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Podcast Transcript: Artists' Voices: Life in a Pandemic

Ruth Lyons in conversation from her studio in County Offaly.

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 at the National Gallery of Ireland.

This episode of Artists' Voices: Life in a Pandemic features artist Ruth Lyons in conversation from her home in County Offaly on Thursday, 18th of June 2020.

Born in Dublin, Ruth Lyons lives and works in county Offaly. She's a sculptor who works with a variety of natural and human-made materials such as granite, rock salt, bog land materials, glass and plastic. Her work originates from an experience of landscape and the consideration of human engagement with the land, exploring the constructed forms that have shaped it, and what human interventions might say, are the spiritual dimension of people. She's particularly interested in the concept of deep time and the geological history of earth.

In 2019, works from her ongoing project *Salarium* were acquired by the National Gallery of Ireland following their inclusion in the Gallery's exhibition *Shaping Ireland: Landscapes in Irish Art*.

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

Hi, Ruth. I'd like to begin with your ongoing project *Salarium* from which works have been recently acquired by the Gallery for the national collection.

Salarium comprises a series of bowls carved from large pieces of rock salt, the work in the Gallery's collection from salt mined in County Antrim. Can you describe what *Salarium* is and how it manifests itself physically as an artwork and in the form of bowls?

Ruth Lyons 2:14

Yeah. So *Salarium* is a very important project to me. I started in 2014, when I made contact with the Irish Rock Salt Mining Company in Antrim, and just out of an interest in

where salt came from, and I found out that there was a salt mine in Ireland. And I contacted them with a view to carving their salt and they said, probably wouldn't be possible to carve it, but I was welcome to come and visit and have a go.

So I went to visit the mine. And I was just blown away by, I guess I'd never been in a mine before. But at the scale of this, it's almost like there's tunnels underground that are like motorways like, these vast tunnels through solid salt.

So in general, in mining terms, salt mining is kind of known as gentleman's mining, because it's through solid self-supporting sort. So these tunnels are vast. And there's no kind of risk of these collapsing like with coal mines or something. And, but, what I found so incredible, they told me when I was visiting the mine, “just by the by” they said that, “this is part of a seam of salt that extends from Ireland to Russia”.

And that notion, like, that never left me, I was just so drawn to that idea, and then began to look into it and found out more about the seam of salt which is now known as Zechstein Sea, and it's the remains of an ancient sea that's 230 million years old. And I guess I was just so fascinated by the notion that, firstly, that all the salt is sea salt, so whether it comes from the earth, or it comes directly from the sea, it's originally from the sea. So it might be, if it's from the earth, it's from a really ancient sea. And I was just really struck by that idea and how it then, this really simple material embodies this vast, vast cycle and how salt, as the only rock we eat, that humans consume. And it means that we are so, like, our bodies are implicated in this vast cycle.

So I just became really, I mean, I guess I've always been drawn to the sea and just like, to the landscape and an encounter with the sublime and this sort of abstract notion of the sea that we can't see anymore just really drew me in and I got in touch with the Salt Association. So this umbrella association that oversees the salt production in Europe. And ask them if they would facilitate contact with me between the different mines as you go east from Ireland towards Russia. And they said, they'd be very happy to do so.

So, since 2014, I work with a different salt mine as you go east from Ireland, and I make carvings with the salt that's in some way set out to make manifest the Zechstein Sea and make this invisible landscape accessible to people. So what I make are, as you said, bowls, so the ones that are in the National Gallery collection are from the Irish rock salt. And to date, I've worked with mines, six mines as you go east to Germany. And together, they create this kind of map of the sea through the different mineral contents of the salt, because the salt is different colour at each different site. And there's different kind of crystal properties.

And yeah, so together, they kind make manifest to see but the reason for the bowl form is just a notion of, I guess, I just started carving the salt. And that’s what came out, well, began to evolve from it. And what I really like is that it's a really simple accessible form. It's almost a non form, it's sort of an echo of maybe the early mining practices, how mining came about hollowing out the earth. But at the same time, it's just this really

simple form that allows the material to speak. So it’s more about the salt and the texture of the object then the form of it.

Donal Maguire 7:13

And of course, a bowl is used for gathering things, for containing things and sharing things, what are essential human activities. However, to me, it's also a work about scale, the human to bowl scale, the bowl to this enormous mine that you've mentioned, and then to the vastness of the seam of salt itself and the ancient sea from which it was formed.

Ruth Lyons 7:37

I think that's what I loved about this work is that, as you said, I often work on a monumental scale as well, but this work is tactile and portable, and you can hold these objects, you know. And it really speaks to the notion of, like, the sea contained within a single salt crystal like that vastness contained within a single crystal of that material.

Donal Maguire 8:02

Could you tell us how you make the work? You mentioned there are challenges in working with with the material of rock salt.

Ruth Lyons 8:09

Um, yeah, well I suppose their immediate notion was that I would be working with a hammer and chisel and if you impact carved salt it would probably fracture due to this crystalline nature of the material. But, I work with an angle grinder, and I work on a kind of gradual process of paring back more than in any heavy impact. So, working in that way, it actually, the material, it suits the material and it's a lovely material to work with in that it's a really soft salt, soft rock, sorry, it's one of the softest rocks but it is tricky in that it's hygroscopic so it wants to, like - this is also what's really beautiful about the material but really tricky, is that it wants to be the sea as soon as you raise the salt up above the earth it wants to return to be the sea. It starts absorbing all the moisture in the air.

So I remember the first summer I was carving, I was carving outside in the yard of my studio here in the Midlands and it was a really hot summer but the air just became so moist and, like, my clothes were dripping and I burned out two angle grinders just because the salt is attracting moisture from the air. And so it's fascinating in that way, but tricky so I've had to come up with different ways of working with it.

Donal Maguire 9:49

You are using the salt for making art but that's not why it's mined. Is it?

Ruth Lyons 9:54

Yeah, like the salt in Antrim is used largely for de-icing the roads in North America, so it's brought up above the earth, it's ground underground into quite fine salt. But it's very - as you see the salt in the National Gallery collection from that, those bowls from

Salarium, they are quite brown because they're on what was the shore of the sea. So they have a really high clay content. And then as you go east it gets purer and purer, so this is actually salt from Germany so it has less clay in it.

But the salt from Antrim, which I find really beautiful, it's really quite brown and almost like a sort of a marble, brown marble, but it's ground up underneath the ground, and then it's brought up and they have huge mountains of this ground salt, and then it's put onto boats, and it's shipped off to North America. And it's used in one morning to de ice the roads.

Donal Maguire 11:03

Time seems central to the work, the vastness of time over which the salt is formed, in comparison to the fleeting moments in which it will melt on the road as grit. How do you think about time and translate this medium in to your material sculpture?

Ruth Lyons 11:24

I think about these large scales, like what really inspires me, is landscape. And human interaction with landscape throughout history. And I guess I'm inspired by an experience of a cycle that is bigger than the human scale. So even just the cycle of the seasons.

I'm really, continually, inspired by megalithic Ireland and these monuments that connect, that still exist on our landscape from like 5000 years ago, and then speak to us of that community's connection to the cosmos and their understanding of their place in their physical place within a broader, much broader universe. And I think, I guess that's where I, that's what inspires me. And that's what I'd love to bring into my work.

And I am continually striving to bring in this notion of, or create, like, a portal to these, this vast experience of time and just to experience - to sort of give voice to that - so that we can experience what we have is really special. You know, these moments, the current moment is really special, because life is so short, you know?

Donal Maguire 13:11

As well as looking backwards, do you also look forwards in terms of how we are shaping the land and the consequences of our activities today?

Ruth Lyons 13:21

Oh, absolutely. Yeah, I do think about that a lot. I think about, you know, how every impact we make on the landscape embodies something of the spirit of our time, of our society, and how the huge imprint of the energy industry ... what that says about where we ... our belief systems and our value systems and how ...

I love to imagine, you know, thousands of years into the future, and the remains of these mines or the remains of nuclear power stations, and how they're perceived. And, to impose the archaeological perspective that we put on these monuments from 5000 years ago on to some hypothetical monument that, you know, like, the pylon, what that

means, or that comes to mean and how we always impose a spiritual perspective on the past.

And that, I mean, it's true, it's sort of very valid thing to do, because everything that we create holds an imprint of our time and really embodies something of our values. And that you kind of can separate something that is spiritual from something that is not, you know, and that that everything we create and everything we build within our landscape today says something about -

Donal Maguire 15:05

Human relationship with our environment has become a subject of more popular discourse these days. Now that we are living through this pandemic and our experience of COVID-19, have you given thought to how, about your work, how it relates to the world we're living in at the moment, and how it perhaps could be reinterpreted in relation to the context of what's happening in the world today?

Ruth Lyons 15:34

I don't know, I have, I guess. What I really thought is that, I guess my experience of this lockdown period has been that I live in a very rural place, and nothing massively changed, except that we never left. And that, because I didn't, because I haven't left here in like the last three months, I came to know the place so much better, and just spent so much time growing things and foraging and fishing and walking, and just outside all the time, and it just kind of hit home, like, a lot,

I didn't make that much art during this time. And - I was just reminded of a thought that I've often had, that if I lived in a different time, that I might not be an artist. In some ways, what I do, I think, is a reaction to the demands of society, or like the business or a way of, kind of, a way of existing just a way of finding meaning within a very busy and active society. With so many messages, and so many things coming at you all the time.

And I guess so what I thought is that, like, I just spent so much - I just I get so much inspiration from just being out in nature. And I just find such meaning in that, in my experience of just working with the land. And I realized I'm very lucky to have that. And, like, now is the time when over 50% of the world's population live in urban areas. I think, since 2008, that was the first time that 50% of the world's population lived in urban areas. And that has only increased.

And I guess what I thought is that art really offers, can really offer, that connection, that sense of connection, with something greater to people who aren't - don't get it in their daily lives, or like who live in spaces where they don't have that connection, even with the seasons. Or the, you know, where just nature doesn't have that they might not see it, you know, it might not be that present. And so I really, after a few months of not making much art, have naturally come around to making, like, a real necessity to make it again. And I guess I probably would always do, will always do that. But it's just really hit home to me the importance of art in society.

Donal Maguire 19:01
There is a collaborative nature to your work also. And I'm wondering how have you managed to continue this aspect of your practice during these extensive lockdowns?

Ruth Lyons 19:13
Yeah, it's been more difficult. Certainly. Like I'm planning on developing *Salarium* into a large-scale video project. And that totally was put on hold.

I mean, just the nature of the different industries, because the scale of my work is large to me, but it's small to everyone who I work with generally, because I mean, for the stone work, I tend to work with a stone contractor who does much larger work and I can't really— the, you know, small scale stuff just becomes less relevant to them, especially in times like this, and then the mines, it was just impractical to be contacting people.

So that is something that has been tricky, but also quite, like, there's been positives to that as well, because I have two small children and I have not been on the computer for more than 10 minutes a day. Because you can't do it, I just don't, there's no childcare. So there's no - and I can make certain amount of work with them, but I can't go on the computer. So there's been a kind of a brief, you know, at least I'm not kind of feeling anxious about these connections, because there's no possibility of sustaining them.

Donal Maguire 20:48
Could you describe a normal day in the studio, and what is involved for you in making art?

Ruth Lyons 20:54
There's not, honestly, there is not really ... I'm not very good with routine. And, yeah, so then a normal day over the last three months has just been very much sort of family oriented. And managing two children. I'm also five months pregnant. So yeah, there's been a lot of kind of, it's usually very domestic and - but what has really anchored that has just been growing things. So we spend all the time outside in the garden, or, so we spend most of the time outside in the garden, we've planted loads of vegetables, and going for walks around the landscape, we're lucky, there's a lot of land around here that we can walk on.

And then how I get some studio time - so I often get into the studio with the children. And we paint, or we paint outside. And I kind of muddle through. And if they draw on, you know, make some chalk marks on paintings, it's fine. Some of it's just a process of just to be making stuff. It's not necessarily for the finished work. But how I get studio time is that they go fishing. So we've got really into fishing, and they go down to the canal for two to three hours a day. And then I get some studio time. And I can use an angle grinder then if I like, or a polisher or which I find really, really grounding. I really like using power tools and I find that switches me into a different mode. So it's great to be able to do that. And it's nice to know that they're fishing.

Donal Maguire 22:59
And what are you working on at the moment, Ruth, is that something you can tell us?

Ruth Lyons 23:02
What am I doing? I'm working on *Salarium*.

So, since lockdown sort of eased off, I started to work on that again. And I'm developing a relationship with a director of photography and trying to get a film produced.

So I'm making plans with the EU Salt Association. So prior to lockdown, I had been over in Brussels with the EU Salt Association, discussing my plans to visit each of the mines and make this, kind of, traveling film work.

And, then, I'm also working - I've started doing quite a bit of painting on stone and just smaller scale stone carving. And work that's kind of revolving around megalithic Ireland, whether that's visible on the work or not, but it's working with found stones and seeing what is possible with it. So this is something that has really come from lockdown as well. And my partner is really into lifting heavy stones. And so I'm trying to figure out what's possible, like what's possible, scale wise and sculpturally without, like, using contractors, around your work because although I do collaborate, I'm very, I much prefer to be fully in control of what I'm doing. And I would love to be able to create like the scale of work I want to do but have more of a control over the production process.

Donal Maguire 25:02
If I can ask one final question, Ruth, you've given us a huge insight into your life and work at the moment. And how the pandemic has impacted on your, on your life, the pandemic and the virus has been had been traumatic for many people. And I'm wondering where you find hope, as an individual and as an artist? And what have you seen taking place in the world, at the moment, that gives you a sense of hope for the future?

Ruth Lyons 25:36
I suppose mostly from talking to people, and more so than from global media - I find that difficult to take any solace from that. Especially as we come into lockdown, there's so little talk about the environment broadly, but then when you talk to individuals, I think everyone, I think there was one positive for most people, and that was just the general slow-down experience of the world as a quieter place. And that it is possible.

Like, I know, it was incredibly traumatic for so many people, but that it was possible to live in a world without so much industry. And yeah, like, there's huge negatives to that sociologically, as well. But it was, I guess, it goes to show that nothing is fixed. And then that these things can stop, you know, I suppose I find the positive in just people's awareness of nature and awareness of the environment, and how important it is for us to ground ourselves and be aware of the impact we have on our landscapes and how we live day to day.

So that's really what I've taken the positive I've from it from just from talking to people. Yeah, it did show me how vulnerable we are, and how vulnerable the society we've set up is, and how, I guess, it hit home to me how lucky I am to do what I do, how I'm just - how art will always sustain how - it'll always sustain me, I'll always have a driving force within that. And that it's not driven by an outside force, I don't work for someone else.

But it really hit home to me the importance of being sustainable, not just with the land but, like, that in yourself like that it is really important to be able to sustain yourself - whether that's food or the way you work, or just your own positive nature - and to try ... just that you can't always rely on outside forces, because you don't know how things will go. And yeah ...

Donal Maguire 28:22

In fact, to finish on that idea of sustainability, which is hugely relevant to so many things that are taking place in the world at the moment, you yourself have developed a practice that is sustainable in the sense that it lets you continue, or that you found a way to continue, to be an artist in difficult situations. Is that fair to say?

Ruth Lyons 28:45

And when I realized that the opportunities or the deadlines I had that were coming up or gone, that when I left college, there was nothing, you know, and you start that ... like when I ran a studio called The Good Hatchery, and that came from the difficulties of leaving college in Dublin to Celtic Tiger Dublin being unaffordable that I work really well with obstacles and challenges. And that creativity comes from that. I think for most people it does. So that there's real positives in that, in what - and it's exciting. I mean, three months, it's a short time. But we don't know what will come out of that. Like I know things will return to some, to fairly normal situation now. But, I mean, we really don't know the impact of what people would have come up with in those three months. You know?

Donal Maguire 29:57

This conversation with artist Ruth Lyons from her home in Offaly was recorded on Thursday 18th of June 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.