



# Rita Duffy

*A good painting always makes me think longer and deeper thoughts.*

Rita Duffy



**Rita Duffy** was born in Belfast in 1959, growing up as a Catholic in the predominately Protestant *Stranmillis* area of the city. Her father was one of the very few non-protestants to work in Belfast's shipyards, while her mother was from Clara, a small village in Co. Offaly. Throughout her childhood, Rita was interested in drawing, painting and imaginary worlds, recalling that in school she was a 'daydreamer' and was constantly drawing in her notebooks.



Stranmillis Road and Clara, Co. Offaly.

During her university years at the *Art & Design Centre* and the *University of Ulster*, she lived in Montauk in New York during the summer months, drawing street portraits, and connecting with a vibrant New York scene that included figures such as *Andy Warhol*. Her travels in America also gave her experience of outsider art, fostering in her a deep interest in the social and political dimensions of artistic expression.

These early New York scene influences have coloured Rita's work throughout her career, as has her passion for *magic realism* and *surrealism*, especially when applied to Northern Irish politics and society, and themes such as *feminism* and *injustice*.



Civil rights march in Derry 1968.  
Source: *The Irish Times*.

In 2001 she was responsible for the *Drawing the Blinds* project at the Divis flats on the Falls Road, a 'huge collective portrait' made from linen strips. She came to international prominence for her 2005 attempt to move an iceberg from Greenland to Belfast, hoping to explore not only the city's connection to the building of the *Titanic*, but the sense of impasse in Northern Irish politics and society. This plan was widely-discussed in Belfast and beyond, with some commentators arguing that it did not present the city in a favourable light.

In 2013 she opened the *Shirt Factory Project* as parts of Derry's celebration as *UK City of Culture*, which focused on the female workers of Derry's shirt-making industry. In 2014, as part of the *West Belfast Festival*, Rita organised *Thaw*, a pop-up shop, that used quirky food labels to examine the Troubles and other aspects of Northern Irish culture.

In 2017 she was responsible for *Soften the Border*, a cross-border temporary art installation which used knitting and textiles to foster cooperation and make a small patch of the border 'soft, colourful, curious and comfortable'.

Rita Duffy's national and international reputation continues to grow, and her creations now make up the permanent collections of institutions such as the *Hugh Lane Gallery*, the *Irish Museum of Modern Art* and the *Imperial War Museum*. From her studio in the disused courthouse in Ballyconnell, Rita continues to explore feminist, nationalist and republican themes in an innovative yet accessible way. This

process often involves long-term collaborations with local communities, promoting art as a powerful vehicle for empowerment and dialogue.

Rita's most ambitious project to date has been her 2016 *Souvenir Shop*, which sought to explore Irish identity, commemoration and rural decline. In association with the *Arts Council*, *Cavan County Council Arts Office* and the *Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA)*, Rita reused fittings from Mary Ann Darcy's drapery shop in Bawnboy to represent Thomas Clarke's occupation as a small shop owner. The shop contained a variety of objects, in many cases designed by Rita and produced by ICA members. Although based in a run-down Georgian building in North Great George's Street, Dublin, elements of the exhibition have travelled around Ireland and internationally, to critical and popular acclaim.



Launch of Souvenir Shop 2016.  
Source: *Cavan Arts*

Andy Warhol c. 1975.

