



'Rembrandt would struggle in today's Irish art market'

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The trademark cream fisherman's hat and white pants remain the uniform for one of the country's "greatest living artists", here in his studio, filled with the "intoxicating" smell of turpentine, surrounded by pots of paint, and brushes, and canvases in his own creative cosmos.

The wit, the irreverence, the tirade against conformity, and polemical rhetoric against a world once riven by political correctness hasn't left him.

In reference to a women's group in the city, he says 'Ah, the 'We don't need men crowd'; Travellers don't have a culture, he claims, and certain arts committees are full of a "load of boll***s". And that's just for starters.

I remind him of some of his quotable quotes over the years. "Did I say that, did I," he chuckles. "I don't remember saying that," he says, half-straightening.

"I'm glad I'm back," he says, unfurling himself over a chair and stool, cappuccino and rollie in hand.

Everything has changed and nothing has changed since his last public foray in a gallery.

"I was painting away grand in 2014, and then I got the knock," he says, referring to being knocked down as a pedestrian on a motorway by an off-duty garda. While his health has



struck by a van driven by an off duty Garda on the M7 motorway shortly before 11am, whilst crossing the road, and the incident was investigated by GSOC.

He doesn't care to reflect too much on that time in his life except to say, that he woke up in the Regional [UHL] and went on to spend three months in Croom hospital, after seriously injuring both his legs.

"Look, there were people outside in Croom a damn sight worse than me. I prefer to dwell on the lighter side of life, the past is a foreign country."

And on that note he asks that I pass over his copy of Irish Arts magazine, and produces his bookmark from it, which is a cutting of a cartoon from the Irish Daily Mail.

"I was having my pint in the lounge in the Spotted Dog, and this guy threw it up on the bar. I was bemused, rather than amused, by it really."

The cartoon shows a newspaper billboard with the headline: '21 art pieces missing from Leinster House'.

'Shinnors?' asks one man walking past, to which another replies, 'That's not fair. Members of all political parties could be involved'.

The last time Shinnors himself made headlines was in July last during Limerick's bid to be European Capital of Culture for 2020, when he gave away one of his paintings in the garden of the Hunt Museum to a young boy called AJ, who made quite the impression on him, for just €10.

The Rubberbandits

in today's irish art market

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"I was painting away grand in 2014, and then I got the knock," he says, referring to being knocked down as a pedestrian on a motorway by an off-duty garda.

While his health has largely made a full recovery and he is literally and figuratively back on his feet, the same he feels cannot be said of the art world.

In late May, the 66-year-old will unveil 14 pieces, in his idiosyncratic three-tone abstract style, in Dublin's eminent Taylor Galleries on Kildare Street.

The Shinnors triptych palette of red, black and white is back - much to delight of his fans, who queued for his paintings as they were unloaded off trucks in Dublin during the boom, and before they even made it to a wall.

He has exhibited one-off pieces around the country over the past few years, but this will be his third return



Portrait of an artist: John Shinnors, 66, in front of his portrait of the Limerick writer Kate O'Brien in his O'Connell Street studio PICTURES: ADRIAN BUTLER

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The Rubberbandits tweeted the story, with their trademark Limerick seal of approval - 'Yurt' - and said his work has commanded up to €250,000.

"Hundreds of thousands of euro," he laughs, at the marked-up valuation.

He was "astonished" by the coverage that his small act of decency received.

"He was a lovely little bloke, a smashing fellow. He said 'I know I look 12, but I'm only eight and a half. Would that picture be worth a lot of money?'

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He has exhibited one-off pieces around the country over the past few years, but this will be his third return to Taylor in his own full, accomplished right in a decade. "You don't have a choice with galleries in Dublin. You don't select them, they ask you. They're young men, but an old firm."

While his work commanded up to €70,000 for a commissioned canvas in the good times, he remains typically nonchalant about how much they'll fetch - and he can afford to be, in a financial sense, but moreso in his own mind because, as he says, every artist has to

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know the value of their work.

"I don't care [if they sell]," he said.

"Some artists in Ireland made a lot of money in the boom. I'm at a stage in my life where I'm OK. I paint because I want to paint. If I didn't make any money I'd still be painting. Poets will still write poetry, musicians will still make music, painters will paint. It goes on regardless.

"If you were Rembrandt and had an exhibition in a gallery today you would struggle to sell in the Irish market. The only market is for the old - the dead [artists]," he says, citing the work of Jack B. Yeats, Sir



Portrait of an artist: John Shinnors, 66, in front of his portrait of the Limerick writer Kate O'Brien in his O'Connell Street studio PICTURES: ADRIAN BUTLER

William Orpen and Sir John Lavery as being impenetrable to the economic storm.

At an auction at Christie's in November last, a work by Shinnors sold for €20,000, a piece by Jack B Yeats fetched €135,000, and A Windy Day by Sir John Lavery was sold to a private collector for €1.1m.

In the boom, one of Orpen's works sold for £1.98 million at Sotheby's Irish Sale in London.

"Times have changed hugely. During the boom, Donald Teskey and I would have been the best-sellers, for want of a better word, in Ireland. But the enthusiasm for the work isn't reflected in the buying of the work. That's just a sign of the times."

"What happened to me was extraordinary. I was painting away grand, had a show in Taylor every four years, lovely and smooth. Then I had a show that sold out [in Taylor], the pieces were modestly priced, maybe €3,000.

"I gave a piece to the RHA to auction as they wanted to build a library; it must have been in the early '90s, and I was in the Spotted Dog [pub in Janesboro] one night, and my wife said there's someone on the phone, and this person said 'That piece you gave - it's after making €18,000'.

"Oh shite," says I, 'Is it?'. That was the sign of things picking up, but I didn't completely realise it at the time. I didn't care about the money, I was actually chuffed. I said if I'm going to paint a picture of that size again for three grand the phone is never going to stop ringing."

At one point, he was forced to take his name of the phone book as he was getting so many calls.

"I'm not all that prolific in a way. But I became like the Rhinestone Cowboy, getting cards and letters from

John Shinnors: The Critic

"THE thing that irritated me during City of Culture was that bloody Giant Granny. It was a ridiculous idea, and the money spent on it. I don't think it was a good idea at all, and it had nothing to do with culture. "I wish it had fallen into the Shannon. It had nothing to do with Limerick; it was just an import," he said of the Royal de Luxe spectacle, which attracted tens of thousands of people to the city, and for many was a highlight of 2014. While Limerick's bid to be the European Capital of Culture in 2020 was claimed by Galway, Shinnors believes "a lot of boll" goes on there as well" in certain arts

committees, and perhaps even within the selection committee. "I think one of their gripes were 'Why don't we have more inclusion with the Travelling community?' 'Fack it,' says I, 'how much more do you want to include them and they don't want to be included?' "The word culture is abused and over-used. Travellers don't have a culture - they have a lifestyle. Drinking culture isn't a culture - it's a lifestyle. It's overused in the same way that the word love is, in many ways, or specifically 'making love.' Graffiti is another 'old chestnut' of Shinnors', who finds it to be "an abhorrence, as it is to most decent people". The

one-off international graffiti festival some years ago was, he said "the most ill-advised idea". He also described the Richard Harris statue on Bedford Row as "nothing more than touristy kitsch; an opportunity lost, an opportunity that was thrown away". But in particular, his greatest distaste is reserved for conceptual art, especially some of the pieces in Ev+2, Limerick's biannual annual contemporary art exhibition, saying after one viewing in the City Gallery, "My scrotum actually tightened."

"I don't call it art at all, I call it things, as many people do. There's no substance to it or process of creation at all, but I'm not saying every artist should stand in front of an easel." And don't get him started on "charlatan" artists and "mere face painters". Everyone has their own idiosyncrasies, and Limerick's pre-eminent artist is not without his own. Asked once about his fascination with featuring lighthouses in his work - visible to the discerning eye - he replied with typical good humour: "Isn't everybody attracted to lighthouses?"

people I don't even know, and offers comin' over the phone, so I had to up my prices - because they'd just be sold for profit, going the way things were going.

"I have to stick to the prices that I was looking for before the boom. You have to know your own worth. The one thing you can't do is bring your prices down."

With the country showing some signs of recovery, he believes "the last thing to recover will be the good patronage of contemporary art".

While art collectors lined up to buy his work, he says they wouldn't have dreamed of putting their hand in their pockets and taking a punt on the emerging talent coming out of the Limerick School of Art & Design, of which he was made a Fellow in 2014.

"What happened in the boom was phenomenal, you just had people knowing nothing about art buying for the simple reason that it was the thing to do, and pieces moved from auction house to auction house," he said.

He recalls a woman, who in dire financial straits, was

forced to sell one of his paintings, which she received as a gift. A week later it was sold on by an auction house for three times that amount.

"She said to me 'I've done a terrible thing' and cries every time she looks at the

"The second best artist in Limerick is dead. I don't mean that in an immodest way. But you have to like your own work"

blank wall. "Well, you can't ate paintings," says I."

His last solo show in Taylor was 'Urban Electrical Impressionism' in 2012, and prior to that it was in 2007. As he said previously, there are two things you can't rush in this life - love and art.

"I'm not like a pop star

who has to have a record in the charts every two months," he told the Leader in an earlier interview. "Behind you is an easel; it's not a production line. You have to wait for inspiration. It's the artist's equivalent of the writer's block. But it's a

rework another. He prefers to "tip away at my own pace". The artist certainly won't be rushed.

Some, he says, are "like a wayward daughter or son; they take a bit of time, but you'll eventually rein them in."



healthy and natural process."

The majority of the 14-piece collection, which has no working "exotic" title to date, has been completed, while some are "still cooking". He generally paints up to three canvases at any one time, leaving one to breathe and going off to

Turning his attention to one of the biggest pieces in his upcoming exhibition, the artistic and cultural critic is well able to critique his own work.

"It's ok," he sighs, "the swallows are holding their own, but this bit is far too fussy. There will be less colour when I'm done with

it, I minimise everything."

What does he think of the artistic talent in Limerick currently?

"Well," he says, taking a drag on a Golden Virginia rollie, "the second best artist in Limerick is dead."

He is referring to his former teacher Jack Donovan, who passed away in June 2014, aged 80, having taught him, Brian MacMahon and Henry Morgan between 1962 and 1978 when he was the head of LSAD.

"I don't mean that in an immodest way. But you have to like your own work. You have to be friends with your work, and shake hands with it every morning.

"You're very lucky if you can put your hand on your heart, and say you've created a minor masterpiece in your lifetime.

"There are aspects of other people's work that I admire; too numerous to mention, and some of the students' work [in LSAD] is outstanding. I look it at and say 'I'd paint that, but I'd add another bit'."

There is plenty of talent out there, he says, but his fear is how artists will survive in a somewhat flat-lined market where he once thrived.

He has had a few setbacks himself - and the one he speaks of most frequently is the death of his dog Jack, who used to sleep under the easel.

"He had patches of blue and red, and loved it when I rubbed my brushes off him," he says fondly.

Then there was the death of his friend and mentor Jack Donovan.

"I never realised I'd miss him so much. He was a pivotal figure in Limerick from the 1950s on, and was the first real artist we ever saw in the school. He was an iconic figure."

Then there was the accident - a few months later, in October of that year. He was

then trademark Limerick seal of approval - 'Yurt' - and said his work has commanded up to €250,000.

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"I said 'What's a lot of money? He said '€20'. 'It wouldn't be worth that much', says I. 'Would you like to buy it?' He scampered off and came back and gave me €10. He was well bred, well fed and polite to boot. That was only [me] being human."

His decency also extends towards providing some €12,000 a year to the Shinnors scholarship for emerging artists, and this year he has also kickstarted the revitalisation of the drawing awards under LSAD, with a smaller financial contribution.

"It's something I'm glad to be associated with it. There's outstanding work in the college. I'm interested in drawing, and people who draw well. Jack was always on about that. 'You must have the foundations right'. And he was right."

Born in Limerick on April 14, 1950, and educated at CBS Sexton Street and LSAD, he berated himself one day for being "a mere illustrator".

Fate led him to a fish shop near the Franciscan Church, where he saw mackerels glistening in the sunshine.

"I said that's it; that might be the genesis of something" and his work as we now know it was born.

In the years since, his style "hasn't changed hugely".

His only wish is to find "contentment and gratification" in his own work, to satisfy his "creative urges", and ultimately for the pieces to fill the empty walls and blank spaces in our lives. That his work should, as his old master Donovan said, be "visual poetry"; that it speaks to someone, through its own unique language.

John Shinnors is the 'curator's choice' in the Hunt Museum this month, and will give a free talk on one of his paintings which is currently on display in the Hunt, on Wednesday, January 25 at 2pm.