

## TEXT by PETER MURRAY

Just fifteen kilometers or so from the sea, the river Lee flows through the city of Cork, the land on either side rising gently from the riverbank, the older streets of the late medieval city being enclosed, as it were, in a shallow bowl. Silhouetted against the skyline, north and south of the river, and interspersed amongst terraces of private houses, a series of large buildings represent both the aspirations and social realities of nineteenth century Cork. Some of these buildings retain their original function, others have been converted to new use. To the south, the quadrangles of the university and the Cathedral of St. Finbarr's, built in an impressive Gothic Revival style, speak of religious worship and the wish to educate. North of the river, an array of imposing Victorian institutions speak also of religious devotion, charity and caring for others, but also of the imprisonment, literal and virtual, not only of criminals, but also of young unmarried mothers, and the mentally ill.

Of the institutions north of the river, the westernmost, reputedly the longest building in Ireland, served until recently as a mental hospital. A changing approach to care for the mentally ill, coupled with a rise in economic prosperity, has seen this structure, Our Lady's Hospital, with its magnificent views over the city, recently converted into apartments. This building was linked by an underground corridor to another large red-brick hospital, bearing the same name, closer to the city. Built on south-facing slopes overlooking the city, the scale and architecture of these hospitals clearly expresses the social optimism of the nineteenth century, and a belief in 'improving' society. Further east, convents, schools, hospices and convalescent homes, as well as a women's prison, reaffirm this belief. Although several still cling to their original roles, the days of these vast buildings now seem numbered. Already three have been converted into hotels, while others stand empty, awaiting news of their fate. The women's gaol is now a museum. The church attached to the Convent of the Good Shepherd, where unmarried mothers were forced to work in a laundry run by nuns, was burned to the ground in recent years, with little lamentation at its passing. Improved planning and heritage laws may prevent demolition, but with their large windows, high ceilings and wide corridors, these buildings are seen as old-fashioned and uneconomic.

The closure of Our Lady's Hospital was rendered inevitable when Senator Brendan Ryan, in June 1988, in the Irish parliament, read out sections of a report on conditions endured by the one thousand inmates, most of them elderly. Ryan described the report as "among the most appalling, distressing, disturbing, offensive documents that I have ever had the misfortune to read." In 2002, the last patients left. The older section, at the westernmost extremity of the city, is now apartments, but the large red-brick annexe, closer to the city centre, still lies

empty. In her film, Konik uses the deserted corridors and rooms of this disused building, not as a background stage set, but as a living protagonist. Inevitably, given its history, the building has a strong presence that envelops and at times seems to overwhelm the two actors who move silently through the abandoned rooms. Isolated, wrapped in their own thoughts, standing by the windows, sitting in chairs, or walking slowly through the corridors. Konik uses a multi-screen projection to build both content and meaning into her work. *Our Lady's Forever* consists of seven video images. The central image shows an extractor fan, listlessly turning, driven not by its motor, but by strong winds outside. While this image remains constant, the others change constantly. There are scenes of fingers tracing messages on windows, close-ups of fingertips touching surfaces, of curtains blowing in the breeze, the camera captures details of the faces of the two actors, a young man and the young woman, and there are recurring images of headlands and of blue seas stretching to the horizon. These scenes convey a profound sense of isolation, but evoke also a sense of peace and inner reflection. The spoken soundtrack is based on a drama written by a young man who suffers from schizophrenia: "I feel helpless, even in this home. It fills the emptiness which constantly saps my being and will continue to until it chews and spits me out in pieces. The wind will then carry my parts, and scatter them far away from me."

Konik is no stranger to such places, feelings and situations. In Berlin, she filmed a series of quietly harrowing interviews with men and women in their nineties, in which they recalled their lives, and scenes from their youth world revisited in memory. These films, entitled *Transparency* (2004), consisted of two separate interviews, spliced together in a mirror image, so that the same person is seen twice, recalling, in slightly different ways, the same events in their life. By using this simple device, Konik shows how memory and mind are continually building and rebuilding our past, and each time a memory is recalled, it changes subtly, based on present experiences.

In another series of films, entitled *In the Middle of the Way*, the artist interviewed, in the streets of Moscow, Berlin, Warsaw and Cleveland, homeless and dispossessed men and women. The interviewees speak eloquently of their sense of loss and regret, but they speak also of their everyday lives, and joke occasionally, giving glimpses of the humour and good fellowship that can sustain those working the streets. And old and respectable woman, Svyeta Trubachova begs for alms in front of the Kremlin. Standing nearby, policemen, and officers of the FSB, allow her to beg unhindered. She brings the artist to meet another homeless woman, a teacher of language and literature, whose husband was killed by Chechen mercenaries and who has also ended up on the streets. In Cleveland Ohio, Konik records the sad but eloquent lament of a homeless man. He quotes Haile Selassie's 1963

speech to the United Nations: "Until the colour of a man's skin is of no more significance than the colour of his eyes, there will be war. And until that day, the dream of lasting peace, world citizenship, will be but a fleeting illusion, to be pursued, but never attained."

Konik is at home with the ghosts of the past, brought into the present by the elderly and mentally alert, by young schizophrenics, by ageing radicals protestors, and by those who have simply opted out. In *Our Lady's Forever*, she goes one step further, constructing a complex visual montage, using actors, script and setting, to create a work of art that resonates with a gentle but profound feeling. Inspired by a poem, and by those empty rooms, still furnished with metal framed chairs and tables, her film dwells on the isolation of the individual, on the impossibility of true connection between individual minds, and perhaps also on the terrors of forgetting, and being forgotten. But there is some magic too, amidst the sadness: "When stars start to speak it means that light crystals can dance."