

Podcast Transcript: Artists' Voices: Life in a Pandemic

Kathy Prendergast in conversation from her home in London City

Donal Maguire 0:01

Artists' Voices: Life and 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 Kathy Prendergast in conversation from her home in London on Friday 24th of April 2020.

Born in Dublin, Kathy Prendergast lives and works in London. Over the past four decades, she has developed a sophisticated and critically acclaimed art practice working with a diverse range of media across various disciplines including installation art, sculpture, drawing, photography, and video. In 1995, she represented Ireland, at the 46th Venice Biennale.

Prendergast has a strong interest in maps, cartography, and systems of human communication and infrastructure. In 2019, a work from her ongoing series of black maps was exhibited at the National Gallery of Ireland's exhibition, *Shaping Ireland: Landscapes in Irish Art*.

Her work is represented in many international collections, including Tate in London, and the Irish Museum of Modern Art.

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

Donal Maguire 1:38

Good morning, Kathy. I thought we'd begin by returning to a work that you showed at the National Gallery of Ireland this time last year in the exhibition *Shaping Ireland: Landscapes in Irish Art*. This was an artwork, entitled *Atlas*, and is one of a series of black maps that you've been creating. These black maps reflect, among other things, your interest, your strong interest, in mapmaking and cartography.

So I thought you could begin by describing this particular work to us. And what you are have been responding to in creating these black maps over the years.

Kathy Prendergast 2:15

Well the piece you're referring to is called *Atlas*. And it came in two forms. It comprised a motoring atlas of Europe. And the one I showed in *Shaping Ireland* was one motoring atlas of Europe on which every page was worked on. Everything was deleted from the atlas, apart from the location dots, the white location dots. So, I erased borders, roads, any topographical information. So what was left was a series of white dots on a black background. These dots, too, at the time, I was thinking about how people migrated across landscapes, and also about how people settled within landscapes. So, for me, it was about a layering of history of people's migration and people settling.

And, although I work with cartography, in lots of ways, it's always about our human impact on the landscape. So for me, there's a double edge thing about the human body and the landscape, those two strands are what I'm concerned about.

That piece was also shown as a larger installation in different galleries, which were the 100 pages of those maps, opened on different pages comprising of a hundred atlases on tables, where people could actually negotiate and walk through the kind of landscape. What I was trying to do there was showing how people connected with each other, but also how there was a disconnection as well, the kind of isolation between spaces. And so, for example, in middle Europe, all those dots were very close together. And curiously, were very regimented in their distance between each other. And then when you got to places like Sweden and Norway, they were very dispersed. The whole piece could have been seen almost like a star chart, how we look at space in different ways. And so that was the background to the piece you showed in *Shaping Ireland*.

Donal Maguire 4:58

It's a fascinating artwork and was such an interesting addition to the exhibition at the time in that it spoke to so many different issues around ecology and human relationship with the landscape and our environment. And I think I'm right in saying that the settlements, their positioning in Ireland that you highlighted, I suppose, revealed a quite an even spread across the landscape. That you could almost make out the shape of Ireland from the position of where people live. And which says so much, again, about our own Ireland's geography and climate that we can inhabit almost every area of the island.

Kathy Prendergast 5:43

Yes, you could imagine the island. So that's probably because coastal regions, but also that evenly spaced distance, makes you think about how we communicate with each other, like those distances could have originally been a day's walk between each other, or a day's car journey between each other. So for trade, for exchanging of goods, that was the optimum distance, you could do, say, going to and from in a day or two, and maybe those areas got established, and then got built up.

And then as you could go further, there would be a bigger city that all these smaller clusters could congregate towards. So while I was making the piece, these were things I started thinking about. Because in deleting everything else, you could start to very clearly see these measurements of distance. And then that made me think how these areas were denoted for very practical reasons. And so, you know, that was very interesting for me.

Donal Maguire 7:04

And this series of work, these black maps that you've been creating, have you returned to them or reflected on them in a different way? And in the context of the recent situation of social distancing due to the pandemic, and I suppose the changes that we've all experienced and how we communicate with each other, and how we travel, how we negotiate our environment, all of these things that are represented in your work.

Has the current situation affected how you've been thinking about them?

Kathy Prendergast 7:38

The really curious thing for me is what's happened recently, has made me think about that piece in a different way. And that almost like, those, location dots are now in isolation from one another. So, because of what's happened, which was kind of inconceivable, really, it makes me look at the piece in a different way, that we're all kind of isolated from each other kind of floating in space.

But also, because there's no borders or anything, there's a democracy, every dot is the same. And you know, what's happened now, there is, you know, quite a democracy about how we all are. Yeah, so it's made me rethink that piece. And I'm not sure if that will develop into something else or not.

Donal Maguire 8:48

And, of course, it's extremely interesting for the viewer to look at a work like that. And to think about the new perspectives on which we consider its meaning in the context of what is happening in the world today, and how different it is, from, I suppose, the world in which it was created only this time last year.

Kathy Prendergast 9:08

Absolutely. And the larger piece, *Atlas*, was meant to be shown in Germany at the moment, and that will, supposedly is deferred until December. And I do think, how will we view it? Or how well I view it? And then what will I get from it?

You know, I kind of think even after you finish a piece of work, when you revisit it, you know, you're in a different place. And the whole way of looking at art maybe it's in a different place. So yeah, that'll be interesting.

Donal Maguire 9:48

And people's lives have been disrupted in so many ways by this pandemic, that the whole idea of what is normal, I suppose, has changed hugely in recent months. But could you describe maybe what was a normal day for you in the studio, What was involved in making art?

Kathy Prendergast 10:06

Well, a normal day for me is and I usually stick to a very, pretty strict routine. A normal day for me in the studio would be, I get to the studio, usually at about nine, nine thirty. Have a really lovely walk from where I live along the canal, which is one of the most beautiful parts of London, lots of weeping willow trees and houseboats.

And I get to the studio about nine, nine thirty. And I work pretty solidly, or slowly, I've always been very slow, methodical worker, until about five, six now, and then walk back home. So that's my day in the studio.

And I usually have two or three things on the go at the same time. I usually have some three dimensional work that might - or I have ideas about a turning into an installation. And then I always have some two dimensional work, which probably will turn into an installation as well. I usually work by making quite small condensed things, but then they usually end up being shown as a more broader work.

So, for example, before I left the studio I've been trying to work on - I've got three projects on the go. The one I'm mainly working and grappling with in the studio is called *The Road*. And this is a kind of follow on from the *Atlas* piece. I'm trying to work on the idea of the road as a metaphor. So I have lots of bookcases, domestic things that can make up the idea of a road. And I'm trying to work out how to make a road maybe look like a bed so I've left the studio in that state. And I had also been making very small models of generic roads in cardboard. So this is very small, they kind of look a bit like stone, because I've kind of sanded them and dipped them in water and moulded them. So there's these very little roads called, you know, the road up, the road down, and things like that. So that was taking part in the studio. And I had run into a few technical and conceptual difficulties with that work. And just from years of experience of working, when that happens, I generally stop that work and continue with some other work.

So an ongoing other project I've had on the go has been some other cartographic work, where I have a eighteen maps of Mount Fuji, which would take up probably about four meter square on the wall. Actually, there's some behind me here. And you can't see what the form is until you start coloring in the contour lines. And it is a really extraordinary shape, which actually doesn't look like a mountain but maybe looks like some organic thing like some part of the anatomy or tree rings. And so that's been an ongoing project that I've always turned to when I've had other difficulties in work. And up to now I'd probably finished about ten or eleven of those maps. And the final idea for this work is that it will be turned into a series of wood cuts and be only viewed by reclining on a day bed underneath it. So it will be a kind of installation piece eventually.

But at the moment, I'm just going through the very - it could be seen as laborious, but I find very nice task of just hand painting each line. So that's been going on in the studio as well. And then I've also been revisiting some small bronze work I had done a few years ago. So a normal day in the studio would be working within those three different aspects. I'd have my maps on the wall, my models of the road, and I'd kind of be working between each. Very nice.

Donal Maguire 15:36

And when access to your studio is restricted due to the current situation, are you able to continue working from home?

Kathy Prendergast 15:43

Yeah, the access has been restricted to the studio. In theory, I could still go in. I've decided actually not to go in. Partly because all the other areas are shared areas. And I just thought, actually, I can work at home. My map project is actually custom made to these conditions. So and I was really grappling with my road project. And any deadlines I've had for shows have been deferred or cancelled. So I've just chosen to work on my Mount Fuji project at home, which has been actually fine.

Donal Maguire 16:38

And what would you say you miss most from the studio environment?

Kathy Prendergast 16:42

I miss actually the physical making of things at home, you know, it's purely two dimensional. So I do miss, even like, if I only spent an hour actually making something in the studio and then sitting looking at it or you know, mooching about, I kind of miss that. Kind of just that tactile thing of using materials.

And the other thing I miss is the social life of the studio. There was a group of us maybe every week or two, we used to go to the local cafe just have lunch together. Probably once or twice a week someone would pop in for tea. And although you would just be chatting and having tea, having other people looking at your work, even if they don't say anything, that actually is really healthy. The part of being in a studio block, I find really healthy, really, really nice that rapore . So I missed that.

Having said that, and I actually really enjoyed working at home as well, I have a specific project and I set myself my own deadlines. So I kind of feel I haven't been trying to go, "oh what will I do now I'm not in the studio", it's been quite seamless, actually.

Donal Maguire 18:10

And communication and how we communicate with each other has become a real point of focus, I suppose, of this pandemic and how we're dealing with it. We're turning a lot of less traditional means to keep those lines of communication open.

But how have you as an artist continued to communicate with your collaborators or people you would generally work with? Has that been a challenge for you?

Kathy Prendergast 18:37

Well, I had another thing I do miss. I had started working with a foundry here. And that actually was a really nice beginning of a relationship that could work really well. So I had just finished doing one thing there. So that won't continue till all this lockdown is over.

And curiously with galleries and that, I had used WhatsApp quite a lot beforehand. So and this my first Zoom meeting, Donal, so it's quite new. But actually I think it's great. Actually I did, I have some very close friends in LA. And last week, there is probably about six of us. We all Zoom, had a meeting that was really nice. And when they come to London, we generally, you know, every summer, have this really big group picnic. So it was kind of curious. We were all on zoom one was in Vermont, two were in LA, two or three were in London. And I just think it's probably the new normal, in a way.

Donal Maguire 20:05

Sounds lovely.

Kathy Prendergast 20:07

I know hope it continues, it makes you feel like you don't have to leave home or your studio, or you can connect with people rather than, you know, when will you next be in London or whatever.

Donal Maguire 20:21

And then being trapped at home, have you had difficulty with access to materials? Or have you found yourself experimenting with any new materials or ways of making art?

Kathy Prendergast 20:31

Well, you know, I'm really shocked, I probably have enough materials, and medium to keep going for a year here. Which kind of surprised me, it actually really surprised me. And I think this is to do with probably making work for years, and just making work really slowly. And not being super prolific, there's been so much stuff on hold, and on the sidelines. And I can just continue doing what I've been doing. And I do have even some two dimensional work here that I could continue.

So weird, I'm actually quite surprised that, weirdly, it hasn't super affected my practice so far. And I think that's because there is a long lead up in making work to, let's say, turns into its presentation installation,

Donal Maguire 21:43

There is an element of sustainability, then, maybe to your practice that you have that allows you to continue to work throughout such difficult times. Or that maybe that you've developed various strands that give you options to pursue certain ways of making art when others aren't impossible.

Kathy Prendergast 22:04

At the moment, like, while I'm doing this map work, I'm fine. Once it's finished, it can only be sent to one particular scanner. And so they would have to be up and running.

And then to get it converted laser cut onto wooden panels. So all those aspects down the line, I would, you know, depend on people.

But for the moment, I'm pretty self sufficient. Yeah, so yeah, I think that probably ten, fifteen years ago, I actually wouldn't have been. I think it's just experience. And weirdly stockpiling art materials, you know, like the ink I need for these. A couple of months ago, I just noticed that some huge bottles, others in the shop, not just thought, "I'll just buy a couple of those", and now I'm really glad. I'm slightly running out of paint brushes, but there is online shopping still going anyway.

But yeah, I think everyone finds a way. Artists particularly I think would always find a way to make something out something anyway.

Donal Maguire 23:32

As an artist who is interested in means of human travel, communication, human systems and infrastructure, is there anything that has surprised you about our response to the pandemic and the way we're living our life, in the context of what's happening in the world at the moment?

Kathy Prendergast 23:57

Well, you know, London is, you know, so busy all the time. And London is actually really beautiful at the moment. So that's actually been a real surprise. Even though it's, you know, stressful going out to make sure people keep their social distancing. I think, really, the thing that has surprised me most is the lack of air travel. You know, and, you know, that's the best. I just think the skies are really clear. There's no noise from planes, I never actually realized how noisy planes were even more than the kind of, you know, sirens and car traffic. But also the impact of no, or very little, air travel that really cuts people off from one another. You know, so the whole thing about globalization, you know, which has been, you know, almost the reason why this happened possibly as well. Like, that really disconnects people. And so that's actually surprised me, you know, that's what I kind of was thinking about more than on the local level.

And then you know, people who happen to be trapped in other countries like, you know, I do really feel for them, you know, and we've just taken the idea of, you know, traveling everywhere in the world for granted and also as a right. And when something like this happens, it makes you realize just how fragile our connections are. And so that's actually been a surprise to me, you know? And I kind of wonder how, you know, if and when all this is all over, will we just go back to, you know, traveling or anything, you know, or will there be a kind of a bit in the back of our heads? Like, how can I get back? And then does that give us, you know, an idea of a sense of home or whatever? Anyway, it has made me think, you know, just think of stuff like that.

Donal Maguire 26:30

If I could ask one final question, Kathy. It's obviously a very difficult and traumatic and uncertain time for many people at the moment. But where do you personally find or

see hope for the future? And 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?

Kathy Prendergast 26:56

Well, I would hope that there is a better democratic - that we actually treat frontline workers a bit better. You know, when I look at, you know, there's still people collecting our rubbish, you know, people we've completely ignored on the streets. And we realize how important and how much we depend on people in certain jobs.

I think, you know, London, it's, you know, particularly extreme the kinds of systems, class systems, but I do think it's worldwide. And I would hope that we have a bit more respect for each other.

But also, I think, and environmentally, I am going to be really sad when the streets of London are filled with cars again. When I go for my exercise walk every day, it's so amazing, you can see right down to the end of streets. You can actually see how the city was planned, you know, particularly walking down to really empty bits of Piccadilly and Mayfair. It's just really beautiful. And, you know, that will be gone, you know, we should be recording it because it'll never look like this again. I don't know if that's the same in Dublin.

And the trees, you know, I think we're all noticing nature a lot more. You know, so, I'll be, you know, I won't be sad when all this is over, and hopefully, we'll all be safe.

Donal Maguire 28:57

This conversation with artist Kathy Prendergast from her home in London was recorded on the 24th of April 2020 through a video call with Donal Maguire, curator of the ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art.