

Discovery Box

By Toma McCullim

We are in Skibbereen in West Cork Arts Centre. All around us is make believe: three worlds that make up the 'Panto Collapsar'. Australian artist Mikala Dwyer has created these worlds from clay, wood, paper mache, helium, gold cloth and paint, and strange things like whiskey, all poured into a cauldron of 'magic and modernism'ⁱ. We are at the panto, where a star is becoming a big bang. Dwyer has summoned the spirit of Yeats and is channelling her Mother the jeweller, drawing each into the magic circles. In this activated space we have been invited to play. West Cork Arts Centre have brought their own special addition to the spell, an old leather trunk, the Discovery Box, a container for the imagination. In it are bags, boxes and jars, openings to stories and transformations. I am your witness, a Granny, a Mum, an artist, and fellow magician.

In scene one, my daughter Molly and her three-year-old son, Joshua, are visiting the exhibition. He delves into the box and brings out a bag. Inside is a red box with a toggle fastening. He likes the challenge of opening it himself. Inside are 'gold' buttons and coins. He is most interested in the coins, which he slots into the spaces in the clay lump. Mum says it is a hedgehog. Joshua has never seen a hedgehog but tries the word for shape anyway. Mikala talks about the 'naming in alchemy being a different type of poetry'ⁱⁱ, and I ponder this thing, money, that shape shifts and changes into other stuff, like clay being changed into a cup. Joshua looks around before holding his sculpture out to meet the artist's own. I am aware of that noisy critic that sits often on my right shoulder, shouting 'not good enough'. My left shoulder critic gets a chance to shout back, 'here it is, perfectly made by a three-year-old, powerfully expressed by an artist who knows what it is to be a child in an adult's body.'

A simple wooden baton wound with thick black cord engages Joshua most. He stretches it out from Mummy to other places round the room. He takes the cord as far as it can go into the corner of colour on the wall. Then he runs back twisting and turning to tie himself and Mummy together, laughing. I am seeing again the umbilical cord between them and later when I open Winnicott's essays on play, the first case describes a boy and his use of string as 'a transitional object'ⁱⁱⁱ.

Discovery Box is the latest incarnation of a concept developed by WCAC^{iv} and is the fourth of such works commissioned by Justine Foster. Artist Susan Montgomery has manifested this edition in collaboration with Sarah Ruttle^v. The team are creating a way to bring children to a full appreciation of the art work, but as Jo Boniface, the child psychologist involved in the project acknowledges, the Discovery Box develops a helpful template for creative interactions between children and caregivers.

Susan describes her part of the process as one of thoroughly researching the exhibition themes and then 'looking around the house for stuff I will use.' As a Mum she is looking with her active child's mind, as an artist she is honed in the art of finding things that the anthropologist of Art, Alfred Gell would call 'cognitively sticky'^{vi}. These are often objects that function as containers for metaphor. This exhibition is stuffed with them. Think of all the poetic connections that issue when we say the word 'Gold'...

I return again and this time to observe six-year-old Eoin who has brought his Grandma to this, his fourth visit. She tells me that the box and the exhibition have really caught his imagination. 'Every night after school there is making going on'. He shows me the torch and black shadow puppets and we move around the room looking at shadows. Our shadows merge with the shapes on plinths, as we become a druidic circle fascinated by our own sun. The magic that is created in the space is this activation, which happens when the art is acting on you and you are acting upon the art. Eoin talks about the clay things he made in play-school. These materials have a rich vocabulary. Through kinaesthetic memory Dwyer draws us into our own childhood world.

Eoin and Joshua are both present at one of WCAC's Saturday morning workshops. A group of 'Big People' have brought their 'Small People'. We are invited to sit on the floor and play at making a miniature exhibition. Susan leads our explorations. She has gold painted plinths, nuggets of fools

gold, beads, a melted plastic bottle - all miniature versions of what is around us. We talk in our circle about our local stone circle, Drombeg. We wrap small gold things in pieces of fur. Then they get buried back inside the box. In the next room a cluster of silver helium filled balloons, each one a zero, are holding up the silver giant foil. The children are encouraged to run around this silver cloud causing the balloons to gently bob. We are bonded together as a whirl becoming a wind that will move the sky. Then we huddle under the crumpled canopy and are reflected back as a many coloured, many headed beast, which breathes with us. We are art as a verb. We are 'The Silvering'. Dwyer has us look up to giant costumes that hang limply above, waiting for possession. We could transform into humans who are also gold nuggets. It is this liminal gap that we are continually traversing when we are creating work. We look at this 'stuff' that we seek to animate and through a conjuring trick we create meaning. Into this world is brought a box of tricks, tools that will enable the physicalization of these conceptual acrobatics. The children try the gold masks and the slippery gold cape; they are scared and thrilled in turn. Mask is scary on Mummy; she disappears in front of our eyes. Relief when she stretches it up to reveal her face... "Do it again", (in-breath, prepare to be horrified!) "Aaaah there she is"! Fingers come to life as small people with gold shell heads, most of them intent on bashing that frightening mask.

The third room's bright painting of primary colours and simple shapes take up the two walls that centre in a corner, black lines divide up the remaining walls in huge graphic measures. These lines extend through the remaining rooms, taking measure and cutting things down to size. The white space is put behind bars, no chromophobia^{vii} here. Susan brings out goggles that hold changes of coloured film. "What does it feel like to be yellow?" she asks the biggest of the boys in the group. "Puke" he says and gets a laugh. A little girl gets to be pink, "a cheaper option than painting the bedroom" says Mum. Out of another bag come pieces of kite material, in colours and shapes that correspond to the wall. The children run around the space with their colours. Dwyer's 'Open Corner 2012' is based on a small design for a tarot card painted by William Butler Yeats. He whispers:

*And had that colour upon cheek or hair,
and thereupon my heart is driven wild,
She stands before me as a living child-^{viii}*

The session comes to an end as Susan directs the children to sit in a circle. They are encouraged to close their eyes and become each colour in turn before saying goodbye to the colour as it leaves and returns to its bag in the box. She gently brings them back from this magical world where they have been yellow and gold, been ancient people hoarding their precious things in furs and burying them in sacred places. Slowly they are brought back to the here and now and the end of the Panto. They run out into the day like shooting stars.

ⁱMikala Dwyer speaking about 'PantoCollapsar' at the Project Arts Center, Dublin. www.youtube.com/watch?v=kWXQJVPMh1k accessed 6/3/2013

ⁱⁱDwyer, as above.

ⁱⁱⁱWinnicott was the psychoanalyst to offer us a theory of aesthetics based on this idea of the infant using objects to negotiate the gap between the inner world of the mind and the outer one. In the 'potential space' between objectivity and subjectivity, we use objects to make the transition from dependence to self-reliance. It is through the use of these transitional objects, Winnicott argued, that the developing infant develops play and creativity into symbolism and culture.

Winnicott, D.W. (1980) *Playing and Reality*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

^{iv}In 2010 WCAC (West Cork Arts Centre) adopted a partnership approach to developing this programme to draw in the existing intelligence and resources locally. The partnership includes West Cork Arts Centre, HSE Community Work Department, County Cork VEC – Community Education Programme, Cork County Library and Cork County Childcare Committee.

^vSee www.westcorkartscentre.com for more information on their collaboration & <http://www.youtube.com/embed/TFMhy57SSho>

^{vi}Gell's anthropological approach defines artworks as 'things provoking attachment' moving us away from more traditional institutional, aesthetic or semiotic definitions. He describes the mechanisms of this attachment as 'cognitive stickiness'

See Gell, A. (1998) *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon.

^{vii}Batchelor argues that 'Chromophobia' - the fear of corruption through colour, runs under Western thinking which denotes all that is colourful as 'other' - the feminine, the foreign, and the infantile.

Batchelor, David. (2000) *Chromophobia*, London, Reaction Books

^{viii}Among Schoolchildren 1928. William Butler Yeats

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West Cork Arts Centre, HSE, West Cork VEC, Cork County Council and County Cork Childcare Committee.



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