

## Podcast Transcript: Artists' Voices: Life in a Pandemic

Amelia Stein in conversation from County Mayo.

### **Donal Maguire 0:01**

Artists' Voices: Life in a Pandemic is a new series of oral histories from the ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art at the National Gallery of Ireland.

These oral histories were recorded as a series of conversations with artists to document their experiences during the global Covid-19 pandemic. This series is produced with the kind support of ESB, sponsor of the ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art.

This episode of Artists' Voices: Life in a Pandemic features photographer Amelia Stein in conversation from County Mayo on Friday 1st of May 2020.

Born in Dublin, Amelia Stein lives and works between Dublin City and the Erris region of Northwest Mayo. She is a photographer who began her career in theatre and music photography, while moving steadily towards establishing an art practice. Over the past two decades, she's focused primarily on portraiture and landscape subjects, tending to work in series. Her collections include portraits of artists and aspects of the landscape and coastline of North Mayo. Stein's work is represented in many collections, including the Irish Museum of Modern Art and the National Gallery of Ireland.

Amelia generously agreed to talk about her life and work as an artist during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Good morning, Amelia. And thank you for joining me from County Mayo. I'd like to begin by discussing your work as a landscape photographer. I'm sure many of the people who are familiar with your work will know you for your black and white photographs of rural Ireland. These include bog lands in the western counties of Galway and Mayo, images of empty vernacular farm buildings in remote rural areas and photographs of dramatic sea cliffs, these precipices where the land meets the ocean. And I thought you could begin by telling us about how you approach the landscape as a, as a landscape photographer, and how you engage with the landscape as well as ... as a site of culture. And aesthetically, and perhaps beginning with your series of photographs of the sea cliffs of North Mayo which are called *Precipice*.

### **Amelia Stein 2:24**

The *Precipice* series came about from me just physically being here and learning how to walk out on the cliffs and learning what I was looking at, because, you know, you're

looking at sea and rock, and then you realize there's a very special shape and form to all this because of the rocks themselves, they're grandeur ...

... And then meeting local historians trust Treasa Ní Ghearraigh and Uinsíonn Mac Graith. And in fact, I was speaking to them today. And they're, they're very fine book, *Logainmneacha*, which is the place names that are put on the cliffs, fields, areas, they're actually working on a reproduction of that book. I'm so delighted for them about that, because I'll be, I have two copies that are in my life, one at home in Dublin and one here. And it's like my Bible.

So when I met them, and I found the book, you know, the cliff stopped just being rock. Every crevice has a story to it. There's a name for a ledge, there's a name for everything. And so you become quite personal with the landscape here. Because you know that's where the so and so and so and so is from, the point of deliverance, I mean, there's, in the bay outside, there is, it's a U-shaped bay, and there's a rock on the right hand side, it's quite square and comes out. And it's known as a point of deliverance. Because if you were coming in at sea from that, and you, you were, the sea as rough, as soon as you hit that rock, you were safely within the area of the bay. So, you know, your chance of drowning would be reduced.

So there's a massive, I mean, that book and getting to know people here and becoming part of the community and doing community art projects. And that's not meant to sound like doing community, but you just get roped into doing things and being part of things and you build up relationships with people over time. And you understand the place more and I think, for me, I mean, people think that you have a camera and you run out into the landscape. I don't. I might, you know, get up, tidy up, sort out my head, go for a walk and then I'll pick a moment when the light just grabs me and I'm gone out on the cliffs. Or I will pick my time, but it's not - I don't go searching for photographs. I just, you know, the mood will take you and you'll know that the light is a certain way. Or you know you just - I don't walk around with a camera. I just have to be in the frame of mind where I feel really well, you know, I've had a good meal, I've had lunch, I have a flask of tea. And I know I'm going for two hours that way.

But at the moment, nobody is doing anything out. You know, I just won't insult anybody here by going out on the headlands of the cliffs because I just don't want to break my ankle, get into difficulties, I noticed to speak, normally, there's a walkway out here to Teacháin a'Watch, which is, which is in one of the photos. And that's a massive project that the community are undertaking here to rebuild it from the original plans towards Teacháin a'Watch.

And just I'll just finish that bit by saying, I haven't walked out to Teacháin a'Watch, and I've been here nearly five or six weeks, I just won't until I feel the lockdown is coming near to an end because I don't want to break my ankle, I don't want to cause anybody any difficulty by having to have a helicopter out for me that I've done something stupid, but I just feel that even the beaches have signed saying beach closed but we are kind of

skirting that slightly, I think it's not for locals to staying local, do your walk, do your bit of beach cleaning.

I suppose the biggest difficulty up here for us is you're so used to people calling in. Like when they see the cars. Mick and myself are here, the husbands, the men come up to see Mick in the evening to talk. You know, there is a huge social element in visiting, visiting is a huge part of what people do here and exchange of conversation. And that's not, that's being really adhered to up here. People are not calling in. I mean, you have the gate conversation, or you're in one car and somebody is in the other but people are being, people are genuinely very nervous.

### **Donal Maguire 6:42**

And your work is very much sourced in, or influenced by, this local knowledge that you encounter. And going back to the picture of Teacháin a'Watch. This depicts a locally known site of some cultural and historical significance. And that was a pre-war watchtower, is that correct?

### **Amelia Stein 7:03**

So we are, we were looking at post number 63. It's a very interesting post and I had absolutely no idea about how much information there was until I was researching another project of military archives and one of our friends there said, What number are you? And that came to number 63 logbooks which I have here beside me, so all 1000 pages of it. So we, the community people, have started reading it. And trying to interpret it. Nobody had any real understanding of how much air traffic was going past here because of the Donegal airport. The flights were coming in from North America, Canada, coming across the, across the Atlantic and they were heading into, in the beginning, Castle Archdale which is an air, a seaplane base in Donegal. So the whole picture was a bit revealing of itself, of what went on during World War II off our shores. The tragedies.

There's a wonderful book written by Dr. Michael Kennedy who's been up twice called Guarding Neutral Ireland, and that is our Bible. So two men sat 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in shifts, recording what they saw. And as the war years progressed, they got more sophisticated at judging tonnage of ships. They got better at knowing what was going on. They had several tragic bodies washed ashore during that time. So it's – [speaking to another person] Mick. Thanks. Hi.

Mick just came in there to get a few things. You can hear him clicking away.

We have read the logbooks, we're coming to an understanding of what was in those logbooks. What it gives, it gives us a picture of what life was like here during the emergency or how people were trying to - you can only imagine how people were trying to imagine what was going on in Europe and how information...

So, you know, there's a kind of a synergy between that and now so some of us in the group have been talking and saying, What was it like during World War II? Has this

lockdown given us any inkling of what it might have been like during World War II, the not knowing. Like, we are in the information age, so we know everything that's going on. We can see tragedy, what's happening worldwide, the number of lives being lost. So I can only imagine how terrifying it was not to know what was going on during World War II. And we have food. There's no shortages. There was a tremendous loss of life offshore. A lot of Irish people died that were in the British Navy. So, they were being, you know, the U boats were shooting targeting the boats out off our shores. So there was tremendous loss of life.

And, in fact, Michael Kennedy wrote a wonderful essay called the Men Who Came In with the Sea and we have a body that came ashore here identifiably from Liverpool. So when we rebuild the Teacháin a'Watch with the men from the rural social scheme, help from the Air Corp in airlifting 10 and a half tons of materials out to the headland. You know, we have the original plans, we're going to install some art pieces very, very sensitively as a memorial into it, not to clutter it, and we hope to have a website and local schools are making paintings and involvements. And ...

### **Donal Maguire 10:30**

It seems you're thinking a lot at the moment about types of communication, perhaps, whether it's the conversation over the gate or the, or global conversations or means of communicating with people. Historically, it's via these, these watchtowers. But is, is this something that you find has entered your work more so recently, or in terms of the current context that we're living in?

### **Amelia Stein 11:01**

No, because I'm not making any work at the moment, I've just suddenly decided it's time to stop. So, you know, the conversations that we're having about Teacháin a'Watch are recapping what we know. And where are we going to move to next. What happens a lot, we're more planning when the lockdown lifts what we're going to do. We were putting together an exhibition, that's on the long finger. It's advancing the project while we're sitting on our hands. That's really what we're doing. Because I don't really feel like taking any photographs of anything, other than I've set up a tiny little black background in the shed, and I'm photographing the food that we're eating.

### **Donal Maguire 11:40**

Why do you think that is, that you just don't feel like taking photographs?

### **Amelia Stein 11:43**

I'm exhausted. I'm tired. I've done an awful lot of work in the last couple of months coming up to Christmas. I got a commission for College of Surgeons - that was nine portraits; I have the opening show, whenever it happens, for the Butler Gallery in Kilkenny, which is sixty portraits of a barracks. So, it's getting those into production.

And you know, there's been just so much work that you have to do. Plus the Teacháin a'Watch project - plus my own work on the Teacháin a'Watch project, which is

amalgamating photographs that I've taken in the past off the cliffs and putting it together with text and drawings of planes and the, the aircraft identification books in our military archives. So there was a lot going on.

I was also taking small landscape pictures and adding hand colour to them. So it just seemed to me like this was a chance. Or my body just said, Stop, get on that sofa for two weeks. But I think the first two weeks, I never really moved off the sofa, lifted my head slightly. And just it was two sofa weeks. And then it's just gradually getting in touch with people again, realizing who you really want to talk to, missing a lot of my books, I'm a great one for books. So I missed the books that I put back in Dublin. But I just, I'm just taking the time to build up energy to look at my work more critically. And we've had a bout of good weather. So that's been remedial, and a relief, if you like.

### **Donal Maguire 13:25**

Could you maybe talk a little bit about what a normal day is like for you as an artist? You spoke a little bit about the process of taking a photograph. But obviously, the artwork doesn't stop there. There's a process of selection and post production and preparation of images for exhibition. Then, can you tell us more about that, what's involved in that process for you?

### **Amelia Stein 13:47**

So my normal routine is get up, get out the door for an hour's walk. So I would do an hour in the morning, whether I'm here or in Dublin. So I go for my walk in the morning, which is really me working because I go into, kind of, I try to go into a very neutral zone. And that's a speedy 40 minutes to an hour. And that gets me ready for work. Whereas if I sit and sit at the desk, I try to do something straightaway, it's a waste of time. So I formulate what I need to do in a given day.

And there's then, at the moment, instead of being able to go to Dominic printer and pick up a test and look at something on screen. We have, because I have a screen set up here, the same screen as he has in Dublin and I have in Dublin as well. So we're literally working through Dropbox on that. And I have all my backup disks here with me. So in theory, I'm the same as I am in Dublin.

You asked me about going out to take photographs. I just don't feel like it. You know I'm just very conscious as well not to be driving around my camera in my car looking like I'm on holidays here because it's a very serious time for everybody. You know, there's been some quantity of deaths in Belmullet in the old folks home, people are very uncertain about, you know, when will this end? How will this end? How will we get back to normal, whatever normal is, which is the kids coming to visit, seeing grandchildren.

So it's, it's just a very normal, ordinary, everyday personal shock. And then realizing globally, that, you know, we're not in such a bad position here. We have food, we have roofs overhead. It's not World War II. But there's this, there's just this devastating loss of life. And if you're living in less than comfortable surroundings, or you're living in

poverty, or homelessness, or any of the social problems that we've had in Ireland with - there's a lot of people who are probably in a much tighter corner than I am here. So, grateful, if you like, to be here and to be able to walk outside the door, take a bit of air and have food.

### **Donal Maguire 16:00**

And what would you say you miss most about the normal routine of life? What are you looking forward to getting back to in terms of your work as an artist, the people you work with or meet or colleagues?

### **Amelia Stein 16:13**

I think I would just like to be able to, if - I was trying to define it in my mind - I'd like to be able to go back to Dublin this afternoon if I felt like it. Do work on my screen there for a while, pick up some things that I have there the colouring pencils, get a few prints sorted. Finish this exhibition for Kilkenny, and get it delivered, irrelevant when it's going to be seen. But just finish off work that's to be done.

And I'm a very tidy, clean, organized person. So I've a very tidy house. So I suppose I miss my own physical home. This is Mick's home and studio. And I miss my books and I miss my friends and I miss my neighbours. I miss my family. But you know, this is - we're zooming and we're talking to each other and conversations are long.

And it's curious because there's in, in my years working as a performance photographer, which ended in the year 2000 when I pulled the plug on that way of life, I put up a page on my website in 2015 as a tribute to the women I photographed in theatre. It was about 30 images up and I have asked what, you know, I will talk to people if I meet them on the street and say, Look, why don't we put some text to go with this? And one person did. So Kathy Mack, she wrote magnificent piece. And last night, or two nights ago, I emailed another person, Kathy Belton and she wrote a magnificent piece. And in the space of about two hours, I contacted about eight of the women that I photographed. And people come back, Yes, I'll write something I'd love to. You know, it's time to be doing something like that now.

So this, you know, I've only got 30 images here with me on screen and maybe have some in my, one of my hard drives. But it's, you know, going back to Dublin, and going through my archive and adding more pictures to that, to that page on my screen. But I think probably, you know, your conversation to me the other day has actually brought me back to the reality of it. Well, you know, you, you better get back on the bus again, stop the holiday vibe here and start looking at things more critically again. I think you just have to stay in the moment and making your practice. But sometimes, you need to step a step away from it. And maybe that's what this has done.

### **Donal Maguire 18:37**

And on that note, do you think this experience and how we're dealing with this situation, the pandemic, will change your approach to art making in any way?

### **Amelia Stein 18:49**

I think, as an artist, if you're not evolving new ways of working as you're going along, I mean, you're not, you're not progressing for a start. So I would be very self-critical. And I would be always trying to up my skills.

So I always feel I'm really only getting started in, in some ways that you are refining your eye. I suppose I've had a little bit more time to look at the artists whose work really interests me at depth because I don't have my book, I'm looking at them on screen. Thinking about them, how they express themselves through this strange medium of black and white photography.

And, you know, you also consider, you know, my work is mainly done with film. So before the shops were closing in Dublin, I bought forty rolls of film and developer. So there's thirty rolls of it here and I've only used one in a year for about seven weeks, and I just feel maybe I shouldn't be wasting it. So I'm out with my little digital camera. And it's not the same emotional commitment. You mean you take a photo, but you haven't committed it to film. You have to think about now, you know, I'm sixty two now and I'm not as, I can't go the same long days in one way, and then I can do did things differently. But you know, for the moment using the digital medium is very, very interesting until something cracks it and you think, I have to commit this to film. So it's not that I'm not taking photographs at the moment, it is I'm not committing to my, my practice of using film.

### **Donal Maguire 20:26**

And what would you say has surprised you most about people's reaction to this situation that we've found ourselves in? How as people, individuals or society, we've responded to this quite extraordinary and perhaps unexpected experience that we're going through?

### **Amelia Stein 20:49**

That's a very, that's a very big question. Because I think you could only experience it yourself in what you physically have to do when you go to a shop locally, or the local town, or the fact that you can only see your friends on a screen, or that we're seeing more of each other on screen. You know, we're making an effort to have more physical conversations or check in on each other more. So how are you? How's your mom? How's your dad? You know, it's, you know, it's been a long, hard winter up here anyway, and I think this is the time of year where people will be calling in on each other, you know, even more. And, you know, you see, the turf has all been cut early, and we had a blast of good dry weather. So we've had the lambs have been born, the turf is cut and the turf is in brought stacked and brought in. So you have extra hands are at home at the moment. So people came home before the lockdown. So you will see more young people running on, running on the roads in the morning, you'll see the older men having their sons back to help them with farm work, painting sheds. So there's, you

know, there's a lot more to life up here, in terms of physical work to keep yourself going.

Then in Dublin, I'm in touch with my neighbours every couple of days. And I think it might - my saddest moment was when my neighbour sent me her photo of her cherry blossom tree. I said, How is the tree? and she said, It's just cheering everybody up. And I just have waft of, kind of, I want to go home, see the tree, sending pictures of my flowers in the garden. So it's simple, ordinary things and that are really touching at this time.

But, you know, with having the internet, which is great, you can, you can read and you can do and you can work. Portraiture, I don't know when anybody's going to want to stand and have their portrait taken.

### **Donal Maguire 22:55**

If I could ask you one final question, Amelia, amid all of the anxiety and trauma that this pandemic has brought, and I suppose in the context of wider issues and problems around the world, where do you find and see hope for the future?

### **Amelia Stein 23:15**

Goodness in people. You know, I think people, people have to come back to the real values of life which is understanding, the giving of yourself to other people and giving your time to other people and being kind and considerate in life. And it's not all about career-ism or, or having a bigger house or your job or - it's just people being concerned for each other. So basic human interest or respect for each other. That's really coming to the fore and you think what the people on the front line are going through at the moment, from the doctors right down to the people who make the hospital work - the porters, the cleaners, the absolute dedication of nursing staff and what they're going through and the fear of their families. And you know, we have to be very, very grateful to people who are keeping the country going just food, ordinary things.

### **Donal Maguire 24:20**

This conversation with artist Amelia Stein was recorded on the 1st of May 2020 through a video call with Donal Maguire, Curator of the ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art.