

Two women have just been elected to the artists' body Aosdána: Shelley McNamara, the first architect to be admitted to the group; and Amelia Stein, one of just a few Aosdána members to specialise in photography. They tell **Gemma Tipton** about their lives and works



Cailíní Dána



Set up in 1981, Aosdána was the brainchild of the writer Anthony Cronin, then cultural adviser to the taoiseach of the day, Charles Haughey. Established by the Arts Council, it is an affiliation of artists "whose work has made an outstanding contribution", including writers, film-makers, musicians and, this year for the first time, an architect.

Aosdána now has 220 members, although the poet and Aosdána member Theo Dorgan points out that "there are artists who are not in who are at least the equals of their peers".

Members may apply for a stipend, called the *cnuas*, which, if they earn less than a certain amount of money, gives them €12,180 each year (for five years), to make work as artists.

Perhaps it is the *cnuas* that is at the heart of some of the begrudgery that has afflicted Aosdána in the past, but it is more likely to be that destructive "who do they think they are?" sense of aggression we typically direct at anyone appropriately honoured for doing well.

Although funded by the Arts Council, Aosdána is autonomous and self-electing; its first member, invited by Anthony

Cronin, was Samuel Beckett. Dorgan describes it as an "association of honour" with no particular lobbying role, suggesting that it would be a mistake to take on the role as an influencing group, except by "standards of commitment".

With no official role, however, there is also a sense of a missed opportunity, an idea that this collective of brilliant artists might find a voice that would be listened to. There are some small signs of this.

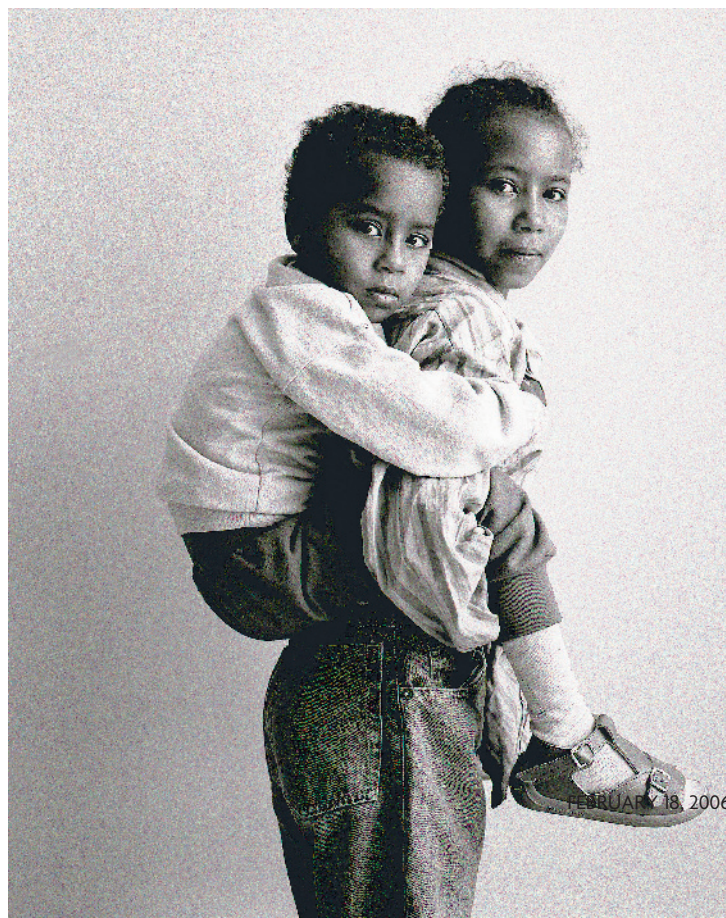
At its recent general assembly, as well as electing 12 new members (including Stein and McNamara), Aosdána noted their opposition to the proposed moves of both the National College of Art and Design, in Dublin, and the Crawford College of Art, in Cork, to locations outside their respective city centres.

These well-made interventions suggest that while we need to get used to being proud of our exceptional citizens, they might also need to get used to the responsibilities that come with honours.

A full list of Aosdána members is online at www.artscouncil.ie/aosdana



The work of Amelia Stein (photographed right by Cyril Byrne). This page, from top: ● Olwen Fouéré, photographed to publicise the play *Lessness* ● Stein's shot for *Dancing at Lughnasa*. "Rather than showing a close-up of the couple, I included the second sister looking on with knowing and longing, and the third staring with the same longing but disengagement. In theatre, you have to tell the story of the play in the photo" ● In the 1990s, Israel airlifted Jews out of Ethiopia, and Stein visited "absorption centres" in Israel shortly after their arrival. "In this photo, I wanted to put across the idea of one culture being carried by another"





AMELIA STEIN

Working on a project to computerise her archive of more than 30,000 carefully filed photographs, Amelia Stein has come across some images of her parents. They are black-and-white photographs from the 1950s, showing a time that would otherwise be fading from memory. "Look at this one," she says as a picture of a woman picking a flower by the river at Powerscourt waterfall, in Co Wicklow, comes up on screen. "My father took this of my mother. You can see how much he loves her from the way he has taken it, the way he has composed it." There is another image of Stein's mother, this time on a holiday in Bray. She is in her teens and stands with her sister on the stony beach, with Bray Head in the background. Fishing boats are drawn up on the shingle. Stein points out her mother's hand, clenched with excitement, the smile on her

lipsticked lips. Noticing the importance of these details is one of the things that has made Stein such a brilliant photographer herself. As Josephine Kelliher of Dublin's Rubicon Gallery, who shows Stein's work, puts it: "She sees through her subject to the heart of the matter."

Stein's father, Mendel, was an optician. For years Stein's was a well-known spot on Harcourt Road, Dublin 2, with its famous eye-shaped shop front. Today Stein, who, as well as being a photographer, followed her father into business as an optician, carries out her work on Grantham Street, Dublin 8. The link between the lens of a pair of glasses and the lens of a camera seems an obvious one to make, so does she see a connection between her two roles?

"If there is one, it's about relationships. People come to you with the hope that, whatever you're going to do, you're going to do it right. You're going to listen to them. The more time you spend listening to people, the better the job. It's the same when you're photographing somebody for a portrait. You're not going to walk in, photograph them and walk back out."

It is this kind of understanding that has seen Stein photograph actors and artists, musicians, writers and opera singers. As well as working with the Abbey, the Gate and Wexford Festival Opera, she is working with a number of rock musicians, in collaboration with the designer Steve Averill. She is also completing a series of images of Elvis Costello.

"You have to ask yourself what you are taking the photographs for," she says. "Is it for the here and now, for the newspaper we're all rushing for on the day and then it's gone? Is it for an academic book that's going

continued overleaf

● Above: Much of Stein's work has been in the theatre. "This is one of my favourite pictures, from *The Bog of Cats*. I adored the play. Here are Tom Hickey and Fionnuala Murphy coming out onto the bog, she in her wedding dress . . . Monica Frawley's set was so exterior, so magnificent – a gift to a photographer" ● Below: "This ornament sat in my parents' living room. She died first. He died three and a half years later. The house was closed up, and their whole life together had to be put away. This figure used to sit on the mantelpiece in their home. Now she dances out of the darkness in my photograph"





● **Top:** Palm House in the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin ● **Left:** Elvis Costello, with whom she has a long-standing friendship, during his collaboration with the Brodsky Quartet ● **Above:** the artist Stephen McKenna. “Stephen invited me to his house, and the photos were made after a very good lunch. He was the one who spoke for me at Aosdána”

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to be read by 300 people? Is it for a glossy coffee-table book? Or do you photograph the play so that you look back on *The Bog of Cats*, for example, and say: ‘That was an amazing drama?’”

Showing another image, this time of the artist Stephen McKenna, Stein describes how she felt taking the picture. Each of her photographs is a clear reminder to her of the moment it was taken.

It is only relatively recently in Ireland that photography has been seen as a valid art form, worthy of collection and exhibition. Josephine Kelliher describes the development. “Newer Irish art collectors are finally following the trend, well established in Europe and the USA, in realising the value and collectability of photography. Aosdána has invited into their membership some of the more important artists working in that medium. It’s exciting for everyone.”

In addition to artists whose work has included photography, such as Willie Doherty, Gene Lambert and Alice Maher, Stein remembers the late Fergus Bourke as a member of Aosdána. “He is the great Irish

photographer, and my hero. He’s a tremendous loss; I’m wondering when the big book on him will be done.”

Stein is planning her own big book, a publication based on the series of photographs she took at the Palm House in the National Botanic Gardens. Showing some images, she picks out the velvetiness of the leaves, the contrast in the spine of a frond, certain plants and stalks and the way the light catches them.

Alongside Brendan Sayers, John Banville is to write the text. “He is one of the people who writes best about photography,” says Stein.

Stein came to photography by way of her father’s interest. “My dad always had a camera, and I liked it. It’s kind of an obsession. You fall in love with it, and you learn along the way.” Her work is now considered alongside that of the most significant artists in Ireland. “If my parents were alive,” she says, considering her election to Aosdána, “it would be an honour that you could take to them, that you could say: ‘It was you who trusted me enough to do this.’” ♦

See Amelia Stein’s work on www.rubicongallery.ie



SHELLEY McNAMARA

“One of the important questions about a building is: How does it make you feel? Does it engender a sense of well-being? Does it lift the spirit?” says Shelley McNamara, the first architect to be elected to Aosdána. At a time when people are excited about the world’s incredible art galleries, and simultaneously sceptical of the anonymous apartment and office blocks and the tracts of ill-considered suburban housing, it’s an interesting moment for an architect to be so honoured.

At Grafton Architects’ offices in Dublin, models for buildings, both built and imagined, are fascinating and beautiful sculptures of Perspex and wood. On the walls, intricate plans and dramatic photographs show how some of these models have come into being as real offices, schools, galleries, theatres and homes.

Born in Lisdoonvarna, Co Clare, McNamara grew up in the west of Ireland. She describes her interest in architecture as coming from a family tradition; her father was a builder. “And once you get into it,” she says, “you’re hooked.” McNamara graduated from University College Dublin’s school of architecture in 1974. “Things weren’t so bad in the 70s,” she remembers. “It was in the 1980s that we had nothing. Yvonne [Farrell] and I set up our practice with only one year’s experience of working in an office. It was a crazy thing to do.”

Crazy or not, McNamara and Farrell developed a practice that has influenced the shape of contemporary Ireland. So do they have a particular style? “There are connections between one project and the next,” McNamara explains, “but our practice is more to do with a way of thinking than a style. We’re always trying to push boundaries.”

Many of us come to famous buildings, those icons of architecture, by way of photographs, the coffee-table books and Sunday-supplement spreads of the latest places in New York, Cork, Los Angeles or London. But beyond the glossy photographs, architecture is also something that affects every aspect of how we live, work and relax, and although a building might look amazing in a book, someone also has to work in it, sometimes to live in it.

“It’s a thing that struck me recently,” says McNamara. “I was visiting someone in an apartment block, and I heard children laughing. I realised that wasn’t normal in an apartment building in Dublin. These kids were visiting, and their laughter took me by surprise. In Marseilles, when I visited Le Corbusier’s apartment building, the kids were riding their bicycles down the corridors into the lifts, which they take up to the rooftop, where they have a place to play.”

McNamara is excited by such buildings as a science centre that seems to defy gravity, in Wolfsburg,