

Liam faces the road with 1916 exhibition

AN idea that lived for 10 years in the head of West Kerry artist Liam O'Neill before finally escaping onto canvass will be on display in Dublin this week before crossing the Atlantic for an exhibition in May at the Irish Consulate New York.

The idea was for a collection of portraits based loosely around the Irish cultural revival that formed a backdrop to the Easter Rising. The central figures in the Rising were later added to the mix and so the exhibition includes portraits ranging from Tomás Aghas to WB Yeats and from John Millington Synge to Pádraig Pearse.

The portraits might seem like a change of direction in Liam's work, which is most closely associated with the people and landscapes of West Kerry, but in reality this exhibition brings him back to where he started.

Liam taught himself how to paint in the late 1980s, when he was living and working as a teacher in Dublin. He began painting on the kitchen table, taking the great Irish writers as his subjects and so he painted "Beckett after Beckett and then Joyce after Joyce" as he honed his art. The paintings ended up in the attic and, as Liam recalls, "it took a hell of a long time to clear the place out when we moved back to Kerry 14 years ago".

Looking at West Kerry anew he discovered "how big it was". "I was amazed by the landscape and the colours and I started painting that."

Liam gave away the early paintings until a relative insisted on paying him for one. "He gave me \$100 and I thought, Christ, this is real money." These days the paintings sell for a lot more but the work

isn't about the money. "The satisfaction is that somebody says, I like that so much, I'm going to pay for it."

No surprise then that Liam has given no thought to whether or not this return to painting portraits is a sound commercial proposition. "They could have been shown in Cathair Scuilibín or New York, it didn't matter... but I couldn't let the centenary of The Rising pass without doing something on the subject," he says.

The exhibition will be staged in the Shelbourne Hotel, Dublin, for one night on this Thursday; it opens in Dublin's Oriel Gallery on Saturday, April 23, for a two-week showing and it will be shown on May 26 in the Irish Consulate in New York. Given Liam's standing as an artist, it'll be no great surprise if some few of them get sold somewhere along the way!