

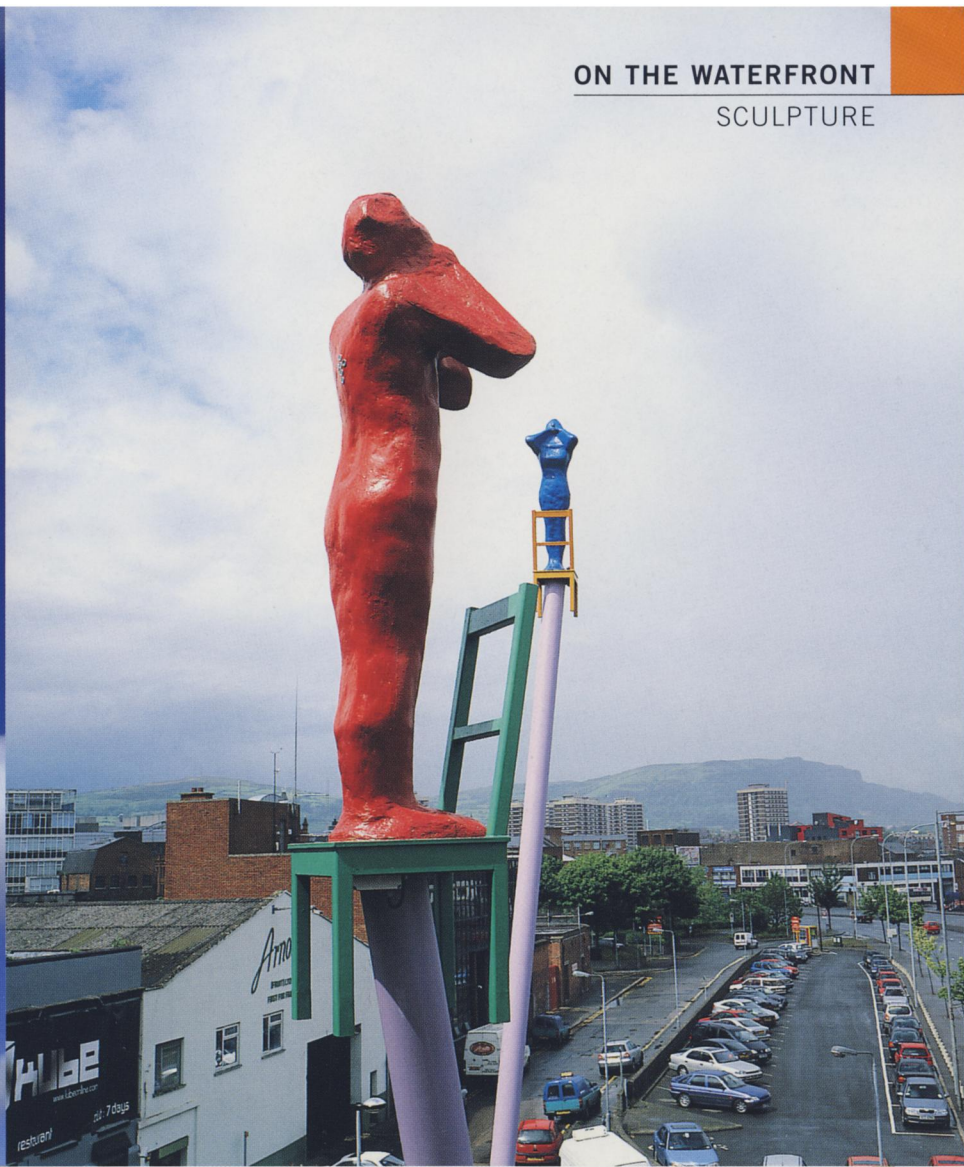


# On the Waterfront

MARIANNE O'KANE BOAL surveys the public sculpture enlivening the Liganside in Belfast, with work that is both thematically resonant and aspirational in tone

Public art clearly has the power to create a sense of place and even has the potential to create a revitalised identity in its habitual environment. Major examples such as Anish Kapoor's *Cloud Gate* in Chicago, Antony Gormley's *Angel of the North*, in Newcastle and Louise Bourgeois' *Spider*, in Bilbao, have all demonstrated this capacity. In the past decade, the City of Belfast has identified the importance of art placement as a powerful regeneration catalyst. Modern development and urban landscaping require the humanising characteristics that only well-sited art can bring to an invigorated city environment. When successful, art works engender collective ownership and do indeed provide a sense of topography and indication of 'where we are.'

Belfast gives testimony to the fact that a development corporation can have a beneficial impact on the urban cityscape in revitalising otherwise redundant space. Established by government in 1989, Liganside Corporation's commitment to arts and culture has been clearly stated since its inception. Liganside operated as a vehicle for regeneration for eighteen years, from 1989-2007. It was only in the second half of its existence, however, that a public art policy was adopted. Since 1998 over forty artworks have been placed throughout its 200-hectare area. For the organisation investment in art and in infrastructure went hand in hand, and in 2005 wrote 'Liganside considers the provision of public art is an integral aspect of a regeneration strategy which seeks to create distinctive and memorable public places which are the



setting for private investment and for residential, commercial and leisure activity.' To this end they informed and involved the general public as much as possible. In 1998 the Lagside Board adopted a 'Percentage For Arts Policy' to be implemented in all future Lagside development and also established a Public Art Advisory Panel at this time. The panel comprised of representatives from Belfast City Council, Arts Council, Sculpture Society of Ireland, the Royal Society of Ulster Architects, Arts & Business and the Community Arts Forum. The Lagside Public Art Programme was specific to projects carried out by Lagside Corporation. To date it remains the best example of contemporary commissioning practice in the North of Ireland. Evidently public art commissioning became a passion but it was not part of the corporation's original remit and according to Kyle Alexander, Former CEO of Lagside; 'I consider commissioning artwork as one of the riskiest things I did during my time with Lagside and in working on this with the board, yet it became one of the most rewarding, all the more because it was not a requirement for us. It cannot be merely about media coverage as it has no lifespan then.' The main onus was to leave a legacy to the community of Belfast beyond the regenerative infrastructure it developed. The emphasis was on a bequest to the public in the form of art in the collective environment.

Belfast-born artist John Kindness has commented; 'I think the best advice to artists taking on a public, or a

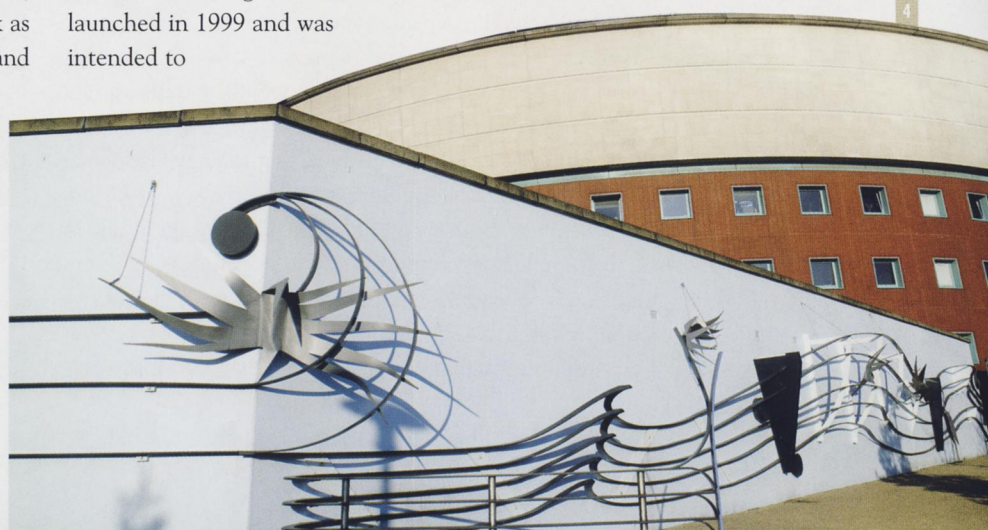
private space is; "know your audience". Find out who they are, and what they do in the environment you are dealing with. Consult them by all means, but question their answers and challenge their perceptions.' Kindness has completed a number of public art commissions in Northern Ireland, including the iconic *Bigfish* on the Waterfront in Belfast. *Bigfish* was the first art work to be commissioned by Lagside in conjunction with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and it has become the city's most distinctive and successful intervention (Fig 1). The sense of ownership that this artwork engenders in the people of Belfast is powerful and is strengthened by its integrated imagery that strikes a chord and stirs the collective memory. Located on Donegall Quay, *Bigfish*, is a sculpture faced with printed ceramic mosaic measuring 10 metres. It was launched in 1999 and was intended to

**1 JOHN KINDNESS**  
*Bigfish* 1999 10 x 2.1336m ceramic, reinforced concrete and bronze

**2 ANDY SCOTT**  
*Beacon of Hope* steel and bronze 15 metre h.

**3 PADDY MCCANN**  
*The Calling* 2002 steel, fibreglass

**4 SUSAN CROWTHER**  
*Lagan Symphony* 1999 mild and galvanised steel





tional sculpture, situated at Clarendon Dock. It stands at 8.3 metres and is composed of patinated bronze with a stainless steel core. Lagside commissioned it in conjunction with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the Belfast Harbour Commissioners. The artwork is designed to reflect Belfast's maritime heritage and represents the familiar hand-held tools that were crucial to navigation in the city's ships. According to the artist, Burnside was interested in achieving 'poetic ambiguity' in the word *Dividers*. Here, at the edge of the dock, the form of the sculpture will act as a frame or doorway in the space, both entrance and exit, and it will provide a symmetrical, linear shape among a great many blocks of buildings, echoing the Harland & Wolff sentinels on the other side of the river. This particular commission incorporated community engagement



celebrate the regeneration of the river Lagan. The text and images printed on the outer 'skin' of the fish relate to the history of Belfast and include material from Tudor times to present day newspaper headlines. These feature alongside contributions from Belfast schoolchildren including depictions of a soldier and an Ulster fry. Images were provided by Glenwood Primary School, St Comgalls and Everton Day Centres. *Bigfish* also contains a time capsule storing information, images, and poetry germane to Belfast.

*Dividers*, by Belfast-based artist Vivien Burnside was launched in 2002 (Fig 5). Burnside trained at the University of Ulster. Previous public commissions include her billboard paintings in Belfast and a commission for the Royal Victoria Children's Hospital. Burnside was Public Art Co-ordinator for the Mater Hospital in Belfast and supervised the commissioning of thirteen artists for this integrated arts project. *Dividers* is a representa-



that was initiated in 2000. Eight people were eventually involved and they attended design workshops and physically made their own bronze plaques to be located near the *Dividers*. Each participant was asked to prepare an image or text, which best described what Clarendon Dock and the surrounding area means to them.

In a portfolio of over forty commissioned pieces *Sheep on the Road*, by Deborah Brown was the only sculpture that was purchased by Laganside (Fig 6). Originally commissioned by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland for the Sculpture Park in Riddell Hall, Laganside Corporation sited the artwork outside the Waterfront Hall. Its placement is critical and was designed to highlight this area of Belfast's former function as a marketplace for the sale of cattle and sheep. Members of the community who recollect this heritage appreciate the reference to recent history before regeneration. Susan Crowther's *Lagan Symphony* (Fig 4) is a semi-abstract work, representing a musical stave, which was produced in conjunction with Willis Engineering and is another artwork that indicates its context adjacent to the Lagan.

In addition to art commissions that reflect their context thematically, the city's heritage, and the importance of the river a catalyst for the rejuvenation of Belfast, Laganside also funded a range of artworks that are aspirational in impetus. These include *Dreams* by Rita Duffy, *Beacon of Hope* by Andy Scott and *The Calling* by Paddy McCann. Belfast-based Rita Duffy's *Dreams* was launched in 2005. Developers Dunloe Ewart commissioned it in conjunction with Laganside and Arts & Business. Located on the Oxford Street facia of the new Lanyon Quay building at Lanyon Place, *Dreams* is strategically sited on the waterfront's arterial route (Fig 6). It incorporates a grid formation of forty large, metal panels etched with the portraits of children. This is a large-scale figurative artwork that rep-



resents the city's metal crafting heritage, while also referencing the dreams of local children; the next generation. employment of modern materials. Andy Scott's *Beacon of Hope* is the largest commission in the waterfront district (Fig 2). It was commissioned by the Thanksgiving Square Group and grant-aided by Laganside. This contemporary representation of a female figure measures fifteen metres and towers over Queen's Bridge. The figure is composed of steel tubes and she stands aloft a bronze-cast globe. According to the artist; 'Strong similarities are evident in the form of the mythological figures of Helios 'The Bringer of Light', myth of St Brigid and Classical and Celtic mythology, with the globe representing continents and oceans and points on the sculpture specifically representing Belfast's industrial heritage. I hope that the figure is adopted by the people of Belfast as a symbol of peace and reconciliation, and as a shining beacon of modernity and progress.'

Laganside commissioned over forty public artworks. These are predominantly located outdoors in the Lagan district's public realm. Three exceptions are *Shoal* by Rita Duffy, *Big Red* by Catherine Harper that were produced for the reception space of the Waterfront Hall, and Peter Roney's wall piece for 109-113 Royal Avenue. Other commissioned artists include; Michael Baker, Brian Connolly, David Dudgeon, Sue Ford, Maurice Harron, Jo-anne Hatty, Mike Hogg, Susan Hunter, Rachel Joynt, Des Kinney, Claire McComish, Farhad Nargol O'Neill, Aisling O'Beirn, Deirdre O'Connell, Peter Rooney, Claire Sampson, Ned Jackson Smyth, Marian Tucker, Eleanor Wheeler and Ross Wilson. The represented artists are predominantly from Northern Ireland with the majority from Belfast. There are a few English artists and one from the Republic of Ireland, Kerry-born sculptor Rachel Joynt. A range of materials represented in the artworks includes; bronze, stainless steel, ceramic mosaic, aluminium, cast glass, cast iron, sculpted brick and sandstone.

In its eighteen-year history Laganside and the stakeholders it encouraged invested over £1 billion in the regeneration of Belfast's waterfront and dockland areas, also creating Belfast's Cathedral Quarter. The Corporation's tagline is 'Our Legacy, Your Future,' and banners around the city serve as an important reminder of Laganside's contribution. Public art has provided the crucial link between community and place in the city and each artwork was selected with its context firmly in view. Laganside

5 VIVIEN BURNSIDE  
*Dividers* 2002  
bronze, stainless  
steel, 8.3 metre h.

6 RITA DUFFY  
(assisted by Lydia  
Smyth) *Dreams*  
2005 oil on  
brushed aluminium  
1200 x 1200cm  
(each panel)

7 DEBORAH BROWN  
*Sheep on the Road*  
1991 bronze cast  
from papier-mâché  
life-size

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resents the city's metal crafting heritage, while also referencing the dreams of local children; the next generation.

Armagh-born painter, Paddy McCann's *The Calling*, (2002) is the first public artwork by the artist (Fig 3). It is located on Gordon Street at the edge of Cathedral Quarter. Two figures in bright primary colours, composed of fibreglass are placed in a standing position on small chairs elevated on tilted steel poles. The work is intended to represent positive communication between people and their environment. It is a quirky depiction of social interaction and is unquestionably Laganside's most contemporary figurative art commission, in its conception and

created three art trails that last between one hour and two-and-a-half hours. The first art trail's route follows: Clarendon Dock, Cross Harbour and Cathedral Quarter. The second covers Donegall Quay, Hanover Quay, Gregg's Quay and Lanyon Place. Finally the third trail covers Maysfield, Cromac Springs, the Gasworks, Haulers Way, Ormeau Bridge and Governor's Bridge. The art trails remain as evidence of the Corporation's commitment to public art commissioning, providing enjoyment of Laganside's legacy for the citizens of Belfast into the future. ■

MARIANNE O'KANE BOAL is a regular contributor to the *Irish Arts Review*. All images © The Artists