at 81 in 2011 as a good example of an artist whose reputation has been well-managed after his death: “His widow was the art historian Katharine Crouan, so you have a practical and astute heir."

The death of any artist leaves behind practical questions as well as issues of reputation, legacy, and of course, money. “When you think of Willie, who could hardly pay the rent most of his life. It is horrifying to think that it [the value of his work] would be enhanced by death," says Cross. “I wouldn't imagine Willie's work would be that kind of material, but you'd wonder about the people who haven't organised that and what happens. You think of people whose work is really good and it falls away [after they die]." It can go either way, but it's a situation that is complicated when an artist has not left specific instructions and identified an administrator as well as an heir or heirs.

Cross has a will, but agrees appointing executors can be problematic: “you don't want to weigh anyone down with that kind of stuff." It is a huge job. It involves protecting the artist's reputation, continuing or ending contracts with gallerists, some of whom may have had a long relationship with the artist, negotiating legalities with next of kin and coming up against collectors who may find themselves in a sudden position to manipulate the market for financial gain. Artist estate issues tend to only make the news in the case of big names: Lucien Freud, Francis Bacon, Willem De Kooning. But for those with a lower profile, estate management remains a significant issue, and a job that often falls to family members who do not necessarily have the professional skills, to sort out.

Gerda Fromel, A Retrospective, IMMA, April 2015

Kissane worked with Fromel's sons to put together the retrospective at IMMA last year. They were children when she died and went to Germany to their father, leaving their home in Dublin to be rented out. Decades later, this caused some unexpected complications: “Her studio was there and her work was really scattered all around the house and even the grounds of the house," says Kissane. “The inner courtyard for example had several of the stone sculptures. And even the [carved marble] ‘Pond’ pieces with the hollow, she had used those to catch water …the dog would use them to drink, or the cat. So there was a sense that some of the works had a domestic function." “The difficulty was that her kids were not able to separate out domestic items from artworks. It was this process of trying to reclaim things from the gardens."

On his return, her son Oliver Shürmann did catalogue and store the work he found, “but there were no titles because they just didn't know," says Kissane. Crucially, the family handed Fromel's entire paper archive, including catalogues and reviews, over to Kissane, enabling him to put names and dates to works. Frömel had been represented by the Dawson Gallery. “They had the retrospective at the Hugh Lane [in 1976] and her estranged husband instructed them to sell their stock and to close the relationship… [after that] no one had a contract to sell her work," says Kissane. Neither did anyone have the job of preserving or promoting it.

Still, there is only so much control an artist can exert, even while they are still around. “When we're dead we're dead," says Cross. “Do you miss your work when it's sold? Well I don't, but it should be presented in the way it left you. That's the thing. When the *Virgin Shroud* train was all scrumpled up at the Tate and there was a little rope, I had to ask the guard could I climb over the rope to make it straight. It should be straight." *Virgin Shroud,* Cross's 1993 cowhide and wedding dress train sculpture, is one of the artist's most iconic works.

“Documentation is so important," she says. And yet she also acknowledges another side of it: “The whole egocentricity of permanence and longevity." “Our lifetimes are very short and the existence of our work is going to be very short also… I wonder about this desperation to keep it forever, because there is no such thing as forever." That's true, in a big picture way, but there are art institutions, collectors and certainly estate inheritors, who might try to disagree.

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