

Finola Jones : Mother's Tankstation

In a converted storehouse in the shadow of the enormous 25-acre Guinness Factory, where Dublin's best-known export is brewed, Mother's Tankstation is creating a new export for the city: cutting-edge art.

Founded by artist Finola Jones, Mother's Tankstation is at the forefront of a new generation of galleries in Dublin (and other secondary art cities such as Glasgow and Frankfurt) which are lifting the art world out of its big-name, big-bucks stasis.

Breaking new ground

'I felt driven to set up the gallery', says Jones. 'There was definitely a need in Dublin for something a little different.' Although the Irish financial renaissance has driven change in Dublin for a decade, 'a new gallery hadn't opened here for quite a long time'. Since Jones proved it was possible to bring innovative artists to the Irish capital, many new spaces have opened.

'People expect the big cities to be the centre of the art world, but they never have been', says Jones. She cites three Glasgow galleries — The Modern Institute, Sorcha Dallas and Mary Mary — as examples of the growth in cutting-edge, innovative galleries away from the main art cities such as New York and London.



With the rise of the art fair, galleries like Mother's Tankstation are more visible on the global stage, especially with the corresponding growth of satellite fairs for emerging art, such as LISTE alongside Art Basel, Zoo during Frieze Week in London, and NADA with Art Basel Miami Beach. However, there is a strong feeling in the art world that things have got out of hand. 'The art fair is where the art world is at the moment. There are now 21 fairs on the calendar: Miami last December was positively ridiculous,' says Jones.

Into the sunset

Mother's Tankstation hit the ground running. Within months of its opening in autumn 2005, Mother's Tankstation secured a place at one of the world's most prestigious fairs for emerging art, LISTE in Basel. It was a fitting launch pad: Jones was inspired to open her gallery by a visit with her artist husband David Godbold to LISTE the previous year.

Fair-goers responded instantly to Mother's Tankstation, says Jones, 'because we were the first gallery from Ireland to get into LISTE, because of what we were showing, and because we have a great name.'

The artist they showed, Petri Ala-Maunus from Finland, crystallises the subtle but striking approach of the gallery. Ala-Maunus, in his own words, 'only painted sunsets' for the nine years, while listening to hard rock music. He buys flea market paintings and paints sunsets into the backgrounds in oil, using classical techniques, that, according to Jones, 'you just don't see any more – it reaffirmed that there is talent there in the application of oil paint'.

Creating collectors

Art prices rose 20% in 2007, driven by the record-breaking sales of Warhols, Bacons and Hirsts at auction: between them, Sotheby's and Christie's sold \$12.5bn (£6.2bn) in artworks in 2007, an increase of 40%.

As a result, the art world is becoming the domain of the giga-rich, excluding young enthusiasts and budding collectors. Jones hopes to counteract this by supporting emerging artists with emerging prices. 'One of the things we wanted was to create collectors who'd never thought of buying an artwork, and we've certainly done that. For me, that is the backbone of the gallery. It's about extending; art is there for everybody, not an exclusive thing.'

Mother's Tankstation is not promoting the easy, 'high street' art touted by events like the Affordable Art Fair and the Art Car Boot Fair. Including Ala-Maunus, the gallery works with 10 artists from painters and sculptors, to video, sound and installation artists, all dealing with 'real issues', as Jones puts it. 'Some of the work is very complex, very difficult, very dark,' she says, 'so it's great when new collectors can connect with that.'

Darkness and light

Atsushi Kaga, dubbed the new Marcel Dzama for his darkly endearing fantasy worlds, addresses depression, perversion and loneliness in his exhibition 'Bunny's Darkness and Other Stories' through a cast of characters including the protagonist Bunny, his panda father, a crippled bear, a cynical penguin and a failed superhero.

Likewise, Alan Phelan peoples his world with a series of diverse characters, whether it's a game of DeathMatch Pong between Darth Vader and sculptor Dame Barbara Hepworth, or an exhibition entitled Ralph Eamon Odo Barbara, which takes its name from a roll call of the characters it features: US Navy sailor Ralph Gifford, Irish politician Eamon de Valera, Star Trek character Odo, and Dame Barbara.

Echoing the history of the building (as a storehouse for barrels of Guinness), many of the works embrace the ephemera of industry, from Nina Canell's installation featuring neon, loudhailers, smoke machines, and trailing wires to Margrét Blöndal's paint-stained cotton gloves and tentacles of wrinkled polyurethane. There is also a whimsical weirdness, in the work of Kaga, and the wry drawings and sculptures of David Sherry and Garrett Phelan.

LEFT :

1 : FOUNDER OF MOTHER'S TANKSTATION,
FINOLA JONES PORTRAIT BY MATT BURGESS

THIS PAGE :

2 : 'LIFE AGAIN, LIGHT AGAIN, LEAF AGAIN,
LOVE AGAIN.' BY GARRETT PHELAN





THIS PAGE :
 3 : DETAIL FROM MOTHER'S ANNUAL 2007
 4 : 'THE FUTURE IS TOO BRIGHT' BY ATSUSHI KAGA

OPPOSITE PAGE :
 5 : 'SLIGHT HEAT OF THE EYELID' BY NINA CANELL

The Future Laboratory: 08/04/2008

Nurturing figure

Of course, the gallery's fabulous name has contributed to its success, but the Mother of the title is not just whimsical: there is a strong nurturing culture, driven by Jones' own experiences of gallery representation. 'Every decision I take is as an artist. How would I like to be treated? How do I want things to be? And I know that if I make work, I want the show to be long, not three weeks: we do six shows a year and they all last about six weeks.' She wanted the work to be written about, 'not ignored'; this led to Mother's Annual, modelled on classic comic annuals such as the Beano and Dandy. Each limited-edition book covers the year's exhibitions, with critical essays on each artist, as well as illustrations and cover art designed by the artists.

Mother's nurture extends to regular studio visits, which Jones believes are essential to support artists and to understand the work. It is a practice that has fallen out of fashion with many money-hungry galleries. 'It's a lonely place to be, in a studio. You just want to talk your work through. It also keeps us completely up to date with what the artist is thinking, and what has driven that work, so when you go to an art fair, you know everything about that work there is to know.'

Long view

With the growing success of the gallery at home and abroad, Mother's Tankstation is stepping up a gear. The gallery will be part of Art Statements at Art Basel, the first Irish gallery to contribute. As is Mother's wont, the show will be a critical solo presentation of Garrett Phelan's work, followed by new addition Kevin Cosgrove at Next, the new art show in Chicago, and bringing former engineer Ian Burns, back home to Australia with a solo presentation at the Melbourne Art Fair.

By Gwyneth Holland

