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Westmeath Examiner

Still Very Much a Mullingar Man

by Eilis Ryan

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Mullingar-born Patrick Graham, a member of Aosdana, is one of Ireland's most esteemed artists. Over 20 years on from last meeting him, Eilís Ryan recently spent a fascinating morning chatting with Patrick at his studio in Dublin.



Artist Patrick Graham at his studio in Dublin

IRELAND – It's not the precise rows of pencils, graded by length, that lead me to ask artist Patrick Graham is he a very tidy person. I only notice those later, after our two hour conversation, which has taken us from his youth in Mullingar, through his early poverty-stricken years trying to earn a living from his art, and through the grueling experience of his alcoholism.

It's just the canvases are neatly stacked against the walls; his dozens of art books are in tidy piles, the kitchenette is immaculate; the walls are white.

Even the hammers and screwdrivers – the equipment he required for stretching canvases before deciding the work was now too arduous for him – are arranged neatly, .

“It’s neurosis,” he quips.

“I can’t work in a chaotic environment. I just have to have everything clear. I just find it very difficult.”

Patrick has worked for around 25 years now out of the same space at “The Fire Station” in Dublin, a warren of studios for artists.

A self-described “creature of habit”, he commutes in daily from the home in Dun Laoghaire he shares with his wife Thelma – but only after first completing his ritual of going to a favourite café and having a couple of slices of toast and “as much coffee as I can get my hands on”.

From The Fire Station he has produced the works that have earned him membership of Aosdána, and won him the sort of respect that has seen immense US interest in “Patrick Graham – Thirty Years: The Silence Becomes the Painting”, currently showing at the **Jack Rutberg Fine Arts** gallery in Los Angeles.

He didn't travel over for the opening of this particular exhibition: in his stead, his son Robin made the journey, and spoke for Patrick at events such as a seminar for art curators.

A long time out of Mullingar now, Patrick's name may not be spoken daily in his native town, but in the art world, he is regarded as one of the finest artists this country has ever produced – and he still brings Mullingar into his work and remains proud of his Westmeath roots.

“I can go and talk at a seminar in LA or San Francisco or Boston or wherever and I talk about Mullingar. I don't talk about great art or what art is or 'this is where art comes from'.

“I carry [Mullingar] around with me – I mean it's part and parcel.

“Any talks or lectures I do in the States, people would ask me: 'what is this place The Captain's Hill?' And: 'What's Lough Owel' - or 'Owl' or 'Owly'?

Born in 1943, Patrick grew up on the Green Road, the second eldest of two boys and two girls. Eileen, who lived in Southampton, died two years ago, his brother Noel, who lived in Mullingar, died last year; but Patrick's sister Olive Clarke lives in Castletown Geoghegan and his step-sister, Phyllis Wheeler still lives in Mullingar, so he still comes back from time to time.

Green Road

The Mullingar he grew up in was not one of plenty. As elsewhere in post-war Ireland, work was scarce, leading Patrick's father to head to the UK. Thus, when their mother contracted tuberculosis, the Graham children were temporarily split up, Patrick finding himself at the home of his grandfather, James Montgomery, who ran the noted Montgomery plant nursery at Streamstown.

“The place was magical: it was like being transported into a kind of Disneyland setting.

“It was wonderful. It had all kinds of things - it had barns, it had chicken runs, it had pigs, geese, turkeys, guinea hens, it had orchards – it had fruit - it had all this stuff, this amazing kind of magical plenty of delight. It was just wonderful.”

But it was also lonely: he missed his family, especially his mother. Heartbreakingly, he recalls still how he was brought to the hospital in Mullingar and because of the fears of tuberculosis, he was only allowed wave as she saluted him through a distant window.

“No matter how great my grandfather and grandmother were, they were strangers,” he reminisces.

“Essentially, I was a stranger there and these people were old as well, and when I saw them first, I thought they were not just old but very very old, and I felt completely kind of abandoned in a way.”

Streamstown

He did his early schooling at Streamstown NS, which he loved, and came back to Mullingar in time to start off in third class at the Christian Brothers primary school, a place he found “frightening”.

After primary school, he headed for “the tech”, which was to prove a seminal decision for it was there he fell under the influence of Dermot Larkin, one of the most important figures in his life.

“There were a number of art teachers who would come in for 6 or 7 months and all of them took an interest in me. They felt I was particularly talented or something.

“I never thought I was any different to anyone else but they took an interest in me.

“And eventually Dermot Larkin came.”

Larkin, from Dublin, was not just an art teacher but an artist in his own right. He was quick to recognise that Patrick had a special gift and took him under his wing.

“He asked me would I work after classes in what he called 'his studio' – he used the art room as his own studio as well – and that’s where he showed me how to mix paint, how to mix wax into paint, how to size canvases, how to prepare and stretch them, and how to do small drawings squared up for the backdrops for the Opera Society in the county hall - these things were 36 feet by 18 feet!”

Art college wasn't really something that Patrick or his family would have automatically considered, but to Larkin, it was just the logical next step, and after he came first in Ireland in Group Cert art, Larkin suggested he try for a scholarship to the College of Art, which he obtained, along with a county council scholarship.

College he loved, staying late in the evenings, perfecting his craft. He was shy, and it wasn't until 3rd year that he went out for his first drink, little realising he was embarking on a path that would lead him to extreme alcoholism.

“I remember my first drink: it was magical. It was a total release for me...I had to be dragged out,” he says.

It was in O'Donoghue's of Baggot Street.

“I had my first pint and I thought I’d discovered God, the universe, the answer to everything!

“I thought I’d discovered art for the first time. I thought I had it all.

“Of course I woke up in the morning: nothing.

“But I remember that and that thing made a complete and utter impression on me and I couldn’t wait to get back to it.”

It was an unfortunate alliance – and even more unfortunate was that Patrick began his love affair with drink just as funds were becoming very tight: what he hadn't fully taken on board was that after college, he was going to have to come up with an income as his grants would be ending.

“When I finished college, in ’63 or ’64, everything finished. I was out the door and I had no money for digs, no money for food - there was no scholarship anymore.”

At that stage, he was 21.

“There was no dole or anything

“I remember trying to get a job and having to kind of get a pair of trousers from somebody a shilling from somebody else and a shirt from somebody else and I went out like Charlie Chaplin: the trousers were too big, the shirt was too small. I remember sitting in front of this guy in Crumlin Tech – I was looking for a job as an art teacher – and he said: “Oh J*****...you’re looking for what?”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, that interview didn't lead to a job. Nor did his other efforts.

“By that time I’d cultivated friends in various pubs - so I lived in pubs. It was the only place I could stay warm.”

He remained in thrall to alcohol for eighteen years.

Unable to cope with Patrick's drinking, his then partner, who was American, moved back to the US, bringing with her their son, Aaron, who has born in 1967. Relations have long since been repaired, and he sees Aaron – who now lives in Seattle - whenever he visits Ireland, while Aaron's mother is back living in Ireland.

“I tried to stop many times in between and hurt an awful lot of people in between, destroyed relationships. It’s a horrendous problem. It’s a very selfish thing - a very mean disease. I was in St Loman’s about three or four times. I was a regular customer.”

St Loman's was also significant in Patrick's life in another regard: it brought him back to art.

“I remember picking up a pencil and saying: 'I’m going to start drawing again' - because I hadn’t worked for a couple of years...

“So I started drawing this fellow Joe and did this wonderful academic drawing... and I showed it to him expecting this guy to say: 'J***** that’s f**king wonderful', but he didn’t even see it: he was rocking, he used to rock; he never stopped, and I decided 'that’s the end of everything. F**k this. He can’t see it I can’t see it. This is the best I can do and it’s rejected by this person who should have the sensitivity' – I thought – 'to see it'.

“Nurses and psychiatrists came out and said: 'Oh that’s wonderful...'

“But I didn’t want their...I wanted him to be impressed by something, because I thought his humanity was much more raw and on the surface than anyone else’s.

“So I went off really desperate. I went off crying - the first time I ever broke down in my life - thinking 'there’s no solution to anything here’.

“And I started drawing - the first time I ever drew blindly in hope rather than in knowing and knowledge and skill and all that and waited for something to happen and this kind of ball of tangled stuff emerged. Now this is a portrait - but it was a tangled mess. There was no pretence in it, no facile show-off stuff about it and I showed it to him and he stopped rocking and said 'Great’.

“And it made a huge impression on me.”

That set Graham out on the road to the exhibition that first made his name - “Notes from a Mental Hospital and Other Love Stories”.

The experience was also a foretaste of the ongoing strife he would endure, that of art versus his ego.

“You understand you have a gift, you have a talent....Do I serve it or does it serve me?

“What in the hell is the meaning of having a gift? Is it a prison? Is it destructive? Is it illuminating?

“Or how do I liberate myself from it? Do I lose it - if I lose it do I lose the audience?”

Beautiful paintings lose their “hold” over the fan within months; art leaves the fan “kind of awestruck”, he says.

He tries to open back the window wider to make clear the war he's been fighting, describing the ego refusing to lie down and surrender, injecting an aggressive tone into his voice to mimic the determination of his ego as it says: “I’ll take you on you bastard.”

“And that winning and losing: that goes on to this day. That fighting with self, as author, against the art telling you what to do...,” he says.

“You have to give away your own ego and your own authorship and you have to wait for the paint to tell you 'This is the direction we’re going, whether you like it or not you bastard.’

“So it’s a war and a tussle.”

He is impassioned on the subject, labouring to explain the difference.

“We’re either creative or 'we know..!’,” he continues, saying that even at the Academy of Art, you can look at “exquisite” work, but it won't “hold” you.

“It becomes a beautiful object - but it has no questions to ask you.

“It is complete in and of itself as a little art object, in honour of art.

“It honours art. It doesn’t honour philosophy, religion, resurrection, loss, death, sex.

“It doesn’t honour any of those.

“It doesn’t honour life: it honours skill.

“Now skill on its own – and I only speak for myself – skill became a prison to me.

“It is heartbreaking stuff to have a skill and be sort of harnessed to it not only by yourself but by other people.

“And I quickly discovered all this offered was you polished the same thing over and over – it’s like a beautiful object you just keep polishing, but it leaves you empty it’s something out in front of you all the time – it’s in your hands, it’s not in your heart, it’s not in your soul.”

Art is, he continues, a religious feeling.

“I’m not talking about priests and monks. I’m talking about that quest, that journey for hope, for life, for grace, and it also of course consists of failure. Absolute and abject failure. It’s life to the fullest.”

As a child, he wanted to be a priest, and he's never fully gone away from the faith.

“Simply: I just stopped thinking about it and didn’t think about it again until I discovered what I was doing wasn’t art and that art was something else entirely and that it didn’t come from the ego, it didn’t come from the knowing, it came from unknowing.”

Patrick says that while not a practising Catholic in considered sense, he has seen people like his mother “who was very religious” get a lot from it, “and I’d never take that away from people”.

Patrick has enjoyed being an artist: “It’s been exhilarating at times – not enough times.

“By and large it is ferocious. It is not something I wouldn’t do or can’t do.

“I just couldn’t stop doing it: it’s like breathing.”

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