



# Back to the future

'Most of the art that inspires me is pre-industrial',  
John Kindness talks to **Brian McAvera** about his  
interest in the 'longevity of imagery as opposed to its  
immediate social impact'



**Brian McAvera:** Almost everything you do has humour in it. Yet outside of caricature, there is remarkably little humour in the art world. Why?

**John Kindness:** I think you have to ask the humourless bastards why that is. A lot of artists have a fear of not being taken seriously, so they take themselves far too seriously. Black humour is something I think Belfast people can't help: finding some element of mirth in almost every situation. If you think of Irish literature and humour, Flann O'Brien was a humorous writer, yet Joyce could be incredibly funny though he would never be described as a comic writer. Flann's reputation as a major writer suffers from his always being put into the category of comic writer. *The Third Policeman* is an extremely dark book. *Ulysses* is an extremely funny book despite its reputation as a literary milestone and a modernist tour de force. I recently found myself with tears in my eyes laughing at The Citizen's conversation with his dog.

**BMcA:** Would it be fair to say that your influences were more literary than visual, especially in the early years?

**JK:** Yes, or at least of equal weight and importance. Joyce was a major influence. In my teens my friend Paul Nolan discovered Alfred Jarry. I remember *The Banquet Years* (there was a copy of Roger Shattuck's book in the Belfast Library). That appealed to me. I loved reading anecdotes and observations from that period, and accounts of the later exploits of the Dadaists and Surrealists. I was as interested in the anecdotes and events as I was in the art that was made, although every teenage boy loves Magritte and Dali.

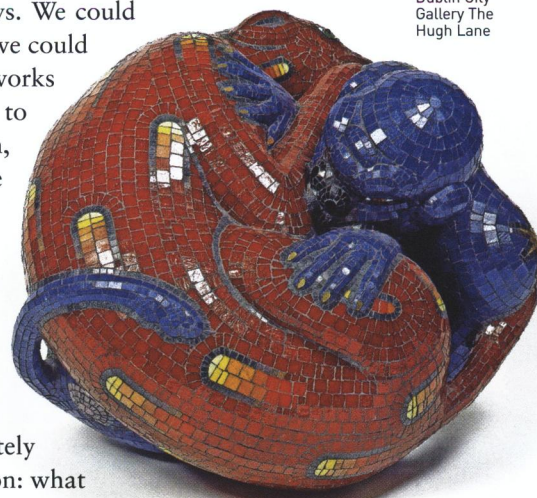
**BMcA:** You were born in Belfast in 1951. What are your earliest memories of growing up there and what was it that predisposed you towards becoming an artist?

**JK:** A good visual reference would be the first panel of the *Belfast Frescoes* series. I remember my dad's cigarette moving around in the dark on a winter's morning; the little glow moving around the room (Figs 7&8). Something that always interests me is what artists did as kids: so many biographies jump from birth to further education but the alchemy starts much earlier. I grew up, like Louis MacNeice, between the gantries and the hills, overlooking the waterworks, in Brookvale Avenue, an urban place that had access to wildness or semi-wildness. When you can observe nature and your fellow humans: that teaches you quite a lot about both. We were at that age, a generation allowed to run wild. I was the middle one of three boys. We could take off, go over to the Cave Hill which we could walk to from our front door. The waterworks was also quite a big chunk of green space to explore. Then, going in the other direction, down into the city: Carlisle Circus was the beginning of the town. That told you a lot about Belfast: a huge cluster of churches, the statue of 'Roaring' Hugh Hanna, the first signs of sectarian territory-marking.

A lot of advertising at the time was painted onto walls. I love children's assessments of situations: they can get it spectacularly wrong, or be as sharp as razors! Why working-class people voted for the Unionists completely puzzled us. The last sequence of *Belfast Frescoes* poses the question: what was going on here? *Belfast Frescoes* was about the period of childhood where you

1 John Kindness in his London studio

2 JOHN KINDNESS b.1951 *MONKEY AND DOG* 1986 glass mosaic, steel armature, reinforced plaster 70x80x80cm Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane







start to look outside of your home environment. For the beginnings of my interest in art I probably have to credit the Ulster Museum: it was the only place you could see art that wasn't a statue or a decoration on a building, although our favourite things were the stuffed animal tableaux, like the Golden Eagle tearing the breast out of a Mallard Duck. They were savage dynamic pieces. Being boys we also loved any artefacts to do with war: poison arrows, a Polynesian war canoe. There was a fascination with the Mummy (although I didn't get interested in the Egyptian thing until later on). It was the dead body-ness of the Mummy that we responded to, not its cultural baggage. The Ulster Museum was important to the way I grew up looking at art, at other civilizations, understanding the importance of objects as primary documents, rather than written records after the event. Scott's Antarctic diaries are a primary document but a history of Rome, written two hundred years after the event, we have to be circumspect about. Various forms of vernacular art have always been important to me as well. My mother would have made our soft toys, and she probably spent as long on the face of an animal as on the rest of the body: 'I'm trying to get the expression right', as she would have described it. She wouldn't have recognized herself as any kind of artist but that's where the art comes in, bringing a character to life, giving it an identity.

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**BMcA:** Within a year of the Troubles starting you were at art college. What impact did this have on your college activities and in retrospect, do you think they influenced your work?

**JK:** When social order broke down in 1969 it was very frightening. My brothers and I were brought up to be naive about sectarian divisions. My generation had grown up in a sleepy period. It was quite unnerving. The city centre imposed a voluntary curfew on itself. It was a time when we should have had the social and creative time of our lives but we were in a dead zone after 6.30pm. If I missed the last bus at seven I had to walk home through an area known as Murder Mile. Once you were home you weren't going into the city again. However, one of the positive effects was that it pulled people back into the older style of entertainment: people got together, brought drink, sang and played music the way they would have done before there was a city centre.

I suppose I went along with the agenda in Art School up to a point, but when you found yourself in a lecture on the intricacies of Minimal Art and the building was rocked by an explosion that might have taken lives in a civilian shopping area, that agenda came under scrutiny. Several of us felt that we wanted to bring conflict into our artwork, but we got no encouragement from staff and were often discouraged. The only person who did seem to meet the approval of staff was Brendan Ellis who did a marvellous set of paintings at the time. To have somebody in an art school who made a painting of an IRA funeral, that was quite a surprise. I don't think

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I knew about an artist like Seán Keating at that time. I couldn't think of using conventional art forms like Brendan, so I started to look at printed material as a possible medium. The term graphic novel wasn't in usage but that was the way I was thinking: telling a story visually. I created most of *The Hand* (Fig 9) during college days and I started on *The Three Graces* which was never published. I had envisaged a series, the equivalent of short stories in visual form. I tentatively discussed this with tutors but was discouraged. These were the days of diplomas, not degrees, and we were expected to stage a Diploma exhibition. The small intense images I was working on didn't fit their idea of a diploma show, so I gave them a diploma show they did not forget, and continued with the graphic novel idea for a couple of years.

**BMcA:** How did you come to produce *The Hand* in 1975?

**JK:** It started with James Joyce. I read *Ulysses* in my first year at art school. I hadn't read earlier Joyce, and after struggling through the initial chapters I was amazed by its revolutionary quality: the use of language; everything from a shopping list to a Shakespeare play was grist to his

mill. That made me think about trying to conjure with a visual vocabulary and look at various forms of high art and vernacular art (diagrams, comics, ads), to be all-inclusive in using visual devices to tell a story. My ambitions were not matched by my abilities to deliver this however. The story of *The Hand* is simple; a young boy meets his pals on a Belfast street corner, someone finds a dead bird, and as a prank they go into a chip shop, distract staff and throw the bird into the deep-fat fryer, then sit back and watch the fun. On the way home, they disperse and the principal figure is randomly gunned down from a passing car. It's a very Joycean non story. When I went on to read *Dubliners* I enjoyed the telling snippets of observation, the epiphanies as Joyce called them. There was no real analysis of sectarian division, but you know where the boy's loyalties lie: he sews the Loyalist Red Hand badge onto his denim before he goes out. The attitudes to the Chinese population were similar: racism is like sectarianism, the same weakness in us. The shooting isn't classified in any way, and the work ends with a deliberately poor quality photo of the boy's body lying in the street. It's meant to look

**3 A MONKEY PARADE** From 'A Monkey Town Besieged by Dogs' 1985 chalk on sandpaper 62x62cm IMMA Collection

**4 DOG WITH ALTARPIECE** From 'A Monkey Town Besieged by Dogs' 1985 chalk on sandpaper 62x62cm IMMA Collection

**5 NAUSICAA 2** From the 'Odysseus' project 2012 engraved acrylic on linen apron





IT SOUNDS LIKE A LAUDABLE ENTERPRISE TO GIVE PEOPLE WHAT THEY WANT; BUT IT IS DISASTROUS CREATIVELY. THE ARTIST'S JOB IS TO SURPRISE, DELIGHT AND CHALLENGE, TO GIVE PEOPLE WHAT THEY DIDN'T REALIZE WAS POSSIBLE

like an on-the-spot amateur photo that might have been taken at a crime scene, as if printed in a newspaper, so it ends with a picture that would normally be the first image people would see when a sectarian killing took place.

**BMcA:** In 1976 you were a founder member of Balloon Features Cartoon Syndicate and you contributed to *The People's Comic* between 1976 and 1978. Over the years the physiognomic element, often played off against animal types as in *A Monkey Town Besieged by Dogs*, has been a constant element in your work. What attracts you to this area?

**JK:** I remember when I did *Monkey Town* (Figs 3&4) at the old Grapevine in Dublin – John Hutchinson reviewed it for *In Dublin* and he made those kinds of observations. He referred to the 'Singeries' of the 19th century – scenarios with monkeys posing as humans. I was obviously aware of it but it hadn't been at the forefront of my mind when I was making the work. One of the things I know influenced me as a child was *Rupert the Bear*, especially the old Mary Tourtel stories which were more sinister than the later ones. Two things came out of that: the animal caricature, and people as animals. I particularly liked Mary Tourtel's quite sinister elements: Rupert was frequently locked in a cage or a dungeon

by a witch or a sinister old man. That may have been why she was sidelined – she was in *Grimm's Fairy Tales* territory. The satirical cartoonist Giles, and Dudley D Watkins (*Desperate Dan* and *Oor Wullie*) were both major influences. I recently did a project, at the Foundling Museum in Bloomsbury, in which I mixed images from Hogarth engravings with *Desperate Dan* strips [see *Irish Arts Review* Winter 2008].

**BMcA:** You were more than ten years out of college before you had your first one-man show in 1983 at the Bank of Ireland in Belfast. What else did you do in the intervening years apart from freelance design and illustration work?

**JK:** *The People's Comic* happened in that period, thanks to Alastair Herron, who had been thrown out of art school for doing video (now he's teaching there). The frustration we had was with the contemporary art agenda versus the real life in our home town. Margo Harkin went into film-making and various people were looking at alternative media. At the time I was looking at (what would become) 'graphic novels' for the journey I wanted to go on. Alastair co-ordinated *The People's Comic*. He was the entrepreneur and he lined up Dave Hyndman to print it. Ian

Knox was, and remained, a professional cartoonist. John Carson did a strip, and Liam de Frinse. We only did three issues, and sold it personally in the Student's Union and in bookshops like Just Books in Winetavern Street. It was as a way of dealing with the frustrations, with the feelings of powerlessness. At least you could poke a bit of fun at sectarian divisions: we'd no illusions about changing the society we lived in.

When leaving art school I had the idea that traditional art forms were inadequate to deal with the horrors on the streets. I came to revise that through a peculiar set of circumstances. I got a job with Cathal Caulfield who ran the graphic design element of the Alexander Law company. He took me on as an apprentice – I learnt about design for print and TV graphics. One of the materials we occasionally used was mosaic. I'd no experience of using it but I began to look into its history. When you use something it sparks your interest in the history of that material, (sadly mosaic has gone from being the choice of emperors and popes to that of art therapists for people with learning disabilities). It made me realize that you can use a medium in your own time and make things that will record your observations for centuries to come. It gave me an interest in the longevity of imagery as opposed to its immediate social impact.



**BMcA:** You have always been attracted to techniques and materials. Do you, like Renoir for example, have an aesthetic about the craft and decorative aspects of your work?

**JK:** After Art School I was tempted by photography and printing but I stayed with the things that resonated with me like those objects in the Ulster Museum. I had a very good art teacher, Gerry Hawthorn, in secondary school who added value to our curriculum. We did figure and plant drawing for exams but he would bring in books of Leonardo's and Michelangelo's figure drawings and Durer's watercolours: those were the things that fired my imagination.

I look at the concept of craft in Darwinian terms. If you think of the Industrial Revolution as the Big Bang, then that's what created the category of craft; before that, everything was craft. Most of the art that inspires me is pre-industrial. There have always been hierarchies in materials and media. One of the things I'm interested in right now is the history of painted cloth. Oil-on-canvas is now the gold standard for art collectors, but the first artists to paint on canvas were considered a lesser breed than those who painted on wooden panels. In art history we learnt that Japanese prints came to Europe as wrapping paper for porcelain, but their discovery by western artists was like an aesthetic bomb going off.

The important thing about the Japanese prints is that by crossing a geographical border they were liberated aesthetically. Westerners could see what the snobbish Japanese connoisseurs couldn't! Until recently, it was the same with various makers striving for a higher status for their discipline, but they were still craftsmen in relation to the method of production – there was no other way of doing it. Now all an artist needs is a brain and a computer! You can conceptualize a piece and get expertise on the internet to realize it, and if I get to a point with my things where someone else can do something better than I can, then I bring them in.

*Bigfish* (in Belfast) I created in the Firestation: rolled out slabs of clay, shaped, decorated and fired them, but there wasn't anybody else who could have done that. With *The Museum of the Old Lady who Swallowed a Fly*: I made all of those animal forms – the animals she swallowed – but I also wanted to create her tea-set, jewellery, bed jacket, and lace but my lace-making skills are non-existent so I collaborated with a lacemaker, also a silver-smith and a potter, to realize those things. I'm not out to prove I can do everything. I do have a facility with different materials and mediums but hope I'm not a show-off about it.

**BMcA:** Do you approach Public Art commissions differently from your studio work?

**JK:** I don't use the term Public Art. I feel that the term itself is in danger of making us think that a

different kind of art exists here. We don't have public music and public literature. Really, in the end, all art becomes public anyway – even the very personal things people were buried with, that they thought would never be scrutinized by visitors to the British Museum!

There is a lot of anodyne, sanitized art in the public realm and just the same in the private gallery world. It sounds like a laudable enterprise to give people what they want; but it is disastrous creatively. The artist's job is to surprise, delight and challenge, to give people what they didn't realize was possible. With the Philadelphia project that I did, the association responsible for all of the city's new art invited the citizens to come forward if they felt they would like art commissioned on their behalf. My proposal focused on work buttons from denim overalls writ large but with the images relating to the things that working people had made in the city. I didn't spot the flaw. The citizens involved were all originally union people. They clarified to me in no uncertain terms that it was the workers' struggle against the bosses that they were interested in. What do I know about American Labour history? Then I remembered that Bob Dylan, Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, all the music that I had loved as a teenager, was about strikes, lockouts, and bullies, so I produced a series of seven bronze work buttons, about one metre each in diameter, depicting people or incidents in American

**6 DOCTORS & PATIENCE** From 'Treasures of New York' 1990 engraved taxi panel. British Council Collection

**7 BELFAST FRESCOES, PANEL 1: EARLY IN THE MORNING** 1995 lime fresco on roof slate. ©John Kindness. Collection Ulster Museum NMNI

**8 BELFAST FRESCOES, PANEL 20: LESLEY GALLOWAY** 1995 lime fresco on roof slate. ©John Kindness. Collection Ulster Museum NMNI





Labour history that were significant, like the Abolition of Child Labour, or individuals like Karen Silkwood, the nuclear installations' whistleblower. I felt that this was new territory for me though I'm not sure if I would ever do it again!

**BMcA:** You are currently working on *Odysseus* in relation to Homer's *Odyssey*. This sounds like a continuation of the Hellenic theme in the New York work?

**JK:** It was Joyce and not Homer who started me on the *Odyssey*. The work I did in New York, *Treasures of New York*, connects to this project (Fig 6). Both look to antiquities as a precedent. Both use the museum-as-medium where I created a set of artefacts that could have come from some other time and place but gave themselves away as contemporary objects (Fig 10) [he produces works which are on two toilet seats!]. These refer to Scrimshaw techniques used on ivory that whaling crews did on their long voyages. The engraved object goes back as far as you want to go. Think of the Etruscan mirrors that inspired Picasso's etchings and drawings. Again, as in *Treasures of New York*, I've used fresco. I'm also working ostensibly on canvas but actually a lot of the substrates are pre-existing artefacts. *Death of the Suitors* is on a mangle cloth! I like things that have had a working life.

**BMcA:** You were selected for Lucy Lippard's touring show 'Crossroads, Turns of Mind' exhibition (1985-86) and for 'Directions Out' (1987) and in between you were one of the few Northern artists to get a solo show at the Third Eye in Glasgow in 1986. How useful were these shows to you?

**JK:** It was John Carson who enabled me to do the Monkeytown show which was expanded for the Third Eye. The sculptural piece from it is now in the Hugh Lane (Fig 2). It was my first solo show in Dublin and my first outside Ireland. I was on the map and felt then that there was a progression, a trajectory to an artist's career. Once you got onto the conveyor belt there was a progression of events

## IT TOOK ME A LONG TIME BEFORE I EVER SHOWED MY WORK IN ENGLAND: WHAT I DO IS NOT AN ENGLISH TASTE

that carried you forward to prominence in the art world – which is not really what happens at all! There are sequences of events which are sometimes self-perpetuating – one thing logically leads to another – the art world is a very small place and people quickly become known. I could have progressed into Brit Art a bit more but things were developing in Ireland and my career developed more there. I remember showing my work to galleries in Geneva where they all said 'this is very violent: you should go to Germany'! It took me a long time before I ever showed my work in England: what I do is not an English taste. The Irish artists that the English respond to are quite cerebral and understated, like Willie Doherty and Gerard Byrne: 'worthy but dull' as the critic James Hall put it. Cerebral rather than visceral.



9 THE HAND, A TALE OF OLD BELFAST  
(Shooting) 1972 gouache on paper 23x30cm

10 CHARYBDIS From the 'Odysseus' project  
2012 engraved acrylic toilet seat with oil  
scrumble

**BMcA:** You have lived in the Republic of Ireland, and now in London. Why did you leave Belfast and what did the Republic, and then London, offer?

**JK:** I never felt I had to leave Belfast. A lot of people couldn't stomach it anymore, but in the end we left because, not long after PS1, my wife Danae, was offered a job in Dublin having failed to get jobs in Belfast. It was like being pushed out of the nest. It seemed to be the right time to leave. Danae started in the Douglas Hyde Gallery the day I got a letter saying that I'd got my first major commission in Belfast.

I've always felt very welcomed in the Republic. I'd exhibited before in quite a few shows there – the Grapevine, IELA, GPA and so forth. Northerners were welcomed like long-lost relations. I think people felt we were under pressure in the

North yet were still making art. It's also just a very welcoming place. Carolyn Mulholland who moved there in the mid 1980s said that the people were so friendly, at first it made her suspicious!

We were gentrified out of Dublin by the property boom. We looked around Dublin to see what we could afford to buy, looked further and moved to Tullow, Co Carlow. We were able to buy a former bishop's house on a couple of acres for less than a modest Dublin town house with no garden, but we were very isolated. What it taught me was that you shouldn't live in the country unless you've a reason to be there. I resented the intrusion into my creative life of dealing with the place. The day-to-day work of maintaining it became onerous for both of us. We had a long talk about where we



would like to live and we both agreed on London. A year later we set about selling the house and making the move. After I left it developed that vast new gallery space Visual, but Carlow wasn't then a cultural centre.

We had been five years in Dublin and five in Tullow and in 2001 we moved to London. In many ways I've found London a difficult place but I've never been unhappy here and I definitely was unhappy in Carlow. The first year I was in London I saw exhibitions by Vuillard, Philip Guston and the history of Armani Design all running simultaneously in the Royal Academy, and there'd be something similar every couple of months.

**BMcA: How important for you was the New York period 1989-1991?**

JK: Major! I think it was the point at which, in terms of a career in Ireland, a lot of people started to take notice of what I was doing. One of the hazards of making humorous work is that 'serious' people don't value what you do. In terms of creative development it established for me the idea of 'the museum as medium' – a collection of objects not so much made as a narrative device but as a way of telling a story, of creating a picture of a place or civilization through a collection of things, the way a museum does through its display of objects. Most of the art of the past that I admire takes the form of objects that tell stories. New York is where that way of working crystallized for me.

**BMcA: Tell us about the genesis of *Gaswork*, your recent sculptural piece for Dublin.**

JK: It started off like most things in the sketchbook. I then did finished line drawings, ink on paper, done to one-third size. This was slightly counter-intuitive as I had been trained to do things big and then reduce them to make them sharp. Now, with the new technology you can convert a line drawing to a vector file which means you can enlarge it to any magnification without it pixelating. Then these black-and-white vector files are coloured electronically to create the final digital file. I'd already chosen my palette of colours at the enamelling plant so I just had to decide what colour was going where. These files were then transferred at full size to silkscreens, and because the panels were curved, enamel inks were printed onto transfer film which was wetted and slid onto the surface of the panels and fired. Once that image is fixed at over 800

degrees, you've got a very tough bond. It's one of those mediums like tapestry or mosaic where the image is the surface, or image and surface are the same thing. Fresco is another one.

The commission came about because the gas board realized that they once had the equivalent of a village on that site and that now only one brick chimney remained. That's what started me thinking of it as a lost civilization. It's also the civilisation that is lost from my childhood – horse-drawn, coal-fired, a mechanical civilization that dominated the world I was raised in, so there was a personal input into it. It's also a celebration of the workers who created this vast entity, with a lot of references to end usage, the creature comforts of the industry, and observation of how that was synchronized with the general modernization of Ireland.

I wanted something that would fix in time: the beginning and end of coal gas; the conversion to gas power, the ubiquity of it in Ireland established during my lifetime. We still have gas, but it comes from a very different place.

**In an interview I did with you in 1985 you said 'the further away you get from Ireland, the more absurd you realize that the divisions here are'. Do you still hold the same opinion?**

JK: Yes, I think that we now have a psychological problem, not a political one. Quite a long time ago legislation was in place for dealing with the sins of the past. Any problem can now be pursued through

mediation, if not the courts, so this vicious sectarian conflict is completely unnecessary, such as the recent Pavlovian responses to the flag issue at the City Hall in Belfast. A few years ago Paul Nolan, a childhood friend, took me on a tour of our old turf in North Belfast. It was frightening to see how much division there still is. It's worse, if anything, in terms of geographical separation of the communities. We fondly remembered the 77 bus. You would have to go quite a few miles out of your way now to cover the diverse ground once traversed by the 77 bus! What I didn't realize in the innocence of childhood was that we lived on the slopes of an active volcano and we were really in a state of shock when it erupted in 1969. The eruption may have ended but the underground rumblings are still there. In my opinion they always will be until we stop the absurd process of educating children separately at the age of four. ■

Brian McAvra is an art critic.

