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Saturday October 20 2012

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Limerick ready to be Unfringed
Art festival begins with Limerick playwright's original piece >>P4

Why not Limerick?
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A master of light and dark

John Shinnors discusses his life, career and continuing evolution as an artist with **Alan Owens**

TWO things in life you cannot hurry, says John Shinnors, a hint of a smile playing around the wrinkled corners of his mouth, one is love and the other is art.

The Limerick artist, a maverick figure firmly lodged among the first grade of living Irish artists, his work filled with idiosyncrasies and a dazzling visual style, remains grounded, a lack of affectation populating both his work and his engaging manner.

He has invited me to his workshop, a nondescript, first-floor Georgian living room overlooking O'Connell Street, one of up to three he uses to paint in the city. The 60-something year-old admits gracefully that such a situation is a luxury.

"Luxurious," he smiles again, hand rolling a cigarette and

"You don't contrive to change, stick to your guns and do what visually interests you"

searching desperately for a lighter in this cluttered space. "I paint in three places; this is the big space," he nods to the room around him. "I am in the luxurious position that I can have places like this; I can concentrate on one body of work in one area, walk away from it and go to another area and concentrate on

that without any visual cluttering of images."

Just to his right, as the eye moves across a dusty workbench, over a palette of paint bursting with colours and dried paintbrushes and slowly across a wall covered in old posters – The Cranberries, a Shannon RFC calendar from days of yore, sketches of the artist and of familiar motifs – sit three enormous paintings, instantly recognisable for their visual style, abstract in many ways, deeply figurative in others, colours flowing from one to the other, darker masses throbbing and seeping, a siren, sodium red in the corner of one striking the eye.

They are, as he uses the word himself with a touch of self-deprecation, classically 'Shinnorist'.

These particular



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Portrait of an artist: John Shinnors painting his latest work, a commission from UCD called The Scarecrow in a Sculptor's Garden.

Picture: Owen South

Shinnors to reproduce seminal work

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→ paintings will form a triptych and make up Shinnors' latest commission, for UCD's medical faculty, worth a reported six figure sum.

"This is unfinished as you can see," he motions to one element of the painting. "They will be ready when they are ready. I am not talking about next year or anything like that, but I hope, in a way, that they will resolve themselves in a month's time."

They will soon be called The Scarecrow in a Sculptor's Garden, inspired by a figurine in a friend's garden.

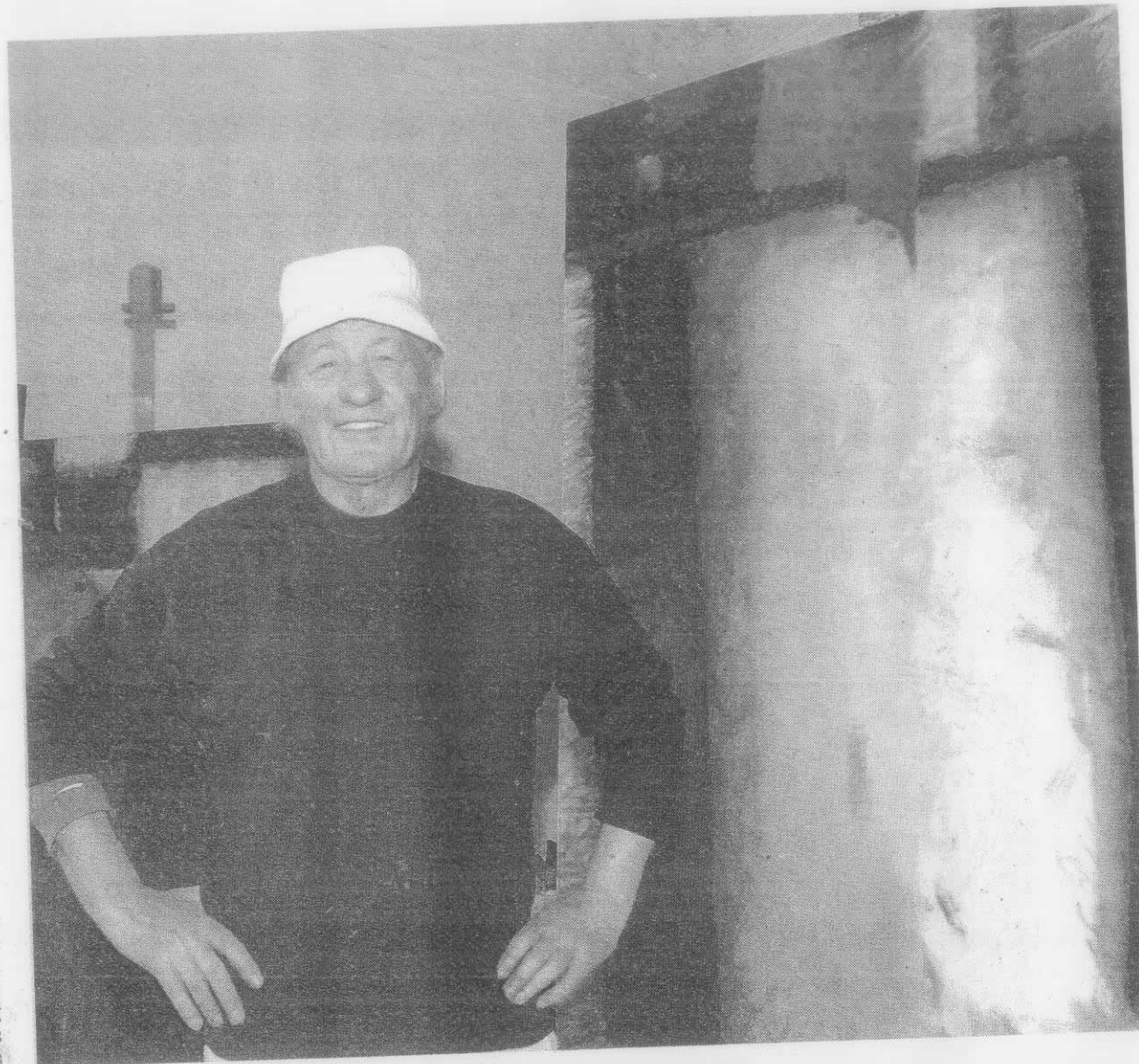
"I know a sculptor and he makes his own scarecrows," says Shinnors, eyes holding mine without waver. "I was always taken by that. I could have, if you like, perhaps continued painting what I was painting at the moment, back to the lighthouse again, but no, I wanted some human content in the picture. The scarecrow is an image of man, made by man."

If he has been conspicuous by his absence in art circles in recent years, Shinnors is currently experiencing something of a renaissance, with his first exhibition in five years taking place in the Taylor Galleries in Dublin, plus the UCD commission and a rare public appearance with an art demonstration this Saturday in Mary Immaculate College to mark Limerick Art Society's 70th anniversary.

There the Roxboro Road resident will work from a large blank canvas and engage with the audience, a rare feat by such a private man.

"I actually enjoy it," he says, and you believe him. The last such event was in Limerick City Gallery about three years ago, and there wasn't even standing room available. He will entertain questions, understands that people have a "natural curiosity".

"This is an opportunity for an artist to stand in front, paint, take questions from the audience, if



Shinnors in his studio in Limerick city, which he has occupied since 1989

you are a sociable type of creature you have no problem doing that. If you are an exhibitionist you can really screw it up," he explains. "You could start throwing brushes in the air and catching them in your teeth. I am not of that mould."

The artist will reproduce one of his earlier works, The Box, from 1987, oil on canvas - a deceptive work that has roots in the alcohol problems a friend of his experienced. He will explain its genesis in the demonstration.

Amazingly, and presumably to the chagrin of his peers, Shinnors feels that such a workshop bears little difference to a cooking demonstration.

"It is totally the same like," he roars, the Limerick accent deep in his voice, eyes twinkling. "The ones who are, shall we say, arrogant and pompous would probably not agree with me."

He doesn't subscribe to such pretensions?

"No, no, no. For God's sake. Look, the ingredients that a chef or cook uses, he or she decides on what they are going to use in the creation, for want of a better word. I decide - you see the paints in front of me - what colour I am going to use on the canvas. I am not saying for one minute that I consider chefs to be artists, I am not."

He has admiration for Limerick Art Society, is

friendly with some of their members, thinks it is great to have an amateur body who are "there for the sake

"I don't enjoy putting paint on canvas, I do it so that the means justify the ends"

of painting". It reminds him of his own excitement at buying a box of paints when was 16, remembers the process of experimentation, discovery.

of painting. The excitement now is when something is done," he adds quietly, adding that he believes he will be "quite happy" with the UCD commission when it is finished.

His visual style continues to evolve, the sodium light in his current work an indication of that, while the exhibition in Dublin was influenced by the lights above his home on the Roxboro Road.

"The introduction of artificial light and depicting that through the medium of oil paint is certainly newish to me," he admits.

"That would have been totally unthinkable five years ago."

The way he sees things and then interprets them is key to his style. Shinnors explains that it was a passing a city fish mongers when he was starting to paint that influenced his future direction, changed everything.

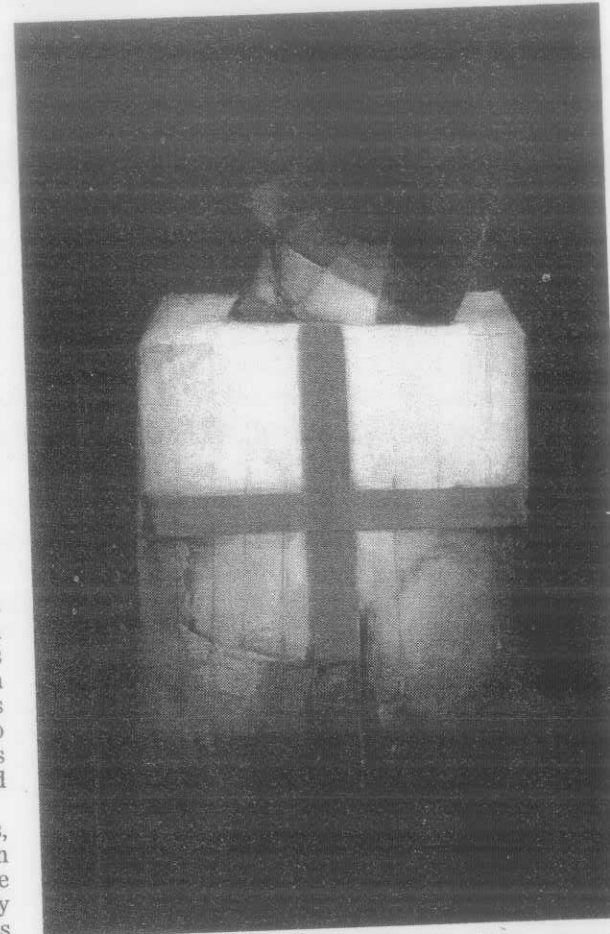
"Mackerel," he says, "and the gleam and pattern of the mackerel, with the sun hitting it, was visually stimulating and I was mesmerised. I knew I was visually educated, but I felt, this is it. What I didn't exactly know at the time, was this was the way I saw things."

"Instead of painting the mackerel just as they are, fish, I was picking up the patterns and concentrating on those, the heads or tails didn't matter. It was everything; it was the contrast of colour between the white and dark areas, the particular glistening effects that caught my eye."

Over time he has developed through familiar motifs, animals, kites, lighthouses being constant themes in his work - and later, now, to scarecrows, his popularity growing with every process of his evolution.

We spend some time discussing the "ugly aspect" of the Irish art market and the Celtic Tiger, which led to hugely inflated prices. Shinnors' work became "hot" a commodity, paintings being snapped up by speculators.

"In my own case, I was doing fine, I could make a



The Box, which he painted in 1987 and will reproduce at the art demonstration for Limerick Art Society

living out of my art, which I have always done," he says matter-of-factly. "But, of course, along came the boom, and what happened was, in the early stages pictures of mine were going for ten times what I was selling them for. I had to take cognisance of that. If I stayed with the price structure I was on, people would be rapping on my doors, speculators would anyway. I had to disconnect my phone."

"That was the ugly aspect of the boom. When the speculators arrived, you had auctioneers operating who, the last thing they auctioned were yearlings in Tuam Mart, so you had this madness that was going on that was very disagreeable and unfortunate. But look, when the door opens, flies come in."

He acknowledges that the bottom has "dropped out" of the art market, but is unruffled, knows

he is appreciated but does not seek plaudits or favour. Rather the change is the thing, although it comes dropping slow.

"It is extraordinarily slow. It comes like age, you don't deliberately contrive to change because of change, you stick to your guns and do what still visually interests you," says Shinnors.

"The day that ends I will be back painting the ladybird books again."

'Art Demonstration by John Shinnors' will take place on Saturday, October 20 at Mary Immaculate College from 3-5pm. Admission is €10 and a contribution from the proceeds will be made to Limerick Marine Search & Rescue. For more information visit www.limerickartsociety.com.

Writer releases his 'challenging' debut novel

LIT Film Festival to return in 2013