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The art of crying



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WORK SPACE: Cecily Brennan has made a study of grief - video of an elderly woman in tears. Is there an autobiographical element to the sadness, asks **Gemma Tipton**

WHEN WAS THE last time you had a good cry? Perhaps it was in the darkness of the cinema, after an argument, to do with a trauma or tragedy, or at one of those moments when everything feels overwhelming. You may not have had an audience, but if you did, chances are you made an effort to hide your face, bowing your head or ducking behind the barricade of tissues.

Sitting in artist Cecily Brennan's pale blue kitchen, with the sunshine darting in through the French windows, we're considering the issue of sadness. With a cup of tea in hand, the kitchen seems a good spot to have such thoughts – it has clean, spare lines, but nevertheless it is the kind of comforting place that's nice to sit in. Welcoming and lived-in, it's also the kind of place where you feel you could chat for hours. Brennan had it redesigned, many years ago, by friends, the architects O'Donnell Tuomey, swapping a new

kitchen for a painting in one of those arrangements that creative people often dream up.

What has prompted our conversation is the first cut of a video piece that fixes on the face of an older, crying woman as she delves into the depths of an unexplained grief.

“We don’t want to recognise sadness,” says Brennan. “When we see someone cry, we look away.” We also often do anything we possibly can to distract ourselves (and others), to avoid tears at all costs, and I’m not always sure that is terribly good for us. These are feelings that are, for many people, “frighteningly ordinary and present”, and what Brennan wants to do is to describe them in “an extraordinary” way.

Oddly, looking at the video, the first thing I feel like doing is laughing – not a laugh of joy, but that sort of nervous giggle you wish you could get over. It’s compelling, though, this weeping, and you can see Britta Smith, who is doing the crying, go from acting her tears to really feeling deep emotion. Is there a story behind it?

“No, the problem about a story is that it can overwhelm a work, the work becomes about the story, it’s like a trap, so I wanted to avoid that.” Brennan gave Smith notes on what she wanted to achieve, and the actress came to the studio one day. “She wouldn’t let anyone be with her while she was crying, so we didn’t know what we were going to get until it was done.”

Trap or not, stories are our way of explaining and understanding the world, so watching Smith cry, I begin to go through in my mind all the things it might be, then onto many of the things that have made me cry in the past, and from then to wonder if this work is somehow autobiographical. No, Brennan’s own story doesn’t include depression, “although I do get periods of blackness”, and she traces this evolution in her work instead to a period in Iceland – though that’s getting ahead of things.

Did she always want to be an artist? “I think I did.” Brennan studied at Dublin’s NCAD, where she met her husband David Kavanagh (who runs the Irish Playwrights and Screenwriters Guild, and is on the board of Dublin’s Light House Cinema). That was in the 1970s, which is not famed as a great time for artists in Ireland, but Brennan remembers it very positively.

“There was a shift, and the women’s movement made a big impact.” Up until then, “art school was always a place a lot of women went to, but they didn’t continue on working as artists”. Leaving college, she and a number of other artists, including Eithne Jordan, set up a studio, which was the first independent studios to be funded by the Arts Council – it’s still in existence today, as the Visual Arts Centre on North Brunswick Street. She also became a director of Project Arts Centre and, at this time, she was painting landscapes.

“There was a market then,” she smiles. The Taylor Galleries took her on, and, by selling work in advance, John Taylor enabled Brennan to go to Iceland.

There, Brennan felt the connection between landscape and emotion more strongly than ever, and her work began to reflect how we endure life’s hardships, how there is beauty in melancholy, and how seldom we stare unflinchingly at illness, depression and life’s difficulties. Brennan, however, is an interesting mixture of serious and witty, which is probably what makes her work compelling and fascinating rather than relentlessly sorrowful. The work is beautiful, too. In the studio, there is a line of expertly rendered watercolour sketches of Smith’s crying face, as well as two huge drawings in black and white.

At this stage we have moved to Brennan’s bright studio, which she had prefabricated and craned in to the site she had found for it, not far from her home. “We had been living in London, David’s work had taken us there, and our son, Jack is there now, studying anthropology. When we came back, I worked in a room in the house before I got a space in the Temple Bar Gallery and Studios. But I didn’t want to keep having to look for a new studio, so this is perfect.”

When she found the site, Brennan says she spent a lot of time “just sitting in it, working out the light,

imagining a studio here”. She drew out the design, with lots of wall space, good height, a relatively small window, and northern light – the most constant light for an artist to work with. “Sheila looked over the drawings, just to check.” Then, Brennan sent the designs to a company called Extra Space (extraspace.ie), and one day a crane arrived and the whole studio was just lifted in.

The scale of the studio allows her to work on large drawings and paintings, a process very different from detailing small pieces.

“With a large work it’s like playing chess. Every move you make affects something else. The physical energy required is amazing too – sometimes I feel I’m wrestling with it.”

She tells me a tip she got from another artist, Oliver Comerford, which is to take photos of a painting as you go along. “It’s good, because you can imagine you’ve lost something, rubbed out something that was great, and you can go back and see that maybe it wasn’t so good after all. You can often think the thing that’s gone was brilliant, and gone forever.”

We walk back to the house and talk about that perennial problem for artists and writers, although almost certainly for accountants, plumbers and scientists too, of getting down to work.

“I’m getting better at it, getting better at making work too, I think. And if I don’t work for a while I get tense. Sometimes I sit here at home and I think ‘don’t go to the studio, don’t go . . .’ I have better boundaries than I used to, I don’t get so anxious.”

Brennan tells me that after the video was shot, but before it was edited, she got the news that Smith, who was in her seventies, and had been in such films as *Breakfast on Pluto*, *The Magdalene Sisters*, *The Boxer* and *My Left Foot*, had died. Did that change how she felt about the work?

“I think it did. But without exploitation or over-sentimentality, you’re trying to create a space where people can have access to sadness, that’s what I’m thinking about with this work, it’s not complicated.”

I leave, into the sunshine outside, thinking that in future I’ll try not to avoid sadness, and instead will try to recognise what I’m actually feeling. But, a day or two later, on the first black thought, I’m at it again, distracting myself, avoiding it. Back to normal.

Black Tears by Cecily Brennan is at Dublin’s Taylor Galleries from next Tuesday until May 8th. See taylorgalleries.ie, or tel: 01-6766055

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