

# Friends, Family and Lovers

**James Hanley** previews an exhibition at Ranelagh Arts Centre where the theme of intimacy reflects the sense of community at work there



Nestled just beyond the main drag of Ranelagh sits an Arts Centre that bears the name of one of the most sought after Victorian suburbs in south Dublin. Located between the Luas station and a busy supermarket means the Ranelagh Arts Centre gets footfall and passing trade. Its open door and large front window are inviting and welcoming. Its status is unique amongst the chic retail outlets, busy restaurants and popular watering holes in that it is a registered charity, partially funded by Dublin City Council and washing its face for the rest with monies earned from the exhibitions which, it is keen to stress, do not charge the fifty per cent rate which is the norm in most commercial galleries in the city.

Its staff come from the Tús scheme of the Department of Social Welfare, bolstered by the altruism of local volunteers from ages eighteen to eighty who generate a real sense of community spirit. An annual show of work from the inmates of the Central Mental Hospital (albeit a little outside the borough) underscores the inclusive nature of the centre.

Ranelagh Arts Centre still has a connection to the Ranelagh Arts Festival since the centre's foundation in 2008, when it was used as its base. The festival showcases street theatre, historical walking tours, exhibitions and a hugely popular dog show in the hidden gem of a park behind the row of buildings in which the centre resides.

Small boutique community inspired festivals like this are popping up over the city. Though not yet with the clout of say the Dalkey Book Festival, quirky individual and creative enterprises such as Fizzfest in Phibsboro and the Five Lamps Festival in the North inner city have galvanised local communities and are growing from strength to strength. The latter in an area more economically challenged than its Southside opposite nonetheless rises above these difficulties with passion and grit. Hats off to all those who give of their time to creating something special for their area.

When Ranelagh Arts Centre started its programming was open-ended, with events and exhibitions following one another without one particular strand dominating. Now a recent string of critically and commercially successful shows have focused the identity of the venue more clearly and its



**THIRTY ARTISTS FEATURE, WORKING IN PAINTING AND DRAWING WITH THE ONE EXCEPTION OF VERA KLUTE WHO WILL SHOW A VIDEO PIECE**

credibility as a space is on the up. To coincide with this year's Arts Festival in September the centre is putting on a portrait exhibition entitled 'Friends, Family and Lovers'. Conceived by Ranelagh Arts Centre director Caroline Canning, the show's theme is the intimacy that is particular to a private portrait as opposed to one commissioned or for a formal public setting.

Inspired by seeing a sensitive portrait by artist David Hayes of his wife Ann (Fig 4), Canning knew what she wanted and asked Mick O'Dea to select the artists. One of the country's leading portrait painters, having just completed the official state portrait of the President, O'Dea ensured Hayes was enlisted. This will be a departure for him as his show at the centre last year was a wonderfully endearing set of



watercolour portraits of Ranelagh dogs. I did say the place was inclusive. Thirty artists feature, working in painting and drawing with the one exception of Vera Klute who will show a video piece (Fig 1). The best contemporary practitioners are involved including Una Sealy, Blaise Smith, Maeve McCarthy, Comhghall Casey (Fig 3), Cian McLoughlin (Fig 2), Joe Dunne, Catherine Barron and Conor Walton among others.

The show will be accompanied by a catalogue, which will be a first for Ranelagh Arts Centre, with insightful texts from the participants about their subjects. With the public's enduring fascination with portraits and faces being a natural crowd puller for a local venue, the show should be a winner. And no doubt it will be. But before anyone gets ahead of themselves – no pun intended – a cautionary tale. A recent cancellation was imaginatively overcome by the Arts Centre by asking a local artist to pin her life drawings from floor to ceiling. Confronted by a wall of 'privates' a well-known local vocalised his disapproval with the line 'Can you not have anything nicer in there like horses, tigers or Michael Collins?' Sadly for this indignant man the great portrait painter Leo Whelan RHA who painted Collins from life in 1919 and posthumously in military attire for the Free State won't be participating in the show, as he has been dead since 1956. ■

'Friends, Family and Lovers,' Ranelagh Arts Centre, Dublin, 28 September - 16 October 2017.

James Hanley is Keeper of the RHA and a member of Aosdána.

1 VERA KLUTE  
PORTRAIT OF MY  
DAUGHTER 2016  
video animation,  
3 min looped

2 CIAN  
McLOUGHLIN  
PORTRAIT OF MY  
MOTHER 2016 oil  
on board 50x40cm

3 COMHGHALL  
CASEY PORTRAIT  
OF EMMA-ROSE  
CARNEY 1999 oil on  
board 27x30cm

4 DAVID HAYES  
PORTRAIT OF  
ANNE 1997 pastel  
54x52cm