

The Red Umbrellas

An Exhibition of Paintings
By Bernie Keogh

Opening Speech by Donal Taheny
The Kenny Gallery, October 2003

I am reminded very much of the story of the professor from Yale University who came to lecture to the West Cork farmers and when he saw the motley crowd in front of him he changed his theme and started off by saying "I come from the University of Yale, four letters Y A L E" – he was doomed from the beginning because that implied that they weren't able to spell. So he said 'Y stands for Youth' and for about an hour he spoke about the value of youth in the world. He didn't notice the crowd getting anxious, looking at their watches, seeking a method of escape, looking at the exit holes. So then he went further and said 'A stands for ambition', and now he waxed more eloquently still, he was really riding his hobby horse so for about an hour and a half he spoke on ambition. They were really bored out of their minds so eventually he came to L and said "L stands for loyalty" and the crowd were getting more and more confused looking for some exit to get away until he eventually came to E and said 'E stands for end-product'. He sat down awaiting applause and a voice from the audience said – in the kind of action Bernie had once upon a time – "Thanks be to God he didn't come from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology".

It is a privilege and a pleasure for me to be asked to launch these wonderful artistic treasures from an old and dear friend, Bernie, whom I have known for many years. I knew her from when she came as a young and almost shy teenager to the Bish and she was our art teacher and we all took her under our wing. I see my comrade there, Tom, who was one of my pals there at the time, and we kind of liked Bernie. She was shy, she didn't know her way around - she's learnt a lot in the meantime of course – and we used to bring her out for spins every Sunday. On these spins I noticed she had a wonderful eye for detail. I would pass things by in my car and she would say 'isn't that a lovely red stain in the dying sun' or 'look at an old woman's withered face' or the beauty of a child's innocent expression or a tumbling leaf twirling to the ground, little things you'd pass by and not notice. I realised quickly enough that it was her artistic eye. It was that great genius that people have, that they can express themselves in oil, in canvas and in watercolours. It is for me, her paintings here, the early ones particularly and now more so which has reached almost full maturity there's a great forward movement in what I look at here this afternoon.

They are all to my mind, singing music to the eye. You just look around one after the other almost overwhelming rich and lovely in colour, simple ones like Silver Strand and houses that we know – rooftops – and then we come to the great symbolic ones of which we will speak later. And they touch the heart because if we don't touch a heart where are we? Later on we will see this idea of the heart coming through in the symbolic images, which she had produced and also the influence of intellect. It's an important thing to have the combination of art, intellect and intelligence coming together that the emotions shouldn't merely sway us. We should be ruled by our head and our heart.

Bernie has developed wonderfully and these paintings tonight are almost not really reverential shall I dare say almost sacramental. There are some lovely, beautiful, moving images. We forget the earlier works, the types she did before – the quay side of the dock, the ones you see around and I'd like you to look for a moment at the images she has produced of people. Outstanding to my mind there, one should not dare probe a person's feelings – I can only see as I see it, she may have a different vision completely. In them I feel she reveals the inner depths of her soul, she reveals her heart, she reveals what really makes her tick and come through. The red umbrella stands out as an image or symbol. And what do I make of that symbol – well an umbrella shelters you, shades you, gives you safety against rain and turmoil, but you can also prod a fellow in the eye with an umbrella – you can do a lot of things with an umbrella. But it could also mean that you could hide yourself away, that you cover yourself with an umbrella so that nobody would see you and I see there in many of the images around me, I won't go into detail because you all see your own vision in each piece.

You can see the images of this lonely person here, this girl hiding under an umbrella, the pool of water in front of her. Will she stumble through it? Will she stand and stare? She goes through life's adventure, something daring, something new, something challenging which she accepts and does. I see the love pair under the umbrella meeting and in this other painting a love pair sitting at a seat with an umbrella. The theme here again in this interior of the house with the hat ready is like an interior of a Dutch painting to my mind.

I am no artist. Whatever way I reveal myself would be in camera slides which is a different art form completely, but they move the heart very more for me. Now there is a lovely poem written by a friend of mine, Geoffrey Johnson. I'll just take one section of the poem because it's very apt, I feel. He writes of a wood carver and he is the wood carver so there is a kinship and friendship between all art forms. He says:

*"I do not crave the immediate praise of men
But if it comes it brings me joy."*

I feel that that is Bernie's theme, if she gets the immediate praise of men it's an extra bonus. But she has satisfied the longing and the craving and the artistic leanings in her own heart. And has expressed them to us, to come and stand and stare and love or hate as the case might be.

"Not gold.

And so you think I carved this forest freize for prosperity.

What is fame

Ten thousand years of fame before the press and swirl of dust ages

I am known along the Ganges,

In Ceylon a little,

In Indo-China not at all

But where I sung from Greenland to Cape Horn ,

In the Pliades, Orion and the systems wheeling on and on in silence without end.

Fame is not the spur, that pushes her onward to produce the artistic cravings in her heart....

Yet something will have been fashioned, something left shapelier finer than it was, a legacy for us to love, ignore or hate if only for a while.

The final climactic ending to the poem sums up for me what Bernie is doing...

I carve this monument, I paint these paintings because I must, because I love it, and because I wish before I die to feel the thrill that comes when what has been wrestled with at last leaps clear to match the vision leaping in the mind.

May I end with another poem – light, lovely,

I feel when the time comes to wish this old world adieu – you are young and happy (I was nearly going to say 'gay' – that would be wrong word!)... one has to be realistic, and I love this poem.

***When Earth's last picture is painted
And the tubes are twisted and dried
When the oldest colours have faded
And the youngest critic has died
We shall rest, and faith, we shall need it
Lie down for an aeon or two
'Till the Master of all good workmen
Shall put us to work anew
And those that were good shall be happy
They'll sit in a golden chair
They'll splash at a ten league canvas
With brushes of comet's hair
They'll find real saints to draw from
Magdalene, Peter, and Paul
They'll work for an age at a sitting
And never be tired at all.
And only the Master shall praise us.
And only the Master shall blame.
And no one will work for the money.
No one will work for the fame.
But each for the joy of the working,
And each, in his separate star,
Will draw the thing as he sees it.
For the God of things as they are!***

Rudyard Kipling

Thank you Bernie for sharing your knowledge, your love, your wonderful artistic quality and genius with us all. We enjoy it, we thank you, and long may you produce it

So, enjoy, love, and buy....