

## PROJECT PROFILE

Frances Crowe, *Life Blood*, 2015, wovenSiobhan McGibbon, *Technologies for Internal Explorations*, 2015Adam Burthorn, *Hibernian Rasquachismo*, 2015

**THE** Roscommon Visual Artists Forum (RVAF) was established in early 2014 by Linda Shevlin as part of her ongoing Visual Arts Curator Residency at the Roscommon Arts Centre. Given that the objectives for this Arts Council-funded residency prioritise “engaging new audiences” at local, regional and national level while promoting a “coordinated approach between curators and organisations”, Linda felt it was important to work closely with Roscommon County Council Arts Office to establish a network for local artists. There was a sense that a membership-based forum might galvanise the regional visual-arts community, which had become increasingly detached from both the Arts Office and the Arts Centre. The original rationale was simple: to provide visual artists from or living in County Roscommon with a platform to develop their practice through professional development opportunities, exhibitions and events. I was later appointed to coordinate the RVAF 2015 programme, allowing Linda to devote more time to her curatorial programme at Roscommon Arts Centre. Though the county seemed to have a pretty active visual-arts community, many artists work in isolation from home studios across peripheral or remote townlands and villages, suggesting that peer-to-peer networking and social events are all the more important.

#### RVAF Programme (2014–2015)

Based on initial correspondence with forum members, it was clear that local artists wanted more opportunities to exhibit their work. The first RVAF members' exhibition took place in Roscommon Arts Centre in March 2014 as a two-phase presentation of artworks by locally based students, recent graduates, amateur enthusiasts and full-time professional artists. These showcases provided an opportunity for the general public to familiarise themselves with the diversity of arts practice occurring in the region, from craft and painting to sculptural installation and new media. ‘Here/Now’, held at Boyle Arts Festival 2014, was a curated open-call exhibition of members' artworks that initiated a dialogue on art production in rural contexts – a curatorial inquiry that was further explored in the RVAF exhibition ‘Shifting Perspectives’ for Boyle Arts Festival 2015, which focused on the realities of maintaining contemporary-art practices away from urban centres.

As well as calling for opportunities to exhibit, forum members also expressed interest in mentorship, including one-to-one clinics, consultations and talks. A quarterly RVAF newsletter was initiated to circulate details of upcoming exhibitions and opportunities. With modest annual funding from Roscommon Art Office, it has been possible to deliver an ongoing programme of bi-monthly events at two venues: Roscommon Arts Centre and King House, Boyle. Working in partnership with Visual Artists Ireland, Show & Tell and Common Room Café events were hosted at Roscommon Arts Centre, offering opportunities for local artists to convene in social and discursive settings. A range of professional-development workshops have been delivered by VAI speakers, including Annette Maloney, Eilís Lavelle, Alan Raggett, Helen Carey and Áine Phillips, covering diverse topics such as ‘Proposal Writing’, ‘Peer Critique’, ‘Installation Skills’ and ‘Conservation Issues’, ‘Writing about your Work’ and ‘Working with Public Galleries’. Other invited speakers have included independent curator Shelly McDonnell, who discussed working with artist-led

galleries; and artist Mark Garry, who considered research methodologies for visual artists. Inviting arts professionals to the region to share their insights and expertise has allowed forum members to situate their own practice within nationally relevant conversations, while potentially enhancing perceptions of the county's art scene beyond the region.

In response to the perceived and expressed needs of local artists, the Roscommon Visual Artists Forum Award was established in 2014. Applications were invited from artists to realise a new project that would be exhibited in Roscommon Arts Centre's gallery space in spring 2015. The award included a production budget as well as organisational and curatorial support. Siobhan McGibbon received the inaugural 2015 award, and Vida Pain has just been announced as winner of the 2016 award.

#### North-West Curators in Conversation

To coincide with ‘Shifting Perspectives’, RVAF hosted a public conversation between curators of contemporary-art spaces located in the north-west region. I facilitated an informal panel discussion between Linda Shevlin (curator-in-residence at Roscommon Arts Centre), Sarah Searson (director of The Dock, Carrick-on-Shannon), Miriam Mulrennan (Westmeath Arts Officer and former manager of the Luan Gallery, Athlone) and Sean O'Reilly (director of Leitrim Sculpture Centre, Manorhamilton). Discussing their roles within their respective institutions, the curators reflected on the challenges of being situated away from major urban hubs. The ways in which geographical location informs each institution's remit and potential audiences was discussed in relation to developing visual-arts programmes of local, regional, national and international significance. Encouragingly, nearly 60 people attended the event. Most striking was the sheer appetite for discussion, which caused a tremendous buzz in the room. I found myself introducing local artists to one another, though I had initially presumed that most of them already knew each other. A lengthy post-panel Q&A session seemed timely and much needed.

#### Making Visible

From an art-historical perspective, horizontal modes of organising have been an integral way for artists to establish social contacts and assert shared artistic visions. Societies such as the Art Workers Guild (est. 1884 in the UK), the Artists' International Association (est. 1933 in London) and the Art Workers Coalition (est. 1969 in New York) were developed by artists as counter-cultures to the prevailing political or institutional agendas. In recent years, similar modes of affiliation have resurfaced within the Irish arts community. It is notable, however, that many of these initiatives, though forged in direct consultation with artists, have tended to be ‘administrator led’. In the context of diminishing arts funding, a desire to ‘make visible’ the always present yet frequently disconnected creative fabric of a region (to institutions, funders, publics and each other) has become increasingly prevalent. This is evident in the spatial clustering of initiatives around the country, including Sligo Artists Network, Artlinks (Wexford Arts Office), Donegal Artists Network and the Hello Sessions (Cavan Arts Office). At a national level, initiatives such as the Artists Studios

Network Ireland (est. 2007 at IMMA, Dublin) and the Visual Arts Workers' Forum (est. 2010 at Project Arts Centre, Dublin) highlight the merits of country-wide networks in providing information, support, advocacy and spaces for collectivity and dialogue on critical issues.

Roscommon Visual Artists Forum builds on the momentum of previous regional initiatives, including BAG (Boyle Artists Group, est. 1996), Tower Arts Project (TAP, est. 1998) and Westmeath Arts Movement (WAM, est. 2009) – collectives of artists who were committed to developing the regional arts scene. Working Artists Roscommon (WAR) was co-founded in 1990 by RVAF members Frances Crowe, Anne Rigney and Noel Molloy. With other local artists, they exhibited nationally and internationally and organised numerous workshops, symposiums and exchanges.

#### Channelling Complexity: What should forums do?

During my first meeting with the RVAF group in April 2015, our wide-ranging discussion addressed several issues. In terms of identity, members described the RVAF as a group of practicing visual artists who are from or living in County Roscommon. With regard to the forum's ideological function, members suggested that the RVAF should give a voice to the region's arts scene; encourage the sharing of information, expertise and strategies between members; provide social spaces for local artists to forge friendships with like-minded people; and promote the good use of existing local infrastructures, services and businesses. It was acknowledged that in order to sustain a vibrant arts community, several elements have to converge: a vibrant arts centre, a proactive arts office, a committed arts audience and sufficient infrastructures for artists, including access to facilities, equipment and work spaces. As arts audiences often include other artists, the forum should support members by attending each other's exhibition openings – a personal investment that arguably will create and sustain the forum.

Questions of a more philosophical nature are yet to be resolved, such as ‘Where does the forum exist?’ As a programme of the local arts office? In virtual spaces such as mailing lists and social media posts? When members convene in one place? Other issues, including the archiving of the forum's activities, are yet to be comprehensively addressed. Even something as basic as membership has proved difficult to define. The core RVAF programme is developed for Roscommon-based members; however, artists in the neighbouring counties of Leitrim, Sligo and Westmeath are often invited to attend particular events, with the ‘north-west’ often seeming like a more appropriate spatial designation. An unspoken stratum of committed and casual memberships has emerged, reflecting differing levels of commitment and expectation. In short, the RVAF offers a flexible network of affiliation, with the capacity for artists to engage in ways appropriate to their individual circumstances, priorities and needs. The challenge is to consider how this momentum can be maintained or further expanded to generate more opportunities for artists living and working in the region.

**Joanne Laws is an arts writer and current coordinator of the RVAF. This text was developed in consultation with Adam Burthorn and Linda Shevlin.**