



John Kelly: *Poul nabrone Dolmen (Burren)*, 2014, oil on canvas

Artist John Kelly on Mullaghmore, Sidney Nolan, *Father Ted* and Losing an Artist's Pride

“Oh yes, the Italians know about football

all right and of course the world of fashion. God Ted, do you remember that fella who was so good at fashion they had to shoot him?” — Father Dougal to Father Ted in *Father Ted* ‘Escape to Victory’, Season 3 episode 5.

Placing a College of Art in one of Ireland’s most beautiful and wild of settings is a stroke of genius.

Ever since I saw a photograph of Sir Sidney Nolan standing by the Poul nabrone Dolmen I had promised myself I would get there to paint, and the Burren College of Art have offered me this opportunity with a one-month residency.

Heading out into the landscape I become fixated on an emerald-green island enveloped in the Atlantic-grey rock whose stripes make up Mullach Mór (Mullaghmore). This landscape brings me close to the mythical Craggy Island and *Father Ted*, one of my favourite TV

comedies. My trusty Land Rover heads up over the hills as a minibus full of nuns speeds by in the opposite direction. I wonder if Sister Assumpta is on board preaching ‘Mattie Hislop’s ten-step guide to ridding yourself of your pride’.

Being an artist, one is used to losing one’s pride, it’s kinda obligatory. If not to your fickle audience, then to your materials or even to the landscape in front of you. And when an artist loses their pride one needs to be very careful. It’s a little know fact that World War II was

fought between two wannabe artists. Hitler failed to obtain entry to an art school and then nearly destroyed the world! Churchill's paintings were only slightly better. It's no wonder that post-war governments of both left and right persuasion have funded public art ever since, if only to avoid global destruction.

As I paint Mullach Mór a local farmer stops and declares, "I've lost my bull, he's escaped!" He explains it has run off into the rocky landscape that is also popular with hikers. I ponder the poor soul who comes between the beast and the green field up the mountain. After a few minutes he declares he has a hurling match to watch, and in any case the bull will come home when he's ready. The farmer and his missing bull feel very much a *Father Ted* moment.

I continue to paint peacefully on what I thought was one of the more remote roads in the Burren. After all, the tourists generally stick to the coast road, only digressing for the Poulnabrone Dolmen but little else. The odd local drives by and a walker's voice might be heard on the wind; however, few other vehicles had passed over preceding days, until that is one of those 'People Movers' appears and I glimpse the red tail light as it brakes.

My worst fears are realised when a few seconds later I am surrounded by eight tourists, all from China, intent on having me in their photographs. I mouth the word, *Nǐ hǎo* (hello) and am met with a request to move my easel so they might get a better photograph. Politely refusing, I carry on painting while they surround not only me, but also my Land Rover. After an age they climb back into their car and drive off, leaving me to battle this remarkable landscape that they seemed to have dismissed in favour of the mad artist and his pickup. I ponder the surreal idea of my image making its long journey back to Beijing.

I love *Father Ted*. It sits together with *Fawlty Towers* and *Yes, Minister* in the Pantheon of television comedy. It's like we know these characters and situations from real life. I have a feeling I once exhibited with the art-dealer equivalent of Father Ted, who always had my money resting in his account and who also liked a punt.

Ted is not a crook and means well but is always getting caught out in awkward situations of his own making as he tries to navigate the realities of his small 'island' with Fathers Dougal and Jack for company. "DRINK, FECK, ASS, GIRLS" impersonates many an artist and the odd dealer I have encountered, while Dougal could well be any one of those government art officials that have given me that vacant stare, whether in Australia, the UK or, dare I say, Ireland?

Of course Bishop Brennan is portrayed as a tyrannical hypocrite whose self-belief that there is no higher god emulates many an art-institute director. Not forgetting Mrs Doyle, the overly helpful and subservient housekeeper. Tea anyone? Go on, go on, go on, GO ON...

I hold my cup of tea at the window where Ted had his own Chinese encounter whilst wearing a lampshade on his head and unaware his new Chinese parishioners were looking in, horrified at what they perceived as racism in Parochial House. Father Ted's house is literally just over the hill from the green field of Mullach Mór, and I had booked afternoon tea with our host, Cheryl, whose family run the working farm that is in the very heart of the Burren. It is a wonderful generous helping of home baking and is concluded with Cheryl telling some entertaining stories of how the show came to immortalise her family home. While she talks the rest of her family are literally digging up the spuds out the window. My only question at

the end is if a group of nuns had by chance visited that day and Cheryl tells me they had. They were a hen party.

Before we leave I stand at the window where an errant bit of black dirt positioned itself perfectly above Ted's upper lip as he berated his new parishioners for leaving while unwittingly creating a perfect imitation of a raging Adolph Hitler.

Father Ted's house and the Poulnabrone Dolmen are within a few miles of each other and it is at these wonderful elegant neolithic stones that a painter might expect a busload of tourists to descend on him at intermittent intervals. Strangely, after my Chinese encounter, I began to look forward to the visitors who would regularly look over my shoulder and chat. They would quickly circle the rocks taking their photographs before heading back to the bus all in a few minutes. There were the Russians, the French, the Americans, the odd English and Irish and the Germans. Their interactions were generally very positive if not occasionally humorous.

One man was holding a young child who was mouthing a sound that had mummy and daddy asking each other whether the word might be 'stone'. One could hear the delight in their voices at the thought their young prodigy might already be engaging with this mystical archaeological monument that predates the Pyramids. Until, that is, he responded with howls of tears at their suggestion and they realised he was asking for the iPhone. Another asked in true Dougal fashion where the burial chamber might be. "Do you think underneath?" she asked.

In between these invasions I was peacefully painting the Poulnabrone tomb that on occasions has been renovated – one of the portal stones being replaced in 1988; however, you would be hard pressed to identify which one. Before long the obligatory bus tourists descended en



John Kelly: *Tree (Burren)*, 2014, oil on canvas (60 x 60 cm)

masse to ponder the meaning of the arrangement. A woman approached me and declared in a loud, bossy tone, “I am also an artist,” at which she snatched my straight-edge out of my hand and, leaning back, began checking the angles of my painting before declaring, “Wrong, the angles are all wrong!”

“I don’t believe it,” was my first reaction before I briskly snatched my ruler back and found myself

checking the angles and brusquely informing her that her position being different to mine the angles would obviously be different. Turning my back on ‘Sister Assumpta’, who was sauntering off, the image of Father Ted gesticulating wildly with that black rectangle over his top lip sprang to mind, and I realised it was just another artistic step in losing one’s pride here on Craggy Ireland.

John Kelly

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