

IN THE FLESH

'Everything that is beautiful has something creepy about it or something unsettling underneath,' Vera Klute talks to **Brian McAvera** about her aesthetic





Brian McAvera: Vera, you are currently working on three Public Art projects: a sculpture of Luke Kelly for Dublin city centre; a bust of Eileen Gray commissioned for a location in France; and a set of sculptures for the entrance hall of the new children's hospital in Dublin. How far can a personal response operate within the confines of Public Art?

Vera Klute: The Luke Kelly sculpture is to be positioned at the end of Sheriff Street near the Convention Centre. The brief from Dublin City Council (DCC) was quite open to all kinds of formats which was great. The Gray was specifically commissioned as a bust but it didn't have to conform to the standard format. The architectural concept for the new children's hospital is 'based on a wonderful garden in the sky' and that's what I took as a starting point. There was a lot of freedom with this as the commissioners were quite open to materials and ideas. The good thing about short-listing is that you can propose whatever you like. If they like it, that's great and if not, they will choose something else. I feel it's always better to submit an idea for something that I am interested in myself rather than second-guessing what a commissioner might like.



With a portrait you naturally have a set starting point, but for me a portrait is not so much about a person's achievement, even though a lot of them get commissioned for that reason. Instead I try to relate on a more personal level. Whether it's Luke Kelly or my neighbour, it's the same.

This Luke Kelly commission will be a large, oversized head made of stone, with metal wire set on/into it for the hair and beard. First I made a small model and then a larger one to be scanned in 3D. I went to Italy to choose a stone, which will be CNC milled there, and the hair and other finishing touches will be done here in Dublin.

The Eileen Gray bust is an edition of three and I have one of them finished. They will go to Parc du Cap Martin, the Irish Embassy in Paris, and one has been acquired by the OPW to be displayed in Ireland. It is in bronze with a two-tone patina and a bespoke plinth which I based on her architecture and her furniture. It is a cross between the front façade of villa E1027 and one of her coffee tables. I found her an interesting but challenging subject, as she looks so different in profile and from the front, and also her general look changed so much when she aged. The pose is from one of the iconic black-and-white photographs of her but the face is mainly based on her driving license.

For the new children's hospital, I'm developing three huge balloon-like creatures which will float around the main staircase. As most of the patients are so young, it really is an artwork made specifically for children. The sculptures are mechanical, interactive and they also illuminate. The spheres will have floating tentacles and buttons for children to press and illuminate the different spheres. It is quite open to interpretation and not based on any specific creature, but there are associations with a bouncy castle, a whale,

1&2 VERA KLUTE
PLUNGE 2017 carved
polyurethane foam, silicone
250x150x150cm. Photo
Ros Kavanagh

3 SELF-PORTRAIT oil on
canvas, 41x51cm. NSPC
Commission 2012 National
Self-Portrait Collection,
University of Limerick



bubbles, a caterpillar or a seal in there. There is also a waking phase and a sleeping phase to mimic the behaviour of a real living creature. I am currently working on the design and development, taking on board the feedback of the various stakeholders, including young children. It is definitely my biggest and most ambitious commission so far.

After all of this I will try to get back to making a few smaller things in the studio and work towards a solo show at the Molesworth Gallery next year.

BMcA: You were born in 1981 in Salzkotten in North Rhine-Westphalia in Germany, a small town previously noted for salt production and then for metal mining. Who were your parents, what did they do, and what do you remember about growing up in the area?

V K: My mum is a retired secondary school teacher. I am actually from a very small village outside Salzkotten with a population of about 2,000 people. My father worked in a software company but he was the artist in the family. It might have been an alternative career for him. He is more interested in design and illustration though, and he would have produced posters for local clubs and logos for small

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companies over the years – of course for free. My parents were generally interested in art, so when we were on holidays we'd go to lots of museums. My dad also made copies of famous paintings. He always said he lacked the imagination to be an artist so he copied oil paintings: Van Gogh, Picasso (only the early ones), Gauguin, Degas, for example. It was only later that I found out that they were not originals. But it didn't matter. I grew up with these paintings which were so beautiful.

I'm not very academic. I'm an undiagnosed dyslexic. I didn't struggle with grades, but I was not particularly into school, with the exception of Maths and Art. I would rather be doing something with my hands. My parents do everything around the house themselves, like tiling, wallpapering, rewiring lights and sockets, converting the attic, so I picked up a lot of practical skills.

My teens were difficult. The school system was categorically not working for me and my whole environment was a bad fit. But it was a time when I became more focused on art and also craft. A few of my friends were into graffiti so I dabbled a bit with that but I struggled with the very stylized approach and soon gave up on it.

4 SR. STANISLAUS KENNEDY 2014 oil on cotton 105x78cm. Photo©NGI

5 EILEEN GRAY 2018 edition of 3, bronze on bespoke concrete plinth 74x54x42cm. Photo Vera Klute





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BMcA: Nationality is often an important determinant of cultural attitudes. If one thinks of the Northern Renaissance as opposed to Italy, there is a strong element of a knotty, unflinching, unsentimental focus on cruelty and the macabre – the Isenheim Altarpiece for example. How far were you formed by being born and living in Germany?

V K: When I think of the art I saw in Germany, I think of Baroque and Renaissance art such as little floaty angels and swirling ornament. The area I am from is very Catholic and I spent more time in churches than I would have liked to. But our local church also has an excellent copy of Michelangelo's *Pieta*, which I had time to study for hours and hours. I did see Käthe Kollwitz later as a teenager and I really like her work. There is a lot of harshness in Germany, a lack of kindness and emotion. A lot of coldness, even in families. The mentality in Germany is different to Ireland. Everything in Germany is much more controlled and maybe that is what I struggle with in my own art. I find it hard to let go of precision and detail and get a bit messy. I guess that is what the German Expressionists might have been trying to break out of. My parents wanted me to get a proper job in Design or Illustration. I was shocked to see them writing 'Designer' on official forms until very recently as they didn't think that 'Artist' was a valid profession. I had seen very little of contemporary art, maybe the odd exhibition in Hamburg. When I was eighteen my dad and I went on a trip to Vienna to see a Klimt exhibition at the Belvedere and we later went to Rome for the Vatican museum and Villa Borghese. For the last two years when I was at school I had a boyfriend in Hamburg and so went to the Kunsthalle occasionally. I never made it to Berlin or Munich. Then I was interested in comics, mangas, and music videos and most of all movies. MTV was a great source of inspiration.

BMcA: You came to Ireland to go to Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art & Design and Technology, doing your degree between 2002 and 2006, and presumably arriving in Ireland when you were 22. Why did you want to go to Ireland, and specifically Dún Laoghaire, and what were you doing previously in Germany?

V K: I was in Ireland from the age of twenty. As I had taken a year out from school, I didn't finish until I was twenty and I went straight to Ireland, to get a break. I had been here at the age of six or seven on a short holiday and I really liked it. So I signed up for a working two-month holiday in Kilkenny and I sort of stayed on. My mum made me come back a few months later as I got a place at art college at Kassel, in Germany. I started the course but it was awful – hugely conceptual, and especially the fellow first-year students put me off as they were incredibly arrogant, and took themselves way too seriously. I did not feel that I had anything to contribute there and I got really depressed quite quickly. I had started the course in September but by Christmas I was back in Ireland, going to Carrick-on-Suir,



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and I applied to a few art colleges. I never figured out how to apply to NCAD as it wasn't accessed through the CAO and my English wasn't great, which didn't help. I got a place at IADT though and I liked it a lot more, especially socially.

BMcA: At Dún Laoghaire, who were your peers and what kind of art education did you receive?

V K: My peers were a lot more pleasant than the first-year students I met in Germany. A lot of people in college weren't that bothered about art. I found that a bit strange. Of my peers a couple are practicing artists though having real jobs. A lot of

them went into related fields such as design or illustration or arts management. Personally, I like to figure things out for myself and I don't respond well to instruction but the tutors opened my mind to other things – forcefully at times. I was learning Art Talk! There is a certain language that you have to learn for applications. I was a little disappointed with the technical skills there. I chose video but there wasn't a lot of technical support at the time. I regret that I never had a chance to take part in sculpture workshops and I never had a chance to learn the technical elements of painting because I had chosen 4D Video. I think the course is structured differently now though.

6 BLACK CLOUD, WHITE CLOUD 2017
clear and frosted acrylic, plywood, motor, acrylic ink, 138x138x15cm each
Photo Ros Kavanagh

7 LARA 2018 oil on canvas 30x40cm
Photo Vera Klute



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BMcA: You had a very well-received Diploma show at Dún Laoghaire. Tell us about how it developed.

V K: I was so stressed back then which was probably due to a lack of confidence. For the show I had a video animation – live footage combined with animated 2D drawings and a ‘set’ created around it in simple black and white outlines. I got good at video editing and was able to get playful with it. I was trying to make an installation, but I wasn’t really sure what that meant. For me it was really all about the video animation. I guess ‘Installation’ was a trendy word then which was thrown around the college a lot. I felt that just painting or just sculpture would have never been exciting enough for the tutors and maybe that’s why I keep moving back and forth between materials. At the same time, it just happens that I get bored easily and also get excited about new materials or techniques easily. I have to admit that I take a lot of shortcuts and I don’t make the effort to learn a skill from the ground up. I like figuring things out as I go along. If I already know exactly how something is going to work, I don’t see the point in doing it.

BMcA: Residencies have been a staple of your career. Two years out of art college you had a Unit Residency Project at Portlaoise (2008-09)] overlapping with your tenure at The Fire Station Artists’ Studio (2007-10), and then after a six-year gap, the Heinrich Böll Residency on Achill Island in 2017. Apart from the monetary aspect, what do you get out of a residency? How far do they generate material?

V K: The Fire Station Residency was fantastic. It meant that I could afford to live somewhere and have a studio straight after college. And then there was the recognition of the residency; a seal of approval. I don’t know how much the environment or surroundings would have fed into my work directly, but living in this area of the city centre broadened my horizons in a lot of ways.

Achill was great as well. I had been interested in landscape for a long time and I did a lot of thinking about how to approach this subject in a different way. The softness of the clouds hanging over everything in that landscape really fascinated me in Achill and I started painting on silk as it had the same kind of lightness and combined it with etching into acrylic. They are in the RHA Annual at the moment. Now that I have kids I wish I had gone on more residencies before, but often the opportunities come with a great sense of expectation and pressure, that I wasn’t quite up for.

BMcA: Aidan Dunne, referring to ‘The Grand Scheme’, your show at The LAB in 2014-15 in which you exhibited tapestries, kinetic sculpture, drawings, animated video projections and realistic wax and polystyrene sculpture, noted your versatility but characterised your work as disturbing and slightly creepy. Is this a description that you recognise?

V K: Yes, I think it is a compliment. Everything that is beautiful has something creepy about it or something unsettling underneath. For me, a lot of the work is not conscious. It’s about association and gut feeling and the creepiness comes out of that intuitive place. I’m not very good at articulating things. My art is not conceptual and it is not something that I can consciously describe, so I don’t really know what I am doing most of the time. Since I have had the children, my artistic decision-making process has changed completely. I used to fuss around and get hung up on things. Now I go straight with my gut feeling and that seems to work well for me. Maybe it’s about female sensitivities or maybe I just don’t have the time to contemplate everything.

BMcA: ‘Breeding Ground’, your solo show at the Molesworth in 2016, was another eclectic mix: video animation, acrylics, wax and polystyrene sculpture, portraits in oil, paper sculpture, drawings and tapestries and even glazed porcelain sculpture. There’s a very Germanic preoccupation with the body; a sense in which *Alien* and SF movies, Grand Guignol, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, the early work of Lucian Freud, and a Gothic sensibility in the sense of Fuseli, all swirl around in the mix. What is it that you are aiming for?



V K: I think essentially it's about mortality and the way we are all flesh. I became a vegetarian at the age of four when I grasped that meat was made from dead animals, which struck me as absurd. And this is essentially what we're made of as well: meat. I have always found the body fascinating. It grows, mutates, decays, changes, regenerates, falls apart. We have such strong visceral responses to anything related to our own body. We are disgusted by body hair, odour or any fluids produced by the body and at the same time there is such an effort for denial and suppression. I look to a mixture of references for inspiration and other artists are the least of it.

I'm hugely into movies. I remember every single movie I saw as a child: *Inner Space*, horror movies I shouldn't have watched at that age, and then later the *Alien* movies, Tarantino and Lars von Trier. Anything related to movies I would have sucked up. Still cinematography is a huge inspiration for me. With 'Breeding Ground' I was coming to terms

8 GROWTH 1 2014
wax, polystyrene
40x35x25cm. Photo
Ros Kavanagh

9 STAMPEDE 2015
paper 100x100x90cm
Photo Ros Kavanagh

with a lot of personal life changes. I was transitioning from having the outside perspective of the artist, to constantly being in the middle of life: domesticated with no time on my own and constantly socializing around my children's needs. I remember the first pregnancy. It was like the *Alien* opening sequence, something growing inside me. It's as absurd as it is amazing: the pain and the fleshiness.

BMcA: Portraiture, in one form or another, has been a staple of your art and in 2015 you won the Hennessy Portrait Prize. Putting it baldly, there tends to be two kinds of portrait painters, those who view it as a personal exploration of style and psychology, and those who view it as a craft. How do you see it?

V K: I love doing portraits because I find the face so fascinating: how we are so fine-tuned to little nuances. If anything in the faces moves by even a millimetre, we read it as a completely different expression. At the same time, I'd love to be a bit freer, and make it less about the likeness, but at least half the portraits I do now are commissions and understandably a good likeness is an important part of that. In this way I like doing self-portraits because I don't have to please anyone but myself. Generally, I'm caught between the two as you say but portraits have proven to be a good way to pay the bills and I don't feel like I am selling out. It works out best when it's a compromise – and there is a little bit more of me in it as I feel it is the case with the portrait of *Garry Hynes* which I did for the National Gallery. I don't know if she was hugely pleased to start with but I appreciate that she accepted it for what a portrait is: someone else's interpretation and not an exact copy of the person. With this commission, I was given free choice of materials and I couldn't see it as a painting. When I first met her the room was all grey, her clothes were grey and she had grey hair. It didn't make sense for me visually. I felt I would be more interested in texture and slight tonal variations. Some faces look great as sculpture and I could see more of the sculpture in her. People, maybe, with harsher features work best in painting.

BMcA: When you were growing up Germany was a divided country and you arrived in another divided country, Ireland. How concerned are you with politics (if at all) and how far are subterranean tensions useful for the artist?

V K: I don't think I am political, though I'm quite passionate about animal rights. Nothing ever changes in politics when you think about the bigger picture and I find it too frustrating to get invested in it. The divisions in Ireland and Germany are very different. A big difference is guilt. There's a lack of guilt and a sense of being hard-done by in Ireland, and the opposite is true in Germany; where there is so much guilt and no hope for redemption ever. I think psychologically these things are still relevant even though most of us were born much later than the original conflicts taking place. ■

Brian McAvera is an art critic