

Derdimus Tower

MICHELLE BYRNE DISCUSSES HER RECENT PUBLIC ARTWORK, DEVELOPED FOR KILKENNY COUNTY COUNCIL UNDER THE PER CENT FOR ART SCHEME.

IN NOVEMBER 2018, I was awarded a Per Cent for Art commission by Kilkenny County Council, arising from the completion of the N76 Callan Road Realignment Scheme. The commission brief invited proposals for a permanent artwork, made from high-quality, durable materials that would respond to the cultural, natural or built heritage of Kilkenny. The proposed site for the artwork was the historical townland of Derdimus (or *Doire-diomas*, meaning 'the oak grove'), one mile outside Kilkenny town. Taking this information as my starting point, I responded to the brief by proposing the creation of a four-metre-tall limestone sculpture, titled *Derdimus Tower*. Another meaning for Derdimus in Irish is 'we derive'. This definition inspired my initial research, which investigated the rich history and geographical features of Kilkenny, imagining how the city may have looked hundreds of years ago. The site-specific sculpture I created for this commission takes inspiration from the oldest built structure in Kilkenny, St Canice's Round Tower, and its 360-degree views over the surrounding landscape – a vantage point that prompted me to consider city's historic topography. The dimensions of the sculpture are at a 1:10 ratio with the scale of St Canice's Tower.

Upon being awarded the commission, I met with the commissioning panel, which comprised: Shelly McDonnell (Communications and Advocacy Officer at Visual Artists Ireland); Mary Butler (Kilkenny Arts Officer); and Seamus Foley (Kilkenny County Council Chief Engineer). Discussions surrounding the technical details of the proposed sculpture resulted in an alteration to the siting of the work to a more level and accessible site, in order to simplify the installation process. The development and realisation of *Derdimus Tower* went smoothly, and fabrication commenced within a month.

Also known as The Marble City, Kilkenny is characterised by medieval limestone buildings and pavements. I felt Kilkenny Limestone was an obvious choice of material, given that I have been primarily sculpting with it over the past few years. Three blocks of Kilkenny Limestone were sourced from a quarry at Treecastle, County Kilkenny, and delivered to McKeon's Stone Yard in Stradbally, County Laois. I was fortunate to be able to work onsite at McKeon Stone for the duration of the project, which was beneficial to the overall progress of the work, based on the facilities and support offered by the company. McKeon Stone have welcomed sculptors from all over the world to work at the yard with their top-quality limestone. Managing Director, Niall Kavanagh, and all the team at McKeon Stone are incredibly generous with advice and hands-on support, making this and other similar large-scale projects possible.

Generally, I would fully shape the stone using grinders, chisels and mallets; however, as this was a tapering column, I had to turn the stone first, using a large lathe. It was incredible to watch a two-tonne block of stone spinning and changing shape on the lathe. The stone was shaped in three sections to create a conical tapering tower and was then sanded with grinders and sandpaper to a high polish. The final measurements of the tower are 650mm, tapering to 450mm over a length of 4000mm, and the entire tower weighs approximately four tonnes. On the surface of the piece, there is a network of raised polished lines. The pattern for these lines is based on a detailed study of a 1830s Ordnance Survey map of Kilkenny, depicting the networks of fields, lanes, roads and the river surrounding the city. Though abstract in appearance, the map pattern is totally accurate and can still be read.

We tend to perceive the countryside as a natural environment; however, nearly every square inch has been transformed in some manner by centuries of human interaction – from the patchworks of fields, to the networks of trails and roads. As an artist, I am interested in what these traces of habitation tell us about geology, topography and our relationship with the landscape. Many of my recent works have been influenced



Derdimus Tower being installed on-site on the N76 Callan Road, Kilkenny, by Gallen Crane Hire; photograph courtesy of the artist

by my ongoing interests around these concerns. Experimental investigation into materials and process is an inherent part of my practice. I have previously used a broad range of materials to create new work, including metals, plaster and found objects. I am drawn to undertake in-depth environmental or historical research, in relation to specific projects that I am working on.

The three completed sections of the limestone tower were stacked together using a key system. Three 30mm holes were drilled into the base, to a depth of 300mm, allowing for the fixing of the sculpture with stainless steel pins to the concrete foundation. Having the assistance of engineer Seamus Foley was invaluable, as he looked over proposed systems for keying the stone together, as well as the foundation requirements. The installation of large works can often be quite stressful; however, Gallen Crane hire were outstanding during the installation of *Derdimus Tower*. Kevin from Gallen came to McKeon's Stone Yard to do a dry run. Stacking the three stones effortlessly with a crane and straps allowed us to lower the stone one millimetre at a time, while lining up the intricate surface lines. We installed the work on the N76 Callan Road the following week on 24 August, where it now sits in front of a five-foot stone wall, backed by tall deciduous trees.

The entire commission was mediated and administered by Shelly McDonnell on behalf of Visual Artists Ireland. She played an invaluable role in the project's fruition, offering advice and support, while liaising between myself and the commissioning panel. In my experience, public commissions that have an arts representative acting as mediator for the duration of the project tend to run far more fluidly, positively impacting on timelines, progress and the overall management and realisation of the project. It's my opinion that an awareness and clear understanding of public art commissioning policies prior to undertaking a project creates a more successful experience for both the commissioner and the artist.

Michelle Byrne is a sculptor living and working in the foothills of Mount Leinster, County Carlow. Her practice includes both public and private commissions. She has exhibited extensively, both nationally and internationally, with previous solo exhibitions at the Olivier Cornet Gallery and The Arts Council. Her work resides in collections of the OPW, Irish Management Institute and Deloitte, while previous awards include The Conor Moran Award for Sculpture (RHA) and the Stone Sculpture Award (RDS).

This public art project was administered by Visual Artists Ireland, on behalf of Kilkenny County Council. Guidelines and support for procuring artwork for Per Cent for Art Commissions are available through Visual Artists Ireland.

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Michelle Byrne, *Derdimus Tower*, 2019, installation view, N76 Callan Road, Kilkenny; photograph courtesy of the artist



Michelle Byrne working on the map pattern for *Derdimus Tower* at McKeon Stone; photograph courtesy of the artist