

Immersed in the 2km

Vera Klute's new body of work is the latest in an ongoing practice that continues to innovate and test the limits of her virtuosity in a manner that appears effortless. Documenting her daily walks in her neighbourhood, delving into previously unexplored terrain to entertain her children during breaks from the studio, these paintings and sculptures capture the particularity of the 'together-apart' messages of lockdown.

As schools closed and businesses followed, with all but essential workers and the food retail sector operating, we were asked to work from home where possible, to exercise within our 2km. Previously overlooked green spaces, verges, overgrown parks, became busier. In commuter belts and suburbs, families seemed to become visible for the first time, emerging from apartments and houses to explore their locale. Driven from the obvious paths in search of social distance, Vera and her family began to explore the Tolka Valley Park, a small gang of intrepid explorers, delighting in the feeling of discovery. The strangeness of adventuring through previously unknown terrain on your own doorstep is both joyous and tinged with an incongruity captured in these paintings. How could something so close be so unfamiliar?

Unprecedented times. Social distancing. Global pandemic. Cocooning. Coronavirus became COVID 19, with daily televised briefings from the Chief Medical Officer standing at a two metre distance from the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health.

In preparing to write this text I visited Vera at her home, post lockdown and we took a walk through her 2km route before chatting in her studio.

Studios are always private spaces but when we have been forced to exclude all visitors, the

invitation seems even more intimate. It is filled to capacity with new work. It's been a productive time.

It's so lovely to see the work and catch up. Vera described how when she's on an airplane and there's turbulence, she looks to the faces of the crew to see how worried she should be. In these "unprecedented times", she found herself looking at the faces of others, looking deep into these strangers' faces to gauge how worried she should be. What was the appropriate level of anxiety? At the same time she describes the feeling of the fine line between extreme panic and boredom, the lethargy that comes with the ongoing wait for the apocalyptic doom.

I am reminded of the film work at the centre of Vera's solo exhibition at the LAB Gallery in 2014. Projected seven metres in height, *A Grand Scheme*, also traversed the fine line between calm and terror. Featuring a distinctive Aer Lingus plane flying slowly across the sky while below the earth's surface, the legs of the four horsemen of the apocalypse raced above a sea of desperate hands reaching up from the depths of hell.

At times there are joyous figures, like *Tolka Valley Park (Girl with Jojo bow)*, a young girl dressed in a brightly coloured dress with a matching bow in her hair, as though she has somewhere to go. But we had nowhere to be but the kitchen table, a place to eat, work, homeschool with daily walks the only escape. For Vera, her studio at home became a place of intense work.

The material constraints of working with oils meant that she committed herself to working until a piece was finished, from early morning until sometimes late at night, her subjects fuelled by her lockdown experience. The black oil paint has a resistance to it that means to get a bright line

you need to work it, “like kneading dough”, Vera says. Another lockdown activity. A pop of colour, a bright blue streak in the water, a pink runner, requires really tackling the black with layers and layers of colour to win out against the pull of the black darkness. Another metaphor perhaps.

Magical family moments are captured. A monoprint in the studio shows two of her children delighting in the flight of a kite. A fleeting moment. The happiest moments of lockdown. When you thought for a moment, this is it, this is pure happiness, this is all we need, family, nature, a little kite. The frustration of the lack of wind and their tiny capabilities meant the moment was short-lived but like an Instagram post, it's the happiness that's captured for posterity. The movement of the kite and the long grass are in stark contrast to the buildings in the background which for me capture the incredible silence we experienced during these months. With so little traffic, an airplane was a cause to stop and look.

These works also capture human nature. Queues became a feature of our lives. Queuing to get into shops for food. Socially distanced queues. Some terrified by the closeness of others. Some taking up as much space as possible. From her studio window, Vera inevitably was drawn to people watching as they engaged in the new sport of food shopping, like hunter gatherers. Poses, facial expressions, unforgiving and unflattering are captured with a curiosity renewed by a knowledge that all were local. This is your community. Your 2km crew, revealed in a new way.

In a Totally Dublin Review of Vera's RHA exhibition, the writer says of Vera's work, “place is never a promise of belonging”, drawing our attention in particular to *Move Along* (2014), “where a wall of white arms twitch and wave you on in an impatient domino style”. Conversely in this body of work, there is a sense of stillness, of being with place, for all its strangeness. Vera describes documenting places in her locale

through photo, in one instance only seeing later in the photograph that a man had been in the bushes right beside her on his phone.

This body of work seems to reflect Vera's ease in moving through her 2km radius. Sharing nature with the lone character on his phone (*Tolka Valley Park (Guy on the phone)*), the old man sitting in full camouflage hidden further along the river (*Tolka Valley Park (Creep)*), the gang of young people whose bikes are strewn together to ensure minimal social distancing (*Bikes outside Spar*). Together, Apart.

There is a curiosity in discovering people and nature co-existing, a gentle wondering rather than a sense of prying or a fear of strangers. Vera's level of comfort in the place seems connected to her new found familiarity and I'm drawn in.

As we walked through the Tolka Valley Park, I shared her joy in encountering giant dragon flies buzzing, speculated on the names of certain plants before finding an official Dublin City Council sign depicting Teasel, Corncockle, Field scabious, Lesser Knapweed and other names that seemed to add to the sense of discovery. We retraced the routes she had taken with her family that had become part of their routine, pulling away some braches to reveal a tyre swing, wondering who had left such a gift. Following more trodden paths to reveal a hideaway by the river with great stone seats, a haptic bridge to the other side, fresh litter. This is where the young people hang out she smiles. “Imagine, I'd have loved this!” she says. I would have, I did, but somewhere along the way I thought these spaces aren't safe for me and retreated to places with better lighting, more groomed pathways, more familiar people.

Perusing the paintings in the studio I'm drawn again to the ladder in (*Tolka Valley Park (Island)*), an obvious human intervention, not an urban design feature, a response to necessity. I had looked at this painting in an online discussion

with children. They described two boys as “up to no good”, which when pressed was because one was smoking. Vera laughs. During lockdown she found herself observing people more but she doesn't make character judgements, she's just sharing a curiosity. The whole point she says, is you don't know. You just bear witness.

Previously she has eschewed including people in her landscapes. An award winning portrait artist, her portraiture is known for its hyper realism and incredible details, capturing a likeness through a connection with the personality and physical features.

Is a picture ever about someone unless it's a portrait, Vera asks. This body of work is the first time she has painted people she doesn't consider portraits. They are more an essential part of the capturing of the character of the time and place; these figures, going about their business of having nowhere to be.

The picture of what appears to be a grandfather and a toddler on a rainbow reins is a particularly strong example. *Tolka Valley Park (Toddler on a rainbow leash)* takes us along the man-made pathways that cut through the lush parkland. You feel as though you are joining the artist in wondering about the tenderness of this moment across generations. Looking closer you see the man, with his top off, is covered in a collection of tattoos which on a man of his age suggest he has tales to tell, as he and the toddler share a moment. Tenderness, cuddles, granny's kisses, were all outlawed during lockdown. Nobody wanted to be the one who infected the cocooning. So a moment such as this is all the more curious - beautiful, but not for the viewer, not without judgement.

And this is the thing, these images are filled with humans we know nothing about, so we create our own stories. Why is a man in the bushes on his phone? What kind of illicit conversation needs to be part of such a covert operation? Who are these

angry looking individuals queuing for milk? What is going on with this Emporio Armani tracksuit? I'm reminded of the rather apt motto for the Alderborough Family in 18th century Dublin, on a building I pass on the way to work: *Otium cum Dignitate ~ Leisure With Dignity*¹. Producers of luxury and fast fashion alike scrambled to rebrand their stock as leisure wear, loungewear, and market other “essential” items for self-care for fear we might become too close to nature and forget our consumer needs.

In this new body of work, Vera has captured the human energy and sheer joy in reconnecting with nature in all its wild overgrown, weed filled beauty. In a time of unprecedented stillness and anxiety, when our worlds became smaller and we could hear the crickets. The paradoxes of teeming nature so close to the city, anxiety and mindfulness, energy and stillness are exquisitely captured in her use of minimal but decisive brushstrokes.

The gestural paintings within this collection stem from the what Vera describes as the hugely satisfying process of making the monoprints. Rubbing away the ink in gentle but broad strokes capable of depicting a recognisable face or place with an immediacy. Quick results, when time had taken on this new quality where the calendar meant nothing. No appointments. Of their time, yet timeless, Vera has captured human nature during a period when we had nowhere to be and no one to expect us.

Sheena Barrett, August 2020

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¹ *Otium cum Dignitate ~ Leisure With Dignity* was the title of an exhibition and film work by Anne Maree Barry shown at the LAB in 2017 based on her research into the Monto area of Dublin and the history of Alderborough House.



Tree,
Oil on Plywood,
61cm x 45cm, 2019