

ART...LINK



“...it’s like one of those strongman Mr. Universe champions, all bulging muscles on top of muscles on top of even more muscles. Except, it’s a cow.”

The artist Maria McKinney is from Inishowen. She is interested in the folk art that stems from rural mythology stretching back thousands of years and in this project for Artlink and the 2011 Inishowen Agricultural Society Annual Show, McKinney blends this interest with a fascination with the 'Belgian Blue' cattle breed.

For this year's Inishowen Agricultural Show the artist has designed two sets of prize garlands: one garland design is to be awarded to winners of the Belgian Blue classification; the other is to be awarded to the rest of the Champion-winning cattle. These new garlands are inspired by harvest knots. An age-old activity of binding straw into decorative shapes, traditionally used as blessings for buildings or given as a token of affection, making harvest knots has its origins in paganism and formed part of an annual ritual that worshipped the spirit of the corn/wheat/harvest.

The corn dolly (from which the harvest knot stemmed) was a vessel for the corn spirit to ensure it did not permanently depart from the farmer's fields when its home in the corn was harvested. Letting the corn spirit reside in the corn dolly figure through the winter ensured it was able to be restored to its rightful residence the following spring when it would be buried along with the seed and authorize the growing

of another crop. As such these objects acquired the status of symbols of fertility.

Fertility and breeding have been crucial to the emergence of the 'Belgian Blue' cattle breed. The cattle have a natural gene mutation which results in accelerated lean muscle growth, the 'muscles on top of muscles on top of even more muscles'. The defect is maintained through line breeding. Today we see the result of the 150 years of work in the modern Belgian Blue. An animal that is structurally correct and sound, docile in temperament, fertile in breeding, and above all the ultimate beef machine.

The artist arrived at the connection between the corn knots and these cattle through observing the spiral shapes necessary to be made when binding straw and the genetic make-up that is manipulated to achieve the desired results when breeding the Belgian Blue. The spiral DNA helixes and bound straw shares similarities in terms of pattern and shape. Part of the cattle breeding process utilizes plastic straws as hollow plastic tubes ready for containing bull semen for use in artificial insemination. It is from these hollow plastic straws she will make the garlands for the Belgian Blue categories, in order to echo the original purpose of the harvest garland, though re-interpreting it through artificial and

contemporary materials. By using these materials she will connect the natural traditions, mythology and fertility rituals of the countryside with the artificial methods used in modern animal breeding.

Ruth McCartney is another artist from Inishowen who has a long interest in rural traditions of weaving and spinning, which shares similarities in terms of pattern and shape with the tradition of corn dollies and harvest knots. For today's Agricultural Show, Ruth will lead workshops for children and adults in weaving, spinning, harvest knots and corn dollies.

Artlink is a visual arts organization in Inishowen which seeks to make our place in the heart of rural Donegal by commissioning artwork that originates in traditional activities and gives it a contemporary edge. For more info see www.artlink.ie



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