

For Ted Kirby form, pattern, beauty, and enlightenment emerge from juxtaposition and happy accident – in life as in art. You can see it in the sense of repose he has created in a breakfast nook where huge machine engines support a concrete table surrounded by gold flecked walls that would not be out of place in a Renaissance Palace. It's also in evidence in his photograph of an old man in a flat cap from County Clare, layered against the stones of the Burren landscape with such intensity that the unmistakable form of a Sheila-na-gig halos the portrait.

TED KIRBY ART & HOME

By CAROL CRAIG
Photography by SAFSI HOPE-ROSS



ABOVE: Ted Kirby against a background of Japanese artisan wall finish from Scudding Clouds

ART
room



Ted Kirby's journey from Limerick and his father's electrical contracting business to his work-in-progress 1920s Dublin house and successful shows at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) has been a long one. It has been a voyage so full of twists that it is almost impossible not to share his faith that some other dimension has been in attendance. No one would call it an easy ride.

Kirby had what seemed a golden beginning. After two years of art school studying photography and video production he went to work with a video company in New York. His upward trajectory there was interrupted by being selected to appear in a 30 second TV advertising spot which got him a Hollywood agent, film offers, and a face so famous that people stopped him in the street. He spent the next two years

studying acting and writing, directing, and producing his own short film *28th Street Shuffle*.

'Before I started to make the film I knew I was in trouble health wise. I was walking through Times Square and there was this Coca Cola sign; I opened and closed my eyes and looked left and right and I could see that I was losing the red with my left eye.' Kirby had an MRI the day before he started to shoot the film, and discovered a benign pituitary tumour. He returned to Ireland for surgery and what he calls 'a horrific experience'. He needed surgery again five months later, this time in London. During recovery, when he was too tired to do anything else, he spent most of his time meditating. This turned, as he puts it 'what would have been a horrible time into a real positive time.'

LEFT:
The sitting room was designed around a magnificent Art Deco wooden fireplace – one of the few original fixtures in the house

BELOW:
Burren Man



ART
room



For reasons which he cannot quite explain, when Kirby went to London for the second operation he took unprinted negatives from art college photographs with him. 'I had no intention of being an artist; I thought I would get well and chase Hollywood.' But his healing was accompanied by a sudden burst of creativity and he began experimenting with the negatives, putting different images together and printing them in the dark room. That period, and a subsequent time in Clare, produced a moving series of black and white prints: a jazz band coupled with grass; dancers with car doors; the first portrait of the Clare man with the Burren stones. He began to refine the layering process, putting images on top of themselves. 'At the time I said: what if I did this? And: what if I did that? When I did it I almost collapsed!' He displays a picture,

Dimensional Scream, of a man shouting at a rugby match. The image has been printed over itself again and again until patterns that look very much like Buddhist Tantric yantras (mandalas) appear near the man. 'About a year later I was doing acupuncture and I picked up a magazine and it talked about parallel universes and I said: that's it!'

He took his work to IMMA to ask if anyone else was doing anything similar. The answer was no, and he spent a year as an artist in residence there. He says he used much of the time studying: reading physics in the work of people such as Stephen Hawking and less mainstream thinkers such as Terence McKenna, an early experimenter with psychedelic drugs who believed that art and visual experience were 'information'. For Kirby much of his layer work (now produced in Photoshop

LEFT: The kitchen features a cast concrete tabletop with innovative legs made from deconstructed engines

BELOW: A carved wooden tea set





on a G5 Mac) has some similarities to McKenna's aesthetic theory. His photographs are 'layered upon themselves with perfect symmetry'. What that produces is, he feels, 'a moment in time, frozen'.

'If you do long exposure, time and space kind of meld,' says Kirby who has used long exposures of Dublin and Limerick superimposed again and again to produce a mandala, like a meditating Buddha. He believes that he has not only created a beautiful image, but also revealed some of the truth hidden in the images themselves. For those who harbour doubts of an intrinsic connection between the patterns Kirby produces and the original material, there is always *Grand Master Flash* – a fight at a rugby match. Its final representation is the only mandala shape in Kirby's current work that is at all menacing: a dark and hulking figure bearing more than a slim resemblance to Kali, goddess of death and destruction.

Kirby bought his house in 2002, about the time his residency at IMMA ended. He has done much of the work himself, following intuition more than preconceived design. Describing the design of the breakfast area he says: 'I just got a flash. I walked in and said "car engines". I went looking for car engines but I looked in cars and saw that they were just big and ugly and dirty. Then I saw these. I cleaned them myself. I washed them down with industrial cleaner and took a drill with a steel brush to them. I had to leave them on their sides for days so all the oil and stuff could come out.'

LEFT: A glimpse of the bedroom with warm orange wall and a funky handcarved wooden chest

RIGHT: A blue guitar in the sitting room plays a decorative role between tunes. The wall shelving, designed by Kirby, is possibly inspired by a hamster wheel







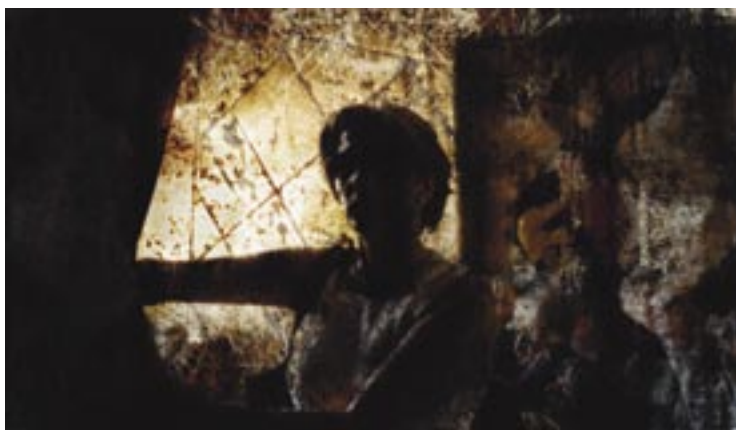
Two steel doors separate the hall from the sitting and breakfast rooms. They are made from brass windows manufactured in New York in 1905 and were found in a Pearse Street salvage yard. 'The guy just wanted to get rid of them. They were really, really, dirty. I was lucky. I had hired a guy from Mongolia to work on the house and he kept cleaning them and cleaning them. It turned out he used to be a tooth cleaner for a dentist and I had to pull him away!'

The furniture in the sitting room is much like his photos – 'I take pictures and process them and see what comes out' – a mix of things that he found and brought home because they appealed to him. Chrome circular alcove shelves reflect the same design universe as the 1950s chrome frame-and-tile coffee table, and both manage not to clash with a floor lamp which would have been at home in an 1890s bordello. Leather couches face each other in front of an Art Deco wooden fireplace, one of the few original features left in the house.

OPPOSITE: Grand Master Flash

ABOVE: Dimensional Scream

BELOW: Facing the Feminine





The sitting room is dominated by two large works of art. Above the sofa is the first painting Kirby ever bought: a young woman draped around a decaying older man, which Kirby now believes is an original by Limerick artist Jack Donovan. He found it in a curio shop so neglected that its proprietor hardly bothered to open. He didn't have enough money to buy it, and family members chipped in. The other one is his own. It is based on a photograph of a woman entering a cathedral in Portugal, a male figure, and an image of straw. 'I call it *Facing the Feminine*: looking at a side of you that, as man, you are taught not to look at.' He moves closer and traces a shadow form on the canvas: 'I think that looks like Beelzebub.'

The last explanation is at the front door. It is composed of a series of stained glass triangles which reflect the proportion of the Golden Mean – that proportion represented by the letter pi, which has been seen by artists since the Greeks to arise out of the basic structure of the cosmos and was thought of as a magical key by Renaissance artists. 'Six months ago I discovered that I was actually trying to map the divine,' says Kirby. 'My art work is very much integrated with my spiritual development.' ■

ABOVE: Cowgirl

DIRECTORY: Scudding Clouds, The Shed,
Bow Lane East, Dublin 2 Tel: 01 4761004;
www.scuddingclouds.ie