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IRISH ARTS

SUMMER (JUNE - AUGUST 2021)

€10 (STG€9)

REVIEW



Painters of the **WEST**

CURRAGHMORE HOUSE
CORBAN WALKER INTERVIEW
YEATS AT THE MODEL

ANNA CAMPBELL SCULPTURE
PETER YOUNG STAINED GLASS
SUSAN SEX BOTANICAL ART



Man on a mission

John P O'Sullivan traces the colourful career of artist John Kelly



1 John Kelly in front of *Cow up a Tree*
Photo John Minihan

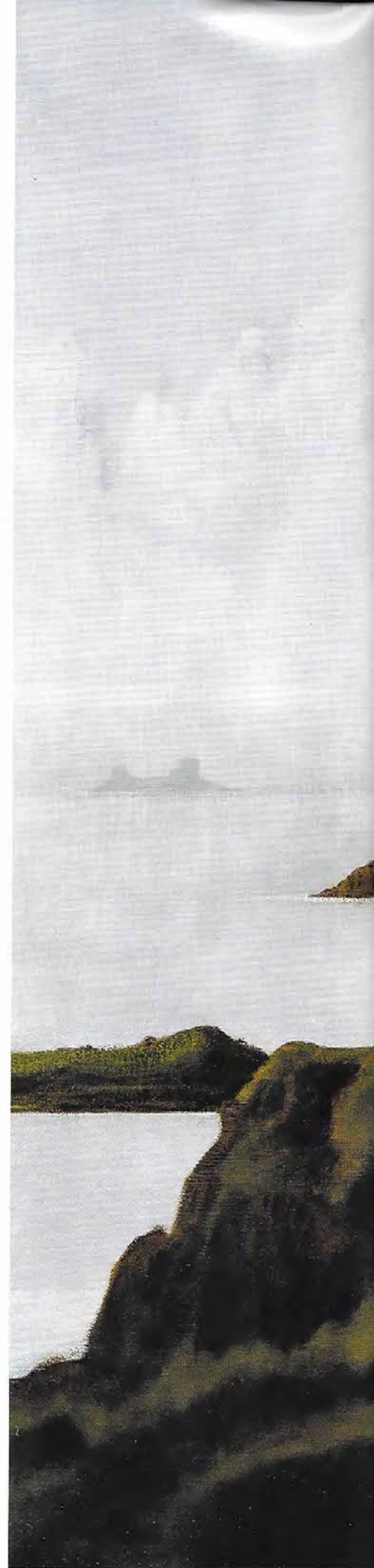
2 *COW UP A TREE*
(SOUTH REEN, CO CORK) 2017-2020
oil on canvas 200 x 180cm

In 1994, an Irishman, an Englishman and an Australian walked into the Piccadilly Gallery in Cork Street, London, and announced his arrival on the European art scene. All three of these were John Kelly, son of an Irish father and an English mother, who grew up in Melbourne – thereby allowing him access to three passports. Walking into a high-profile London gallery hawking your artistic wares takes nerve and usually leads to a brief encounter and a chastened exit. ‘I guess I’ve got a bit of the Ned Kelly in me,’ says Kelly. ‘If I’d been born in the 19th century I’d have been holding up a bank.’ However, on this occasion, Kelly’s quirky and playful work aligned with the direction Godfrey Pilkington’s gallery was then taking, and the youthful Aussie was in.

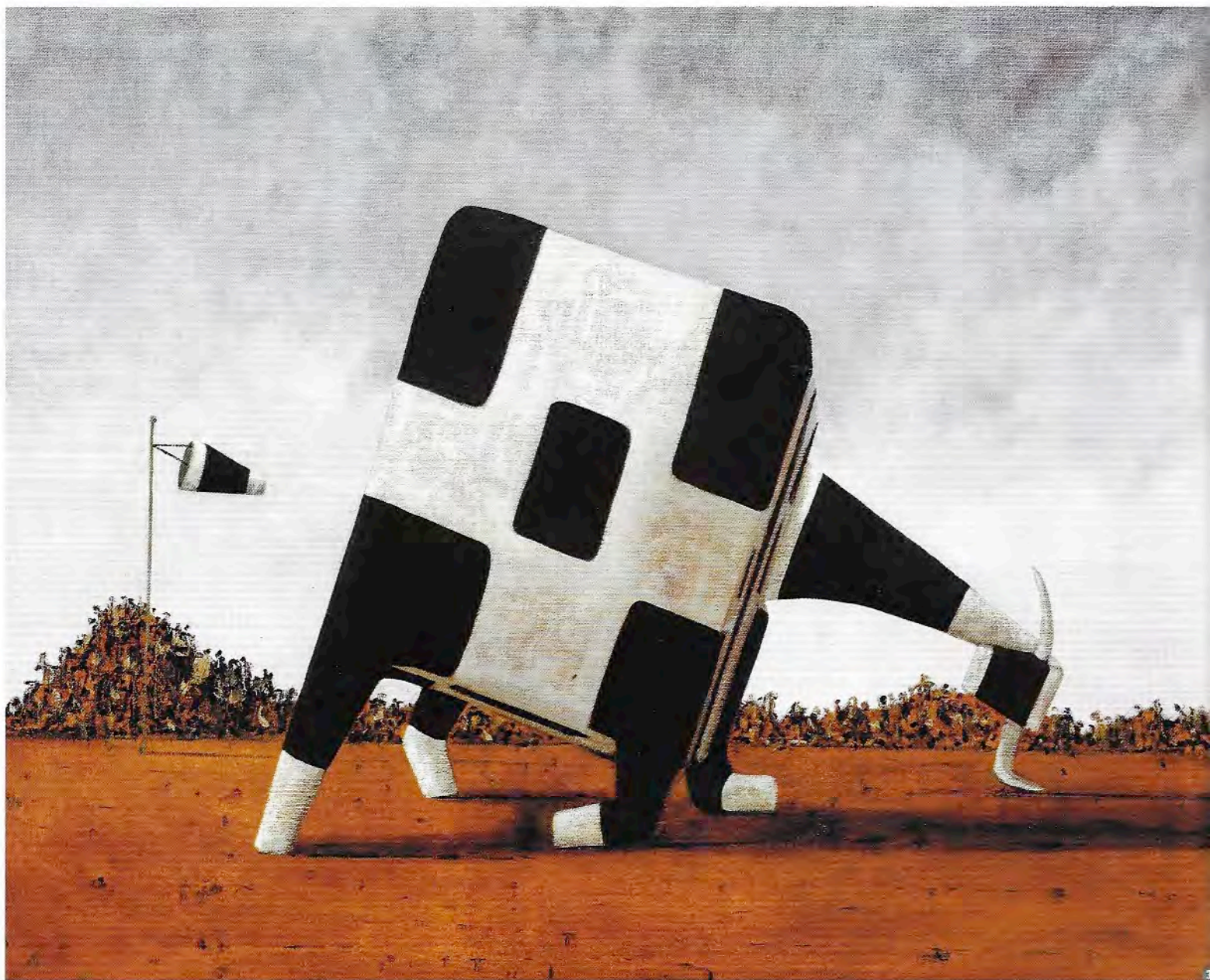
A series of London exhibitions followed, many featuring Kelly’s trademark Dobell’s cows. His work caught the attention of a French dealer in Australian art, Stéphane Jacob, and Kelly was invited to exhibit at the prestigious ‘Champs de la Sculpture II’ in Paris in 1996. He made a maquette of his proposed work – a sculpture of a cow lodged in a gum tree. This was partially inspired by Sidney Nolan’s *Untitled (Ram in Tree)* and his well-known photograph *Untitled (Cow and Calf Carcass Covered in Dirt I)* – Nolan’s responses to an epic flood in Australia.

With the support of his gallery, grants and sales of the maquette, Kelly raised the £100,000 necessary to create an eight-metre-high bronze version. ‘Previously, I’d never made any sculpture more than three or four inches,’ Kelly recalls. The young artist was suddenly launched into international orbit, rubbing shoulders with international art giants such as Tony Cragg, Red Grooms and Nam June Paik, and images of *Cow up a Tree* on the Champs-Élysées featured in *The Times* and *Time* magazine.

Having done well in Australia and London, it now looked as if he was set to conquer Europe. However, an exhibition in Monte Carlo (where







KELLY'S VISION ENCOMPASSES MANY SUBJECTS AND MANY ART FORMS, WITH WIDELY CONTRASTING RESULTS

he showed another monumental sculpture, *Three Cows in a Pile*) led to a dispute between his gallery and Jacob, which deteriorated into a protracted legal battle from which nobody ultimately benefited – least of all Kelly. ‘The whole legal mess in Paris really put paid to a significant career in Europe,’ says Kelly. However, the costs of this legal imbroglio did steer Kelly and his wife Christina to Ireland, where all arts-derived income was then tax free. While the initial plan was to stay for a year or two and pay off the legal fees, a fateful visit to West Cork, where they sighted a property on a beautiful isolated peninsula overlooking Castlehaven Bay, changed their plans. They’ve been there ever since.

Kelly owes much of his considerable career, in different

ways, to the humble cow. His working-class family from the Sunshine area of Melbourne struggled to put their talented boy through art college. A large family and a period of unemployment for his father (who worked in a local quarry) meant the young John’s artistic ambitions had to be put on hold. But the wheel of fortune turned. His mother entered a ‘Win a Wish’ competition sponsored by a dairy company that she spotted on the side of a milk carton – and her name was picked out in the subsequent raffle. This simple twist of fate allowed Kelly to continue his studies. Happily, his siblings were not forgotten, each getting a new bike.

While studying for his master’s degree a few years later, Kelly had a part-time job in a library, stacking books. There



took Kelly around the world before depositing him on an isolated peninsula in West Cork.

John Kelly's vision encompasses many subjects and many art forms, with widely contrasting results. He can create a massive bronze sculpture with all its creative and logistical challenges or essay a delicate, minimal etching of a penguin. Kelly paints, prints, sculpts and enlists computers to generate steel cutouts. He has also flirted with installations and the conceptual. He is not averse to abstraction, as the bright fibreglass creations around his West Cork domain and works like *Blot on the Landscape* (Fig 6) and *Yellow Head* (Fig 11) from his recent Melbourne exhibition testify.

Kelly's painting *After Picasso (Jug and Saucer)* was selected to hang in the prestigious Yale Center for British Art in 2019 (Fig 5). He was also chosen as artist-in-residence on the icebreaker *Aurora Australis* on an Australian Antarctic mission in 2013. In fact, his first Dublin exhibition, at the Oliver Sears Gallery, coincided with this adventure, leaving attendees bemused by his absence. Art produced from the Antarctic trip was shown in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in 2015. His etching *Auster* captures the beauty and starkness of that region in just a few lines, and this year an Australian postage stamp features a work from the same expedition (Fig 9).

In Ireland, Kelly has painted a series of restrained, beautifully composed studies of the landscape, mostly around scenic Castlehaven and in the Burren.

Kelly also writes, and his move to Ireland has not stopped him from engaging robustly with the Australian art establishment, particularly in regard to his views on the treatment of indigenous artists. He contributes to the *Daily Review* and *Art Monthly Australasia*. In 2017 he was nominated for the Walkley Foundation's Arts Journalism Award. While in the Antarctic, he wrote a hair-raising blog about his adventures for *The Guardian*.

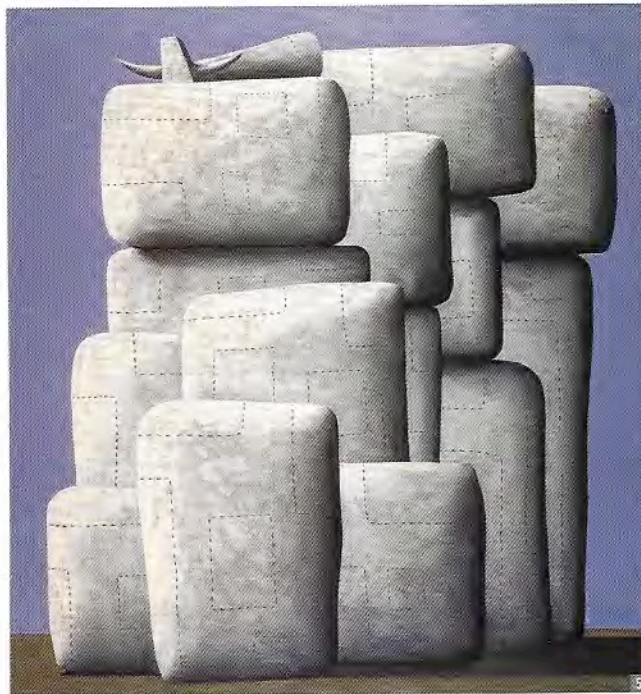
During his time in Ireland, Kelly became interested in the Great Famine and the dark history of his locale in South Reen after coming upon an 1846 letter from a local justice of the peace, NM Cummins. Addressed to the Duke of Wellington and published in *The Times*, it recounted the horrors Cummins encountered and the suffering he witnessed. While landscaping his property and seeding it with his sculptures, Kelly determined to create a permanent monument to the area's tragic past. He has called this ambitious piece of land art *The NM Cummins Think and Thank Garden*. "Thincke and thancke" was the family motto of Henry Tate from Liverpool,' explains Kelly. 'He was

3 OBLIQUE VIEW FROM AFAR 2020
oil on canvas
122 x 152cm

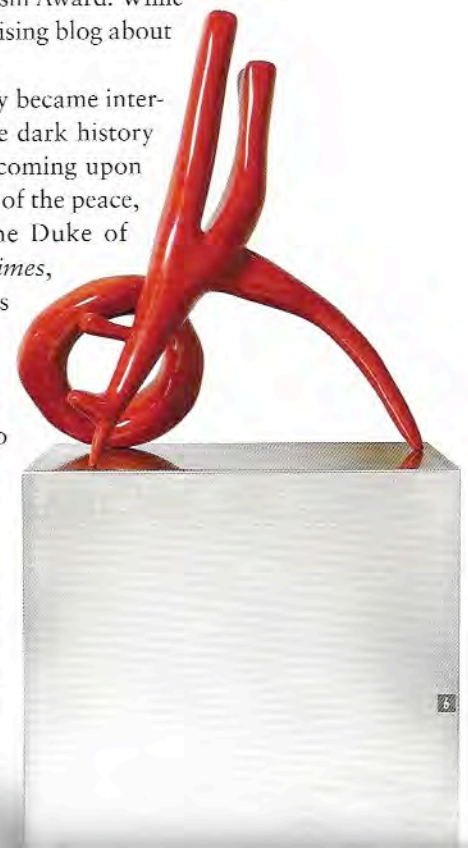
4 COW UP A TREE
2020 oil on canvas
150 x 114 cm

5 AFTER PICASSO (JUG AND SAUCER)
2000 oil on linen
182.6 x 167.5cm

6 BLOT ON THE LANDSCAPE 2002
enamel on bronze
base 180(h) x 87(w)
x 45(d) cm



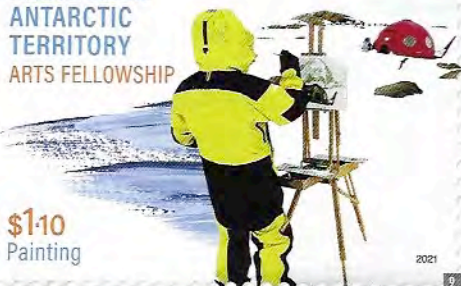
he came upon an account of the wartime activities of the Australian artist Bill Dobell. Dobell was initially enlisted as a camouflage labourer in World War II and was part of a group of artists charged with making lifesize *papier-mâché* cows to fool the Japanese into thinking that airfields were meadows with grazing livestock. The notion of these ersatz cows piqued Kelly's interest. His first exhibition at the Niagara Gallery in Melbourne in 1993 featured a painting called *Man Lifting Cow*. It depicted a man lifting Kelly's cartoonish version of one of Dobell's cows. The background included a windsock indicating the associated airstrip from which the idea came. The man, in overalls, represented his father, for whom this was a characteristic mode of dress. Twenty-three years later, in 2016, a four-and-a-half-metre bronze of the same subject was installed in Melbourne's docklands. In between these two events came an eventful career, which





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RECENT WORK CONFIRMS THAT JOHN KELLY'S CREATIVE POWERS HAVE NOT DIMINISHED, NOR HAS HIS TRADEMARK SHARP WIT

a greengrocer whose fortune was made during the time of the Famine. Tate went on to sell his grocery shops, moving into the sugar market, and in time became the major benefactor behind the Tate Gallery. I was struck by the fact that the art from that period included in the substantial collection that Henry Tate donated to the Tate contained no depictions of Famine events.'

Kelly had originally built a scale model (about the size of a large mobile home) of the Tate Modern for a show in Melbourne, in which he intended to place a copy of Cummins' Famine letter. He decided, however, that it would be more appropriate that this reminder of Reen's history should be given a permanent home in his sculpture garden. 'I placed Cummins' letter in my sculptured Tate Modern as his words painted the picture that the artists could not,' he said.

A local stone-carver was engaged to create a stone tablet containing the text from Cummins' letter and it lies on the floor of Kelly's Tate model. A further stone tablet bearing an eyewitness account of the Famine's horrors by a local doctor accompanies it. Kelly has also included a large cooking pot from the period that he discovered on his property. It



bears the distinctive Phoenix symbol, indicating that it was donated by the Quakers.

Kelly has only recently recovered from a serious and prolonged illness. His comeback exhibition in March this year at Smith & Singer in Melbourne was a sellout. Featuring a mix of new and older work, the full array of Kelly's talents were on display. The recent work confirms that his creative powers have not diminished, nor has his trademark sharp wit, seen in paintings like *Incorrect Shadows (A Conversation)* (Fig 10).

Kelly has an antipathy to all forms of corporate branding (he cites Naomi Klein's *No Logo*) and used culture jamming to subvert the request by the Australia Council for the Arts that he use their kangaroo logo in promotional material for his work by actually incorporating it into the art – hence works like *Big Foot* (Fig 8) and *Incorrect Shadows*. In this latter work a cow and

a kangaroo face off. It can also be seen to represent the conflict between indigenous culture and the tame and ordered world of the European settlers.

Kelly has no immediate exhibition plans, apart from a desire to return at some stage to Art Basel, but he does want to complete his land-art project in Cork. In addition to the Tate Modern building and his giant sculptures, he intends to add four further etched-stone tablets and other artifacts associated with the Famine. He also wants to complete his spectacular landscaping with provision for performing spaces and elaborate stone-walled areas, channelling the epic sea views.

There is a lingering feeling that, since his European and international ambitions were previously stymied, Kelly needs to return to that arena. Given that he is still a relatively young man, I wouldn't bet against it. ■

John P O'Sullivan is a writer and art critic.



7 BRANDED [AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPE] 2020
oil on canvas
122 x 183cm

8 BIG FOOT 2005
oil on canvas
119 x 144.5cm

9 Australian Stamp
issue 2021

10 INCORRECT SHADOWS (A CONVERSATION)
2020 oil on canvas
91 x 122cm

11 YELLOW HEAD
2008 fiberglass 135(h)
x 110(w) x 45(d) cm