

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

Dorothy Cross in conversation from her home in Connemara.

### **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 artist Dorothy Cross in conversation from her home in Connemara, County Galway, on Friday 15th of May 2020.

Born in Cork, Dorothy Cross lives and works in Connemara, County Galway. Over the past 40 years, she has developed a critically acclaimed and multidisciplinary art practice that combines elements of sculpture, installation, photography, video and drawing. Her works incorporate a variety of manufactured and natural materials and objects. Some of these are gathered from the land and coastline near her studio, and include various animal remains and fragments that have been washed ashore. By combining and juxtaposing disparate objects of diverse symbolic and cultural meanings, Cross' works explore different relationships between living beings and their environment.

Cross is represented in many international collections, including Tate London, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Irish Museum of Modern Art, and the National Gallery of Ireland. Dorothy generously agreed to talk about her life and work as an artist during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Donal Maguire 1:46**

Good morning, Dorothy. I'd like to begin by looking back at three particular works of yours that spanned the last 20 years of your career.

*Ghost Ship* from 1999. This is a large-scale sculptural work comprising a disused lightship moored in Dún Laoghaire Harbour, which you covered in green fluorescent paint, giving the vessel an ethereal ghostly character as it floated in the harbor through the night.

*Shark Heart Submarine* from 2011, which is now in the National Gallery of Ireland's collection, and it's constructed from an artist's painting easel, and a model of a nuclear submarine that contains the preserved heart of a shark.

And, finally, *Heartship* from only last year in 2019. This was a performance and film involving the journey of an Irish naval ship, carrying musician Lisa Hannigan above deck and a preserved human heart below deck.

Each of these works can be interpreted and related to ideas associated with travel, migration, and the preservation and loss of life. But, I'm wondering for you do these works relate to each other in a particular way or personal way that might connect them across time in their material form or the themes and issues that you might be speaking to?

### **Dorothy Cross 3:02**

Yes, yes, it's interesting looking back at works, and I think inevitably, all work one does in one's life connects in some way, or one can bring some thread through them. I think those three in particular that you've chosen, *Ghost Ship*, *Shark Heart Submarine* and *Heartship* - well, number one, they all have something to do with the sea and the maritime.

*Ghost Ship* probably more to do with memory, because that ship used to be moored off where we spent time in the summers as children. And that was very much about the loss because the light ships that were positioned around Ireland were manned by, you know, 12 or 14 men, and they couldn't move. They have no engines and that life has passed and that was like very much to do with my childhood and my father's time. So it was about kind of an emptiness and a desire for nature.

*Shark Heart Submarine* is an interesting one; it has more to do with "art" in inverted commas. It originated with a plan, an invitation for a public work in a cathedral in Chichester in England. One of these competitions, which one sometimes enters and rarely wins. And the idea was to get a small single submarine, a one person submarine from the Second World War gilded with gold and have a human heart inside it in the middle of the cathedral. So, not too surprisingly, it didn't get the commission. But sometimes with those kinds of ideas, it just triggers off some - I was so impassioned by it, I thought it could be so beautiful. And even people at the time we're talking about offering their hearts when they passed away possibly to be forever held in this reliquary of a submarine in a cathedral, which in some sense is a very poetic notion.

But *Shark Heart Submarine* is very much about art. On this ancient - well, it's a 19<sup>th</sup>-century easel that I bought in London that has the, you know, paint splatters on it so was used over decades by someone who painted. I never paint. But, most people parallel painting with art and think it is the kind of epitome and central territory of art making. But in my mind, art is about some explosion of the imagination.

So what I did was I had a boat builder build me a model of a submarine. And it's only a metre and a half long, and we gilded it with white gold on the outside. And through a lot of kind of journeys and conversations with fisherman, I acquired a heart of a shark that had been killed accidentally, because I'm very impassioned by sharks. Symbolically, I find them a very, very interesting animal. They're so maligned, and we project so much of our own human frailty and fear of mortality onto them.

So in the heart of this submarine is the preserved heart of a shark. And for me, it's simple. It's sitting on the easel in a way incongruously summing up some notion. Because of its miniature size, it looks like a missile. So that explosive nature when we do encounter a painting, or sculpture, or any art, film, or whatever, that kind of explodes our molecules and makes us look at the world in a different way. So I was thrilled at that notion that that piece actually is in the National Gallery, because it is about painting as well as about my practice.

So then we move on to *Heartship*, which funnily enough, the three you have chosen do have very strong relationships. *Heartship* took three years to do. I had heard of a heart that was in a collection in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. It was found originally in Cork City, where I come from, in a crypt. So, I attempted to borrow the heart, knowing that I had been offered a gig on a navy ship by Mary Hickson, who runs a wonderful festival called Sounds from a Safe Harbor. We encountered a wonderful Captain, Brian Fitzgerald, who's second in command in the Irish Navy, who said yes, we could borrow his ship for an afternoon, when it was coming up the River Lee. I recorded Lisa Hannigan singing a few songs about the human heart. She has one in particular, where the refrain is 'your heart, my heart', which is so exquisitely beautiful, and she has a voice like an angel. And she was on deck as the ship moved up river.

This piece had resonances of the work the Irish Navy had done over the previous, like, three or four years, trying to pick up survivors in the Mediterranean. But we were all aware that how many survived and were saved, probably 10 times that number of hearts were lying on the bottom of the sea. So it was very much about that. And Lisa, in some ways, represented this kind of left over kind of phantom presence, as she wandered around this extraordinary big moving kind of sculptural object, this giant ship, which the aesthetic of which is extraordinary.

The usage in Ireland, which is very peaceful, you know, they've never shot a gun in warfare, and yet it patrols, it protects. And funnily enough, it's kind of the opposite to what a warship was built for, I guess. Or maybe not the opposite, but a part of.

So for one performance in September last year, the ship sailed up the river Lee, with this heart. Finally, they agreed to lend it to us down below with the curators holding it in a little box. But it was present. We don't know whose heart it was. We presume it was a man; we could have had it genetically tested but it wasn't permitted. And in some ways, it was more beautiful that we didn't know whose heart was. And we could then all

identify with this lonely organ, which we all possess in our bodies, and which beats, you know, without our noticing every minute of every day, every second until we die.

So that piece for me is the last big work I've done. It's closest to my own heart. And was only seen maybe by seven or eight hundred people and the accidental person walking their dog down the river Lee. But it worked. The weather was perfect. Everything worked perfectly. It was one of those big projects, a few of which I've done.

*Ghost Ship*, I guess in a way, was more prolonged and went on for three weeks. But it had a kind of mesmerizing effect on people when it did exist in Dún Laoghaire. And it was winter time and it was so beautiful. People told me that they encountered it without knowing it was going to be there and thought they were seeing things. And that was when it was at its most beautiful.

### **Donal Maguire 10:07**

It's interesting that some of the themes you mentioned - travel, migrations of people and objects, our journey through life and death - may have a particularly strong resonance in the current environment of the pandemic, and the ways in which it has highlighted, I suppose, certain aspects of our own lives.

Is this something you have given any thought to recently, in terms of how your work might be reinterpreted in the context of how our lives have been recently disrupted and changed?

### **Dorothy Cross 10:35**

Well, I would hope so, you know. And some people, you know, ask artists "is this a very creative time?", and I don't think it is, you know. I'm planting vegetables and chewing on my lily pond, and actually enjoying the time and space for that. Because I think as artists, we're always occupied with things like plagues. And, you know, and mortality.

And, you know, what you hear on the internet now is that people are looking at the notion of prayer more, and I think they're more aware of their own mortality. And that's not to say that just artists are all aware of it and the man on the street isn't, but I think the world has sped up so much. And I moved here twenty two years ago to the west coast of Ireland, to have a place in nature that kept my balance with having to get on an airplane to go to Italy to carve marble, or to London to have an exhibition. So I'm not a purist in terms of travel. But I think this situation feels unreal out here, because, touch wood, we don't have any cases on the on this part of the Connemara coast yet. And the weather has been exquisite. So it's really kind of strange to watch the news and hear about this thing going on, in a way. Because I live with animals and a few, you know, people along the coast and there and it's it actually feels like it did when I first came here in the 80s. It's so quiet, the birdsong is louder. Everybody's saying that.

But I think this thing of making people stop and consider, yes, their own mortality is no harm because we lost religion through the foulness of the practices of a lot of nasty people. And I've always felt the loss of that, because I think, you know, religion,

whatever aspect, whatever form it takes. You know, art can be religion. And I once said to someone who thought it was hilarious; "does art have a capital A, like, God?". He takes the piss out of me forevermore, because of that. But there is something about art being about some kind of excavation and digging through the unknowing, you know.

And with this virus, I think it's scratched all the surfaces of our skins more, you know. And we had been growing these awful skins of consumerism and speed. So that's the one thing. And actually, I think, I don't know if I'm answering your question for the request.

Also I, you know, over my years of living, I know that in my early works, people were horrified by them. They didn't know what I was doing, you know. I think maybe somebody went with - *Heartship* in particular was in September, and people felt that peace. I think there was a real people were crying on the dock. And every time I listened to the music, it makes me cry, because Lisa's voice is so exquisite. So that piece was very unified and resonated, I think, in a simple way.

But in the past, maybe, I've done things that have an aspect of kind of brutality. Like I used cowskins, you know, the abbatoirs skined because upside down. Most of us wear shoes made of leather, including myself, I don't eat meat anymore, but it is about some physicality that was shocking. That I ... I know, looking back, I was intentionally trying to shake things up. So, you know, there are different ways of making art. Some people want to make calm, some people want to shake up. And in those days, in particular, I wanted to shake up because of the frustration of looking at a world that might not consider the beauty. And now I'm hoping that we might. But then will we just go back to, you know, the horrifying numbers of airplanes in the sky?

### **Donal Maguire 14:37**

I suppose that idea of finding our way through the unknown is something that many of us have found ourselves doing at the moment, and that we don't know what the future holds. Not that we've ever did, but any sense of certainty and control has been taken away from us. As you say, many people if they have the time or opportunity, are perhaps turning to more simple things, the essentials. Things that maybe they do have some sense of control over.

### **Dorothy Cross 15:05**

Yeah, people will know how a carrot grows now. Maybe because, you know, people are forgetting and how a carrot grew. But, you know, I do worry about the younger generation, but before this ever happened, I worried about it.

And I was talking to someone the other day about that thing of the impossibility of getting lost. And, you know, when I was young that I could go to Peru and get lost. There was no Lonely Planet guide, there was no internet to book a hotel. And the kind of compression of that is terrifying, but I still think art has the power to explode that.

And also, I think, you know, access - more people might start seeing that, you know, the world, you know, compression maybe is an interesting word. Because what had occurred was, it was so much about commodification of everything.

And the art world itself has fallen into that awful trap. Like look at the art fairs. Look at the vast amounts of money people are paying for art, ridiculous money laundering. And that, before Covid arrived, they were beginning to look at that, I think, but now hopefully, it will shake the art world up and make it more kind of dispersed, if that makes sense.

### **Donal Maguire 16:22**

Yes, this pandemic has certainly become a great disrupter of what we think of as everyday life. And on that note, could you describe what is a normal day for you in the studio, perhaps, if there is such a thing? What is involved for Dorothy Cross and a normal day of making art?

### **Dorothy Cross 16:42**

You know, there's very little difference between now and - there's very little difference, to be honest, you know. I do have a routine - I get up and I have my coffee, and I feed the horse and I go down to sea even if it's lashing rain, because I live right by the sea. So not much has changed, except I'm more allergic to the computer. Says she here speaking on the computer.

And because I was working in Italy, and I can't go back. And when I make things over there, I have to be there. So that's kind of stopped. But you know, I think it's good. I think it's good to stop. I'm repairing things, you know, I have time to kind of make things for people, you know, like, almost that I didn't have before. So, other than that my routine - and I'm not jumping to the car to drive to Dublin, like, every second week. So it's little changed.

But the thing is, we have had exquisite weather. We've had maybe two drops of rain in six weeks. The earth is like a desert. But it made the place, you know, I go out in my kayak. It was like a lake the other day, and the beaches are empty. And so I am spoiled. I realised that I'm privileged, you know, and I speak to friends who aren't sitting by the sea and I realise it's not that easy for a lot of people. But for some people, it's a gift. And for many people it's not. And I think I was the lucky one that it's a gift.

### **Donal Maguire 18:11**

And are you finding you can make work at the moment?

### **Dorothy Cross 18:14**

I'm actually not trying, I'm not trying to make work. And what I am doing is working with a woman called Maeve Ann Austin, who's helping me. We've started going through the archives for the want of a better word. And that's quite interesting, because yesterday I looked at the opera Stabat Mater I did with Opera Theatre Company in 2004. Because Frith Street Gallery, because of this online stuff, wanted to show it and the moving

image. And I had this weird feeling I didn't like it. I loved it. Now it was a really bad document. Because I didn't have enough money to document it properly. So it's not good quality, but the sound is good quality. So I watched this thirty minute Fergal Lacey Stabat Mater yesterday afternoon because I had to. And it was fantastic to have that time to reflect on something that was done sixteen years ago.

So I get irritated by this kind of feeling that you should be working because we shouldn't necessarily, you know. But also, the other thing about being an artist is sometimes there's no difference between working and not working. And even when I have a big project, I might still go out and dig the garden or you know, cut the grass or plant a tree. So I'm not sure there's not much difference in it because I'm not in an urban situation. And I live and work in the same place.

### **Donal Maguire 19:44**

And as an artist who is interested in many aspects of human psychology and our relationship with our environment and other life forms, is there anything that has surprised you about how we've dealt with or responded to the situation that we found ourselves, in relation to the pandemic, and either its global global impact or its impact on a local level?

### **Dorothy Cross 20:15**

Surprised. You know, it's funny, I wasn't, I'm not, I'm not that surprised by anything. I know, there was an inevitability. I was having conversations with people at the end of last year, friends of mine who worked on were never off airplanes, saying you have to slow down. So actually, there was no surprise, and part of me, kind of the hippie part of me thinks, you know, maybe nature is tripping us up. And I hope that's true. Because once the vaccine is found, and there is more attention to kind of trying to determine vaccines quicker in the future, because more of these things are going to happen.

I just hope that, you know, I look at David Attenborough speaking on the on the television, and I sometimes, up to a few years ago, I was thinking, "Oh, God, I wish that poor man had died before all this pollution had happened". And yet this occurring, it's you know, I'm not I don't want to say we deserve it. That's wrong. Because nobody deserves to be separated from their father who's dying in an old home. But nature has been so brutalized. And I've seen it here, I've seen the plastic accumulate. I've seen dolphins coming up strangled by ropes. You know, so it's terribly important as animals ourselves, that we kind of we consider in a three hundred and sixty degree way.

So, you know, yes, human nature is showing its good side. And I hope that that wins, or that floats to the surface. And that we see, you know, it is about, as you said earlier, our own vulnerability, and our own kind of, reflect upon our own, sure. But that's been a bit of a struggle for the past few years. Anyway, I found in terms of going to the supermarket and things covered in plastic, you know. Or, like, when I once went to an art fair years ago, somebody this woman screamed at me across the art fair, "Get out of here, it's a meat market!" Like, that was years ago, that was ten years ago, you know,

and, so we have to be responsible for how our artists seem, you know, that's why when Mary Hickson organized the ship to come up the river Lee, somehow that was there, people could encounter it, when they were walking their dog, there was something magic, but also, there's something a bit like Stabat Mater too that I was saying to a friend last night, so few people saw those things. And yet, that maybe there's something precious in those so few people seeing something. And there's things don't all have to be all over the place on the internet. And it kind of reverberates, it ripples out in a way from something that is simple. It's not simple to do, I can tell you, but when it actually happens, it feels terribly simple.

### **Donal Maguire 23:20**

If I could ask one final question; it's obviously a very difficult and traumatic and uncertain time for many people at the moment, that where do you personally find or see hope for the future? Both in terms of where we might be, and also what we might take with us from this experience? Or that you have learned from this experience?

### **Dorothy Cross 23:46**

Questioning our every step we take on the earth? I think that's it in relationship to everything. Not running in to buy a pair of shoes that you're going to throw away after one wear, all that stuff. And, you know, like, our government should be rushing, and they should be green immediately, with all this cutting down of emissions, and, you know, I can't believe they're not. And then compensate backwards for the people who need compensation. So we have to live in hope, but you know, I don't know.

### **Donal Maguire 24:21**

And are you working on anything yourself at the moment for any future projects?

### **Dorothy Cross 24:25**

I have another ship project of mine, I would adore to do it. And it's going to be terribly difficult. And but yeah, I'd love to do the ship project. And then I am, you know, when when Italy opens up, they're talking to me, they're phoning me in Carrara. And they have such a hard time in Italy but I can't go back there for a while. But yeah, I'll continue working with those guys. They're fabulous. You know, I make models and then they carve it the marble. And it's an extraordinary place. It's ... it's like going into kind of theatre opera set, but the ship project that is in my heart I really, really hope will happen.

### **Donal Maguire 25:05**

This conversation with artist Dorothy Cross from her home in Connemara, County Galway, was recorded on the 15th of May 2020, through a video call with Donal Maguire, Curator of the ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art at the National Gallery of Ireland.