

Sheila Naughton

AIR Krems International Artist Exchange

Report

The Place

Krems is a town of pretty, pastel-coloured buildings with wide streets and a medieval centre in Niederösterreich or Lower Austria. Designated by the abbreviation of NÖ, Lower Austria is not lower in terms of location, but lower in terms of sea-level - a flat area with hills in contrast to the mountainous terrain that we normally associate with Austria. It is situated in a scenic area called the Wachau, the river valley of the Danube. It is a huge wine-growing area with a distinctive white aromatic wine made from Grüner Veltliner grapes. The terraced vineyards are stunningly beautiful. A sister medieval town called Stein, which has narrow, winding streets and lots of charm adjoins Krems. I'm still bowled over by seeing dates like 1502 over the door of a building that is still lived in today.

The Time

November: the transition from Autumn to Winter. When we arrived, the trees were still covered in leaves. Huge poplar trees, birch trees and a scattering of ginkgo trees with their distinctive yellow leaves lined the streets and riverside path. The birch trees with their spectacular white trunks and bright yellow leaves were straight out of a Klimt landscape painting. There was no wind and we found the silence uncanny. In Ireland, the last leaves were already blown from their branches by the end of October. Unlike Ireland, with its clarity of light and ever-changing landscape, the landscape of lower Austria was perceived through a haze of lingering fog and absolute stillness. The so-called 'Romantik' road was indeed very romantic in its softness. This was middle Europe and the climate was more extreme in its heat and cold than Ireland could ever be.

The Experience

Silently, like falling snow, the leaves fell and formed little heaps everywhere in town. Beside the river, the grass gradually got covered and finally obliterated. Bicycles and cars protruded from the growing mounds of leaves. Krems became a town enveloped in fallen leaves. This was autumn as I had never experienced it before. On a couple of rare, crisp, clear days, we took the opportunity to walk along the tree-lined Danube, wander among the terraced vineyards and hire a car to explore the very beautiful immediate surroundings of the Wachau valley with its pilgrim churches. It is the small details one remembers; the unexpected stall on the riverbank smoking fish in the traditional way and serving passersby with an impromptu picnic; meeting a man who has resurrected a saffron-growing business; discovering 'heuriger' culture. The few nice days changed quickly to sub-zero temperatures, the fog returned and the trees became encrusted with layers of frost. Winter was setting in in a permanent way.

The Exchange

As an exchange, one is conscious of being a sort of emissary or representative of one's country. Austrian people's perception of Ireland will be coloured by their encounter with me, just as Irish people's perception of Austria will be influenced by meeting my counterparts. My exchange was Walpurga Orttag-Glanzer (Purgi) who came to Ireland with her husband Andreas (Andi). It was a matter of happy timing that I met my exchange. Purely by chance, the timing of my solo show at The Custom House Studios in Westport coincided with Purgi's visit in October - otherwise we would never have met. They kindly invited us to visit them, which we did, in the third week of our time there.

The Austrian art which I had encountered to date was very 'cerebral' – content and narrative were fundamental to the work and the human figure was frequently at the core of the vast majority of work which I saw. By contrast, landscape and nature, which traditionally are prevalent themes in Irish art, seemed strangely absent. But already, having lived there for only a couple of weeks, I understood where this difference came from culturally. I was happy to find that Purgi shared my love of nature and landscape and that there was a commonality in how we responded to the natural world. In her studio, I admired her sources of inspiration in the forms of dried flowers and the seaweeds she had collected from the beaches in Ireland. It was nice to find this shared interest in nature, and instantly, there was a sense of friendship and understanding. Lorenzo and myself found both Andi and Purgi inspirational in how they combine their day to day lives with their art practices. Being invited to visit them in their home was one of the highlights of our trip.

AIR Krems invests a lot in the exchange of artists between Austria and Ireland. It should follow that something endures. When a link is forged between individuals and between countries, that link should be nurtured in some way so that it may continue to grow. With the current exchange arrangement, an Austrian gets to experience life on the western seaboard of an island country, and an Irish person gets a taste of life in medieval Europe. One asks the question "What can I take from my culture that will enrich yours and what can you bring to enrich ours?"

For Irish people, the West of Ireland is a very special place: it must be even more so for Europeans from mainland Europe. To be able to spend some time living and working in such a wild and beautiful natural environment as the Atlantic Coast is a unique experience. Westport and Krems have the possibility to look at their respective landscapes and ancient histories and common pilgrim ways and to develop links as modern Europeans. Art and culture is fundamental in forging links between peoples and in giving people a perspective on what it means to be a citizen of each country. Knowledge and appreciation of visual art, music, literature and architecture could all be shared to the mutual benefit of all. To organise a visual art exhibition with artists who have participated in the AIR Krems exchange would be a good starting point. It doesn't have to cost a lot of money and would be a concrete result of the time and effort which has gone into the arranging of the exchanges.

Work

As well as my own physical exchange, I wanted also to exchange something symbolic between the two countries that would represent some aspect of the natural landscapes of each place. Because Ireland is an island and the sea is such a strong presence in the west, I collected shells from the beaches there. I decided to collect yellow periwinkle shells of a particular shade and size which are commonly found there. These shells seem exotic among the soft, muted colours of the Irish landscape but are representative of the ancient geological history of that part of Ireland. They come in hues of pure cadmium yellow. As my recent work consisted of drawing, I wanted to continue "drawing" in a contemporary way and decided to

create a wall drawing using a long line of these shells. Nature being nature, I am still collecting and the project is on-going! I have just made a short, sample line in Krems due to the vagaries of 'Littorina littoralis'!

In Austria, a land-locked country with no coastline, trees took centre stage and became the focus of my attention. Extreme leaf-fall was the most noticeable feature of my surroundings. Under the chestnut trees, curious bits of twigs poked up through the fallen leaves and lay scattered on the pavements. I began to collect these. They looked a bit like giant insects. I took them inside and placed them on the windowsill where they displayed a certain 'attitude'. Depending on which way up I placed them, they either had 'antennae' or 'tails'. They were a decidedly combative force. I made an arrangement of them according to their natural characteristics. They formed strong lines of opposing forces. They became a metaphor for the permanent state of the world. Conflict is inherent in everything!

I returned to drawing at the beginning of the third week. The walk along the road to the vineyards with its tangles of bare branches stayed with me. When the upper woodlands turned white with frost, there was still colour below the frost line. The dividing area between the two was sprinkled with white but the landscape was still visible. That partial covering of white with bits of colour showing through somehow translated into abstract drawings. I wanted to take something from that landscape in Krems with me back to Ireland.

I look at nature but really I am thinking about life and relationships. A tangle of branches can represent entanglement in life, things partially obscured suggest layers of history or hidden meaning. Abstraction lets you take from it what you need to see.

The Studio

The day to day living conditions were such that life was made easy and comfortable and you could have time to just concentrate on work. For me, I would have liked to interact a bit more with people. It would be good to arrange for all the artists to meet each other informally over lunch or coffee shortly after arrival. Language can be a barrier to socialising because of the various mix of nationalities, so there is no easy solution for interaction.

Conclusion

It is a privilege to be given an opportunity to visit a country without being a tourist and to experience daily life and culture. I am very grateful to AIR Krems for the opportunity it provided for me to do this and for the welcome which was graciously extended to both Lorenzo and myself. I would like to thank Elke and her husband Wolfgang, Sabine and Karin who all contributed to making our stay interesting. We also especially wish to thank David of the Galerie Stadtpark for being generous with his time and information and for the excellent coffee!

Sheila Naughton, 2012