

Uncovering stories in a deserted cottage

Aidan Dunne

An installation of a lost Limerick dwelling links exhibitions in Dublin and Vienna

Elaine Byrne's installation *Raum* stems from and fuses two diverse sources: one is an abandoned, dilapidated cottage near Askeaton in Co Limerick, and the other is a 1925 architectural construction by the distinctly unorthodox artist, architect and designer Frederick Kiesler, a pioneer of the modernist avant garde.

Kiesler is the subject of a major exhibition currently running in Vienna. His construction *Raumstadt*, known as *City in Space*, was conceived as "a temporary exhibition system" and, simultaneously, a utopian vision of a futuristic, floating city, devised and made for an exposition of decorative arts and design in Paris.

Byrne's scaled-down reconstruction of it taps into both meanings. *Raum* began a couple of years ago, during a residency at

Askeaton Contemporary Arts, and developed into a concurrent exhibition, *Feralis*, at the Belltable Arts Centre in Limerick. In the company of curator Michele Horrihan, Byrne chanced upon a deserted cottage on a bank of the river Deel close to Askeaton. "The house was built with mud from the river. It felt like part of the landscape. It had been unoccupied since the mid-1990s, and the landscape was reclaiming it."

Byrne was keen to look inside and Horrihan approached a relative of its final occupant. That occupant was Hanni, a settled Traveller. Her nephew, Willie Harty, lives nearby. He readily gave permission and accompanied Byrne and Horrihan to the cottage. "It was extraordinary," Byrne recalls. "He had lived there himself for some time. Everything had been left as it was when he closed the front door in 1995, and this was the first time he'd returned. He became very quiet and reflective while we were there. It was clear that the place, and everything about it, held strong personal memories for him."

Byrne documented the interior of the cottage in photographs. While it's a scene of inexorable decay, with layers of paper and paint peeling away from the walls, a sycamore sprouting from a mattress and ferns from the floor, it is also curiously homely and warm. Byrne quotes Virginia



■ that was the bed she'd have no other, part of Elaine Byrne's *Raum*

Woolf: "What people had shed and left . . . those alone kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated how once they were filled and animated." As Harty began to recall life in the cottage, Byrne recorded his voice-over video footage.

"I got the sense that in being there we were looking at someone's story. Each detail has a meaning in terms of someone's life: Nora's cake top, Dolly's chair. . . Willie's recollections gave a glimpse into these lives and into a way of life that is gone, real-

ly. He says the days he spent there as a child, in a small, crowded cottage lacking what we would think of as even basic facilities, were the happiest of his life."

Byrne has always been interested in, "The idea of making space. How we go about making the spaces we live in." What struck her initially when she came across Kiesler was: "He had this conviction that we should put human needs and concerns at the centre of architectural practice." His slant on utopian modernism was very

much his own and he was generally seen as a bit of an outsider.

Born in the east of the then Austro-Hungarian empire in 1890 (not in Vienna, as he claimed at one point), Kiesler was Jewish and, with his wife Stefanie Frischer, moved to New York in 1926. He eventually died in 1965. Although he taught throughout his life, he has few completed architectural projects, and it's fair to say that mainstream acceptance eluded him. While he has always had his champions, it is only relatively recently that he and his ideas have attracted serious scholarly attention.

Byrne cites a fairly dramatic quotation from him: "What are our houses but coffins towering up from the earth into the heavens. Cemeteries have more air for the skeletons of the dead than our cities for the lungs of the living."

She married Kiesler's grand construction *City in Space* with the altogether more modest utopianism of Harty's family, his grandparents, parents and aunts, in setting out to create their own dwelling with air "for the lungs of the living".

Harty's articulation of a remembered past in Limerick is linked to a representation of that past in the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery. Colour photographs of the interior and details of Hanni's cottage and objects from it are displayed in a scaled-down rec-

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reaction of *Raumstadt*. Kiesler's exhibition framework, as Byrne sees it, becomes a model dwelling space that you have to inhabit and negotiate.

“The final occupant of the cottage was Hanni, a settled Traveller

It could be seen as symbolising the disparity between modernism's utopian idealism and the prosaic reality of domestic life. But Kiesler was sympathetic to that domestic reality, to human priorities. For her, the project is about memory or, more accurately, remembering. “The idea of placing Hanni's cottage in a beautiful White Cube space like the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery initially felt wrong. But it seemed to me that if I combined it with something else from the past, with a dream about a possible future, that offered more possibilities.” What it offers, she hopes, is a prompt for us to think about the kind of spaces we want to inhabit, and the kind of lives we hope to live.

Raum, an installation by Elaine Byrne, is at the Kevin Kavanagh, Chancery Lane, Dublin, until February 9th. Byrne's *Feralis* is at The Belltable, O'Connell Street, Limerick, until January 25th

