GRIST TO THE MILL

a community focused arts project commissioned by Clúid Housing Association
the horse that is next the mill, carries all the grist

William Camden, 1605
As a result of a community focused arts project commissioned by Clúid Housing Association, artist Mike Hannon held a series of workshops in photography at Mill Court, Bandon, in the autumn of 2011. On the first day, each participant was given their own compact digital camera. In a flurry of cellophane, bubble wrap and excitement, the mass unboxing began. Soon the teacher became the pupil, as Mike’s reassurance that “it’s not possible to put the memory card in the wrong way” was shown to be entirely without foundation. Nevertheless, a spirit of teamwork prevailed; a rescue paperclip was fashioned and the work could proceed unhindered by recalcitrant plastic.

Over the course of the following three months the residents learned how to use their cameras. Mike introduced them to the work of some significant artists, from the invention of photography to the present day. The intention was to offer the participants a broad view of what photography can be, and what it can do. Each week’s workshop concluded with a ‘homework’ type assignment, based on the topic covered that day. For instance, a brief introduction to the work of Cindy Sherman and Gillian Wearing was followed by an exercise in taking self-portraits as oneself or as another person - fictional or otherwise. These tasks were often challenging or discomforting in various ways and required a good degree of investment in order to complete.

The following week, the results would be presented to the group. This led to some lively and humorous discussions on, say, why an image of a pedestrian flyover on a grey day may or may not be more desirable than a picture of a nice duck. Not every assignment was a success for every photographer. Some people found they had a natural affinity for one way of working, but not for another. Insofar as was possible in a few months, each artist had found their own style and the group had collectively generated a significant body of powerful and unexpected imagery.

One photo from each participant was selected from this pool of many excellent images, and is presented here in Grist to the Mill, an exhibition of nineteen photographs taken by the residents and staff of Mill Court.
The camera need not be a cold, mechanical device. Like the pen... it can be the extension of mind and heart.
John Steinbeck

This was Mike Hannon’s backdrop to his initial proposal to Clúid and the residents of Mill Court in Bandon. Twelve weeks after the project began, the residents have genuinely created an extension of themselves.

Clúid has been developing housing for older people since the late 1990s and now has over 500 units of accommodation for the elderly.

Sheltered Housing is purpose built accommodation for older people who want to live independently in their own apartment or bungalow, yet benefit from a secure environment and visiting staff. It enables them to live independently without the burden of a house to maintain.

The Association is committed to providing appropriate services and tailoring its housing provision to the changing needs of Irish society. The challenges arising from the changing demographic profile and growing proportion of older persons in Ireland are recognised by Clúid, and the Association strongly promotes the development of a range of models of housing and support that allow older persons to live independently for as long as possible.

This publication is the culmination of a project linked to the “Percent for Art Scheme” which allows a portion of the capital costs to be spent on art projects linked to the scheme. This project has focused on teaching the participating tenants how to take great photos.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank Mike Hannon and all the tenants who participated in the project for their time and effort. This publication and the photographs are testament to people’s commitment to the project.

Simon Brooke
Chairman
Clúid Housing Association

FOREWORD
The process of image making is a way of making intelligible to yourself, and to others, how you see the world. It is an exploratory process and it is an attempt to see. I think making visual art is like feeling around for something in the dark. You might not know what you’re looking for, even when you find it. But you have a record of your search.

I think that living life is a little like this. There is little certainty. We don’t know what lies ahead, as we try to navigate the present while making sense of our past. Maybe this is why art is often thought of as a journey of self discovery; because in the best cases it reflects to us our journey through life.

It was the residents of Mill Court that suggested this art commission should be based on workshops in photography. There can be various motivations for taking up a hobby (since art is a hobby as much as it is a profession or a way of life). All hobbies are driven by a yearning for something more. This might be a desire for escape - a distraction from the everyday grind - through learning a new skill and through getting to know new people. But for some, a hobby can be a way of getting to know yourself, and defining it to the outside world. Art, of course, encourages such self expression.

Photography, in my experience, is a little different from other forms of expression. If I want to paint a painting, write a song or a poem I can do this from my room, conjuring up images from my imagination. More often than not, for photography it is necessary to go out into the world, find something that exists and make an image of it (even if that something is in your room, or is your room, or is you!).

So photography encourages a fairly direct engagement with an external reality. The creativity of the photographer, then, lies in how they choose to represent the outside world. So many difficult choices must be made. What should I shoot? How should I shoot it? What do I want the photo to say? And finding the answers to these questions helps us to know a little bit more about ourselves.

My vision for the workshops was twofold: that the participants would acquire the technical know-how to successfully take photographs, and that this practice, which began as a hobby, would gradually become something meaningful to them in their own lives. I hope that each participant now sees that a photo can be more than just a way to make a visual record.

I hope that each of them has found new ways of seeing; a different way to look at things; a means for reflection, analysis and developing insight. And I hope that each participant feels that through photography they have given voice to something that they recognise as being inside of themselves, shining a little light into the darkness.

Mike Hannon is an independent film maker and video artist whose work ranges from the experimental to the conventional, spanning a number of genres. He holds BA’s in Fine Art and Applied Psychology. His practice as a lens based artist has been honed on a wide range of successful projects, including visual art, experimental video and ethnographic documentary. His pieces have been exhibited, performed or broadcast in a variety of contexts: visual art exhibitions in Ireland, Great Britain and China; experimental video for new music in New York, New Orleans, Minneapolis and Copenhagen, and documentary film at various international festivals and on television.
Self portrait
Anna Marie Desmond
Self portrait as a character
Joe Dwyer
Santa Barbara beach
Christy Dolan
Brother on rooftop
Carole O'Sullivan
Lane at night
Ann Collins
Foliage
Eva O’Regan
I don't know where to go.
Self portrait with nephew
Mikey Foley
Jackdaw with cat’s dinner
Ollie Murphy
Bowls of stew
Paul Grimes
Man in doorway
Tomás Holland
Barrels, rubbish
Tim Gill
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Finbar Hannon
Marie Hannon
Deirdre Johnston
Mary McCarthy
Peter McMonis
Deirdre Nolan
Margaret O’Brien
Tony O’Regan
Eva O’Regan
Eugene O’Riordan
John O’Sullivan
Tim Porter
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