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Live encounters

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SALLY MCKENNA



Sally McKenna with Raftery in clay. Pic by Ann O'Mahoney

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Sally Mckenna

Well-known Irish Painter, Sculptor and Sketch Artist
in a live encounter with Mark Ulyseas

"A society without art is an undocumented society.

All the great civilizations are known through their writers, musicians, painters, sculptors, architects. It is only in retrospect that we know what art will be significant to remember.

Much modern art requires a heavy interaction with the intellectual process.

In the past artists had been formative figures in the development of the society they lived in. They were watch dogs and innovators and not just singularly motivated. So much of art chosen by the Arts establishment is just not relatable.

The average person just has to shake their head. I call it a case of the Emperor's New Clothes when I see some of the work chosen today for the big prizes. Art has to have guts and some devotion to an aesthetic. There are many levels that need to be activated when interacting with an art form.

If thinking is the main receptor then, to me, it is failed art and relevant to the artist but not necessarily to society." - *Sally*

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Water colour sketch from 1994 that I did at a B & B on the Aran Islands. Size 8" x 10". Pic by Sally Mckenna

Why are you an artist? Was it a calling? Or, did you experience an epiphany? Please share your thoughts with us.

You might say it was a calling because it just kept coming back. In High School I'd be organizing the games schedule and then I would be doing the bulletin boards. I was in the Glee club but I would end up painting the stage sets. I was very interested in science but I enjoyed most just drawing the cell, and atomic structures. So I just surrendered to the pull and changed my major in my junior year to art. I often tried to leave Art for a period of time doing stints of teaching but I always became despondent, missing the process greatly. I find it fascinating to come up with a concept and then see it to fruition. It is a very compelling way of being in the world and the more time I put in with the it the more I realized just could not get along without that constant lure. I knew I was a better teacher from the experience of studio art.

I remember the day I felt secure in calling myself an artist. I was working in a converted garage in Arizona in the seventies and it was in an interview for a local magazine that I integrated in my soul self the calling with a profession. I enjoyed doing art with my children and they watched me grow in my art as they grew. They came to my shows and I was always proud to have them there along with me. I did feel a conflict, on occasion, between my profession, and motherhood. Motherhood is a full time, all encompassing job and it is difficult to try to be both a mother and a professional at anything. The child often suffers but then the child also suffers with an unhappy parent. Making art is a physical process and the drawing, painting; sculpture won't get done on its own. I was surprised at how all consuming it was. My art has always been very labor intensive and it takes many hours to complete. It is a positive addiction and without it an artist does not survive.

I really enjoyed learning the basics and it helped to demystify the process of being an artist. I learned to weld in a vocational technical school and that helped to give me confidence in handling my materials. **I learned to spin on my great grandmother Sarah McKenna's spinning wheel from Ireland** and in later years felt that she was behind much of this destiny. That spinning wheel is now on display here at the Glore Mill in Mayo, Ireland. My first sculptures were composed of welded metal shapes with hand spun yarns intertwined in the form. It was an entanglement that I never wanted to or was able to extricate from.

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"St. Nathy's Oak" Sculpture installation installed in St. Nathy's chapel 2009. Size 20 ft arc by 5 ft wide, steel, copper, brass commissioned for the 200th year celebration. Pic by Sally McKenna

You are a sketch artist, painter and sculptor. Do you see yourself as all three or primarily a sculptor?

I do all three , but I find that drawing and painting eventually inform my sculpture. I keep up with the sketching because it is my starting point.

It was very formative to **illustrate Terry McDonagh's book Cill Aodain and Nowhere else.** Since my Nowhere else is also Cill Aodain I felt I was putting together many influences from my own childhood, personal history and the new eyes that saw the subjects Terry wrote about. I always have an empty large canvas with a plan for it in my head. I find painting a very alluring process. It is hard to stop once started. As a mother I found I could leave my sculpture in pieces on a table easier than I could leave an unfinished painting. I spent years painting my dream imagery and I still have four of those in my studio. I recently went back to sketching on a brief holiday and it was like coming home again, settling in. I have over fifty sketchbook of travels , ideas, and free form drawings.

I call these my creative doodles. My training stressed keeping active sketchbooks insisted on by both of my drawing and painting professors. Now I am wondering what to do with them all . I am always moving forward with new ideas but I often will look up a reference in my sketch books. Even today, as I write this, a painting I started working on for the Autumn Equinox caught my eye and an element to add to it came to me to bring it through the Spring Equinox and into the Summer Solstice.

When I came to Ireland I enjoyed moving from the bright colours of the American Southwest to the subtler tones of the Irish landscape. I love raw umber I never used it much before but it is the colour of the bog and the bog is special to me. So yes it is sculpture but it is more just a life of using what I need to get my ideas out of my head and into the real . I would say reality but my idea of reality is now getting very subjective.

There are many forms of reality . When you think we are mostly composed of space and are made of the stuff of stars then why limit reality.



"Eve's Seed" in size 2.5 ft by 2.5 ft. Steel, and copper.
Pic by Sally McKenna

Where does your inspiration come from? Your culture? Your education? Or, sudden streaks of spiritual lightening that lights up your soul?

My inspiration is like being tapped on the shoulder by something that stops me in my tracks. Before I became an artist I had not begun to codify these experiences into inspiration. Everyone has this. That intense falling in love with something is part of being human. If I look back on my work I see that I take these ideas and work with them until I feel there is an ending and then something else moves in. I do work in a series, but not intentionally. **The first idea often comes from an intense connection with a subject.**

When I was a child sifting for garnets and iron pyrite in the sand of a desert school yard it was magical for me. What child does not have a rock collection? **My weaving that formed the protoplasm of my sculpture reliefs was the layering of rock strata. So yes my sculpture was inspired by my first bucket of rocks. I have always loved the invisible microscopic world.** I had a science minor and seeing that drop of water become alive on the glass lens was unbelievable to me. My first sculpture accepted into a show was a pond hydra that had long hanks of my hair issuing from the top as feelers of the hydra. I finally wove them into spirals of tubes issuing from the hour glass of the metal sculpture.

Coming to Ireland was an overwhelming experience of entanglement of everything I loved. I have always been interested in the chronology of human experience. Mythology, ancient philosophies, all seemed to start here in the Neolithic landscape of passage graves, cairns, and bog offerings. It was here that I became less interested in abstraction and more focused on realism. I began to use portrait imagery, a seven foot salmon, a bronze pheasant, flowers, trees, and finally the people. **People are the most important aspect of Ireland for me. Without the connection with their emigration struggle and their intense love of their land I would have missed out on a very valuable lesson in life.**

Opposite : "Ripe Pomegranate",1979. Size 3.5 ft x 2.5 ft in steel, copper, hand-woven fiber. Pic by Sally McKenna

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First building renovation completed in 2000 - living space, collection of sculpture gallery, classroom, fiber studio. Second building completed in 2006 – sculpture studio, tai chi/seminar space, gallery of paintings. Photo in spring of both buildings, by Sally McKenna, from the moon sculpture garden.

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Sally McKenna in studio by Henry Wills

Why did you set up the Glore Mill Follain Art Centre? Kindly share with us your vision of the centre?

It was such an adventure to take two ruined buildings and build them back into their original selves. It really was most about the physicality of the stone laying dislodged on the land. It was first and foremost for the community. To give back something to the land of the ancestors. There was something of a completion of a circle between my great grandmother who left Ireland and myself, her namesake.

The Irish word follain means wholeness and it was always the intent to offer holistic courses as well as art courses. The Gardens are being developed as natural environments for wildlife, fish , frogs and bog flowers. There is a special dragonfly that lives by the pond that is truly unique. **Over 150 trees have been planted in a design that will gradually evolve over the years.** What has evolved the most at the Glore Mill is my own art work. My connection with the land really developed when I inserted myself into this green profuse, rampant eco system. One can almost feel the plants growing in the hedgerows, pushing strongly up and through mats of grass and dead growth from the winter.

When I was asked to illustrate Terry McDonagh's book of poetry, Cill Aodain and Nowhere Else,I realized this was a shared view we had of our village. It gave me confidence that I could do justice to the poetry. Another component was that **I began to use the tree as a symbol of that rampant growth and have made two sculptural trees for the town. One was for the Town Hall Entry way and one was for the Kiltimagh square. It accompanies the Raftery figure.** Many of my early paintings were of the tree of life entwined with my totem animals. I also made abstract tree wall reliefs but had not ventured into realism until I moved here.

The renovation of the buildings brought me in much greater contact with local people than I would have had If we had bought something ready built. We met many people who had lived with the Mill ruin most of their lives so they were curious about us. It was a great way to meet people and I became fascinated with the history of the town. The bronze figures that were commissioned for the town walk ways came from a genuine affection for the history and residents of Kiltimagh.



"Tree of Life", 1989 - amalgamation of the woven fiber, woven strips of painted canvas, steel, copper, brass, acrylic painted strips, shells and fishing net. Size 6 ft x 5". Pic by Sally McKenna

It appears metal is the preferred medium for your sculptures. Does this reflect your sensitivity to the environment?

When I was in art school I tried several mediums but when I first turned on a torch and welded something together I was just hooked. I love the elemental nature of metal. It goes through several states melting and fusing all under control of the fire. Working with the welding torch has always relaxed me. I am intrigued with all metals but I love steel because when it is heated it becomes alive and the molecules race around and when they cool form into another true molecular arrangement. With welding it is not a process of adding something but a process of creating a new something. The sheet steel breathes and moves under the force of the fire. Copper is a heat sink. It cannot be welded because it doesn't meld together and reform. I still love braising it because I love to watch the braze metal flow onto the copper when it is just the right temperature. So it is not just the end result but the whole transformative alchemy of working with metals that I love. **In Ireland there is a whole history of early mining of gold, silver, copper.** The smelting of bronze issued in a new age. You can see the iron flow into the bog drains with cloudy wisps of golden brown trails.

Please give us a glimpse of your life and works.

I was born in Wisconsin in the American Midwest in 1943. I was a very solitary child. My mother was widowed when I was five. It was a strange word to grow up with-widow. It seemed to be the cause of all the instances where I was different. **Single motherhood was not commonplace then. My mother was a nurse, kept long hours and I was alone a lot. I learned to entertain myself with different creative toys, Lincoln logs, erector sets, coloring books, and paint by number, clay mold making and drawing what I called my designs.**

We drove across America on route 66 in the mid 50's and I was entranced with where we ended up in the desert of Tucson, Arizona. It was so different from Wisconsin. I decided to learn all the names of the cactus. That was a turning point in my life. The adjustment was difficult and I had to fall back on my own inner strength. We moved to the West because of my mother's asthma and she took a time to get back to work. **Running away once in tears through the desert I had my first experience of God and that there was something out there that would protect me. I was surrounded by light and peace.**

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"Unfurling Seed", 2007. Steel, copper, canvas with acrylic mixed media mastic. Size 3.5ft x 3.5ft. Pic by Sally McKenna

I was able to move forward after that and since then there has always been a sense of protection that I have felt. My mother recovered her health only minimally so four years later it was decided to move to Chicago where an excellent nursing supervisory position awaited her. I finished high school at a wonderful school that stressed academics and sports and the performing arts.

I was at University in Nebraska when President Kennedy was shot and I stood at the ticker tape with my future husband reading the unbelievable words. Students, Faculty and parents were for days frozen with shock. **In the next year the Vietnam war intensified and a planned marriage helped my new husband defer the draft and accept a prestigious scholarship in Florida. I started University again in the State of Florida and soon became pregnant.** The births of the children guaranteed that he would not be drafted. It was an early introduction to the effect of politics on an individual life. I am spending much time relating these early years because, in retrospect, these influences informed the artist I was to become. For example, living in two climatic zones sensitized me to contrast and I learned to love Nature.

I became very involved in the Women's Movement in the seventies because of my experiences watching my mother struggle in a male dominated system. I stayed an avid Democrat, the party of JFK, and work in many elections and was vice president of the Arizona Women's Political Caucus. I became an art teacher, part time, after I graduated with an art major in Tempe Arizona. I truly believe that creativity is an essential survival skill.

My children taught me about discovery, joy and the creative process. Plus I experienced a love for them that holds very tight. My work developed along with them. I had my first show in 1976. My art was still very much in the developmental stage and I showed the first of my fiber and steel work along with more traditional work. My signature sculpture came like climbing the rungs of a ladder. Each piece led to the next one and incrementally the work evolved. Eventually I began to trust the process but early on it was fraught with a fever of self questioning. I just trusted the pull of the art and the upper I got from seeing a finished piece realized. The greatest rewards come from sticking with it for as long as you can.

It took thirty years for me to receive that sense of an abiding treasure that I have given myself in the evolution of that personal imagery. No one can ever take this away. It is like a life raft.



March 2011 - "The Last Bard", Anthony Raftery Monument, Kiltimagh by Sally McKenna, who is with Enda Kenny Taoiseach) and violinist, Fiona Lavin. Life size and 7 ft tree in bronze, corten steel, copper and fused glass. Pic by Peter Schmidt.

In your opinion who are the leading Irish sculptors of the day?

There are many Irish Sculptors that I admire. So it is difficult to single out a few.

I most admire the work of the partners in the foundry called **Bronze Art**. They are all artists themselves and are also devoted to helping other artists bring their own visions to life. They did the casting of the Raftery figure and bronze branch he is holding. **Ciaran Patterson**, **David O'Brien**, **Jason Flood** and **Jason Crowley** have their own work that they are developing and they also work tirelessly getting the commissioned work that needs casting done in an exciting and collaborative way. I loved being in the space of the foundry and developing the figure from clay to ceramic molds, and then to bronze with them Because I am a welder, watching the arc welding step of reassembling the figure by Jason was fascinating. It is a very elemental process from start to finish and it seems to me that these artists are embedded in the earth, fire, water and metal of every aspect of the creation.

My other most admired artist is someone I have met here and dialogued with extensively. **Ann O'Mahoney** has a doctorate in Art History and is a sculptor and mixed media artist. We are both interested in feminist history and the state of women in the arts and also society today. We share a love of fiber art and the elements of texture that only fiber can give to a work.

My sculpture in America included swaths of hand woven fiber and welded metal that were large wall reliefs. I feel we have a common passion. She is fascinating to talk to and I love to see her new work. She uses stitched text in her work, bits of poetry, words and images intertwined on the surface. The paintings are truly admirable and come from a very deep commitment and an integrated approach to her art.

Do you think an artist should create art without keeping in mind the 'commercial aspects'?

It is great freedom to create art without thinking about survival issues. There is a place for both kinds of art in an artistic career. The freedom based art that is made helps to make the response to commissioned work one of greater integrity. One is always drawing on that body of developmental work. There is always room for creativity in making money with art.

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"Emerging Seed Pod", 2006, commission for Hawthrone Village, Castlebar County Mayo by Cantrel Crowley Architects, Dublin. Size 5.5ft x 4ft in corten steel, brass and copper.

If it becomes only about the money, as with everything, then it is soul destroying. There must be some form of patronage in the Arts. Without patrons opportunity is diminished and that is a sterile environment. It takes a lot of art making to even become worried about selling out with selling. So start selling and then see if you can find your own solution. I believe in artists and most will find the balance.

What is your message to those seeking to 'become' artists'?

Being an artist is a wonderful filter for life. It is a special way of looking that will always enrich any situation they find themselves in. I would like it if there would be many more artists as it is important to have citizens in society that have an aesthetic and are observant. So many people go around only seeing in a very narrow way.

Being an artist opens up so many roads and avenues of thinking. The thought process of the artist is very healing. It puts one beyond the particular and into the universal. It is unfortunate that many artists are threatened by each other. I don't believe in the jury system for entry into Art groups.

There is elitism in the arts which I would like the next generation of artists to tackle and eliminate. There are many ways to become an artist.

Art school often tracks a student within its own way of thinking. Most importantly don't let criticism by others deter you in discovering your own way. Not getting into shows is a disappointment. It is as hard on the jurors to choose artists as it is on you not to be included. They, more than anyone, know how difficult the choices often are.

Don't succumb to the pressure to do what you know will be accepted. There is no growth there. Your time will come. It is important to learn the fundamentals without the pressure of pleasing design professors. I don't have very many answers to improve the traditional ways that art degrees are given. It is important to take many Univ. courses outside of Art.

The way the system is set up makes that difficult. Visionary professors are very important, I was very lucky because I had several but I also had ones that even I as a student I was embarrassed by.



"River Dragon" by the Glore river, completed in 2000. Cast off loom and spinning machine parts from Foxford Woollen Mills.

How would you like to be remembered as an artist?

When I first started writing statements about my work I was more optimistic about the development of society. I wanted to work intrinsically and extrinsically to develop a balance of masculine and feminine with my materials. The steel and mixed media elements were to work change within myself and in a more esoteric way contribute to the change that I saw happening in the seventies. We went from a concern about the commercial portrayal of women in the media to what is now the sexualization of the culture. I experience a degree of frustration and disappointment with the world that I live in. Because I was always interested in change for the better I have had to re-evaluate my place now in a more singular personal way.

The visual arts establishment is part of an old system left over from World War Two artists who were reacting to the darkness of the war years. On every level the way art is perceived will change, but right now it is a stagnant model. So how I want to be remembered within this dying system is a quandary. I would like to be remembered in the town of Kiltimagh as a person who valued their culture and created art to preserve it. I would like to be remembered by the clients and their families who commissioned my art, as it was a very vibrant interaction to create art that mirrored their needs within the context of my work. I have always said that it is not the responsibility of the artist to be remembered as it is a unique combination of events that create artists who move into future generations. The best one can do is to be true to oneself and just keep on working, answer your mail and keep good records.

Opposite - "Eve's Rib", 2010. This is an environmental statement about the evolution of the world and society and how time is running short to the save the planet. Enamel work was done in 1972 and 38 years later they came together into a statement. Site,EOM studios Mulranney, County Mayo Ireland. Size 5ft x 1ft. Steel, copper, brass, fossils, copper enamel, fused glass, silver cloisonné, and glass bead.

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