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East meets West: Chinese citizens take part in the first St Patrick's Day parade in Beijing at which the Irish festival in the city was launched. Right: A building in Beijing (top) and a house in Ballycastle, Co Mayo, both images which are part of Varvara Shavrova's exhibition 'Untouched'



Through a Chinese lens

An exhibition of art featuring stunning images of Ireland is enthralling audiences in Beijing reports CLIFFORD COONAN

THE ENTRANCE to the Through the Lens exhibition of Irish art at the Beijing Art Museum of Imperial City, there is a room dedicated to a vast model of the Forbidden City, a majestic palace where the emperor and

his concubines held court, and the surrounding precincts that once housed eunuchs, warlords and merchants.

This frankly realistic view of the world, steeped in history, is undermined as you enter the exhibition itself, a collection of cutting edge video art from Ireland and a crucial segment of a festival of Irish art taking place in the Chinese capital. Here, beneath the ramparts of the Forbidden City, there are fungal walls from the west of Ireland, along with membrane-like jellyfish and accounts of slumber from the newly-awakened.

Disciplines were crossed, which is still a new phenomenon in China, despite the rapid advances in the visual arts. Choreographer Fearghus O Conchuir and dance partner, Matthew Morris, performed Match during the opening of Through the Lens.

Malcolm McClay's work on the Katrina disaster, The Long Corridor, shows scenes of devastation in New Orleans after the hurricane, and seems an unusual starting point for an exhibition in the Chinese capital. However, the theme resonates strongly with notions of change and development, and how we view these issues. These are central to the exhibition. Through the Lens curator Varvara Shavrova's photographs of derelict houses in the tiny village of Ballycastle in Co Mayo are juxtaposed with the crumbling walls of condemned courtyard houses along Beijing's ancient network of hutong laneways.

The areas in the "Walls" of her work Untouched could not be more different. The walls in Ballycastle are mottled and covered with fungus, a testament to neglect as people emigrated or built new bungalow ranch-style houses next door.

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What strikes a chord with the Chinese visitors to Through the Lens is the commonality of the experience between these two disparate communities.

"I've seen the hutong and village pictures, and found the show very interesting. What really impressed me was that although they are different regions, they have the same feelings and I can feel the old and deserted process of such villages," said Fan Lipeng, a sophomore art student from Renmin University.

Museum worker Zhu Di said there have been lots of visitors, ranging from students to middle-aged, and most were pleased what they saw, although there had been niggling comments about translations.

Savitri Scherer, from Indonesia, who lives in Beijing, described the exhibition as beautiful. "The show is good, the music is beautiful, but it moves quite fast, so you can't always see the pictures clearly. We have the same feelings in Indonesia, villages where the same process is going on, houses deserted by people, it's a kind of development, and new buildings going up," said Scherer.

Russian-born Irish national Shavrova has been working out of Ballycastle and Beijing for the past three years. "I wanted to look at why these two completely contrasting places had such an impact on me – Ballycastle with a few thousand people and Beijing's megapolis with 17 million people," said Shavrova.

"I think many of the Chinese had never seen any images of Ireland, let alone Ballycastle. The fact that it's about Chinese subjects as well as Irish means that the Chinese enjoyed it. Otherwise they wouldn't have understood it. They were hypnotised by it, drawn by it, which is what I wanted," said Shavrova.

Other works in the show include Dorothy Cross' Jellyfish Lake, an elegiac piece showing a figure lying under water while hundreds of jellyfish swim around; Grace Weir's noir homage The Turning Point and work by Paul Rowley and David Philips are represented with pieces including Commonwealth, which examines ideas of social progress through revisiting the Soviet Space programme of the 1960s, in particular Yuri Gagarin's orbit of the earth in 1961, and has a particular relevance given China's ongoing obsession with space and its current interest in walking in space and putting a man on the moon.

The show also features painterly, elegant work by Isabel Nolan and Everything Must Finally Fall by Declan Clarke. This piece has a plane pulling the words "I Have Doubts" over a city. It's a fulsome postscript to the thoughts on development that dominate in the exhibition.

Taking part in the Irish festival is Gavin Quinn, who is in town wearing a number of different hats. The director of Pan Pan Theatre is a regular visitor to China by now and has a deep understanding of performance here, having directed *The Playboy of the Western World* in Chinese two years ago in Beijing, and memorably brought the Chinese version back to run in the Project in Dublin.

Playboy went down well with Chinese audiences, even if the shock sight of a shift did raise the censor's hackles and threaten an early end to its run in the theatre. The Chinese really liked the songs and the movement in the show.

This time he brought *Oedipus Loves You*. And Beijing loved *Oedipus* – even the Culture Ministry censors approved after they were given a special performance.

“*Oedipus* is known in China and the piece has eight or nine songs, movement and dancing. It's all about confusion, it has an energy,” said Quinn.

“This is kind of a follow-on from *Playboy*. It's good to come back to build rapport. Getting involved in something as vast as China takes a long time. It's all to do with performing in Asia. Artistically it's interesting and an opportunity to make work with Chinese artists.”

The audience on opening night filled the slightly avant garde Pioneer Theatre, a mixture of students, the arts crowd and a few expatriate Irish, including Ambassador Kelleher – there is precious little by way of Western drama in Beijing and there is a hunger for new material. It's an inventive, musical postmodern reading of the legend, and Pan Pan's *Oedipus* struck a chord with graduate medical student Feng Keran.

“Although I could only understand about 50 per cent of the play, I was visually shocked. Sometimes I have the same feelings as those in the play – people are under huge pressure in modern life. They are disappointed sometimes. They imagine ‘what if I hadn't been born, I would feel released’. I have the same thoughts when I am dismayed,” he said.

Film industry worker Feng Yuan loved the play's literary, deconstructive approach. “I totally understand what they want to express because I have read articles and myths about *Oedipus* before. I think the play is very good and special,” she said.

Art student Mao Mao was tired from following the subtitles, but happy with her evening. “The play is realistic, very good,” she said.

The next line would be: Quinn is also in town as dramaturge with another return visitor to China.

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