

## Kanturk Arts Festival 2015



### **Schools Art Competition Adjudicator's Report**

I intend these comments primarily for the benefit of the students. To be read by those who entered (and perhaps also those who chose not to enter this year.) My intention is to be helpful to the entrants, especially those who, each year have used their talents and worked hard to produce wonderful and beautiful works without being awarded a prize. Any competition, by its nature produces triumphs and disappointments for the participants. It is my hope that even though there is only one overall, and one winner per category, some balance is achieved by awarding *Commended* and *Highly Commended* ratings. But even these awards do not tell the whole story as there are limits on the numbers of these that can be issued.

As a practicing painter I have experienced the judging process from both sides. I have often felt the pang of disappointment, feeling that my entry was better than the one selected by the judge or judges. On the other hand, I have been on selection panels where I have had great difficulty trying to separate entries that have shown wonderful skill and imagination and have exceeded the design brief. I have always felt that I wanted to tell the people who did not win the competition how good their work was and how closely it was in contention. Rejection, or the *feeling* that we have been rejected, can be very discouraging. Often we hear how respected authors could, as they put it, paper the walls with their rejection slips. We are incredulous that publishers rejected the piece of work that is now seen to be a masterpiece. We laugh at the short-sightedness of the record company executive who didn't sign the Beatles.....and so, on. If there is a message in all of this, it must be that persistence usually wins out in the end. Or to put it another way, *without* persistence we are unlikely to win out in the end. Judging a competition such as this one is a matter of subjective opinion. It is not something hard and fast. I recently came across a quote from the writer, W. Somerset Maugham: "There are three rules for writing a novel. Unfortunately,

no one knows what they are.” This seems to sum it all up. One can only do the most honest appraisal of the work and trust that the decision is the *least wrong* one!

I endeavour to bring as much fellow-feeling to the process as I can; I try to envision the picture-making from the point of view of the student making that picture. My memory of making pictures as a child (some of which are still crystal-clear to me) and how those pictures were perceived by adults, teachers and my school-going peers all have a bearing on the way that I react to these works. I look at the developmental age of the maker. I look for their individual vision, which can shine through, even when they are making an image of a Disney character.

When you have looked at a lot of works and have watched adult and child painters working, you can usually spot without much difficulty the people whose vision is their own and are taking their work seriously, compared to those for whom “any old mark” they make, will do. Quality shines through in the work. But, taking the work seriously is not the same as being joyless about it, much the opposite. So to the student participants, I hope you will try to have the same empathy for my process as I have for yours.

Once again I have had the *bittersweet* pleasure of judging this competition. This is the seventh year that it has taken place and while there have been various changes, the competition format in essence remains the same. Having been the judge each year so far, I have noted a certain ebb and flow in numbers of entries from different age categories. It is likely that these surges probably have nothing to do with the competition per se, but as a result of other priorities or deadlines.

Some subjects and approaches seem to have universal appeal, but really, unless you can bring something special to the image of a rally car, a football match, or the latest toy, it might be more beneficial to look at another subject that doesn't look like it has been copied from an advertisement. If you can somehow make it your own, well that's another matter.

Think of a special viewpoint, or the scale of your subject in relation to its surroundings. How will your use of colour improve your message? These are just a few examples, but there are many other ways of thinking about your picture to make it more interesting to the viewer.

It is important to consider the difference between your own excitement for a subject and how you treat it, compared to the way in which it will be perceived by a viewer.

Using the theme for the competition in a way that allows it to be turned to the entrant's advantage is a positive approach.

I have been very pleased to see the continued, encouraging, guiding hands of teachers. That does not mean that teachers have been doing the actual work, just that they are doing what good teachers do: providing the means by which their pupils can properly become themselves. I have been delighted with the standard of entries since the outset and have watched the overall standard rising with pleasure. I think that now, there is less disparity between the winners and the rest, than there was when the competition started.

There have been some causes for concern, from time to time. This year, for example for the first time, there were NO entries for the senior category. I must say I was very disappointed with that, as there has been a palpable thread of continuity apparent through the years, where pupils who produced excellent work as young primary school entrants were usually in the mix when they entered the older-age categories.

It is also worth emphasising the problems that any entrant must inevitably feel about the final decisions. Believe me those decisions are not taken lightly. At the risk of sounding as though I am going through the motions of saying how difficult it is to choose any one picture over another, I will now say just how difficult it can be, by giving a specific example. To illustrate the point, I am going to make an exception to my normal practice of only commenting in a general way before I get down to discussing the individual category winners and ultimately the overall winner.

I will talk about the two ends of the age spectrum in this competition. The winners of the most junior and the most senior categories this year displayed in their entries, the kind of talent and enthusiasm that make it such a pleasure to be adjudicating this competition. But at the outset, I did say it was a *bittersweet* pleasure. The bitter part is having to choose just one winner.

In the most senior category, Siobhán O'Connor made a drawing in pencil, called: "My Favourite Movie Characters". This is a powerful piece of work. The strangely sinister characters are beautifully rendered in subtle tones of light-to-dark marks. Shapes of the faces are accurately portrayed without looking like "stock" images.

Surfaces of glassy eye or wild hair are beautifully defined without looking stilted. I could go on. Simply put, this is a really fine drawing.

In the most junior category, Leah Scully made a piece entitled: "Circus in Kanturk". This is a work in colour. The overall layout is a strong composition where space is divided into several bold areas. The main colours chosen are yellow rays from two spotlights contrasting with a small dark blue area of background.

In the centre of the page, where these spot lit rays intersect, there stands a jolly clown moving left. The clown is dressed in clear, bright colours which simultaneously blend with and stand out from the background.

Faced with a choice between these two works for the overall prize, I asked myself all sorts of questions. For example: Was either one a ne'er to be repeated "flash in the pan"? If I were making either of these pieces would I change anything to "*improve*" it?

While I could not truthfully answer the first question, other than to say that it was clear that neither piece had been produced by some lucky accident, I could, however, answer truthfully, that I wouldn't want to change *anything* about "Circus in Kanturk". That decided it for me. I hope that Siobhán O'Connor understands my thinking a little bit more and sees that her picture is a wonderful piece of work, that would have also made a worthy overall winner.

I singled out these two works to demonstrate the difficulty of judging an apple to be superior to a peach....it is subjective, in the end. I could have chosen many other examples to make my case.

I am looking forward to savouring the Arts Festival atmosphere and the pleasure of seeing these pictures in the shop windows around the town. I also love to see the people of the town looking and discussing the works without any sense that they are fulfilling a duty, or feeling that they need to have attended History of Art lectures to have an opinion on them.

*John Philip Murray,  
March 2015. Lissardagh*

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## Overall Winner

**Name** **School**  
**Leah Scully (Circus in Kanturk)**

**Scoil Eoin Baiste**

For my comments on this piece, see the main body of text.

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### Category A Winner

**Leah Scully**

**Scoil Eoin Baiste**

For my comments on this piece, see the main body of text.

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### Category B Winner

**Lia Heffernan (Webb the Donkey)**

**Kilbrin**

This picture displays a very strong sense of composition. The donkey shape takes over most of the surface of the page in a diagonal line towards the sun, in the upper left. There is surprising insight for one so young, in the depiction of the stoic, somewhat sad look of the donkey. Overall this is a very rewarding image

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### Category C Winner

**Queen Ogumefu (Paris 2013)**

**Banteer**

This picture shows a very lively balance between accurate observational drawing and free-flowing flights of fancy. Executed in the laborious medium of coloured pencil, it obviously took a lot of painstaking work. I am particularly impressed by the view from the underside of the tower, which suggests the vast area on which the tower stands. I also love the feeling that this is a personal record of an actual event.

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### Category D Winner

**Siobhán O'Connor**

**Scoil Treasa**

**(My Favourite Movie Characters)**

For my comments on this piece, see the main body of text.

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**Leah Scully ('Circus in Kanturk')**



**Lia Heffernan (Webb the Donkey)**



Queen Ogumefu ('Paris 2013')





**Siobhán O'Connor ('My Favourite Movie Characters')**