



Art of the matter: Amanda Dunsmore in the Hugh Lane Gallery with her exhibition marking 20 years since the Good Friday Agreement.

PHOTO: GERRY MOONEY

## 'I'm interested in the legacy of individuals'

An exhibition opens in Dublin this week that reflects on the lessons and imagery of the Good Friday Agreement. **HILARY A WHITE** met its creator, artist Amanda Dunsmore

**D**epending on how you view it, "20 years" can mean very different things. It is enough time for a meaningful handshake to set off on a journey of implementation and reconciliation in a troubled land. In another light, it can be a prison sentence, something taken away from you.

It is both these things and more for Amanda Dunsmore. For the artist and Limerick School of Art & Design lecturer and programmer, 20 years is also a long passage of fluidity and metamorphosis that has no discernible endpoint and a vague germination.

We're in the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin, sitting before a giant video portrait of John Hume, deep in some unknown thought as if listening in on our conversation. In the adjacent room, on the exact same type of screen, in the exact same position, with the exact same backdrop and lighting, is David Trimble. Both men appeared together at a vital junction in history. Both are joint Nobel Peace Prize winners and are regularly mentioned in the same sentence as one another. Equals, in other words. Dunsmore sought a "visual parity" in the representation of these two key subjects, she explains. However, the Kiltaloe-based English artist is loath to project her own positions or opinions on to this collection.

Any attempts to discover her observations on the North (a region she has known intimately since arriving there in the late 1980s) receives polite evasion. Questions such as what she'd like viewers to take away with them are met with one-word answers, thin smiles and an expression that suggests a fruitful career in poker should she ever catch the bug.

Luckily, you don't need to be an art critic or student of politics to absorb the striking but somehow obvious duality of the portraits or other pieces collectively entitled *Keepers*. Coinciding with the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, Dunsmore's beguiling and occasionally astonishing works beg you to examine this recent history through prisms of legacy and age.

On Monday, none other than Senator George Mitchell will deliver an address to mark the opening of the exhibition under the heading *The Good Friday Agreement: A Personal Reflection*. *Keepers* is an appropriate place to hear Mitchell ruminate as it encourages the same in all of us, a chance to sort out the news clips and history lessons and grainy images in our minds against a living, breathing context just up the road.

Part of Dunsmore's duty is artist — the other is archivist. And while she's determined to stand "beside the work rather than in front of it", she will detail the evolution of these works and a little of their core essence. How, for instance, did she pitch these shoots to her subjects?

"I filmed six people from the Good Friday Agreement," Dunsmore explains. "David Ervine, Martin McGuinness, Monica McWilliams, Lord Alderdice, John Hume and David Trimble. But for this exhibition, in this manifestation, within this context in this gallery, I chose to premiere these two. And I say premiere because I filmed John Hume in Derry in 2005 but I held his portrait back from exhibition. I had opportunities but there was never the right context. I had time, though, and this was the right time."

"The process involves meeting individuals who represent the subjects

and explaining what I wish to do and then why that portrait may not necessarily be used for an exhibition when I'm doing it. I'm interested in the legacy of individuals who have imparted a significant shift upon society for the better. How are their legacies viewed by the audience at different times? Sometimes I make portraits and they won't be exhibited until it's the appropriate time. This has been going 20 years and it's ongoing." Elsewhere in *Keepers*, Dunsmore stealthily flags the role of cross-community activists and Peace People



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founders Mairead Corrigan Maguire, Betty Williams and Ciaran McKeown. Like Hume and Trimble, Maguire and Williams shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976. More parity through juxtaposition.

Dunsmore leads me into another part of the exhibition where we're met with the chiaroscuro John Lavery portrait of Edward Carson and John Redmond from 1916. Lavery insisted, with the agreement of the sitters, that the two hang together, something that harmonised with Dunsmore, and parity she sought with Hume and Trimble. "I found that delightful," she says, clearly

satisfied at the sound of artistic vision rhyming over a century.

Opposite these is *The People's Portraits 1899-1918*, a breathtaking wall of 100 glass-plate negatives of men and women of all ages taken to catalogue Northern Irish prisoners, all carefully selected and cropped by Dunsmore. "These are all pre-partition people who knew this land differently to how we know it," she comments. "And because the distance of time strips away for us the connotations of 'a prisoner', we are able to look at them as people."

We at last come to *Billy's Museum*, a 20-minute video essay that stems from Dunsmore's time as artist in residence at The Maze and Long Kesh Prison that began in 1998. If she had to pick a jump off point for *Keepers*, this would be it. Dunsmore had been working as an artwork curator with the Ulster prison service across four facilities and had full security clearance. A friendship with prison officer Billy Hull led to her being shown an extensive collection of items and handcrafted implements that had been seized from Maze inmates. They speak of desperation, humanity, treachery and ingenuity, and the film has never been publicly shown north of the border because Hull's family have yet to give their consent.

Why has she decided to juxtapose this piece with the Lavery paintings and the wall of inmate portraits? I ask with a tinge of nerves and Dunsmore picks it up. She lets me wriggle for a moment that feels like 20 years in itself. A mischievous twinkle in the eye. "Because it wouldn't fit in the other rooms."

*Keepers* opens April 10 to July 22 in the Hugh Lane Gallery. [www.hughlane.ie](http://www.hughlane.ie)