

When was the last time you viewed a piece of art? Maybe you are fortunate enough to have original works in your own home, or perhaps you visit galleries occasionally? Or possibly, you pass by a piece of art everyday and barely notice it...

Wherever you live in Ireland, chances are there is an artwork near you. There are hundreds of pieces of public art – art specifically created or chosen to be displayed permanently in a public place – around the country. What's more, you probably own this artwork – or at least a percentage of it. Because thanks to the Per Cent for Art Scheme, a certain amount of public funding is allocated to the commissioning of a wide range of original pieces, many of which we take for granted as part of our daily landscape.

The role of public art is to enhance the environment, built or natural, in a way that reflects the context in which it is sited and that engages the public that encounters it. The Per Cent for Art Scheme, available through various government departments, allows one per cent of the cost of any publicly funded capital, infrastructural or building development to be used for the commissioning or purchase of a work of art.

In County Kildare alone there are more than fifty public art works: the 'ball' outside Naas, Fionn Mac Cumhaill and his hounds at the roundabout near the Curragh, the two figures watching over the park in Ann Street in Prosperous are just some of the more familiar examples.

Perpetual Motion – the 'proper' name of the ball outside Naas – was originally commissioned under the Per Cent for Art Scheme in 1996 by Kildare County Council and the National Roads Authority. In 2009 it was re-surfaced by the original artists, Rachael Joynt and Remco de Fouw, during which de Fouw fell into the structure (9 metres in diameter) and had to be rescued by the Fire Brigade!

Perpetual Motion is a classic example of a site-specific work. It had to be big enough to be seen clearly from some distance and from all angles. It also had to relate to its environment and to its viewers – and all those who see it as a landmark in their journey to or from Dublin, to or from Naas, will acknowledge that it meets that criterion most successfully. It is modern, but comprehensible: its arrows and road markings sit well with its position on one of the first major stretches of motorway, and it has to be one of the most recognisable pieces of public art in Ireland.

If *Perpetual Motion* celebrates progress and modernity, *Fionn Mac Cumhaill and his hounds* looks to the past. Commissioned from artist Lynn Kirkham by Kildare County Council in 2010, this sculpture in corten steel and stainless steel, commemorates the legendary figure whose home was the Hill of Allen, visible from the site. Its location on the roundabout at exit 12 of the M7 for Newbridge South and the Curragh has further significance, as the piece also marks the contribution to the county of the army at the Curragh Camp.

The Per Cent for Art Scheme aims to involve the public as much as possible both in the process of creation and in the subsequent enjoyment of the art work. *Pause for thought*, the sculpture by Catherine E Greene of two parents watching over the children as they play in Ann Street, Prosperous, is a prime example of this twofold engagement. The garden in which the piece has been located was designed to provide residents with a shared green space and the local children helped in the planting and maintenance.

Public art doesn't necessarily mean outdoor art: *A swim, two shoals* by Annabel Konig in Naas Swimming Pool and *My Butterfly Home* by Sinead McGeeney in Riverbank Arts Centre in Newbridge are indoor works which demonstrate the site-specific nature of public art in different ways. In the case of *A swim, two shoals*, the influence of the location is clear, and the choice of material – fused glass – perhaps an obvious one. However, for the artist, this was a new medium, meeting another criterion of the Per Cent for Art Scheme: developing the artist's practice.

For *My Butterfly Home*, the artist deliberately used fluorescent orange Perspex in order to 'make the most of the unique edge properties of the sheet...[and] economise on the low light available in the space and at the same time highlight the overhead shape'¹. This use of material to complement the site is also evident in external pieces such as the planted 'living structures' made with willow in the roundabout near Kildare Village. Here the sculpture is permanent but organic, allowing it to change and evolve over time, as will the landscape around it.

Public art is all around us; it is on the roadside, in the schoolyard, at the street corner. It is part of our landscape, and as such perhaps is taken for granted, present but not remarked upon, seen but not examined. This may be a sign of its success, the fact that it is so much part of our lives that we don't notice it anymore. But it is our art, and perhaps we need every now and then to revisit our 'gallery' and enjoy its richness. Look at the Kildare County Council Arts Service webpages, consult Ann Lane's book, *By the way: A selection of public art in Ireland*,² take the Kildare Culture Night Art Bus tour, or simply get on your bike or in your car and drive around the towns and townlands. You will be surprised at how much your collection contains!

References:

¹ <http://www.kildare.ie/artsservice/>

² Ann Lane. *By the way: A selection of public art in Ireland*. Wordwell Books, Dublin. 2010