

# Artist and chieftain who made his mark on Kerry tells story to world

Jennifer O'Brien

A film about the Irish-American artist behind some of Kerry's best-known public sculptures has been acquired for worldwide distribution by Starline Entertainment after being partially funded by Kickstarter.

*Why Is There Anything Instead of Nothing*, a feature-length production from the Cork-based company Southernman Films, documents the life of Tighe O'Donoghue/Ross, a painter, sculptor, printmaker and hereditary Irish chieftain.

The artist, who was born in New York in 1942, enjoyed enormous critical and commercial success in that city in the 1970s during the boom years of the art market in the US, selling his work through various print publishers.

Having moved his family back to his ancestral home in Killarney in 1986, O'Donoghue/Ross made his mark on the local landscape in Kerry, creating the *Capall Mór* on the N22 main Cork to Killarney road and the 16-foot bronze sculpture of St Brendan the Navigator in Fenit.

His handmade stained glass windows in St Mary's Cathedral, Killarney, entitled *Dawn & Dusk*, feature the words "why is there anything" and "instead of nothing".

"When I came here first and I viewed the countryside and I saw Ross Castle, I felt welcome, the people were marvelous and they couldn't have been better," he said.

"What I was trying to do was self-discover, to understand who you are. So crates said 'know thyself' and I think that's the goal of all of us. We are looking to understand ourselves."

O'Donoghue/Ross is well known in art circles for the variety of his work, switching from prints to sculpture, paintings and glass at various stages throughout his career. His work is in public and private collections, including the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Brooklyn Museum and the Hugh Lane gallery.

After moving to Ireland, he gradually began to withdraw from the gallery circuit and has exhibited little over the past two decades. Retaining what he considers his best art throughout his career he has amassed a vast body of work, most of which has never been viewed publicly.

O'Donoghue/Ross rises at 3am each day in Kerry and works mainly on oil paintings, which tend to focus on a simple surrealism with playful imagery.

He said that he took inspiration from the masters of the art world and regularly scoured their notes among books



in his extensive library. "You have got to conserve that energy and not burn it out, we only have so many heartbeats" he said of his productivity in his later years.

"Look at Vincent [van Gogh], he burnt out his energy like a Roman candle. You don't want to be too intense. But I do want to have the real fun of playing with ideas. I learnt from people like Picasso and Rembrandt... I began to explore finger painting.

"The oil-sticks are also really wonderful. I try everything.

The arts allow us to express mysteries that we carry deep, deep within us."

The film came about when Patrick O'Shea, a Cork-based producer, stumbled across the work of O'Donoghue/Ross and approached him about a documentary. Having

delved into his ancestry, which traces back to the Ross clan of Ross Castle in Killarney, O'Shea realised that the production would work better as a feature rather than a short documentary.

"Tighe really opened up to us and we were filming with him over a period of about two and a half years," he said. "When you are making something like this, you have certain expectations in terms of how well it might do and thankfully it's going great now having been picked up by Starline Entertainment. We spoke with them at the Galway Film Fair and within a couple of days, the deal was signed and there was an article on *Variety*."

The Irish premiere of *Why Is There Anything Instead of Nothing* will be at IndieCork in October.



Timing is Everything, above, and the statue of Saint Brendan in Fenit by the Irish-American artist Tighe O'Donoghue/Ross