

The Galway Advertiser: Hail and Farewell

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A Spanish Sculptor's dream created a gallery

More recently owned by Kenny's and known as An Dámhlann

The celebrated Spiddal art-space is closing

The siting is wonderful, light, comfortably airy. The view from the windows takes in the crumpled blue of Galway Bay and the brooding dark greys of the Burren and the mountains of Clare. You step out of the front door into a bracing salted breeze. At the height of summer the promenade is manic and gaudy with tourists. In grey winter, the Atlantic plays cattishly with the waters of the bay, driving them in white gusts over the rocks. The busy village of Spiddal is 100 yards up the road to the west. Sited here is a gallery, which, over the past six years or so, has earned itself a reputation far beyond the picturesque confines of the Connemara coastal village.

An Dámhlann, Kenny's spacious gallery in the Spiddal Craft Centre park, will cease trading on March 31. Unless another gallery moves in to the premises - a decision, apparently, resting with Údarás na Gaeltachta, which will advertise for other tenants - this closing marks the end of a minor tradition of displaying visual art here. There has been no real trading since December 31.

Apart from anything else, the loss of the prestigious gallery, which attracted visitors and artists from all over the world, is a blow to the cultural milieu of Spiddal and the craft centre; but, with regret, Kenny's board of directors has made a "strategic decision" to close the gallery and move the varied operation to a new export centre situated at Liosbaun Industrial Estate, Galway. Kenny's bindery, export services, and framing operation are already there; the antique maps and prints mail order and wholesale service, based at Spiddal, will also move into Liosbaun.

An Dámhlann - literally, "the meeting place of the followers of the arts" has been under the managing directorship of Karen Golden, who has

run the gallery since it opened in July 1994. Why, indeed, is Kenny's closing its Spiddal location?

"Well, there are a number of reasons," Karen Golden points out. "The main one is that the Kenny group of companies at the moment is centralising."

The administrative staff - accounts, other back-up services - have also moved out to Liosbaun. Four staff worked full time in the Spiddal gallery, along with an artist who stores the antique prints when they come in, occasionally "foxed" (stained, that is, with damp), whose job it is to remove blemishes. The artist worked for the gallery from his own studio.

Many visitors to the Spiddal gallery may have been unaware of the other rooms in the premises. There are 150 sq. metres in the building, the first two units of which were the actual exhibition space.

"And then, in the back couple of rooms, here, we had storage for the paintings, we ran the framing service; and in addition to that we had the antique maps and prints service and from here we would have supplied about 70 outlets around Ireland, in the US and Australia and also in the UK with antique maps and prints of Ireland."

Was the past six years a successful period for the gallery?

"It was," affirms Karen Golden, "and we've mounted some wonderful exhibitions here."

In September 1994, Bob Quinn's exhibition of photographs, "Atlantean - Looking Still", opened by Lelia Doolin, officially "baptised" the new Kenny gallery. Many group shows of sculpture and painting followed (it was gallery policy to start every "season" with a big group show, occasionally themed) featuring the work of prominent artists such as Brian Bourke, Rita Wobbe, Jay Murphy, Seamus McGuinness, Pdraig Reaney, Sean McSweeney.

The biggest group show was exhibited in March 1995, featuring 103 artists and 288 varied-media works, entitled "Conamara".

There have been children's exhibitions, a memorable show of stained glass from Mary Mackay in November 1997 and in that same year an art auction, conducted by Danno Heaslip, raised more than £9,000; there have been shows of batiks, graphics, ceramics. In March 1997, "The Dance of Light - Stained Glass by 25 Artists", had created a considerable stir. It was the only time, according to Karen Golden, that an exhibition of that size featuring so many stained-glass artists had exhibited under the one roof in this country.

The last exhibition to be held there took place in November of last year, when two shows, paintings entitled "Quarry" by Doreen Sheridan Dolly and bog sculptures "Down to The Sea" by Fr Paddy Howell, were opened by CRH chairman, Tony Barry. Well-known artists have exhibited along with artists having their first solo show.

Informality was a key feature of the atmosphere at An Dámhlann. Kneeling down and tugging out a drawer full of prints, one could find small inexpensive gems by artists such as Patrick Pye, Geraldine O'Reilly, Pádraig Reaney and many more. This won't happen at Liosbaun, which is not open to the public. Some of these sorts of works have now been returned to their artists; the greater number of works will be transferred to Kenny's Middle Street and High Street premises.

The Spiddal gallery, 12 miles outside the city, operated on a seasonal basis, opening its first show around March each year. This had its drawbacks. It was considered unfair to artists themselves to try to exhibit work during the harsh, lightless months of winter here, a period which would not favour, for example, tourists or anyone else who in brighter times would gladly journey out to An Dámhlann. Everyone in the centre, which contains mainly craftspeople producing their won work and a lively restaurant, was similarly effected by the seasons. It can be difficult to keep going.

"It can be a very long winter," Karen Golden muses wistfully.

This was certainly one of the number of considerations, which led towards the final decision to close the premises. "It's not by any means the only one."

Karen Golden describes the lonely process of returning work to artists and generally moving out of the gallery location. "Overall, we all feel it's the best decision. There is so much going on in all of the Kenny companies at the moment. It is difficult in a lot of ways keeping the gallery here going. I'm going to go into town and work as the general manager for retail in High Street and Middle Street [Bookshop, Gallery]"

She hopes that what may be lost in the closure of the Spiddal gallery will be gained somehow in the Galway premises. This is not, she emphasises, what is termed a company downsizing.

"We see it very much as a positive decision and it was very well considered." It took a number of months, nonetheless, to arrive at the final verdict on the gallery's fate.

There is a lot of work still to be done before the gallery at Spiddal closes its doors for good. The women on the staff at An Dámhlann were offered the opportunity to accompany the move to Liosbaun, but Mary Thornton from Letterpeak, near Spiddal and Aine Keady from Knockadoe near Rossaveal, both native Irish speakers, preferred to stay in the Gaeltacht.

There is a hope among others in the craft centre, says Karen that some sort of gallery will slide into place when Kenny's leaves. "It's been a gallery since 1985," she insists, "when Jesus Modia opened the space here first".

In fact the entire concept for the centre belonged to the late Jesus Modia, a Spanish sculptor and a popular and well-known figure around Galway. As Karen understands it, the area now occupied by the centre was to be developed as holiday cottages, when Jesus, who had his gallery nearby in a hayshed, went to the Údarás. The gallery was the first of the spaces he had requested. Modia died in 1989. His apprentice, Raymond O Flaithearta, took the place over and ran it subsequently as a gallery.

So it is that an era in the life of visual art in the west of Ireland appears to be coming to a close, an era that began with the dream of a sculptor, a Spanish Celt, who saw possibilities of spaces greater than a hayshed in which art could flourish and grow and was prepared to put his shoulder to the wheel and get things done.

Perhaps another gallery will blossom in the fertile space left by the worthy, sadly missed An Dámhlann. Perhaps too it will celebrate Jesus Modia and bear his name.