

Putting the art into artisan



Small spaces can be home to big ideas – and even medium-sized families, as artists Madeleine Moore and Oliver Comerford proved when they renovated a tiny Dublin cottage and made it their own

HOW CAN YOU live in the city with a family?" asks Madeleine Moore, sitting in her sunny kitchen over a cup of coffee. Especially, goes the unspoken qualification, if you're a pair of artists with two children and don't have access to huge wads of cash.

The answer for Moore and her husband Oliver Comerford, lay in discovering a piece of Dublin's history, and utilising every shred of expertise and DIY ability available. The piece of history is one of Dublin's hidden gems: an end-of-terrace in the network of tiny, late 19th-century cottages that exist in pockets around the city centre.

The DIY skills and the creativity come from the couple themselves, who make their living by making worlds through visual images, and from the fact that Moore had once been an architect. Having trained at the Bartlett School in London, and then worked for Norman Foster, she put her skills on hold to go back to study for a MA at London's Chelsea School of Art – where she met Comerford.

"Architecture is a group activity, but I was drawn to the one-to-one aspect of painting, to the direct making of art," says Moore, who now teaches painting at NCAD.

Painting is a solitary task, and the problems

and frustrations of turning an idea into an image that satisfies the vision in your head must be solved alone. It's a world away from an architect's studio, such as Foster's in Battersea, where Moore remembers a massive open-plan office and huge triple-height windows looking out on to the constantly changing light and tides of the Thames.

There she worked on projects such as Hong Kong's Chep Lap Kok airport, for which an entire island was built. Foster himself was "very ruthless when it comes to his work", she says. "But you have to be ruthless at that level in architecture." Now, her paintings refer to architecture, to how buildings sit in the landscape, and how they make us feel, as well as how we feel about buildings.

Comerford and Moore had known each other for three years at Chelsea before they got together as a couple. Comerford talks of passionate conversations about art, but it took a power cut on the Aran Islands to turn the friendship into a relationship. Looking back at that trip, he vividly recalls walking through the changing light, seeing the darkening clouds and the shapes of headstones in a graveyard overlooking the sea. It's this kind of sensibility that influences his work, and while he is the more romantic of the pair, and she the more practical, his work is



COTTAGE LIFE
 Clockwise from above left: Oliver Comerford and Madeleine Moore in their living room; Comerford's studio, with *True Romance II* on the wall; their kids making the most of the cottage's living space

INTERIORS



entirely free of clichéd romanticism or sentiment.

Instead, his paintings, which are in the collections of the Irish Museum of Modern Art and Hugh Lane Gallery, among others, connect to a sense of place, but in a strange and sometimes disturbing way. His landscapes are tantalisingly and compellingly familiar, and yet you can't quite put your finger on where they are. This is often because it is the way the paintings make you feel that is familiar, rather than the places themselves; what you are recognising are the feelings of emptiness, isolation, journeying, the experience of a certain light, a particular mood. If you imagine that Edward Hopper had gone to the west of Ireland, or further north to Iceland or Finland, you begin to get a sense of the work.

For all the grandeur of openness, and that elegiac mood of being small in relation to the vastness of nature that you get from spending time with Comerford's paintings and films, and for all the tantalising strangeness of Moore's painted places, Dublin, rather than the countryside, is where they prefer to live.

Had they ever thought of moving somewhere – Leitrim, for example – where artists can actually have that dream of affordable space? “We had considered it,” says Comerford, “and also thought of moving to the suburbs, but here you can live without a car, and walk to schools, to the studio and to work.”

Their house is charmingly cosy and sunny, although with some special touches and quirks. It's one of many built in the 1880s by the Dublin

KITCHEN CONFIDENTIAL

Above: Oliver Comerford in his revamped kitchen. Right: *True Romance 4*, by Comerford, is featured in his exhibition at the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery

Artisan Dwelling Company (which included investment from the Guinness family), as a part-philanthropic, part-speculative answer to the capital's problem of slum tenements. There must be few cities in the world where you can still live right in the centre in what is, essentially, a cottage.

“We were very limited by the site,” says Moore. “And also by planning.” An initial idea to put a contemporary extension on to the side had to be revised, and all the innovations are to be found beyond the traditional facade. They demolished a series of 1970s additions, most of which had been thrown up in a haphazard manner and which included joists simply sitting on plastic bags on the ground, rather than being dug into foundations. To get extra height they dug down at the back, while keeping the front area of the house as one large open-plan room.

“We had thought of trying to get our studios in here,” Comerford says, “but in the end kept it all as a family home.” The house is now “a mixture of what we like, and what the space called for.” In addition to drawing up the house, Moore also designed the shelving, and the kitchen, which Comerford built. “It was very exciting to go back to architecture,” she says. “You've learned a command of volume and scale, and to see it emerging as a home is very satisfying.”

The skill evident in this house is in the way in which open rooms, linking spaces, and more private areas such as bedrooms, have been configured to fit such a small space. Internal openings, unexpected skylights and windows

framing particular views (such as the chimney of a nearby Victorian building) all add an energy to the rooms, and turn it from being simply somewhere to live to somewhere you'd like to stay for a while.

Comerford, who has an exhibition at Dublin's Kevin Kavanagh Gallery this month, and who will also be showing in a mid-career retrospective at the RHA next March, has always been drawn to living in cities. Although he tends to depict open spaces, large landscapes and big skies in his work, a residency in the Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Co Monaghan saw him returning to Dublin to re-gather his thoughts on a regular basis.

He loves the natural light that fills the house, especially in winter when low shafts of sun pour in their gold. The architecture of his studio is less important to him. “When I'm working I don't want the sense of a place to influence me. All my studios end up looking the same. I put up stud walls to get rid of the history.”

“With a studio,” adds Moore, “your real questions are ‘Can I heat it, and how much does it cost?’” Although, as this pair demonstrate, you don't need lots of money to live in the city. With vision you can do it with a family – and the city itself is the richer for it.

Oliver Comerford's exhibition *True Romance* is at the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, Dublin, until November 28th. His work is also in the exhibition *Terror and Sublime*, at the Crawford Gallery Cork, November 20th-February 27th.