

‘Fiery’ isn’t really the word for Helen Kirwan. Like her art she’s low-key but bold, restrained but relentless. “I’m very determined,” she says. “And I love a challenge, I must admit” – yet it’s also true that her life has been a series of accidents, “unplanned, in a way”. She hadn’t intended to be a lawyer – but she went back to Ireland to be with Reg, there were no social-worker jobs to be had (the Church had a stranglehold on that sort of thing) so she started studying Law, and loved it. Decades later, with her husband already unwell and her art having long since been demoted to a Sunday hobby, she moved to a job in Canterbury “and I realised there was an art college in Canterbury which had a good reputation, called the Kent Institute of Art and Design – so I thought ‘I’ll just go and see if they’ve got any evening classes or something... Just to keep my hand in, so when I retire I’ll be able to do it more”.

The rest, in its small way, is history – and that’s how it seems to have gone, a high-achieving woman nonetheless carried along by superior forces, brilliant mentors (Roger King, her tutor at art school, was another one) and fortuitous circumstances. As a barrister, she was respected and combative, but “in my private life I was happy to have a quiet life”. (She even declined to play bridge, she recalls, because it was too competitive.) Most strikingly of all, 20 years after trying to find evening classes so she could get back to doing art after her retirement, she’s reached the age when most of her peers *have* retired – yet, creatively, she’s stronger than ever, her work shown all over the world and at three consecutive Venice Biennales.

It took over a decade, as already mentioned, to process the loss of her husband; “I was so floundering”. Even now, “my work isn’t confessional at all,” she insists; “I didn’t want to make work about *me* at all”. (She practically flinches when I ask if it’s been ‘therapeutic’.) We live in a narcissistic age, when artists are encouraged to exploit their personal tragedies and let it all out – but Helen is 71 and she comes from an earlier age, when you kept it all in and found poetic ways to express it. In a way, she’s glad she didn’t go to art school as a young girl: “If I’d gone to the Slade, for example, then – aged 17 or 18 – I mean, I would’ve been eaten for breakfast! I was so naïve, I had nothing to say.” Instead she prizes older-person values like restraint and simplicity, drawn to the “starkness” of flat empty vistas in places like Iceland (where she did a residency in 2019) and Kazakhstan.

Don’t confuse the work with the woman, of course. Helen herself is worldly and sophisticated, upper-middle-class by training and temperament. She loves her cheese and wine, and sitting in her big house in Kent surrounded by her many godchildren (she and Reg never had kids, by choice). She does a lot of reading, currently taking advantage of being in Cyprus to revisit Heidegger’s *Early Greek Thinking*. She actually did an MA in Philosophy after her art degrees, and borrowed ‘Memory Theatre’ – the title of the piece about measuring the sea with buckets – from a book by the philosopher Simon Critchley.

One might say the art reflects that contrarian streak she mentioned earlier, a quiet subversive streak forged in the stiff conventions of rural Ireland and the strict confines of Cheltenham Ladies’ College – and the art reflects something else too, a general preference for ‘less is more’. “I don’t want to put any more objects in the world,” she tells me, quoting the conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner; she prefers to use what’s already there, like a spy or a magpie. Making art out of chopped-up pomegranates? At 71, she still loves a challenge.

*Cyprus Academy of Arts (CAA) is the biggest specialist Art & Design Higher Education Institution in the Republic of Cyprus. CAA offers courses at Pre-Degree, Undergraduate and Masters level in Fine Art, Animation, Film&Photography as well as Graphic Design. CAA also operates a public art gallery and runs international artist residency programme, artist and photo studios as well as weekend/evening/summer courses for prospective students and the general public. [www.caa.ac.cy](http://www.caa.ac.cy)*