

John Kelly RHA 1932 – 2006

To a whole generation of young artists in the late 1950s John Kelly was a hero. Here was a man with little or no resources, had cycled through France, journeyed to Spain and returned with riches - that is paintings of true originality.

I first knew John in London where he lived and painted in the early '60s. He was a lively bright man, a great raconteur, always game for a laugh. His face bore testament that he had been a boxer.

In 1960 John was a founding member of the 'Independent Artists' and from this group emerged some of the most significant artists of the late 20th century in Ireland. They included Barrie Cooke, Camille Souter, Edward Delaney, Patrick Pye, Michael Kane, James McKenna, Brian Bourke, Charlie Brady, Gerda Frömel, Gerard Dillon and John Kelly. John was something of a renaissance man. Although primarily a painter and print maker, he also wrote plays and poetry.

After much public debate, Project '67 was launched on the public arena. The leading figures behind the movement were Colm O Briain, Jim Fitzgerald, Michael Kane, John Kelly and others. Later the project became 'Project Arts Centre' @ the Old Y.M.C.A. again in Lower Abbey Street, with John to the forefront. The space also embraced a theatre run by the Sheridan brothers, Jim and Peter.

In his paintings and graphic art John Kelly has created a space unique to himself. He never stood up on a pedestal seeking attention. He just did the work. John Kelly impressed his public with a searing honesty. His work was serious and committed. As the years unfolded his vision softened, not into sentimentality but into subtle evocation of the nude and the extremely well painted series 'Letters'.

John Kelly was a very special person. Fearless in debate, yet gentle and 'simpatico', he displayed all the virtues of what Italians called 'Humanitas'. Having grown up in tough times and having served his time as a painter and decorator, he appreciated the position of the underdog. Although he would defend his position with argument and determination, he did so with humour and wit and he was a superb storyteller. He was beloved of his students. His patience in explaining technique was phenomenal and many of them openly acknowledge their indebtedness to him.

He devoted his life to every worthwhile cause which came his way in the arts, was inclusive of every person needing his help or instruction, sensitive to people's strengths and weaknesses and responding accordingly. He shared his knowledge and love of the arts with both his friends, his family and the humblest acolyte.

After his early travels in France, Spain and London, he settled down and pursued with passionate commitment a life dedicated to art. He married Mairead and together they raised a family of six daughters. It was a fitting tribute to John that the six women carried his coffin into and out of Dominick Street Church in a most dignified and moving manner. The memorial service brought all the elements of his life together, his immediate family, his brothers and sister, his friends, fellow artists, former students and poetry, prose and music.

JOHN BEHAN

Galway

April 2006