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An artist-in-residence at the Maze Prison in the 1990s, **Amanda Dunsmore** has revisited the past to create a seminal art exhibition to mark the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. It opens at Dublin's Hugh Lane Gallery on Tuesday

The many faces OF HISTORY

Inside HM Prison Maze, known colloquially as the Maze, we stood in the man's prison cell – number 7, H-Block, of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). He used this cell as a painting studio. Like most of the buildings used inside The Maze, it was excessively warm. I wanted to see if he would take part in the prisoners' group exhibition, *Captivating*.

In 1998, I was commissioned by the Belfast-based Prison Art Foundation (PAF) programme to be artist in residence in The Maze and to curate the first exhibition of prisoner art from the four prisons in Northern Ireland. Research for this exhibition involved visiting each prison and prisoner who was creating art.

As we left his cell and he walked me to the first airlock gate, I was told how the Northern Secretary of State, Mo Mowlam, had come in to see the prisoners. They had voted to pull out of the Good Friday Agreement talks. She had visited them – an unprecedented act for a Secretary of State – and her visit had changed their minds. The Agreement talks and process continued.

Mowlam's groundbreaking act stayed with me. She was a woman who took a political and personal risk and I, as did others, admired her bravery. She inspired me years later to create artworks, using video portraiture, of key political figures involved in the Good Friday Agreement.

To date I have made six video artworks with David Ervine, Progressive Unionist Party, filmed in Belfast, 2004; Monica McWilliams, Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, filmed in Belfast, 2005; Lord Alderdice, Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, filmed in Belfast, 2005; Martin McGuinness, Sinn Féin, filmed in Derry, 2005; John Hume, Social Democratic and Labour Party, filmed in Derry, 2005; and David Trimble, Ulster Unionist Party, filmed in Banbridge, Co Down, 2017.

Sadly, on the morning of August 19, 2005, when I was filming the Martin McGuinness portrait, Mo Mowlam passed away.

One of the reasons I felt compelled to make this body of artwork was because of the actions of prison officer Billy Hull, who I got to know well while I was artist in residence in The Maze. Billy Hull was one of the longest-serving officers there. He was also a family man, keen gardener and a radical amateur historian. Over a period of 15 years at the height of the conflict, he repeatedly disobeyed an order to destroy materials. Instead he saved them.

Despite this disobedience, he was given time off his regular prison duties in order to collate, curate and present his subversive

museum. One day, nearing the end of my residency, he asked if I'd like to have a look at a 'demonstration' he had made. The artefacts were displayed inside the old laundry building within the confines of the prison and not accessible to the public.

I filmed the exhibition he had curated, and this film resulted in the work *Billy's Museum* (2004). It became the starting point for *Keeper*.

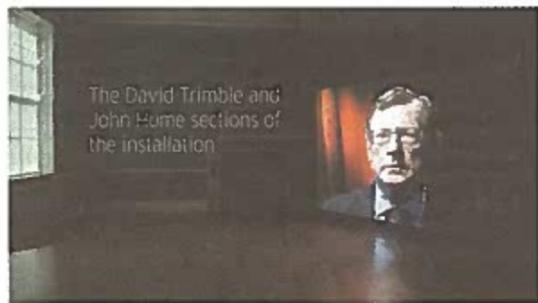
Billy's Museum shows the display that Hull curated of these surviving objects, along with interviews with him about prison and the objects. The artefacts represented in this artwork depict a scattered, non-linear biography of place, time, culture, ritual, routine, subterfuge, life and death. A living history. An artwork. A record.

The film *Billy's Museum* is still the only civilian record of these artefacts. This responsibility to preserve the record of a shared history is central to *Keeper*.

Keeper is an archive comprising artworks and gathered material relating to the lived experience of the North.

The *Keeper* archive holds the Good Friday Agreement video portraits as well as video portraits of Northern Ireland's Nobel Peace Prize Laureates. These portraits are silent, 20 minutes in duration and continuously looped in gallery presentation, and in all of them the subjects are still, seated, their gaze focused and looking out towards the audience.

John Hume and David Trimble were not the first recipients from the North to receive



Amanda Dunsmore with a still from her exhibition *Keeper*.

the the Nobel Prize. In 1977, two women, Mairead Corrigan Maguire and Betty Williams, were jointly awarded the 1976 Nobel Peace Prize. They were leaders of the Peace People, the movement co-founded by themselves and journalist Ciaran McKeown.

Their initiative was sparked by a particularly horrific incident on August 10, 1976, when three of Mairead's sister Anne's children were killed by an IRA getaway car whose driver, Danny Lennon, had been shot dead by pursuing soldiers. Mairead, Betty and Ciaran met on the day of the children's funeral and again in the following days when Ciaran, with prior experience in community organisation and the Civil Rights movement, wrote *The Declaration Of The Peace People* and laid out a four-month plan of weekly rallies at locations all round the North, England, Scotland, Wales and the Irish Republic.

The Peace People's effective campaign for non-violence saw the rate of violence in Northern Ireland during this period (as measured by number of fatalities) fall by 70 per cent, and acted as a powerful catalyst for cross-community dialogue throughout the following decades.

From 1977 onwards, much of the movement's work was below the media surface, in areas such as prisoner welfare, assisting people swept up in the conflict to leave paramilitary organisations, and holding confidential meetings with active combatants to encourage moves towards ceasefires.

In the public domain, it also worked on justice issues and for an end to emergency legislation. In the 1990s, before and after the ceasefires, it organised a series of People's Peace Talks, offering platforms to both politicians and paramilitary leaders to debate their

views in open forums. Four decades on, today's chairman Gerry Grehan and his colleagues continue to make the Peace People headquarters in South Belfast a welcoming venue for dialogue and other initiatives. Mairead and Betty continue to use their status as Nobel laureates to work locally and internationally towards building peaceful societies through non-violent means.

There is a generational memory and understanding which is fading from the collective history in the North, the South and Britain. In the body of artworks that comprises *Keeper*, I try to preserve memories and reiterate people's actions through portraiture.

I believe that the memory and acknowledgement of the three founding members of the Peace People – Mairead Corrigan Maguire, Betty Williams and Ciaran McKeown – needed to be a part of *Keeper* at Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, and I felt it timely to present representations of them alongside those of the Nobel laureates John Hume and David Trimble.

Waves of societal change can be captured and symbolised through the portrayal of individuals. However, the legacy of an individual is subject to different interpretations at different times. It is not stationary. It shifts with societies' influences and the prevailing political climate. It is in constant motion as societal shifts affect the legacy. Over the years, the viewing of these individuals and what their portraits evoke in the audience changes.

Keeper is about people. The portraits of the Peace People and the portraits of the key political figures involved in the Good Friday Agreement embody the people they represented. I have had the privilege to meet and film key political figures who relate to Northern Ireland. With Mo Mowlam's passing, her important contribution has become a fading generational memory and her significant legacy resides in the words of others. With the deaths of David Ervine, Ian Paisley and more recently Martin McGuinness, societal memory continues to diminish. Their portraits are a formal visual fragment and representation of their remarkable legacies. Retained in *Keeper* is a potential future memory. ■

Amanda Dunsmore: *Keeper* runs at Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane from April 10 to July 22