DIT DEGREE COURSE ON SHERKIN

Practical approach to third-level education

BY MICHELLE NEWMAN

IT was in 1998 that the Sherkin Island Development Society and the West Cork Arts Centre began discussions with Dublin Institute of Technology to devise a college course that is nothing if not unique.

What resulted was the creation of a BA Visual Art programme that began in 2006. This course affords students the opportunity to gain an honours degree, while working largely from the convenience of their own studio, which makes for a supported, yet self-reliant student body.

This practical approach to third level education has proven invaluable for the students attending the classes – students who may not have the resources to relocate to the city to attend lectures on a full-time basis.

The majority of the 35 students studying towards an Honours BA in Visual Art live in or around the West Cork area, where they can take a short boat trip from Baltimore Harbour to Sherrin Island. Roughly six days a month the students meet in the community hall on Sherrin Island to attend classes delivered by DIT lecturers and tutors. For the rest of the month they continue to work at home in their own studios at a time that is convenient to them.

BA Visual Art programme affords students opportunity to gain honours degree working largely from the comfort of home

Video link

Classes are frequently delivered by video link from DIT in Dublin. The programme pays particular attention to familiarising students with contemporary art practice and facilitating them in the development of their own particular art practice.

The course is predominantly aimed at mature students, for example many of those enrolled in the course are parents of young children or people who are employed in other areas. Although the course is full-time, the majority of work is carried out at home in their own studios and this user-friendly system has had a huge impact on the lives of the students.

Jocelyn Florence, a past student of Visual Art on Sherrin Island, says: ‘I find it hard to express the massive impact the course has had on my life. ’ Living in an isolated rural area, she found suitable educational opportunities hard to come by.

Describing the course itself as ‘highly innovative,’ Jocelyn feelas it provides a ‘new model for higher education’ and long life learning in that it enables ‘participants to access core educational resources with minimal environmental impact.’

On Sherrin Island, accessibility to the unique landscape consistently informs the student’s art practice forging a strong link between the student artist and the island.

What distinguishes this course from others of its kind is that the programme places a huge emphasis on constructing a learning environment where the traditions and knowledge base of the community are not only respected but also included...
in the work that is created.

The relationship between the student and lecturers is somewhat non-traditional in that one's own life experiences and life in the community have played a part in forming the development of the curriculum. The end result enables the graduating students to say they have a truly unique degree.

Essential funding for the project is provided by Cork County Council and the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht while the course providers – Dublin Institute of Technology, Sherkin Island Development and the West Cork Arts Centre – continue to steer the programme.

The uniqueness of this art course is that it has its basis in the community itself and thrives on the fact that it is a communal effort yet results in a nationally and internationally recognised degree.

This September, the fourth group of students will graduate with BA degrees. Work completed by the students of the BAVA course on Sherkin Island will be showcased from 2.30pm to 5pm at their open day on Sunday, March 16th in Sherkin Community Hall. The ferry to the island leaves Baltimore Harbour, at 2pm. Students will give a first-hand account of their experience of the course and anyone who is considering doing the degree is welcome to come along and view the work on show and speak to the students.

On Saturday and Sunday, May 17th and 18th, an exhibition will be held on Sherkin Island showcasing the work completed by final year students. Those who are unable to travel to the island will also be able to view the exhibition at the West Cork Arts Centre from Sunday, May 31st.

The deadline for applications for the autumn 2014 semester is Sunday, May 31st. In the meantime, the student interviews will be held in June with a view to commencing the course in September.

Application details are available from: registration.service@dit.ie. Phone 01 4023445. * For further information see www.dit.ie/artdesignprinting/undergraduate/bavisualart/ or contact the programme chair, Bernadette Burns, at bernadette.burns@dit.ie
Clockwise from left

Photographs by Anna Kirsch on pier, taken by Fergus Murphy.

Graduation hats in the air by Donagh Carey.

Second year drawing class, photo by Bernadette Burns.