

When worlds collide: art meets science in Dublin Bay



Paddy Woodworth

Projects between artists and scientists on the northern shore of Dublin Bay have shown how fruitful collaborations can be

We often think of the worlds of science and the arts as mutually exclusive, even antagonistic. But both are born of a similar impulse of wonder, and moved by a similar desire to understand the world by ordering it, or reordering it. This desire takes artists and scientists in different directions, but their paths can converge again in remarkable ways.

For two years the Red Stables Summer School, based at St Anne's Park in Clontarf, in north Dublin, has produced productive dialogues between artists, ecologists and the public that have demonstrated these links in vivid and compelling works of art.

Dublin City Council has just published the second book based on these encounters, giving a welcome opportunity for more people to explore their themes. (I had the pleasure of launching the book last week.)

The Red Stables Artists' Studios are an ideal location for such a school, not only because St Anne's is a fascinating park in its own right but also because it is just a short walk from the Bull Island, a key site for seeing biodiversity up close.

Is it the artist, or the scientist, within us that draws so many people to this island, and keeps them coming back? Or is it always some combination of both? The book is little more than a pamphlet in size. Yet it manages to offer us half a dozen rewarding ways of considering these questions. And it comes with beautiful images, and two on-line films, to complement the text.

As a child I first came to the Bull Island to see birds I had known previously only from the illustrations of Archibald Thorburn in a Victorian guide. Thorburn's illustrations were both scientific, in that they were rigorously accurate, and artistic, in that they were windows on worlds of mystery, wonder and imagination. They lent an aura of the unicorn or the griffon to birds with strange, evocative names, such as the godwit or the peregrine. I had never seen these creatures before, and I was not quite sure if they really existed.

To watch a real godwit in three dimensions, moving through the salt marsh or the lagoon, with its long legs and curiously up-tilted bill, was not unlike seeing an actor, previously familiar only from photographs, on stage for the first time. And then the godwits and myriads of other wading birds took off and flew, wheeling in kinetic flocks across the sky, pursued by a barely visible peregrine falcon. I learned that birds could be dancers, that their world is an intricate ballet, a drama where life and death are always intermingled.

This childhood experience sprang to mind when watching, on Vimeo, the dancers of *Interpretive Project*, choreographed by Janna Kemperman for the summer school. It shows a dozen performers, mostly



from Showtime Theatre School, in Clontarf, dancing on Dollymount Strand. Their black-and-white costumes, and their movements, mimic the plumage and behaviour of brent geese, which are among the most familiar waterbirds to visit the Bull in winter.

Rhona Byrne, Vaari Claffey and Ciara Moore refer to this performance in the book, reflecting playfully on six days on the island. They found novel uses for the stuffed animals in its interpretive centre, setting up a half-buried oystercatcher as a performer in Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*. They turned birds into authors – JG Mallard, WG Seagull – and fantasised about visits to the Bull by James Joyce and Joseph Beuys.

Meanwhile, Jenny Brady's provocative film *Carve Up* reflects on how scientists, following the trail blazed by Linnaeus, have always tried to categorise the natural world into distinct groupings. Brady achieves this largely through startlingly fresh images of the Bull's fabled orchids.

Today's scientists are privileged and challenged to live at a moment when revolutionary DNA analysis is tossing the pages of the Linnaean bible of nature into the air. The

old order of species is being turned upside down.

Bruce Pavlik, of the Royal Botanic Gardens, in Kew, recently put it like this: "Groups of plants once thought to be closely related, within the same family, are now split into many families or shifted into new families. For example, in the California flora, the lily family, once thought to be a fairly homogenous group, has been split into 30 different families to reflect long and separate evolutionary lineages. Our world grows more diverse and more interesting with every leap of science."

Back in the book, Niall Connolly's fascinating essay on the notion of biological species offers an overview of the philosophical questions that these issues raise with exemplary brevity and clarity.

And if this new thinking reminds us that species are not, in the last analysis, objective facts out in the world but constructs of the human brain, then we are surely seeing a new kind of convergence between the world as interpreted by scientists and the world as interpreted by artists.

The scientist in us can still take pleasure in learning to distinguish species of orchid:

■ Art world: Brendan Sayers leads an orchid hunt on Bull Island; and part of the *Interpretive Project* film.

MAIN PHOTOGRAPH: SEÁN O'SULLIVAN

Brendan Sayers led a public "orchid hunt" as part of the school to do just that. But the artist in us may now feel more confident in observing that every individual orchid plant, and every individual flower on that plant, is a unique object of wonder in itself.

Another aspect of Bull Island that makes it especially appropriate for artistic-scientific collaborations is its remarkable origin. The Bull, Fiona McDonald reminds us in the book, is an accidental island, even an artificial one, resulting from the building of Dublin Port's North Wall almost a century ago. Yet this product of urbanisation and global trade has inadvertently produced extraordinary benefits for biodiversity.

The bonus of the Bull Island is pitifully inadequate compensation for the vast wetlands the east coast has lost to those same forces of development. But this book and its associated artworks remind us how much there still is to celebrate there, for the artist and scientist in every one of us.

The Red Stables Summer School 2013 costs €5 from Dublin City Council Arts Office, The Lab, Foley Street, Dublin 1



Christmas collaboration
Winter garden birds

■ Another collaboration between art and science takes place at the Red Stables today and next Saturday. As one of its Christmas events, Maeve Clancy is exhibiting striking cut-outs of common garden birds and their food, combined with classes on recognising the species and on feeding them through the winter. redstablesartists.com.

