

Obituary: John Kelly 1932 - 2006

John Kelly was born in Mountjoy Square in the 1930s when “inner city” conditions still resembled those in Sean O’Casey’s plays. Like O’Casey, he had a natural dramatic sense that contemplated this neglect and dereliction with the exactitude of feeling proper to a poet. Verse from his teens evokes the sad mysteries of northside streets and the ruined lives of some of their more unfortunate denizens. Its language is rich in visual suggestion. Efforts to give plastic representation to those inner visions led him to enrol in the National College of Art as a night student. He had begun his adult life apprenticed to the trade of painter and decorator and brought all the skills acquired to his later profession as an artist. This gave John a unique place in the history of contemporary art, where his immense knowledge and technical grasp made him one of the ablest practitioners and teachers of graphic media in the world.

In the 1960s he wrote two plays, produced in the Gate Theatre by the late John Molloy. They were intensely pictorial and compassionate meditations on the same northside milieu that had informed his early verse.

John’s first exhibition, in 1957, was in the Hendricks Gallery in Stephen’s Green, one of the few serious commercial galleries in the city at the time. His paintings were raw passionate expressions of a deeply humane spirituality deriving from his personal vision and exposure to the works of Rouault and Emil Nolde.

During the following years, John’s friendships and alliances in the art world, with such figures as James McKenna, Joseph O’Connor, John Behan, Brian Bourke and Charles Cullen, would place him centrally in the movement that led to the formation of the Independent Artists, the Graphic Studio, the Project Arts Centre and an efflorescence of modernist figuration in painting and sculpture that predated “New Expressionism” on the Continent by twenty years. He was a key figure in the development of the Print Department of the National college of Art and Design and a co-founder of the Black Church Studios. He devoted much energy to reforms in the RHA and the revival of its art school.

John Kelly was never short on pluck, as his career testifies, and in the two and a half years he survived an illness scheduled, according to the medical profession, to kill him in a week, he produced some of the most remarkable works of his life. These extraordinary testimonies to courage and defiance will outlive much that is more highly acclaimed today and, along with a life’s production of paintings and prints, should ensure John Kelly an honoured place in histories of art.

John remained faithful to his northside roots and never lived more than a mile from his birthplace throughout his life. He died at his home off Berkeley Road. He is survived by his distinguished wife, Mairead and six delightful daughters.

Michael Kane

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