

(the site + ruin)

Robert Dunne

10 April - 1 May



Arts Office
Kilkenny County Council

(the site + ruin)

Saturday 10 April - Saturday 1 May 2021
76-77 John Street Lower, Kilkenny

*What is the significance of a place promoting its past?
What is the relevance of being aligned with our history now?*

Kilkenny is a place that identifies strongly with its history, captivating the outsider's eye with its prominent heritage and evident past. History is embedded in the architecture of the city, time is told through - stone and residual traces. For Kilkenny's locals it is a destination to complete errands — a scope for mundanity — and a space for lived experience. This means it must adapt and evolve to facilitate modern day living; the new bus route navigates the narrowness of its streets and the building of bridges eases access and accommodates the increase of traffic.

Rebecca Solnit suggests in the *Book of Migration* that a place can exist in two different ways: exotic and local. "The exotic is a casual acquaintance who must win hearts through charm and beauty and site of historical interest,' she says, 'but the local is made up of the accretion of individual memory and sustenance, the maternal landscape of uneventful routine." This approach of using the "exotic" or intrigued perspective within a familiar context can possibly offer a fresh cognizance of the mundane and ordinary.

(the site + ruin) is a solo exhibition by artist Robert Dunne. Dunne's practice looks at normal elements in our lived environments, extracting the typical from the unseen everyday. Through the process of making, he questions our imprint of time and need. Things become altered and changed, yet, reinterpreted in a common language of materiality — permitting the residual traces to cite their known use and origin.

In response to Kilkenny as a place, Dunne is drawn to the evidence of process shown in the development of the city, this is continuously conveyed through its structure and materiality. When a local becomes a *voyeur* in their hometown, an awareness can be drawn to things that have been blended into the banal.

Robert Dunne lives in Co. Kilkenny and works mainly with plaster and used wood, he says his work "is a way to reframe our 'made' environment. I try to capture physical and visual elements of my surroundings and reimagine, juxtapose and alter their structure and meaning to make new and vaguely familiar scenarios".

He has exhibited throughout Europe, USA and Australia and has had solo shows in Theca Gallery, Milan, Italy, Linenhall Art Centre, Mayo, Pallas Studios, Dublin and Kilkenny Arts Festival. In 2019 he exhibited in the group show *Far From Here* at The Complex, Dublin and *Reviving Plains*, a joint show, with Stephanie McGowan at the 126 Gallery, Galway. Selected group shows include *Periodical Review No.8*, Pallas Studios, *Winter Open*, RUA RED, *Artworks*, VISUAL, Carlow, *PeripheriesOPEN*, Peripheries Space, Biennale Internationale d'art non objectif, France and *Combined*, Gray Contemporary Houston.

He studied in the Cleveland Institute of Art, School of the Museum of Fine Art, Boston, and received his BFA from the National School of Art and Design. He has received awards from the Arts Council of Ireland as well as studio residency awards including, the Tyrone Guthrie Centre and Arthouse, Laois.

(the site + ruin) is the second exhibition of the Kilkenny County Council Arts Office's Emerging Curator in Residence 2020. This programme is funded by Kilkenny County Council Arts Office, the Arts Council of Ireland and supported by Rothe House.



A conversation with artist Robert Dunne and curator Rachel Botha

Robert, could you talk about your approach to materials and the *making* in your practice? You have a particular sensitivity towards the relationships between certain materials, such as plaster and wood.

I think these natural building materials have an inherent relationship and harmony, maybe there is something deep in our psyche that understands and appreciates this idea. I remember someone saying “if you build a limestone house in an area that naturally has sandstone, the house will look out of place”: There is definitely something in this and I suppose this is why different building traditions have developed all over the world. Historically, these methods are primarily informed by the landscape and the natural resources in that particular place, for instance my grandmother’s house is built from shuttered clay in an

area that naturally had an abundance of yellow clay.

Traditionally wood provided the structural and supportive element in construction, this was generally covered over or dressed with plaster; by combining and showing both it brings the process and construction of *making* into focus. This is a part of the overall aesthetic and demonstrates the history of making.

How did you come to a more sculptural focus in your art practice? I know you studied painting in art college, took a break and initiated a home renovation project. Did that renovation project have an influence on your practice, and how?

Yes, I studied painting, but even towards the end of the degree I started to think about things in a more three-dimensional way, and I started to play with installation as a way to explore ideas. After college I went through a few years of the usual dilemma of having money and no time or time and no money for materials, so my art-output was sporadic and inconsistent. In the interim I started to renovate a house and had a family. I suppose it was this hands-on experience and immersing myself in the building process that had a big impact on what I am doing right now.

As the children got older and things settled, I found that I needed to create and make things, I began thinking about the materials and processes I had been using while building the house. I experimented with some of these ideas, especially constructing and assembling elements in a sculptural manner. These things I was making were just for me, they weren’t art pieces, they were just things that I might put up in the house. I remember how easy and free it felt to not be thinking about making art, my focus turned to the exploration of the materials for what they were.

From my studio visit, it was apparent that a lot of planning takes place before the realisation of the artwork, your studio has blueprints and drawings pinned to the wall. Could you talk about your process and what is usually involved?

I generally work in my sketchbook every day, I find early morning is the best for this. Most ideas I will go back to a couple of times over the course of a few months, I find the ideas need this time to take shape and develop physically and conceptually. It is also a good way to see if developing an idea further is worthwhile; if there are elements that I can't resolve, I may go back to it later or it may end up in a new context. So there is always this fluidity at this stage, sometimes the work I am physically making will inform or resolve a work at the sketchbook stage.

The initial ideas for the work can come from lots of different sources, it could originate from a domestic or man-made artefact, it could be something from the building process or be informed by elements of a previous project; either from the physical finished piece or the making process. I enjoy drawing, so in some way the more developed drawings are something in themselves, a way to further work out some ideas. The more worked-up drawings of larger pieces is a way to fully understand the forms and fabricate the mould.

In our conversations we talked about leaving Kilkenny and coming back to it, and how this affects our experience of home, perhaps a new-found appreciation and a fresh perspective. How did the move back home to Kilkenny impact you?

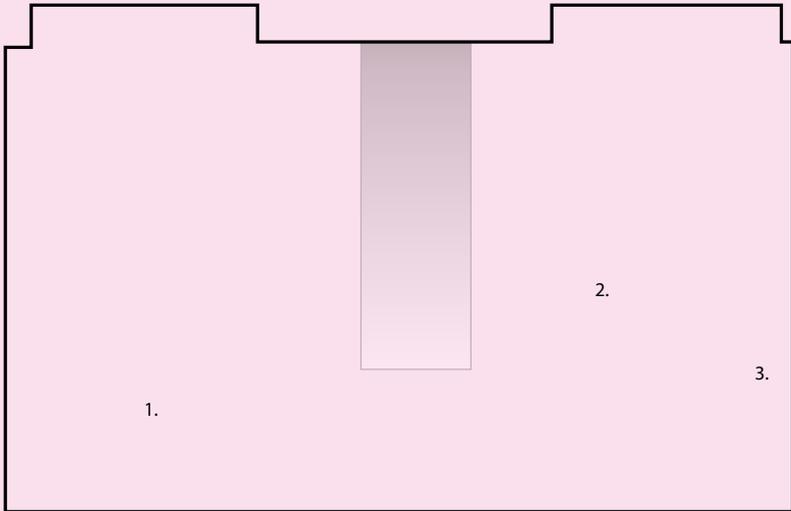
I suppose it's that thing of 'not seeing what was in front of you', I needed to have that break. Ireland in the 80s was a lot different to what it is now, the economy was struggling and the country was much more inward-looking. I emigrated to America initially to find work, after a few years I decided to go to art college; if I had stayed in Ireland I would never have studied art, for both social and economic reasons, it was this opening up of possibilities and broadening of experiences that was a fundamental change in my perspective.

Through the Open Call I wanted to examine Kilkenny's intent with promoting itself with its past and investigating the relevance of

being aligned with our history now. In your successful proposal, you talked about how one can "trace Kilkenny's evolution through its exposed stone." What are your thoughts about Kilkenny as a place?

When I lived in the States, most of the cities were deserted by 6-7pm, after work everyone commuted back to the suburbs and then came back again the next morning, so the city functioned in a very limited way. In Ireland our cities and towns have developed from small settlements and provide for all aspects of human experience and have evolved through the needs of its inhabitants. Through Kilkenny city's surviving architecture one can see how the city has had to develop, how buildings have accommodated the different phases of its evolution. It's this evidence of process that I find really interesting, one can start to piece together how buildings worked, what its purpose, function and social context was. When you look closely you see how subsequent versions of the structure may show developments in building techniques and styles.

I suppose the city is at a juncture right now, it needs to be careful and mindful of the changes it makes as it should be accessible and cater for all its inhabitants and their needs. It is a little concerning the amount of vacant shops on the High Street, at the end of the day, the city needs to function properly for its inhabitants.



1. *Composite*, wood, plaster, paint, metal (2020)

2. *Vertical Construct*, wood, plaster, paint (2020)

3. *Absent Attachment*, wood, plaster, paint, perspex (2021)

