

Optical measure

Sat, Jun 23, 2012

Amelia Stein's photographs of folded landscapes and abandoned houses show the cool meticulousness that is her trademark. But her warmth, and her Jewish heritage, are quickly on show at the kitchen table. **ARMINTA WALLACE** sits down for some home-made soup

I KNOW I'M AT the right house when I spot the mezuzah on the doorframe. There was a time when many houses in the maze of little roads west of Camden Street in Dublin carried these modest plaques inscribed with the words of a Jewish prayer. There aren't so many now. But it's a reminder that the photographer Amelia Stein, who has made so many well-known portraits of Irish celebrities, from David Kelly to Roddy Doyle, as well as documenting the recent history of the National Theatre and the turf stacks of Connemara, sees Ireland through very particular eyes. Irish-Jewish eyes.

What I've come to see are the prints for her new exhibition at the Oliver Sears Gallery in the city. "This is my new adventure," Stein says fondly, talking 90 to the dozen in her low-key, precise way about using a hand-held camera for the first time, about working with an artisan printer in Paris, about "the simple shape of the three-window cottage and the way the land folds over itself".

Wearing white gloves, she lays the prints one by one on the table in her dining room, where they glow like a string of pearls in black, white and infinite shades of grey. It's easy to see why these studies of the Erris peninsula, in Co Mayo, are called The Big Sky. At first glance the vast cloudscapes and abandoned houses strike a note of desolation. But that, Stein says, is just the start of the story.

When she began taking the photographs she went to the people who lived nearby to show them the results. "They were all so excited. 'Oh,' they'd say. 'That's so-and-so's house. He got cancer and the neighbours took him in.' Or, 'He has moved into a new house.' This house" – she points – "has turned into a maternity unit for sheep. So it's not all devastation and doom and gloom."

It is, though, a very different ambience from the confined and tightly framed world of the theatre, where Stein worked for many years. "This is much looser. How do you go into this landscape and make images about the size of it, the scale of it, the people who live there? You don't just get out of the car and say, 'I'm going to make a photograph now.'

"What you're waiting for when the clouds are moving is the right amount of light to flick across, and the right amount of light behind you. If the sun is too high here" – she sweeps a gloved hand across the print – "this is going to be too dark. The shadow won't fall as nicely. You see it. You stand. You look at it. You assess it. You wait. You get back in the car for 20 minutes. You wait for that big clump of cloud to move – and then, all of a sudden, you have this lighting thing going on."

So it is a kind of theatre after all.

Stein's studies of the Palm House at the National Botanic Gardens in Glasnevin before its recent restoration, meanwhile – some of which are also on show at the exhibition, and all of which are available in a stunning book that was published late last year, with an introduction by John Banville – capture its febrile spectacle in sumptuous detail.

Added to the years she has spent recording performances at the Wexford Festival Opera and at the Abbey Theatre – among the latter Siobhán McKenna in Tom Murphy's Bailegangaire, Anna Manahan with Marie Mullen in Martin McDonagh's The Beauty Queen of Leenane – it comprises an impressive body of work. Stein is happy to talk about her work but shies away from talking about herself. When the subject comes up – "We need to talk about you" – she emits a comical sigh. "Soup?" she says. And

we adjourn to the kitchen.

Within minutes she has produced homemade lentil soup and gluten-free bread, both delicious. She laughs. “I have a freezer full of soup. I’m Jewish. I’m supposed to.”

How Jewish is she, really? “Oh, I’m very. Yeah. I’m very Jewish. I’m not out there praying all the time. I’m not a praying person. I’m Jewish, I would like to think, in the way I behave. A lot of it has to do with what we’re doing here now, which is having people at your table, making a home, being conscious of your friends and your family, looking after your nearest and dearest and trying to do the right thing in your life and not being too . . . objectionable, I suppose.”

Stein’s parents, both now dead, were born in Ireland. “My mum lived in Leinster Road and my dad lived in and around Victoria Street. Upstairs I have a lovely picture that he took of my mum at, I think, Powerscourt Waterfall. She’s walking. She has a little scarf on. And she’s bending to pick a flower. It’s a terribly tender, romantic picture.”

Her father set up Stein Opticians on Grantham Street after his premises on Harcourt Road, which he founded in 1944, fell to the developers’ bulldozers in the 1980s. When she’s not working on photographic projects Stein still sees clients there; she has an appointment after lunch. We attack our food with renewed dedication, listening to the rain streaming off the roof outside.

“We are very lucky here in Ireland,” Stein says, suddenly. “There may be a recession on – there is a recession on. But look at this. I live in a house. I know where all my family are. I know where all of them are. We have food on the table. I have more than one pair of shoes. I’m not being persecuted anywhere. Our families have had great lives here in Ireland. The older you get and you realise the weight of the Holocaust and what happened in Europe, the more you realise how very lucky we are, living here.”

In her late teens and early 20s, her father’s interest in photography got Stein out taking pictures – “He had a camera and I could borrow it, simple as that” – but it was the magic of the darkroom that really hooked her. “You go through the experience of seeing something and then swishing the chemicals around and bringing it up. And you think you’re brilliant.”

IN A PREVIOUS exhibition, *Loss and Memory*, she recorded the closing of her parents’ house on Victoria Street with the cool meticulousness that critics have always praised in her work. But there is also affection and a kind of bittersweet humour. It is perhaps most evident in her portraits, such as the singular image of Stein’s partner, the painter Mick O’Dea, sporting an enormous eyepatch. What’s the story behind that? “We’re up in Mayo in Mick’s cottage,” she says. “He’s changing the angle of the lights on a beam in the roof. Paddy the builder has lent him a bit of scaffolding and the drill that shoots a bolt in.

“So he’s up there going, ‘Amelia, Amelia, I’m burning myself: there’s bits of burn coming down here.’ And I’m saying, ‘Is that so, darling? Bits of burn?’ And then the next thing is, ‘I’ve got something in my eye.’ I had a look, and there’s this lovely little black dot sitting in the middle of it.”

As an optician, Stein could see the potential for disaster. “They wheaked it out in the Eye and Ear. He was lucky.”

The timeless air of Stein’s photographs belies the hours of hard slog behind the scenes; hours, days, years of refining and experimenting and perfecting. “You need to know the craft in order to do the art, otherwise it won’t hang together,” she says. “I was very lucky that when I started working in theatre and the music business I met Steve Averill, who has done so many album sleeves with U2. At that time he was receiving a lot of books and prints from abroad, so he was at a level of engaging with photography that I hadn’t come across.

“There was no internet. You had to go to London, go to the print galleries, see what level you should be at. In the colleges now they teach all that. You can go online, go to exhibitions, settle your eye, settle your compositions. Always reinventing.” Her eyes sparkle with mischief. “There’s this old Jewish couple at the movies, right? And just before they leave there’s a trailer for next week. So they’re going out the door saying, ‘Always next week there’s a better picture.’ In a way, you think, Always next time I might take a better picture.”

In something of this spirit she plans to return to Co Mayo to continue her romance with the landscapes of Erris.

Is there anything she wants to add, while the recorder is running? She cuts a piece of bread, adds hummus, chews. “I’ll tell you what I do feel,” she says. “At 53, I don’t have the energy I used to have. I don’t have the same tolerance for the background noise that goes on in the culture. As you get older you funnel your energies differently, and what interests you differently. What you’re going to do and say with your work.”

She looks up and grins. “It all sounds very serious, doesn’t it? I’m not really like this. I’m much more likely to be messing about with recipes and things. Everyone thinks artistic people sit around talking about art all the time. I don’t think they do.”

The Big Sky and The Palm House are at the Oliver Sears Gallery, Molesworth Street, Dublin 2, until July 27th. Her book The Palm House is published by Lilliput Press

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