

This Glossy Life



DENIS CONNOLLY
Architect / Artist /
Science Nerd

BO CONNOLLY
Bookworm /
Computer Whizz

LOTTI CONNOLLY
Rock Climber /
Sims Addict

ANNE GEARY
Architect / Artist /
Flea Market Fan

FAMILY AFFAIR

Irish artists DENIS CONNOLLY AND ANNE GEARY LIVE IN *Paris* WITH THEIR TWO DAUGHTERS. *DEIRDRE MCQUILLAN* MEETS THEM TO DISCUSS THEIR LATEST PROJECT, AN *interactive* WORK THAT *combines* SCIENCE AND VISUAL ART

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SARA NIEDZWIEKA



AT HOME IN THE 18TH:
The family live in a
Haussmannian apartment
building in the 18th
arrondissement of Paris.

It was a visit to the magic mirrors room in the famous Jardin d'Acclimatation in Paris two years ago by Irish artists Denis Connolly and Anne Cleary with their young daughters that first set in motion the idea for Hall of Mirrors, a pioneering installation in Farmleigh that opens on March 15 as part of the Dublin City of Science 2012 festival. "We've always liked the hall of mirrors and using the idea of a funfair as a promenade through different experiences," explains Connolly. "This [installation] is about visual perception - all the pieces are immensely visual."

Accompanying them at the time, was Dr Sally Duensing, a visiting professor at Kings College, London and an expert in public science who, along with other scientists from Paris and Dublin, is part of the consultancy team responsible for bringing Hall of Mirrors to fruition.

"We had been talking to Sally at the time about what we could do together and as we followed the kids into the hall of mirrors, which is a bit like a maze, Sally laughed and said it looked a bit like our installations. We had been reluctant about doing a project with a scientist, but the idea of doing using mirrors to discover things became something that was in our ballpark as artists rather than theirs. It would take in science, but it would never lose that sense of wonder that our twins had that day."

Visitors to Hall of Mirrors are promised a sequence of stimulating and provocative experiences created by the innovative use of state-of-the-art technology, including seeing the world upside down using specially created helmets or undergoing the strange optical effects of stereo vision.

Colour perception, binocular vision, time-delayed imagery or witnessing the magic of a moving body composed of dots will be part of this voyage of discovery aimed at all ages. "The very central issue is a statement about art and art not being about consumerism or decoration, but about community. All our projects are about getting close to people, having people involved and that two-way connection," says Cleary.

Having trained as architects in Ireland, the couple moved to Paris in the 1990s. "We quickly got involved in art rather than in architectural circles and met a lot of people working in sound, video, film and dance who were experimenting

"We are not artists who want to sell to rich people. We make *ART* about *SOCIETY* and *CONNECTIVITY*."

with new technologies and that opened up a lot of avenues. We learnt a lot from them," says Cleary. Their first major piece was a series of videos exploring the meaning of art in a light-hearted but critical way, while another series documented the life around their apartment in Paris. For a while, remuneration from architectural drawing subsidised their art, allowing them the freedom to experiment with artistic collaborations, in what they describe as "entanglements."

Since then, their work with new media has found critical acclaim both in France and elsewhere. In 2009, they won the AIB Prize for emerging Irish artists of exceptional talent. They have exhibited widely in Europe and further afield, at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, the Barbican in London and in Prague, Murcia, Yokohama and Sao Paulo. In Ireland many of their public commissions in Limerick, Dublin, Ballina and Kerry, have involved teenagers and children. "It is very important that our work draws in people of all age groups," says Cleary. "We don't want it to be intimidating even if there is a lot of deep content. Education is one of the big things in our work. I was dyslexic as a child." A recent project, Moving Dublin, explored everyday movement in Dublin and surrounding suburban spaces through video, photographs, ambient sound and interviews and was published as a book and DVD in 2009.

Central to their domestic and working worlds are their eleven-year-old twin daughters, Salamambo and Lotte, computer whiz kids. "They have been the first to try out our electronic installations, they have been our guinea pigs - our very willing guinea pigs - and we have turned them into dots and taken them with us to Kerry [for the Joining the Dots project], to lakes in Mayo [for the On Sight stereo-vision project]," says Connolly. "They inform our work a lot," adds Cleary. "You can tell from their reactions if things are working or not. They are our critics."

Home is the fifth floor of an elegant, fan-shaped Haussmannian apartment in the 18th arrondissement of Paris with *portes fenêtres* opening onto a wraparound iron balcony and views across the city. "The area was developed with stately apartments in the 19th century as a fashionable district for the new bourgeoisie, but very quickly went downhill," explains Cleary. "Now it is one of the most diverse in Paris." Neither knows how to drive, never bothered to learn, and so each day they take their girls to school on the other side of the city on foot scooters; together they "trottinette" down past Opera, along the Tuileries Gardens and across Pont des Arts to the school. "It takes about half an hour each way and on the way home, we stop in a café and a lot of ideas come at that time of the morning," says Connolly. "We call them our Trotti projects."

Cleary says living in Paris is easy "because schools, transport and medical services are good, which is really important when you have children. And then there are the food markets that are so accessible and easy." She admits though that "Parisians can be difficult; they're always prickly and prickly to each other. It's probably a big city thing." With family in Ireland and the UK, they keep in touch and are frequent travellers back and forth. "At weekends in Paris we go to openings and the girls OD on computers and Sims video games. Their ideal weekend is two pyjama days because they work at school from 8.15am to 5.45pm and then come home to homework," says Connolly.

Currently, the couple are preoccupied with the Hall of Mirrors project, which will travel to Limerick, the Solstice Centre in Navan and then Ballina after Dublin through an Arts Council Travelling Fund with the possibility of further international travel and exposure. "We are not artists who want to sell to rich people," says Connolly. "We are trying to make work that is about society, about people and connectivity. As artists we are nomads because we have worked with dance, with theatre, with cities, with architecture, with schools, with scientists and with landscapes. In fact new media makes it possible to work in any context and we are always open to new connections. EM Forster's 'only connect' has always been our motto." ■ www.connolly-cleary.com/hallofmirrors