

Under the Mountain

A 30 year old sculpture at the Belfast City Hospital postgraduate centre.

Patrick J Morrison, Deirdre E Donnelly

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BACKGROUND

'Under the mountain' is one of the few external art pieces commissioned for a hospital grounds in the 1980's. It was created by the renowned artist Eilis O'Connell. Eilis was born in Northern Ireland in 1953, and studied at Cork and Boston with distinction, later moving to New York and London for fellowships and residencies.

From her London base she exhibited widely and won many public art commissions. She received the Art and Work prize for her sculptures at 99 Bishopsgate from the Wapping Arts Trust, and in 1998 won a Royal Society of Arts Award. She represented Ireland at the Paris Biennale in 1982 and the Sao Paolo Biennale in 1985. The majority of her commissions are in the United Kingdom. The most significant three are 'Secret Station' in 1992 (figure 1 - bronze, fibre optic light, and steam medium), for the Cardiff Bay Arts Trust at the Gateway, Cardiff; 'Vowel of Earth Dreaming its Root', a 12 metre high Kilkenny limestone sculpture for the London Docklands Development Corporation at Marsh Wall, The Isle of Dogs, London 1994 (figure 2); and 'Pero footbridge', a rolling bascule bridge 54 meters long, Bristol, 1999 (figure 3). She currently works from both London and her studio in a renovated creamery in the hills north west of Cork city.



Fig 1. 'Secret Station'

UNDER THE MOUNTAIN.

"Under the Mountain" with dimensions of 4 x 4.3 x 3 metres is made of welded and hand painted steel and was commissioned in 1985 by Brian Ferran, director of the



Fig 2. 'Vowel of Earth Dreaming its Root'

Arts Council of Northern Ireland. It was the artist's second commission and she noted that "it was wonderful to work with Brian who gave me complete freedom to do as I wished, unlike today's bureaucratic commissioning processes that drive artists to despair".

Consultants in Clinical Genetics, Department of Genetic medicine, Belfast HSC Trust, Lisburn Road, Belfast. BT9 7AB. UK

patrick.morrison@belfasttrust.hscni.net

Correspondence to Professor Morrison



Fig 3. 'Pero footbridge'

It is now 30 years old. It was made with a small shipbuilding firm in Arklow, Co. Wexford. Eilis worked on the factory floor and did a lot of the welding and grinding herself and learnt how to fabricate steel on a large scale. The title refers to the postgraduate centre building behind it with the lecture theatre section jutting out into space as 'the mountain'. The postgraduate centre is part of the Belfast City Hospital which opened in the same year and the large Tower block of the main hospital sits below the Belfast hills and in itself dwarfs the postgraduate centre so the title is appropriate on several levels.



Fig 4. 'Under the mountain' just after installation in 1985.

Figure 4 shows the sculpture at its installation. The moon-like segment rests gently on the back of the main form and this is to look casual as though it just rolled back to lean on it. The metal tracks are particularly interesting. Her original intention was very ambitious. She wanted a sculpture that moved and

planned to motorise the small triangular form so that it would run slowly on the curved tracks and run through the triangular cut out in the main part of the sculpture.



Fig 5. Blue and silver painted version 2005.



Fig 6. Front of 'Under the mountain' August 2015 after repainting.

Eilis notes that she "wanted the sculpture to be a living, moving thing. The planners objected to that but I kept the idea of the steel track in the ground to suggest movement. It conveys the concept of movement inherent or suggested in something static".



Fig 7. Rear view showing the smaller triangular form and the steel tracks under the larger form.



Fig 8. Lateral view

It has gone through a repainting roughly once a decade. For the last decade it was blue with silver stars (figure 5) and it has just been repainted in August 2015 (figures 6-8) and the artist is thrilled with the current result. Despite planning permission not being granted to allow the small triangular form to move on the tracks, rumours constantly abounded about the power



Fig 9. 'Conetwirl' recently commissioned by the Cass foundation.

switch location for the alleged 'motor unit'. Clearly two of the allegations - that a former chief executive personally chiselled off the wheels late one night to save electricity costs, and that the senior paediatric emergency room consultant crept stealthily under the cover of darkness with a screwdriver to disable the power switch to prevent injuries to children's fingers - are totally unfounded.

The artists' most recent piece is Conetwirl, a painted epoxy resin and woven glass medium of 3 x 5.3 x 2.5 metre dimensions, commissioned by the Cass Foundation (figure 9), a piece that has come to reprise the movement theme that exemplifies many of her works.

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