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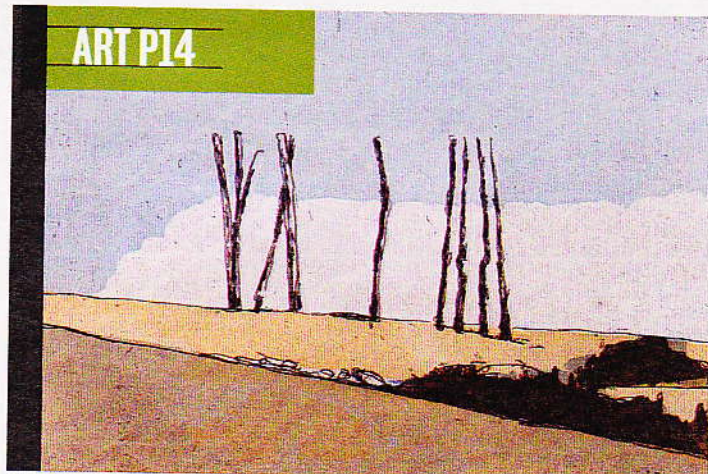
Features

REPORT It's been three years since the Lir opened its drama school. Eithne Shortall meets the first crop of graduates to talk about their backgrounds and prospects

COVER STORY Is Robin Wright just like her icy House of Cards persona? It depends on which question you ask, finds Jonathan Dean over 'a real cup of tea, innit'

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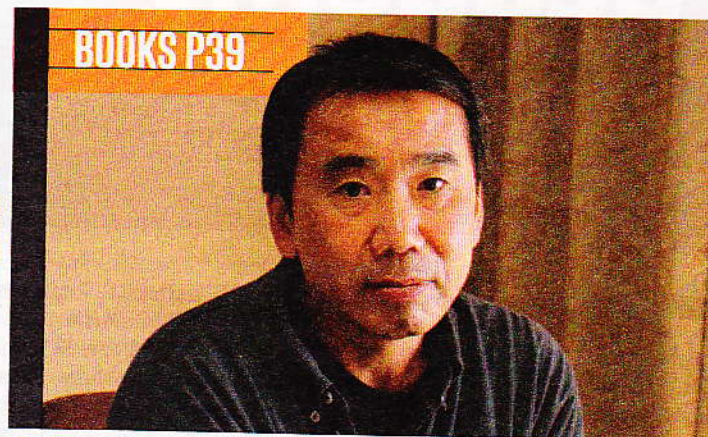
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ENJOY THE VIEW

Irish, Aussie, English? Who cares?
John Kelly should be better known,
argues **John P O'Sullivan**

Take the right turn for Union Hall on the road from Skibbereen to Rosscurbery and head south towards the sea. After many twists and turns, you'll find yourself on the Reen peninsula and at the spectacularly scenic home of the artist John Kelly. A stroll around his extensive property yields many curious and some downright surreal sights. As a herd of amiable Friesians graze nearby, you encounter a large bronze gum tree with a stylised Friesian lodged in its branches. This is Kelly's iconic Cow Up a Tree, a version of which once graced the Champs-Élysées in Paris. Nearby, a scale model of the Tate Gallery in London is the size of a small bungalow, and scattered around his gardens are sundry bronze kangaroos and startling abstract pieces.

Kelly has been living in Ireland for more than 10 years, but remains better known in Sydney and Melbourne than he is in Dublin and Cork. His affiliations are complicated and it shows in his retention

of three passports, as though he's still making up his mind. His father comes from near Mallow in Cork, and his mother is English, but the family moved to Australia in 1965 when he was six months old.

While his primary audience remains Down Under, he also shows regularly in London, including at the Royal Academy. His website describes him as "currently based in West Cork", suggesting a provisional relationship. This identity issue amuses him. "I am the best-known Irish artist in Australia or alternatively a well-known contemporary Australian artist here in Ireland," he quips.

His disparate loyalties were demonstrated at his first Dublin solo show in the Oliver Sears Gallery in 2013. While viewers glided around sipping wine and admiring his cool, spare seascapes of Castlehaven and its environs, he was tossing about in the Southern Ocean, one of the roughest and most dangerous in the world. He was artist in residence on the icebreaker *Aurora Australis* on an Australian-Antarctic mission, a Shackleton-like experience in enveloping ice during which survival was a matter of concern. The art he created on this trip will be shown in Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in 2015.

Cows loom large in Kelly's story. His mother came first in a Win a Wish competition advertised on the side of a milk carton, enabling her to send him to art school. One of Kelly's early shows in Australia was ungratefully entitled *More F***** Cows!*, and he's best known for playful paintings and sculpture based on the stylised papier-mâché cows created by the Australian artist Sir William Dobell — supposedly as part of a camouflage project during the Second World War.

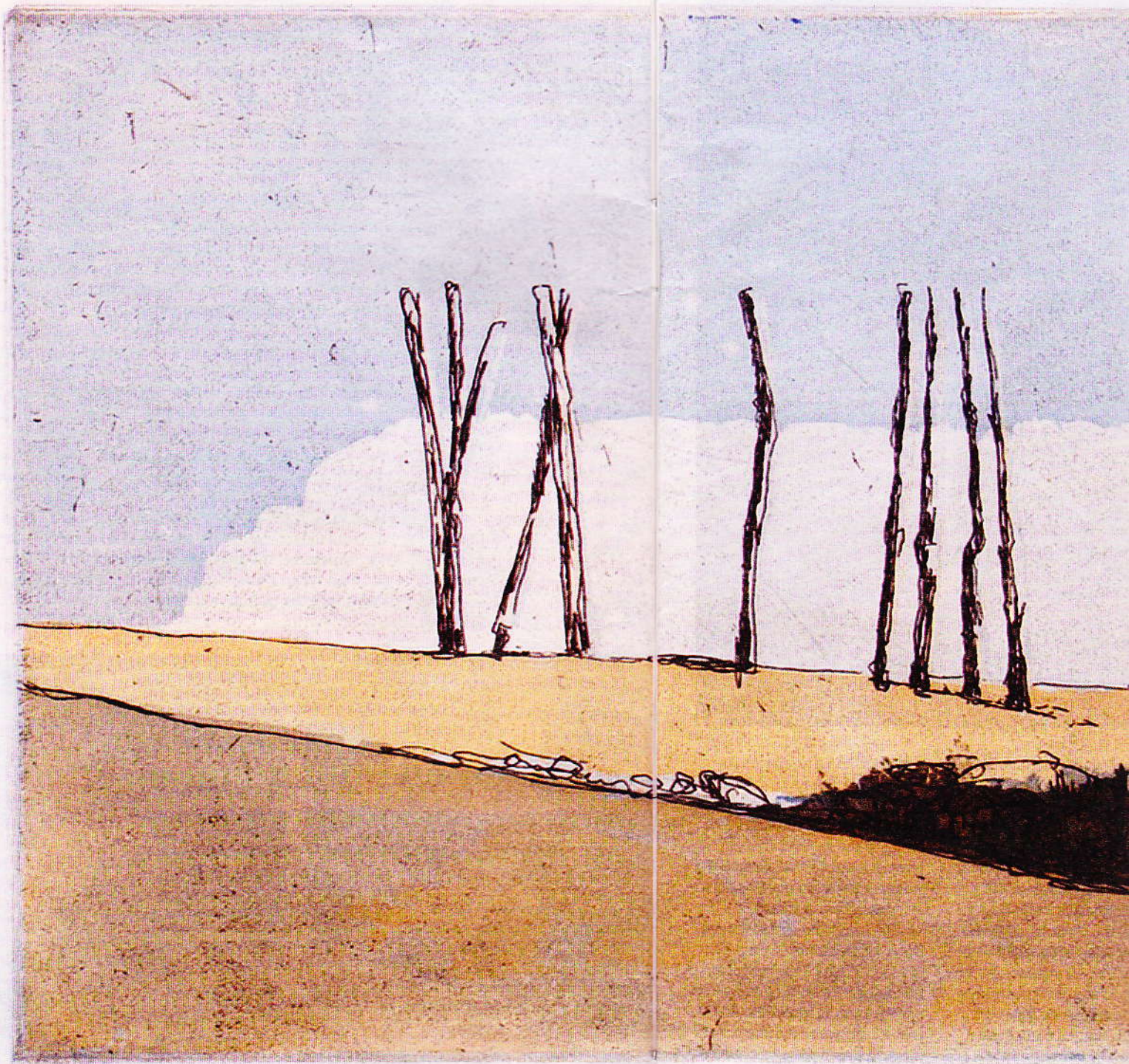
No large mammal was safe from his gaze. In 1997, he did a show on Phar Lap — Australia's most famous racehorse — entitled *Painting the Dead Horse* (the poor creature stands stuffed in a glass case in a Melbourne museum). That show was opened by Barry Humphries, who is a fan, as is Rupert Murdoch. A pivotal moment

in his career came when he was asked by the *Observer* to paint the Champs de la S for the millennium. His work was recognised and he was named Nam June Paik of the Flanagan. His work in the *Time* magazine was launched.

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Kelly's creative paintings, sculptures,





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in his career came in 1999 when he was asked by the City of Paris to exhibit in *Champs de la Sculpture II*, held to mark the millennium. It included internationally recognised artists such as Red Grooms, Nam June Paik, Tony Cragg, and Barry Flanagan. His work caught the attention of *Time* magazine, and his reputation was launched.

A subsequent legal imbroglio with his French agent "took the air out of my ascent" and Kelly, exhausted and dispirited, first came to Ireland 10 years ago to get away from it all. He and his wife, Christina, happened upon a house amid the scenic splendours of Reen, and he has continued his international career from this West Cork base.

Kelly's creativity has many outlets. He paints, sculpts, prints, uses computers for

his steel cut-outs, flirts with installations and the conceptual, and writes about art and art history. When asked about Australian art, many of us struggle to get beyond Sidney Nolan, so it's informative to hear his views on the likes of Dobell, Brett Whiteley and Fred Williams.

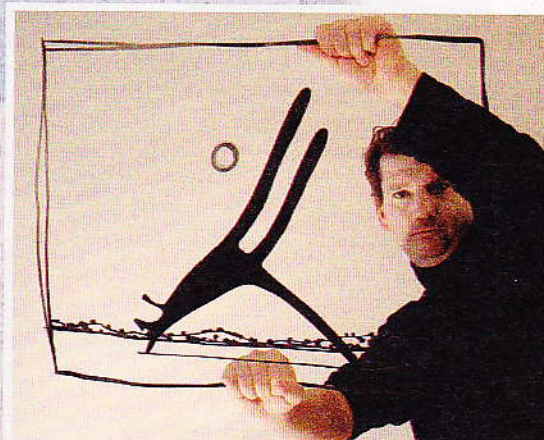
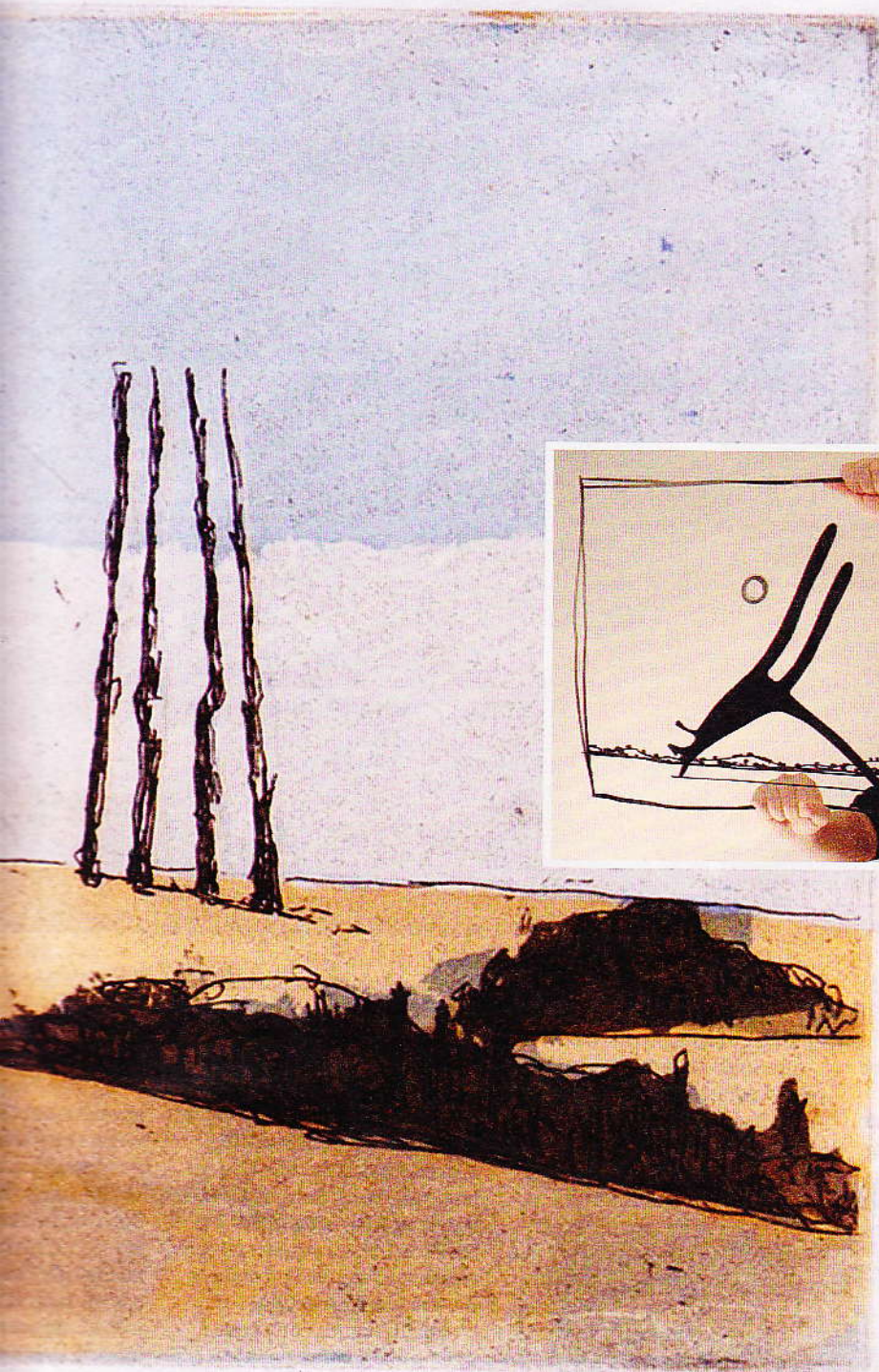
Kelly recounts at length how Dobell won the Archibald Prize for a portrait of his alleged lover Joshua Smith — who came second in the competition. Dobell was then sued by Smith's followers as they felt the work was a caricature not a portrait, and thus ineligible for the prize.

In 2011, Kelly took the Australian art historian Elizabeth Donaldson to task in a letter to *Art Monthly Australia* (AMA) over what he regarded as a homogenised account of the incident.

Kelly is a fine writer, with a colourful

turn of phrase. He wrote a hair-raising and he has written and Circa. He lives in a community here and he's not afraid to speak his mind. Australia Council of the Arts and Saatchi & Saatchi advocated that. Kelly wrote directly to the head of the day to argue his case. Similarly, he wrote to Crawford Open to task over the open-submission

The absence of artists and art is a particular concern of the Arts Council's director. Circa art magazine



Rooted in landscape
The Sticks, left, painted by John Kelly, above

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turn of phrase. While in the Antarctic he wrote a hair-raising blog for The Guardian, and he has written extensively for AMA and Circa. He likes to engage with the art community here and in Australia, and is not afraid to speak his mind. When the Australia Council for the Arts brought in Saatchi & Saatchi to review arts policy, it advocated that Australian art be branded. Kelly wrote directly to the prime minister of the day to argue the folly of this policy. Similarly, he wrote an open letter to Crawford Open 2007, taking its organisers to task over what he saw as a flawed open-submission competition.

The absence of robust reviewing of artists and art institutions in Ireland is a particular concern. He is critical of the Arts Council's decision to cut funding for Circa art magazine, while continuing to

support the Irish Arts Review, which he feels is excessively laudatory, concentrating its criticism on dead artists and past infamies, such as Peter Murray's excellent piece on the Bantry House collection. Kelly feels that there is a cosy clique running Irish art institutions that is happy to host big names from the international circuit but does not do enough to foster contemporary Irish art, and does not take kindly to questions about its stewardship.

His current show in the Doswell Gallery in Rosscarbery demonstrates his love affair with the landscape of west Cork. Kelly felt his studio was becoming "like a padded cell" and decided to "be creative in front of the landscape". So he took his field easel up Ceim Hill for views of Castlehaven Harbour and the Stags. Most of the works

you see were painted from there, or from his perch in Myross Cemetery, high above Reen, where he used the gravestone of an Anne Sullivan as a plinth to hold his easel — going a bit further along the memento mori route than those writers who keep a skull on their desks. In an eerie twist, he discovered from a neighbour that the same Anne Sullivan lived in the house he now occupies.

The show also features some images of his Antarctic encounters with penguins, and a new series of prints done with the Stony Road Press that revisits some of his recent west Cork paintings.

Kelly has also taken a keen interest in the tragic history of his locale. The scale model of the Tate Modern on his land was originally intended for a show in Melbourne, where it would house a letter written in 1846 by NM Cummins, a justice of the peace in Reen, recounting in horror the effects of the Famine in Myross and South Reen. Kelly notes Irish art left no contemporary record of the Famine, such as Jean-François Millet's Prayer for a Potato Crop. The establishment shills that made art in mid-19th-century Ireland would not have wanted to rock the boat. He chose the Tate because it owed its existence to a fortune made from food — initially a string of greengrocers around Liverpool — at a time when Ireland was starving.

Kelly has been described by an Irish academic as "an awkward and obsessive artist". That statement is almost tautologous, or at least a good working definition of what an artist should be. Obsession is surely necessary to pursue any art form, and being awkward means you don't necessarily abide by the status quo or follow received wisdom. The artist as outsider has many illustrious precedents, from Caravaggio to Van Gogh.

For domestic reasons, Kelly plans to spend more time in Dublin over the next few years, and those who care about Irish art in the capital should welcome both his multifaceted work and his critical contributions. Some of our art institutions might even pay more attention to an artist of Irish origin honoured internationally, but largely ignored here. **G**

Castlehaven: Works by John Kelly is at the Doswell Gallery, Rosscarbery, until August 7