

A sort of homecoming... for artist John Kelly

Artist John Kelly scoffs at the idea of luck - but he's had plenty in his life



John Kelly on Reen Farm in West Cork, with his breakthrough Cow up a Tree sculpture. Photo: Michael McSweeney



Emily Hourican

Mon 30 Jul 2018 at 02:30



Born in Bristol, brought up in Australia, internationally renowned for his painting and sculpture - what does artist John Kelly have to do with Ireland's Great Hunger? As it happens, it is a physical connection, through the place he now lives, but also a psychological and creative connection, through his work and family background. Hence his involvement with the West Cork festival's Coming Home: Art and the Great Hunger.

Reen Farm, where John lives with his wife Christina, is a traditional farm cottage dating from 1870, which the couple have restored beautifully, in its original style - no knocking through of rooms, no adding of huge glass extensions. This is a house the original owners would still recognise. Outside is a beautiful cottage garden with flowers native to this part of West Cork. It's only when you pay attention that you begin to notice the not-so-traditional aspects. Frequently, these are sculptures - often of cows. John has history with cows.

"When we arrived here, Christina said, 'I'd love to open the shutters of my bedroom window and see sculpture'," John explains. "And now she's got it."

The couple arrived here 15 years ago, after a bruising experience with French law. They were looking for somewhere peaceful, to make a life with their young son Oscar, and somewhere John could work.



John with his partner Christina

But John was also thinking of his father, who emigrated from Ireland as a very young man. "I had dad in mind," John says. "I knew that he really loved to come back to Ireland. He was forced to leave and he never wanted to. He was the youngest son of a dairy farmer - there was nothing for him, so he went to England. He met my mum in Bristol and, when I was six months old, they bought £10 tickets to Australia."

His father worked in a quarry for 40 years; "he was a character", John says, "but not in a social way. He was quite quiet. He was a very good father - I can remember the words he said: 'There's always a room for you here...'. As an art student, that was pretty good!"

And so, John wanted somewhere his parents could visit, where he could try to repay some of what they had given him. "My parents were really selfless. They didn't have a lot of money but they always did what they could for me. I wanted somewhere that he could come. He came here for about 10 summers, with mum, and all he wanted to do was just work... he would be building a stone wall, you'd always see him sitting down having a smoke, and you'd think, 'how does he get anything done?' but he did. We came to the conclusion he had little people helping him."

When he tells the story of how he - a working-class kid from Sunshine, Australia - got to art college, and subsequently became one of the most successful artists of his generation, it sounds as if his mother may have had little people helping her too.

"I originally wanted to be a writer," he says with a laugh, "but I went to a technical school and the English teachers were pretty poor, but the art teachers were brilliant. I got a place in an art school, RMIT University in Melbourne, on the strength of my portfolio, but my mother said, 'we can't afford to send you'. There were three other kids behind me and a couple in front of me, who my parents still had to support, and only my dad worked. She said, 'we can't do it'."

What John's mother didn't tell him was that she had entered a 'win-A-wish' competition, on the back of a milk carton. "The shopkeeper from across the road came over - we didn't have a phone - and said 'there's a call from a radio station. They're going to ring back'. It was the milk competition, to say 'you've won your wish'."

The wish was for John to get funding for art school, for his younger brothers and sisters to get a BMX bike each, "and for my mother - she was a selfless mother - but she did ask for a ring, so she got something as well". Thanks to this intervention, John got to art college. After his degree he did a Master's, and then won a scholarship to the Slade School of Art in London in 1996.

In London, John decided to approach the prestigious Piccadilly Gallery, set up by Eve and Godfrey Pilkington, "You really can't walk into a gallery off the street, not in London," he says with a laugh, "so I did exactly that. I walked in and said, 'can I have a show?' I had the catalogue from my first Australian show, but they said 'no, we don't do that'. Then I walked into the Redfern Gallery across the road, and asked if they would look at my catalogue. He also said 'no, we're full up', but there, I let the catalogue fall open and I saw him looking and then he said, 'they're pretty good, stay there and I'll run across the road because I reckon the Piccadilly Gallery...' Now, they had just rejected me, but they hadn't seen the work. So he went over, with the catalogue. And he came back and said 'go on over, they're interested...'"

John, by the way, scoffs at the idea of 'luck'. When I tell him it sounds as if he's been lucky, he first disagrees, then concedes that "the decision to become an artist was lucky. I was smart enough to maybe have done something else".

Shortly after the Piccadilly Gallery offered him a show, for the following year, John was travelling back to Australia, for a show in Sydney, and met Christina, a British Airways air stewardess, on board. There, his luck, or whatever it is, nearly ran out.

"I had work with me and I showed her some of my drawings. We just had fun. We had a very similar interest in art" - Christina had considered studying art before becoming a stewardess - "We got to Sydney and I invited her to my exhibition there. But I drank so much on the plane that I couldn't get out of bed the next day - I had such a hangover. So we didn't go. She later told me she had tickets for the Sydney Opera House that night."

And that might have been that, except two days later, John took a flight from Sydney to Melbourne, and there, on an almost empty plane, was Christina again. "I get on and I look up... and we look at each other, and we have a little chat and I apologised. I felt terrible. I really liked her. I messed it up, but I talked to her about my show in London."

And a year later, Christina wrote to him, to ask if the show was on and could she go? And he remembered her, I ask? "Yes, she was really gorgeous! So we got together. Later, she said she fell in love with my art first. I was sort of sad at that... 'you didn't like me as a man?' But we've had a fantastic relationship."

They got married in 1998, in Mosimann's in London, and bought a flat in Brighton. "We had this little tiny flat with a 90pc mortgage and at the time I think it was £37,000 to buy. I didn't come from a rich family and neither did she. I kept painting, doing shows, sending work back to Australia - I was showing there and in the Piccadilly Gallery, and I started to do really well in the two places."

By then, he was painting a lot of cows - based on his interpretation of a bizarre Australian war experiment, whereby two artists, William Dobell and Joshua Smith, were commissioned to make papier-mache cows to put on grass airstrips, to disguise the airstrips from Japanese pilots. "Maybe it was based a little bit on racism, that the Japanese pilots couldn't see properly", John says. "I thought it was weird, so I started painting these cows on the airfields. The series was very successful; it made me some money and allowed me to travel."

It also meant that when he put forward an idea for a sculpture of a cow up a tree, to Les Champs de la Sculpture in Paris in 1999, it was accepted. "We made the sculpture, it went on the Champs Elysees and got massive press coverage," he says. "The American sculptor Red Grooms [known for his pop art] said to me, 'John, you stole the show!'"

However, his success also attracted a spot of trouble, as success so often does. The French dealer who represented him in that show wanted John to sign a contract "that said he would have control of all my work... I said I can't sign that, and he was really pushing me and hassling me. I was in Paris, halfway through making the model for Cow up a Tree, and I got very distressed. One of the beautiful things is that Christina came over; she heard it in my voice on the telephone. She said, 'right, let's go and see him, and to him she said, 'we're going home, we're out of here'. Only then did he back down. It was," he says now, "like the cavalry coming to my rescue".

Sadly, that wasn't the end of the story however. The dealer sued John, "for €1m. That would have destroyed us. We'd just had a baby - we were in a flat in Nice, a humble flat, very rundown, and Christina was on maternity leave, our son Oscar had been born. I was so disturbed and Christina was desperately upset. It affected my work. Ultimately in what became a positive way, but it was a desperately difficult time."

The whole thing took five years - the first judge vindicated John completely, but the dealer appealed, and a different judge awarded him €20,000, but no control over John's work. During those years, John had shown another major piece of sculpture at Monte Carlo, Three Cows in a Pile, another roaring success. However, unlike Cow up a Tree, Three Cows didn't sell.

"We did the exhibition, and it was a success, but we didn't sell the sculpture. Christina was disappointed, I reassured her and said, 'when that court case finishes...' I didn't know what I was talking about but I had faith. It was a good sculpture, it had been at a good exhibition. And sure enough, we got an opportunity to exhibit it in London, and a private collector saw it - an Irishman, who has a beautiful collection, he's not a high-profile guy - he bought it. That was the day after the court case finished."

That was when he and Christina came to Ireland. "I think we came because we'd gone through so much."

They divide their time between Reen and Dublin - "Oscar is 17, he's at school in Dublin, and we go up to Dublin during the school year to be with him. With him being an only child, we didn't want to leave him."

John's father died in September of last year. "It's been tough," John says. "I flew out to Australia, and he died five days after I got there. We were all there, the family. Three or four days after the funeral, I was staying with my mother, and both of us went down with the flu. I got home, and a few weeks later I got the Irish flu, and was back in bed. I'm still recovering."

Since moving to Reen Farm, John and Christina discovered that this is the exact spot where the first deaths of the Great Famine were recorded. "There used to be a village here on this peninsula. If you look at the ordnance maps of the time, 200-plus people lived here. In 1846 they were struck by the potato blight." Every one of those 200-plus people died or left the land. And, for a long time, were forgotten. But John has meticulously traced the history of the place, including a harrowing account from NM Cummins, Justice of the Peace, who wrote a letter published in The Times on Christmas Eve, 1846, describing the appalling conditions in which the people of Reen were living, and dying. This letter was read aloud last Thursday to a mesmerised crowd by Jeremy Irons, at Reen Farm, as part of the Coming Home art festival.

"Cummins painted the picture of what was happening. As an artist, a writer and painter, who came and inadvertently landed here, and because my work is always interested in history, Christine and I want to build a garden here, the NM Cummins Garden."

And what they have done is remarkable. A few years ago, the neighbouring farmer retired, and offered a few acres to John and Christine so that their landlocked farm would have access to the sea. "We'd bought this land and didn't know quite what we were going to do with it," John said.

"There were two hillocks here that stopped the view of the sea, and one day Christine said, 'I'd love to have a window on the sea.'" From that, came a flash of inspiration and, for his 50th birthday, John asked that she find him "a man who can drive a digger and I'll see what I can do". The result - "my present to Christina" - is a passage through the two hillocks, leading you from land to sea.

The first passage brings you to a small clearing between the hillocks, an open-skied but sheltered spot with a large rock placed in the centre. Through the second passage, you emerge onto the headland above a wide expanse of sparkling sea. It is a short but magical journey. "It's like life and death," John says. "You have the first entrance, then it's like a womb and the rock is like an egg, and then there's an exit on to the clifftop, the end of the world."

The clearing with the rock is where he scattered his father's ashes, just a month or so before I meet him, together with his mother and siblings.

"Not all his ashes, he asked to be buried with his mother, but he loved this place," John says. "My father worked in a quarry, digging out big rocks, and I thought of that on the day, when my son was reading out his obituary that I wrote. I thought, 'what a fitting place'."

'Coming Home: Art and the Great Hunger' runs at the West Cork Arts Centre until October 13.
artandthegreathunger.org www.johnkellyartist.com