

Getting into the frame

Marianne Hartigan on the difficulty that emerging artists have in securing their first show, and the gallery directors who take the risk of exhibiting their work

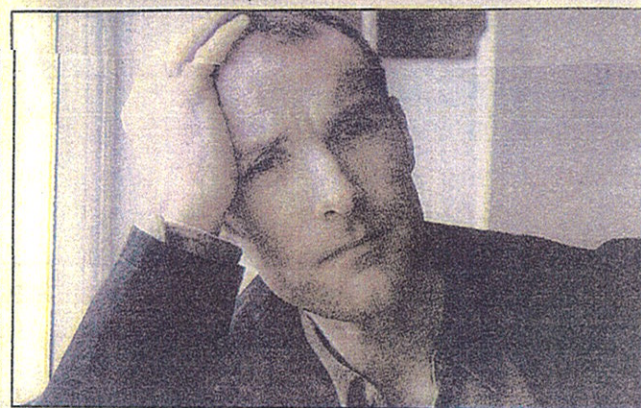
REMEMBER lugging my work around the galleries years ago and getting nowhere. Most galleries had more artists than they could handle and the ones that had space only wanted certain styles," recalls a one-time painter. "If you could bide your time or win awards in the big shows you'd be fine, but I couldn't afford to do that. It was a humbling experience."

While there may be more galleries today, things have changed very little. Getting that first one-person show as an artist can be the lynch pin that leads on to a successful career, but achieving it can be difficult and the competition is fierce. In this country there is both a limited number of commercial galleries and a limited art-buying public, so success may be a considerable time coming. How do artists get that first solo show and who are the people who take the risk and exhibit their work?

Beatrice O'Connell, who recently exhibited her colourful figurative work in the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery in Dublin, qualified in fine art in 1996. She was lucky – as well as talented. "The director of the Lambay House Art Gallery in Howth saw my work at the end-of-year show and took a couple for her Christmas exhibition and offered me a show." Much of O'Connell's work are nudes, which traditionally don't sell well in Ireland, but her works leaped off the walls. "I sold nearly everything. And that gave me the confidence to work towards this show."

O'Connell makes getting a show sound simple. But over a dozen gallery directors, contacted by *The Sunday Tribune*, reported receiving numerous applications from artists each week – amounting to several hundred per year. Only a fraction of those artists will get exhibitions. Those few galleries that can make space for newcomers often meet artists through those who are already on their books, or by choosing works for a seasonal group show and gauging the response – in other words, they want to see sales.

EDWARD Kennedy got a friend to bring slides of his work around the galleries in 1990. "Tom Caldwell put a couple in his winter show and then offered me a solo show," says Kennedy who, after a diploma from Limerick School of Art and



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Jerome O'Driscoll, director of the Green on Red gallery, 'Gam dawn' by Beatrice O'Connell, the artist Beatrice O'Connell, and artist Edward Kennedy

Design, had just completed a fine art MA in Cincinnati, USA. "I found it difficult to go around myself since I had no connections. I was in New York for the next 10 years, and before my return a friend said 'why don't you call into Paul Kane in Dublin?' And that led to the present show. First I took part in a group show, then a two-person and then he gave me time to build up a body of work for this one. There's a rhythm, when it is right, it will come together. But you need to have great faith to keep going."

Faith in his own work and determination is what led Frank Kiely to secure

his forthcoming show in the Bank of Ireland Arts' Centre. After a diploma in fine art print in Galway IT, he graduated from the degree course in NCAD last summer. "I put a proposal to the Bank of Ireland and put a lot of thought into it. I feel I got it on my own strength."

While galleries generally charge a 40-60% commission on sales, the bank takes no cut, although Frank has to invigilate the show and do nearly all the promotion. "But I'm delighted with the space," he says.

The director of the National College of Art and Design, Noel Sheridan, says

it is tough for young artists starting out. "It's unusual to get a solo show on graduation. Normally they would submit to group shows such as the RHA, but there seems to be less of those now, and greater emphasis on curated shows with a theme. We try to give a liberal education in the context of art. All graduates are computer literate, especially in CAD (computer aided design), which gives them flexibility."

A number of artists organise exhibitions in less conventional venues, but selectivity is vital. Gallery owner Kevin Kavanagh warns: "Be very careful

where you show your work." Conversely, Paul Kane says: "Cast your net wide", feeling there is always value in exhibiting. Josephine Kelliher of the Rubicon Gallery in Dublin, says she looks very favourably on artist-curated group shows.

Kirsten Dunne of The Kerlin Gallery, also in Dublin, echoes what many gallery directors say: "While we are constantly looking for artists, and people drop in slides all the time, it is rare that something comes out of it. Generally it would coincide with us noticing their work in a graduation show or group exhibition,

which might then lead on to a solo show." She stresses that the actual relationship with the artist is important too, something which nearly every other director contacted by *The Sunday Tribune* agrees.

SOME of the more recent galleries which showcase new talent had colourful beginnings themselves. Economics graduate Kevin Kavanagh initially set up the Jo Rain Gallery as a six month project in Fownes Street in Dublin's Temple Bar. It lasted five years.

"Sales weren't the prime concern. It offered artists a launching pad and an

alternative space for established artists. The commission was just 25% – now it's 40%. It's difficult to describe my criteria for selection. A lot of it is gut instinct – you have to like the work. The standard on offer is generally high, the difficult part is turning people away." Kavanagh moved his successful gallery, now named after himself, to a less quirky, more streamlined premises in Great Strand St last year.

Paul Kane of the Paul Kane Gallery on South William Street is someone else who does not place a paramount importance on sales. If he really likes an artist's work he will stick

with it, even if there is a negative response. He exposes viewers to the work over a length of time, at first in a group or four-person show, then two-person and so on. He maintains that sometimes, particularly with very original work, it takes familiarity for people to appreciate it.

Kane studied applied arts in London after a science degree ("The Christian brothers said I was too clever to do art.") Success in the fashion world in London and New York allowed him to pursue art as a sideline, curating shows on short-term leases. Abandoning fashion and returning to Dublin in 1994, he set up his own gallery three years later. Apart from the central location of his present building, he was attracted by the light from the tall windows and the shabby splendour of the Georgian building, which combine to create a space that's very sympathetic to paintings.

He too is inundated with applications. He stresses the importance of presentation for artists, of sending in a good curriculum vitae and slides and leaving colour photocopies for the gallery to keep on file. He also advises emerging artists not to "approach one gallery at a time, as they put everyone under too much pressure if they've really put their soul on the line."

THE sophisticated Green on Red Gallery began life as "a humble event" in Jerome O'Driscoll's top floor flat in Fitzwilliam Square. "I had done an MA in Art History in TCD and was teaching, and I opened the gallery as no one seemed to be promoting younger contemporary work. At first it was on the top floor, then with one show I hung tapestries all through the building and out on to the streets, with sculpture on the railings."

"Eventually I opened a gallery on the first floor and then more recently I opened the gallery in Lombard St East, where I show the best contemporary Irish and non-Irish art. I've done a lot of installation, a lot of photo-based art. Originality and quality are important. I'm passionate about the work that I show. It's very subjective, very personal..."

For both artists and gallery directors it can be a risky business. Successful shows are great but where there are no sales there is no money for either party. However passion for their work is the unifying factor which carries them on.