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Interview with Karen Daye-Hutchinson

Karen Daye-Hutchinson is a multifaceted Belfast artist whose work combines elements of both crafts and fine arts. After graduating in Fine Arts at the University of Ulster in 1988, she developed her art in jewelry-making, printing, painting, and sculpture. In 1992, she opened a retail shop Coppermoon specialized in arts and crafts, where she sold and exhibited her work and that of other artists. From 1993 to the present day she has regularly received awards, e.g. HRH Prince of Wales Gold Medal (1992) and from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (2014, 2017, 2018). Over the years, she has exhibited in Ireland, Europe, and the United States. She is currently a selected member of the prestigious Prism Print International and director trustee and treasurer of Belfast Print Workshop.

Fabrice Mourlon and Karen Daye-Hutchinson have known each other for twenty years and have met regularly in Belfast over that period. This allowed the interviewer to follow the various steps in the development of Karen Daye-Hutchinson's work and involvement in other activities such as retailing and mentoring other artists. In some aspects, Karen's work follows in the tradition of William Morris's "Arts and Crafts" movement as she is both a maker and an artist and expresses herself through various media: jewelry, printing, painting, sculpture.

Fabrice Mourlon: How did you start as an artist? When I first met you in 2000 you were making both jewelry and prints.

Karen Daye-Hutchinson: I went to Manchester University. I studied fine arts foundation which was a foundation in a lot of things. I did a lot of making, craft, printmaking. I did also some jewelry and we also had to write a thesis at that stage. We covered all kinds of genres of filmmaking. So, it was a very diverse and compact course.

After Manchester I went to Belfast and did my degree. The foundation in Manchester set me up for so many things, it was so intensive, it was only a year. I knew I wanted to go into fine arts, although I did love making jewelry. I did specialize in sculpture and I did a lot of printmaking and I did a lot of modules on jewelry-making, which was very good. I always recommend that because you need something as your bread and butter, to allow for you to pay for your practice in fine arts especially in the initial years, when you don't have some sort of recognition. You need to have an income, unless you have rich parents or you have inherited. I didn't come from that background. Everything that I did, I did on my own. When I was about 21, I won some painting awards and was given the opportunity to exhibit my fine arts at art fairs in Birmingham, London and out of that I got pretty connected straight

out of university by basically collaborating with another entity that was happy to subsidize you in some way. So, I started to do art fairs where I showed my fine arts paintings, little ranges of prints that were more affordable than galleries would pick up on. So, I was immediately catapulted, I kind of hit the market and I also won lots of awards, including the Prince of Wales Gold Medal (1992). I got a lot of publicity in magazines, lots of people wanted interviews, lots of press. People love that, they invest in that: they feel they know you, they've read that, and they invest in somebody who has been given awards. But you need to keep the momentum going.

FM: You mean they started to commission work for you?

KDH: Yes, because you received X amount of awards and you are prolifically exhibiting and you are doing art fairs, so you could instantly name galleries that showed your work in. You had fifteen galleries buying small pieces and exhibiting on a sale and return basis¹.

FM: You worked in mainland UK and then you came back to Belfast and you started to make jewelry and printing.

KDH: No, I was still making prints and etchings and paintings and from all the connections that I made at the art fairs I thought it would be lovely to sort of sell other people's work. There were not many galleries in 1992. So, I decided it would be nice to have an outlet, because lots of people were going "How can I contact you?". Artist studios were not easily and readily available then, so I opened a tiny little gallery in Belfast city centre. It was tiny and the overheads were only £4,000-5,000 or something like that. Working out my costs and overheads and what I would sell, I took a small unit in Belfast city centre. It was accessible for people to buy my work and to view other's.

And then I started commissioning jewelry because I didn't have the time [to make pieces of jewelry], I was kind of [overwhelmed] with lists of commissions and doing quick commissions for hotels, because when you have a base, even if it's tiny you're more accessible than trying to find a studio. So, I started commissioning jewelry first and making small pieces of jewelry. And then I was able to afford staff in the little shop called Coppermoon. It was located in Spires Mall, a beautiful mall full of high-end shops, although over the years the quality disappeared. At the beginning there were six shops including French brands. There was even a modern conceptual dentist's.

After a few years I moved into a much bigger beautifully designed shop still called Coppermoon [on Wellington Street, off the City Hall]. I was still working on my own paintings, prints, little sculptural pieces. Getting people use my designs, I

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1. KDH: "It is the normal term when you exhibit in a gallery. Galleries don't buy your work, unless it is a second time round Picasso that they can put their hands on. [...] So when you are selling your artwork, when you are letting a gallery handle your paintings or your sculptures you have to bear in mind that they are taking an average of 50%. So you need to be sensible with your net price and your gross price".

got people to make jewelry that I thought would be the ethos of Coppermoon, with my sort of edge on it. Then I started to use my own designs and branded my work separately from Coppermoon, because I knew Coppermoon would not be sustainable in Belfast. Five years before I closed Coppermoon I rebranded my jewelry Ghost and Bonesetter² with the intention that when my lease was up I would close the shop. Five years before I closed the shop there was a lot of rioting, lots of trouble in Belfast with the Flag and Emblem protest and everything was happening at the end of my street. It was always cordoned off and the police was there, the bus route changed, so there was no parking around the city hall and instead people came parking in my street in front of my shop. So, I closed in 2016. The Flag and Emblem protest killed a lot of businesses around and it really hurt the street that I was in.

FM: And then you went to Conway Mill on the Falls Road?

KDH: My plans were within a five-year period before the end to get the jewelry going and recreate on a bigger scale my artistic-ness. And being the director of Belfast Print Workshop³ alongside Coppermoon, I was exhibiting internationally. What I really wanted to do, and the balance wasn't right, because I was spending a lot of time in retail organizing staff, covering days when I was planning to spend time at my studio... it was a very hard decision to make because Coppermoon had been there for twenty-three years.

FM: You had the first shop at the time to have arts and crafts. And then, those sorts of shops started burgeoning in Belfast with Spacecraft⁴.

KDH: Yes, there was Spacecraft and a couple of shops on the Dublin Road. And there was another on Ross's Court. But they fell down and were not sustainable. There was also Equinox: they had a balance between high-end, very design-led work, but it wasn't grassroots craft. It was more craft that you would find in craft magazines, on the border of fine arts individuality and craft made by the maker as opposed to the factory.

FM: Why did that movement of arts and crafts developed so much in Belfast in the 2000s?

KDH: Indeed, there was a great boom. But a lot of people don't understand the ethos of retailing crafts. They opened shops here and there and they didn't work together. I even got kept on the fringes with some craft shops: I was the enemy, I was competition. We could have worked together in close proximity.

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2. <https://ghostandbonesetter.com>

3. <https://www.bpw.org.uk>. The Belfast Print Workshop was established in 1977 to offer specific training in printmaking and support artists. It provides studios and exhibition spaces and facilitates workshop-oriented practices.

4. Spacecraft, College Street, Belfast, is a shop, gallery and exhibition space created in 1997 by the Craft and Design collective. Now the largest craft network in Northern Ireland, it gathers over a hundred artists and makers.

Fig. 1 – Karen Daye-Hutchinson, *Rings*, collection “Heirloom, Ghost and Bonesetter”.

Photo credit: Karen Daye-Hutchinson.

FM: So Coppermoon was a mix between a shop and a gallery...

KDH: I wanted people to have something that was individually made by the artist or the craft maker and have that in the same place. Because that taste is all connected to individuality and it is a mixture of fine arts and high-end craft.

FM: Is there a line between crafts and fine arts?

KDH: It depends on the word craft. A lot of people don't like the word craft because it means what people make when they come back from their daytime job. There is a line for me between [this kind of craft and] high-end craft, like stuff you would find in craft magazines. Things that are made by very talented individuals that also cross a line between fine arts and craft. It is basically made by someone who is highly skilled, highly tuitioned. Craft can be conceptual. It is the difference between what's gimmicky, something that has already been in circulation or copied and made in another country in a mass-produced way. But something that is beautifully handcrafted and speaks of individuality is what I mean by craft. It can be something that uses all of the disciplines or any of the disciplines, but it's how it is presented, and it doesn't need to be functional. So that's why it is a borderline between fine arts and craft.

FM: How would you define yourself, as an artist or a craft maker?

KDH: I have many strings to my bow. I like to make things. I am very particular in my practice of prints. I would never make a copy of a print that would be sold at 25 pounds. It is either the print or the etching which would be individually inked up and prepared and printed off. So it has to be individually made by my hands and not come out of an Epson, whatever your printer is.

Fig. 2 – Karen Daye-Hutchinson,
Scribbles, etching, collection
“Etched, Ghost and Bonesetter”.

Photo credit: Karen Daye-Hutchinson.

Recently, I have been elected to Prism Print International⁵. I am the only female from the whole of Ireland and there is also Jim Allen, both of us from Belfast. We exhibit internationally with selected Japanese, French, a few British, all from the top end of this field. My jewelry is connected because I still etch onto my pieces. They are individually made by my hands. There is nothing cast. I have some bread and butter ranges but I would still etch a big panel: this is where it becomes mass-produced and then cut into twenty pieces from it. That means that everybody can afford a piece of Ghost and Bonesetter. And it is very linked with my passion for printmaking. I play with different layers of plate and gold leaves and textures. I would make also non-functional tiny sculpture pieces. But if I only made 500-pound pieces there would be so many that I could sell. But being able to balance with very affordable pieces, the income from that would allow you to sit and play and be very expressive and have fun with what you do.

FM: The names that you gave to your collection are embedded in the Irish tradition. How do you reinvent that tradition?

KDH: At one stage buying things that were Irish in Belfast could have been a bit dodgy. But now it is working with the change in Northern Ireland. And remember that a lot of Americans are also Irish, in Australia also. It is giving a piece individuality and buying into a story. A lot of people have bought my jewelry because they like the story of Irish mythology, or they love my made-up story.

FM: That's what you're doing with your new exhibition, with the prints and the books. Why did you want to make those 3D books?

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5. <http://www.prismprintinternational.com/about.html>

Fig. 3 – Karen Daye-Hutchinson, *Arrows*, pendants, collection “Amalgam, Ghost and Bonesetter”.

Photo credit: Karen Daye-Hutchinson.

KDH: I love making books and telling stories. The essence of me is this storytelling whether it is in my jewelry or my editions, or prints. I do series, I give them connection, I give them a story, same as the jewelry and sculptural pieces.

The series of books is called mapping. I didn’t realize it until I started doing it and thinking about it, doing all those little maps, then relating stories to places within the maps. It was when I was in residency in Luxembourg last year. On the first day I like to go and get a feel on the place as opposed to going with a project. I am happy to work on the moment and I never plan things around. I wait until that moment when it’s going to come, I put the headphones on and I go for it. When I was in Luxembourg, the first thing I did for the first day was how I felt being in Luxembourg with all those beautiful buildings: I did a lot of automatic drawings and it ended up being this lovely series of book maps, and I loved the 3D element of it.

When I was back in my studio in Belfast and looking out of the window, I asked myself “how can I tell my Belfast story?”. I will start by mapping and I always have stories at the back of my head and I always taught stories about growing up. But I have never put them directly into artwork, I have indirectly done it, but never in a massive series. This exhibition is a big museum size exhibition on the Falls Road, which is a wonderful venue. I started off drawing the maps and then I would cut some up and make some smaller ones and do little triptychs of layering using the map material. And then I started to make some folds, folding the maps and turning the big maps into smaller ones, with little pinpoints. And then hint at what’s happening at those little pinpoints.

FM: And you started with maps of Belfast?

KDH: No, my maps of Belfast. I took one end of Belfast to the other. I did have some reference material. I was drawing almost as if it were therapeutic. I started

Fig. 4 – Karen Daye-Hutchinson, *Map books*, *Mapping* exhibition, Dillon Gallery, Belfast, 2020.

Photo credit:
Karen Daye-Hutchinson.

remembering stuff when I was a kid, good or harsh memories of being a child growing up during the Troubles. However I have not mentioned the Troubles in it. There are a lot of suggestions in the artwork but no weapons. All I have is a barbed wire as a sort of barrier. I wanted to have a series of maps about my growing up and relating to hints and stories and try to show some passion, emotions through symbolism relating back to the maps where things happened.

FM: You also have the folded books.

KDH: They are like handkerchiefs from the Troubles that were in circulation when people were put away in prisons. [There is also some sort of] secrecy: a lot of text and words are done in the invisible with white crayon, or just wax.

FM: You are doing teaching as well.

KDH: I teach to share. I also have graduates that I mentor. I show them my secrets and how to get the best of what they are doing and help them along with getting exhibition space. I include them in my own exhibitions sometimes. All that is great for confidence. To have somebody with more experience, because there is not a lot of that here. As a director of Belfast Print Workshop I have always wanted to encourage that. I have my own personal crusade to make sure that people gain access to exhibition space.

Fig. 5 – Karen Daye-Hutchinson, *Map*, *Mapping* exhibition, Dillon Gallery, Belfast, 2020.

Photo credit: Karen Daye-Hutchinson.

Fig. 6 – Karen Daye-Hutchinson, *Mapping* exhibition, Dillon Gallery, Belfast, 2020.

Photo credit: Karen Daye-Hutchinson.

FM: Would you say that the nature of the work of the artist has changed?

KDH: Yes, most artists have jobs, and if they are lucky, they will have it within the arts, which will keep them. But others have jobs that can take away their artisticness. I heard that in the Republic they were going to give active artists some kind of allowance, to ensure that they continue their creativity. That will probably never happen in Northern Ireland.

FM: It is a turning point that they opened Conway Mill⁶ in Belfast, with artist studios.

KDH: They have been going on for years, twenty years, but the building has recently been renovated. It is a Preservation Trust. There are art quarters in every city. You find those art quarters in other cities like London and Paris. Then the bars move in and the night clubs and then they build some kind of accommodation and then the artists are chopped out. That's what happened in the Cathedral Quarter in Belfast. All the galleries and the studios there are closing down. That's the way it goes everywhere.

But not in somewhere like Conway Mill where there is a Preservation Trust. It's an old mill and they still keep tours of that mill and a lot of community business went in it, there is less chance of it being taken over as a hotel, especially on the Falls Road as well.

Fig. 7 – Karen Daye-Hutchinson, print, *Mapping* exhibition, Dillon Gallery, Belfast, 2020.

Photo credit: Karen Daye-Hutchinson.

Interview carried out on 14 March 2020 via Skype.

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6. <http://www.conwaymill.org>