Michele Horrigan: Yesterday you showed me the first walking stick you ever made. Tell me about that.

Seanie Barron: I stumbled across it as I was going back by the railroad track. I had auld bits of stick before that, do you know what I mean, doing bits of sticks. I spotted this blackthorn, it was crooked and bent and I went in and started tearing and digging out this thing. It zigzagged down along there, so I said “I can’t leave that behind me.” It was onto a bit of a root, so I cut the root off it. It was badly done because the gift wasn’t in the hand at the time. I was still only learning.

Why was it this particular piece of stick caught your attention?

I saw old films long ago and fellas with unusual sticks. You should always go for a good straight stick, but this one was straight at the top and straight at the bottom with a zigzag down the middle. Like a snake. That stick took my mind and I said, “there’s unusual sticks out there, there is!” Roots in the ground grow and hit a rock. The root doesn’t know which way to go and it swells up in size.

So basically, the walking stick is upside down when you find it?

The root is the handle of the stick. It’s very important to get a good straight handle. And you work on that and you can twist and turn it around and scrape it to make it nice looking.

How long does it take to make a walking stick?

Well, you have to watch yourself with the blackthorn, if you get a dart of a thorn you could get blood poisoning and a lump underneath your arm. Oh, a trip to the doctor, that’s why a lot of people give up doing this and that. I often get darts of thorns and it’s sore, but I never get poisoned.
I've plenty of places to cut sticks around. It's hard enough to cut a stick, a good thick root would take five or ten minutes, drawing my breath and then I have to clean it down and take off the top of it. Then I bring it home, and I could have two stone weight of sticks above on my shoulders, down through the mud and away. I have to dry them out and keep them straight. It takes about six months. I'd be looking at them and I'd put them across my knee to straighten them, heating them in front of the fire. And then the green mould would be on them, I'd wash it off with a wire brush, leave them dry and start scraping them and scraping them.

Did you ever learn anything like this in school or did you just pick it up?

I'm in the middle of the family. Two went to school before me. Now it wasn't that I was backward, only that I wanted to be out, so they decided to put me up to the farm. A Farm Labourer. I had to go up there and work away. Three pounds a week I was getting at that time, two shillings for myself and the rest was going to the mother. And then I got three pounds and ten shillings, and I got the ten for myself and the rest went to the mother. It was there I learned everything about timber. I used to go down to the wood and bring cattle out and I'd see a stick and I'd be marking it for the next day, the way no one would see it only myself.

I've seen some of your sticks where you carved the head of a weasel into it and used bristles from a brush for his whiskers. I find it interesting that you often put in references to animals or nature, sometimes by carving or by introducing other materials.

I suppose it is.

Is that deliberate?

Sometimes it looks like something and I bring it around, like that stick I showed you with the fella swimming. If you can put something in that reminds some people of something... I haven't enough gear to make old crows or the feet of crows and things like that. Sure, I’ve only old knives, I don’t have the gear at all, but a knife will do as good you know.

I got bullets from hunters one time, they’re the fellas that give me the deer horns. Yer man said to me “you could put them on the bottom of the walking sticks.” I decided to put them in, but in the middle of the stick instead. The next thing another fella came up and asked “What’s the bullet there for?” I said, “To tell you the truth I went back the road and went into farmers’ fields, and one fella started roaring. Hadn’t he a gun in his hand.” “What happened?” The fella asked. “Well I took off running, with a dart of sticks above on my back and next thing was yer man shot his bullet, I put the stick up, and only for that I’d have got shot straight in the chest, only for that stick.” Didn’t he believe me! “Jaysus, you’re a lucky man,” he said.
A lot of your walking sticks have other uses as well, for pinning down an electric fence on farming land so that you can step over it without getting a jolt. Or the crook for a hunter to rest his rifle. And the sticks you made recently with a whistle on top.

The whistle stick, that’s a very safe stick now for a fella that’s going out walking. God forbid if anything happened to you down the field, you’d get tired of calling, you’ve a mobile phone nowadays and then maybe it wouldn’t work but you’d have a whistle stick in your hand.

I make a stick with a tickler to keep down the electric fences. It’s a little stick coming out of the middle of it to push down the wire. A little tickler I call it, just because if you hadn’t it there, you would get a little tickle off the electricity.

You had started some new sticks when I was in with you yesterday.

A woman asked me “can you make a stick for catching sheep?” I decided that a stick with a little crook handle could catch a sheep by the hind leg. The knuckle is bigger than the small bone there and you can put it in and catch the sheep. Didn’t we try it out at the farm and it worked.

Did you imagine that she was looking for something to catch them by the neck?

Yes. She said, “fair play to you that you thought of this.” Straight away I was thinking about catching sheep. Now, another woman in Crecora wants two more of them.

Some of these sticks have more than one use, it’s not just about walking any more...

They were made one time for faction fighting and some would kill you stone dead. They used to carry them to the fairs long ago and they’d be fighting, after porter. The Barrigone crowd and the Askeaton crowd meet, someone would say something and the crowd would fight away.

They had clout?

Oh yes, more clout altogether. That’s why fellas long ago, they’d be paring and making good sticks. Some people now who walk on the side of the road, they have to have a hazel stick. A hazel is the only stick that keeps away the spirits.

Really?

That’s a fact. To keep away the spirits, they’d say long ago, you’d want a hazel stick, nothing else would do. They used to put a bit of copper on the bottom of them, something to do with electricity in the ground. It keeps away the spirits. It could be all lies too but when you have an auld stick in your hand you feel safe anyway. I sold a stick to Jim Hayes and he’s over eighty-three years of age. The wind would knock him but once he has the stick in the hand he’d knock forty fellas. He gets the confidence.

When we first met, I was only aware of the walking sticks but you’ve made a lot of other variations. There is another stick called a priest, it’s like a club or a baton. Tell me the story behind it.

I used to be going to the pubs and auctions, and I was doing the auctioneering. “Who’ll give me one, two bob, twenty five!” The more porter I’d get in, the faster I’d talk! I made a kind of an auctioneer’s hammer, a gavel. Soon a banker came over to me. “I’m after getting a bit of hassle,” he says, “and I want
something in the car.” They were the only fellas that had good cars at that time, the bankers. The next thing he said to me was, “will you make me something for my protection?”

I see an auld fella from Cork, and he was saying, “wouldn’t you make a priest for him?” The fisherman used to have them hanging around, you know, for killing fish, to put them out of their misery, bang. So I made a right priest for this fella with a lump of blackthorn. I put the hands in, the mark of my fingers around it and the thumb and I just kept making it, you know, to suit my hand. Light enough that you can use, just for protection.

You’ve also been making pipes. They are very elaborate, like something out of a Lord of the Rings film.

I like to make them unusual, very, very unusual. I went to Canada one time and brought home a corn on the cob pipe. We knew nothing about corn on the cob here, it was bacon and cabbage we were eating. It was 1972. I said to myself, “couldn’t I make a pipe with the root that I cut off a briar?” And I got a nice little briar and I decided to bring it to a fella to drill the hole in it for the pipe. As I left my house, I fell out the door, and saw another briar was in my way. A right idea came into my mind, the fire was on inside and I went back in... I won’t tell you because this is a trade secret. I can’t tell you any more! Everyone says to me, “how in the name of God do you bore the hole in the pipe?” “Ah,” says I, “mind your own business!” I nearly gave the game away there!

I’ve noticed with your pipes that they have a lid. I’ve never seen that before.

They have a small lid. There’s a leather strap to hold the lid on. That’s the tongue of a shoe. It’s just to make it funny looking. Some people buy them just to put as an ornament somewhere or a collector’s item. But they’re made to smoke, you know.

The last few times I was back with you, and we were talking, you were telling me that people are starting to acquire your work on a more regular basis.

Last year, a fella came from England. Big John they call him. “I want a collection Killarney,” he said, “I want a collection of your sticks.” “Jaysus,” I said to myself, “I’m right here, if I get a couple of pound together it will be a great Christmas!” I made a whistle stick for him. He had seven or eight sticks got and I made a crib as well, thrown into the bargain. He was delighted with it. Another fella came down the road, a buddy of his, and he wanted three more sticks. So they’re starting to collect the sticks now. They can buy them all from me if they want! I’ll keep making.

A lot of them are going to the UK and the United States now. You don’t sell in shops. How do you manage to sell your work? Is it just being out and meeting people?

I’m talking and then they know me. I go to the fairs. In Killorglin last year, I saw fellas coming down the hill and up the hill. Then I said, “I’ve sticks here they’ll do for going down hills, they’ll stop you from going down fast and another one to push you up the hill again.” The Americans are delighted. “Oh my God, oh yeah, let’s see what you’ve got there,” they say. I love that noise. Tis then I put on the auld craic. I’d say, “that’s very dear there now missus but I’ll give it to you for seventy pounds... feck seventy pounds, I’ll give it to you for fifty.” Keep talking to them. If you can’t confuse them, convince them. And if you can’t convince them, confuse them!

I like to use my hands all the time, to test myself out, to see what I can do. Anything to do with nature I love. I’m really down to the ground. Anything in the ground, rooting in the bottom of the ground for a stick. How low can you go?! Another six feet, that’s all it is! And I’d be looking up then, and a blackthorn coffin and me inside it!
Furze stick
Hazel stick with elm handle carved as a clenched fist
Blackthorn stick with handle that resembles a seahorse’s head
Ash whistle stick
Strawberry stick with elm handle carved as an otter’s head
Hazel stick with handle carved in the shape of a swimmer's body
Hazel whistle stick with deer horn and ash handle
Ash stick with roots creating a natural handle
Blackthorn stick with a blackthorn root as handle
Ash stick with handle carved in the shape of a mink’s head.
Ash stick with deer horn handle and tickler
Ash stick with deer horn handle
Hazel stick
Briar stick with ash and blackthorn handle
Blackthorn stick
Blackthorn stick with handle that resembles a snake
Ash stick with deer horn handle
Sticks from West Limerick Hedges
Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes

West County Limerick, the day after St. Stephens’ Day, Sean Lynch and Michele Horrigan meet my West Limerick-born husband, our Belfast-reared son and I in the square of Askeaton. Locals, the “regulars”, mend the roof of the pub with some makeshift plywood after the previous night’s storms. We have a brief look around the “tourist information” in the square, containing not just a Civic Trust exhibition on the locals who had travelled on the Titanic, but also relics of several instalments of the Askeaton Contemporary artists’ residencies, which Horrigan and Lynch initiated and curate. We drive a few hundred metres further and are taken, without explanation, to the back of a council house from the 1950s, where Seanie Barron greets us warmly. In his icy coal shed and a small lean-to green house behind it, he readily shows us a vast array of walking sticks in various states of completion.

It is as though the coal had been “sprouting”, as if the local vegetation had claimed back the street of solid concrete council houses that give this part of the village an urban feel. Barron says: “You have to have a hobby”. He has over decades honed the art of walking in fields and woods with open eyes, finding suitable branches, cutting, drying and modifying them sparsely, most often by enhancing their twists and turns with the carving knife, or by mounting knotted handles or antlers on them. This hobby has enhanced his status in the community. He takes commissions from hunters, from farmers who need a crook with which to pull a sheep out of a herd, or from walkers who appreciate the tiny hook at the base of a cane that will hold electric fences down when stepping over them. No doubt owing to trial and error and lengthy conversations in the pub, the creations have become versatile, bespoke. And they have become local collectables in “sets” that Barron compiles upon demand. Exchange happens, pints are bought, some money changes hands.

Organically, Seanie Barron’s work is now stretching into the Civic Trust building, into Michele Horrigan’s curatorial practice – and by association also somewhat into her and Sean Lynch’s own practices, as their work has over the years been characterised by collecting (often local) stories that reveal and preserve otherwise untold histories, that practice (quasi-anthropological) attention to the inventiveness of people who do not feature in official accounts. They create asides or instructive footnotes to official history; unearth what would otherwise be forgotten. Such a collection by Lynch was exhibited at the Crawford Art Gallery, Cork, in 2012, and memorable objects, collected by the artist, with stories attached to them, have been shown as centrally as Dublin’s O’Connell Street – and of course abroad. Quite often the objects or stories refer to the fate of artworks in Ireland that reveal public understanding or otherwise: both pranksterdom and genuine care.

How can one grasp the sticks in an art context? Is Seanie Barron’s hobby “outsider art”? It might be. An obsessive nature is certainly a feature, but Barron has no anxiety to engage with contemporary art. He began attending openings of exhibitions in Askeaton. Art has met him, and he has met art. In art-historical terms Documenta 5, 1972, comes to mind: Harald Szeemann’s famous edition of this world-leading showcase of contemporary art, where, for the first time, art and non-art approaches were brought together under themed headings. Szeemann named his life’s project the “museum of obsessions”. Whether it is art or not is one of the least interesting questions. The context from which Barron’s sticks emanate, the social connections and memories that they feed and the links they establish, are more revealing.
Whether that was originally intended or not, his “hobby” is growing the practice of meaning-making in the locality and for Barron personally – through visual and material culture. Memories of how grandparents could read the land, how they did not waste anything and made do and mended are conjured and simultaneously extended into the present. He is giving value. Barron links his life and that of West Limerick with traditions, with vernacular material practices. One may no longer have a range in the house or thatch one’s home, but when walking the dog or surveying the field, the stick connects one to the surroundings and to other times. Even the city boy visiting Barron’s coal shed on this occasion, my son, was amazed to see such accomplishment: he is himself undergoing the stick- and spear-making era of the hunter and gatherer in our own back garden, bridging the millennia with ease.

While this may be a particularly male fascination, it is the opposite of sensually deprived ways of living. It has nothing to do with x-boxes and i-pads. Simultaneously, Barron also does not indulge in the anti-intellectual, anti-art prejudice that can sometimes grow in rural and/or working class contexts, where hostility to contemporary art is sometimes taken to be a given. His sticks are also an apt antidote to the status-quo-preserving, elitist populism that pervades lives everywhere via the flat-screen TV and which paradoxically denounces as elitist the kind of care and sensitivity that Seanie Barron gives to the environment, to his friends’ needs for tools – because it does not exist for monetary purposes alone, because it doesn’t shout, is not made of plastic. His “hobby” is embedded in the local; it is a practice that arises from a (still) timeless system, keeping it alive. It also feeds it with imagination, care and attention for the future. Through Barron’s “hobby”, his enhanced position in the local community is extended into the material realm, to other “audiences” and into the future.

Barron’s sticks and tools have in some way self-selected to be part of Michele Horrigan’s curatorial practice, her project of being based in Askeaton and of living in a community that sees contemporary art and meets artists. Barron becomes part of a system that cares for the locale and both witnesses and participates in the analysis of its social and cultural mechanisms, which is usually only afforded to the densely populated geographical, economic and (thus usually cultural) centre.

Seeing how it is not so useful to separate local vernacular culture and contemporary art in this case, Barron’s works become indistinguishable from the stories both Lynch and Horrigan collect in and as art and as things to curate, to exhibit to a local and – through visits and publication – to an international audience. Authorship is also not the most important aspect of what happens. The project of showing the walking sticks in exhibition, accompanied by this publication with professional photographs of the sticks in front of neutral background, satisfies all categories – and none. Classification doesn’t matter beyond providing a background to help with the meaning-making. Even funding departments’ remits, notoriously relying on classifications of all kinds, are becoming used to being stretched: Lynch and Horrigan profit from their track record of delivering excellent projects in an otherwise “deprived” cultural environment. If such under-representation and deprivation is in one way the reason for it being funded, the project works to subvert such lowly expectations by proving for all to see the riches to be found. The exhibition and publication are clearly spaces where several systems of reference and value, as well as timeframes play into one another.

In order for the system “art” to be satisfied or rightfully to be claimed, i.e. in order for us to know whether we are wasting our time trying to pay attention and make meaning or not, it is not sufficient to point to the enhancement of Barron’s status or the existence of pristine photographs in a contemporary art context. I will need to try out if the work – even its material manifestation, not just its social traction as a “relational” bringing together of people – is possible to be interpreted as art. Does it help us to make sense?
The stick bears in itself more than embeddedness in nature: it carries in its history aspirations to authority and status. Thus, it is not just a vernacular object, a tool, that may even have the associations of “disability”: historically it is part of Royal regalia, a sign that even when devolved to courtiers and society’s upper echelons still stands for status and class. In an Irish context, i.e. a post-colonial context, sticks cannot but contest (colonial) power and point instead to one’s own stick-carrying potentates: druids, bishops – and, questioning even that authority, latterly refer to dandies and artists.

Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz in their influential investigation of artists’ curriculum vitae since Vasari’s Lives of Artists (1550), when studying the underlying patterns in the biographies of those who would be discovered as great artists, found that shepherds feature very prominently: they were observed by those who we would now call curators, while using their staffs to doodle in the sand; their sign of authority, the stick, already in place. Discovery was waiting to happen.

Staffs are also more than drawing tools. As strangely formed branches or roots they were the first sculptures, used by early human societies in religious rites and as objects to be venerated. Barron thus settled on a hobby that historically bears all the conditions for discovery, all the hallmarks for the elevation of his practice to the realm of art and for latent status gain. And that does not just concern his standing in the pub, the “relational” exchanges that are now most easily recognised as features of contemporary art.

In an Irish context in the 20th century, walking sticks might first have been associated mostly with the landed gentry, but soon artists usurped that accessory: most prominently James Joyce (and his alter ego Stephen Dedalus in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man). When the later Joyce needed to explain to a puzzled readership the merits of the fluid language of Work in Progress (later to be called Finnegans Wake), he chose not to use words that would inevitably have narrowed meaning and explained the readers’ experience away, he chose to visualise what he meant: he published photos of driftwood pieces from a collection of strangely shaped wood, gathered by what in Ireland would be called a “mountainy man” in Austria, Johann Baptist Pinzinger. Joyce had visited his cabinet of curiosities, which the collector obviously took
seriously enough to have selected items photographed. Joyce in turn saw the potential of the photos he had bought, possibly owing to his friendship in Paris with the sculptor Constantin Brancusi, himself an avid wood-collector, and he published what he called “Fluviana” under his own name (merely acknowledging the photographer) in the leading avant-garde magazine of the time, transition in 1929. They here appear alongside Brancusi’s photographs of his studio: a very central and advanced location for interdisciplinary Modernist art. The readership would have understood such wooden pieces to be ready-mades, according to a strategy Marcel Duchamp had pioneered a decade earlier. Documenting “ready-mades” photographically soon became an important strategy with Brassai and Man Ray presenting their “involuntary sculptures” in the magazine Minotaure, 1933.

Photography took on the task of elevating strangely shaped roots and branches to objects deserving viewers’ attention – Karl Blossfeldt and Paul Nash would provide examples. In an almost anthropological manner, objects can be classified – similar to how in the early 20th century August Sander had documented people. Branches take on human qualities, and the issue of class that was Sander’s focus, while naturally being complicated when branches are concerned, still holds: staffs and canes conjure multiple associations and ascriptions of status, as has been observed. Contemporary photographic practice shares with the documentation of Barron’s sticks the anthropomorphic and anthropological bent: in Taryn Simon’s work even the white background is present (as opposed to Sander’s dark scenography).

Sculpture as conveyed through photography: this project thoroughly mixes – in good contemporary, but not narrowly post-modernist, manner – what one would have called “high” and “low” art forms, the vernacular and the refined, the “culchie” hobby and the royal cane. They are so thoroughly intertwined in fact that Barron’s immediate environs again need to be considered: they come into renewed focus. Askeaton features a Franciscan Friary, a Norman Castle and a Hellfire Club building (all ruined): staffs were the regalia in all these historical contexts. Producing instead less refined or precious canes retains the theme of staffs, but differently. Our attention turns to where the wood for the canes has been found, the fields at the end of Barron’s street and surrounding Askeaton. In this part of the world the higher status (than predictable, institutionalised aspirations to authority) is to be found in the landscape: here, the seat of learning, the location of the preservation of Greek and Latin knowledge – including more than likely Vasari’s texts on artists’ lives – was historically to be found in hedge schools. These were wide-spread in Ireland over many centuries, but particularly constituted a response to the Penal laws from 1723 to 1782, when Catholic schools were forbidden and the community was educated to read and write and calculate by hedge school teachers. However, the bardic tradition that kept classical learning alive also flourished in them occasionally. Locals learned literally in and from the hedges. It is logical to take from the hedge what would materially remind one of one’s origins as the “sons and daughters of kings”, as the cliché goes.

Finding the material for canes in these hedges then is at once post-colonial understatement and the “cheek” (chutzpa elsewhere) that claims the highest authority for nothing more elaborate than a hedge-grown stick, a sign of authority that was – or is – more found than made or bestowed, and thus also more ancient, more valid. It is entirely in keeping with a context in which the highest learning was sustained in nature and against prohibition by the coloniser that West Limerick should contribute to international contemporary art Lynch’s and Horrigan’s unearthed, curated and re-valued local (hi)stories – and Seanie Barron’s sticks.

Since 2006, Askeaton Contemporary Arts commission, produce and exhibit contemporary art in a small town in County Limerick, Ireland. An annual residency programme entitled Welcome to the Neighbourhood situates Irish and international artists in the midst of Askeaton each summer, while thematic exhibitions and associated events often occur. Through these methods, over fifty projects have been realised. This approach is built on a belief that contemporary art can be used as an active hub for local society, as a form of critique, investigation and celebration where artists and the liberal voices of creativity play a primary and fundamental role.

For further information, downloads and updates please see www.askeatonarts.com
Askeaton
Contemporary Arts