

Kevin Sharkey – sees the big picture



• Kevin Sharkey



» **JOHN HEDGES**

AN PHOBLAUGHT EDITOR

Charles Saatchi, Whitney Huston, Matt Lucas, Courtney Love, Michael Portillo and Kate Moss have all bought his

paintings – now Ireland’s most prolific artist tells *JOHN HEDGES* why he's joined Sinn Féin.

LAUGHING AT and debating artist Kevin Sharkey’s provocative, funny, raw and searingly honest views on life growing up black and Irish in 1960s Ireland to become one of our most internationally successful artists left me wondering briefly at 10am on a wet Monday morning in Dublin after an hour-long, rapid-fire repartee why the former presenter isn’t on TV or radio more often.

It’s probably because the likes of Marian Finucane’s shows couldn’t handle him. He’s too honest.

He’s not impressed by TV management in Ireland or its reliance on ‘the usual suspects’ (or friends) for its panels and commentaries.

The Dublin-born black personality raised in Donegal has publicly lambasted RTÉ for its slowness to reflect the changing cultural profile of the people of Ireland.

“Every face I see on RTÉ is a white face,” The Irish Sun reported him saying in December. “It feels like apartheid when I see all these white faces.”

He understands how people’s attitudes are influenced by their upbringing and experiences and admits to An Phoblacht that he has prejudices but adds that that shouldn’t impact on people’s rights as human beings.

“There’s a difference between holding what are racist views and wanting to burn people out of their homes because they’re black or come from Eastern Europe.”

Racism has always been with us, he says, but adds:

“We all need to get over our prejudices. In Ireland, we are a nation who pride ourselves in our identity, but it shouldn’t be to the exclusion of other people who want to contribute.”

The Iona Institute/John Waters ‘Pantigate’ controversy naturally comes into any discussion of identity.

“For me it’s never been about black rights or gay rights, it’s always been about human rights. As a human being I deserve the right to fall in love with who I want, not who somebody else thinks I should, and as a human being I deserve to be treated as equal – that’s it.

“I think that’s what we’ve shifted away from, where you have idiots like John Waters and the Iona Institute turning the whole issue into ‘Oh, but you’re bad people, you’re sinners.’” Kevin spreads his hands upwards as if delivering a religious sermon and continues: “Hang on a minute. You guys believe in God? So, you like the sunset, you like

the seas, you like the flowers, you like the birds. So did God have a hangover when he was making gays?”

From Killybegs to Kirsty MacColl

Kevin was born in Dublin in 1961 but raised in Killybegs, County Donegal, by a foster family. There were very few black people in Ireland at that time.

Kevin laughs now at the everyday, unthinking attitudes of even very caring, kind people towards a black child growing up in rural Ireland.

“The lovely woman up the road, by no means racist, used to give me a banana when she gave all the other kids Marietta biscuits. One day I threw the banana down and she asked me what was wrong. What was wrong? I wanted a fucking Marietta biscuit like everybody else!”



• Kevin's limited edition 'United Ireland' prints have proven to be very popular

In adult life, he has met his estranged siblings in London but growing up as the only black kid in town (“I didn’t see another black kid until I was nearly 13”) was testing.

“I grew up thinking, ‘Fuck, I’m from Killybegs – that makes me a culchie. Shit. Then I know I’m black. Oh, no! And then a couple of years later, when I realised I might be gay, I thought: ‘Oh, come on, you’re having a fucking laugh.’ Black, Irish and gay!

“So I spent years trying to be anything than what was staring me in the face. In the end, I was able to come back full circle and realise that those four things – being a culchie, being black, being gay, being Irish – they are bonuses because when you’re in a minority you become a fighter who takes on challenges and perceptions.”

He went from his foster family in Donegal into care in an industrial school in Galway run by the Christian Brothers (“the meanest bunch of fuckers I’ve ever met”) before leaving and sampling a wide range of jobs.

As well as being Ireland’s first black TV presenter in 1985/86 as co-host with Flo McSweeney fronting RTÉ’s Megamix music show (credited with showcasing bands such as Aslan, The Pogues and Something Happens), he’s been on RTÉ’s Celebrity Farm and been a fisherman, an actor, a model, a chef at the Hard Rock Café, and a cleaner in London to singer Kirsty MacColl. Kevin was at Kirsty’s wedding to Steve Lillywhite, the Grammy award-winning record producer for The Rolling Stones, U2, Big Country, Peter Gabriel, Talking Heads, Morrissey, Siouxsie and the Banshees, Simple Minds and Joan Armatrading.

“The day I got a job with RTÉ as a presenter, do you know what Kirsty’s first words to me were? ‘Does that mean you won’t be able to come and clean anymore?’

“Hello! I was a good cleaner but what happened to ‘Congratulations, my cleaner’s going to be famous?’”

Kirsty and Kevin remained firm friends up until Kirsty’s death in 2000.

He’s also written music for Boney M with Bob Geldof and for Geldof himself, who Kevin describes as “a real grumpy old bugger, wouldn’t spend a penny on a cup of tea but a very intelligent man with a heart of gold and loves his kids”. (Our interview took place three weeks before Geldof’s daughter, Peaches, was found dead from unknown causes at the age of 25 with her 11-month-old son by her side.)



• **Kevin Sharkey with his design 'Moolah The Cow'**

Thinking back to his growing up in rural Ireland, he chortles at the small part he had in a couple of episodes of Father Ted, playing a 'Fr Shaft'. In one scene, Fr Shaft is asked by a nun what he thinks of all the work being done by priests in Africa, to which he replies: "Sure I wouldn't know, I'm from Donegal."

He laughs uproariously when he recounts being chosen as a model for another part by world-famous photographer David Bailey ("the ultimate celebrity photographer" – Daily Telegraph). David Bailey's subjects include The Beatles, Mick Jagger, Rudolf Nureyev, Andy Warhol and East End gangsters the Kray twins. And Kevin Sharkey.

"David Bailey photographed my dick!" Kevin screams with a triumphant roar. "How's that? Everyone's had their face photographed by him; I figure if you're going to be photographed by David Bailey, you may as well make it memorable."

Charles Saatchi and a 'United Ireland'

Self-taught, Kevin says he took up art "as therapy", explaining that after what he'd been through, "If I wasn't going to be creative I was going to be destructive."

Other people took notice of his talent and he realised he could make a living pursuing his passion when he got almost instant global recognition with Charles Saatchi buying a small painting of his in London.

“Suddenly, people were calling me from all over the world out of the blue. I didn’t know who he was then but he is seen as a trend setter, as a sort of weather vane in the art world and it took off from there.”

A full-time artist since 1972, Kevin has earned a name as a prolific artist, producing some 9,000 pieces in 12 years.

One of his most recent pieces he’s particularly proud of is titled ‘United Ireland’. It’s a signed, limited edition print run on canvas, each one with its own certificate of authenticity, of which there are only 300 at €325 each.



- **Kevin was RTÉ’s first black presenter when he fronted the Megamix music programme with Flo McSweeney in 1985**

Making art accessible to ‘ordinary’ people is part of Kevin Sharkey’s perspective about painting.

“I’ve had my paintings bought by window cleaners, road sweepers, swimming pool attendants, housewives, grannies, and so many of them had never bought a painting before. That is a huge compliment for me as somebody who is self-taught. I feel privileged that I can give some pleasure and happiness to people who hadn’t enjoyed owning a painting before.”

His work has sold for up to €30,000 for an individual piece. Twice a year, Kevin has a studio clearance sale where all his paintings are €500 (he also has payment plans for individuals or groups to make it easier to buy).

“Galleries say I should charge much more but at three grand a painting you have to seriously think about it and get all the family’s views on it. Five hundred quid is not nothing but it’s not a fortune for a painting.”

“The ones I sell mean other people can enjoy them and I can still be an artist tomorrow and next week as well. Without that, it’s just dream.”

Artist to activist

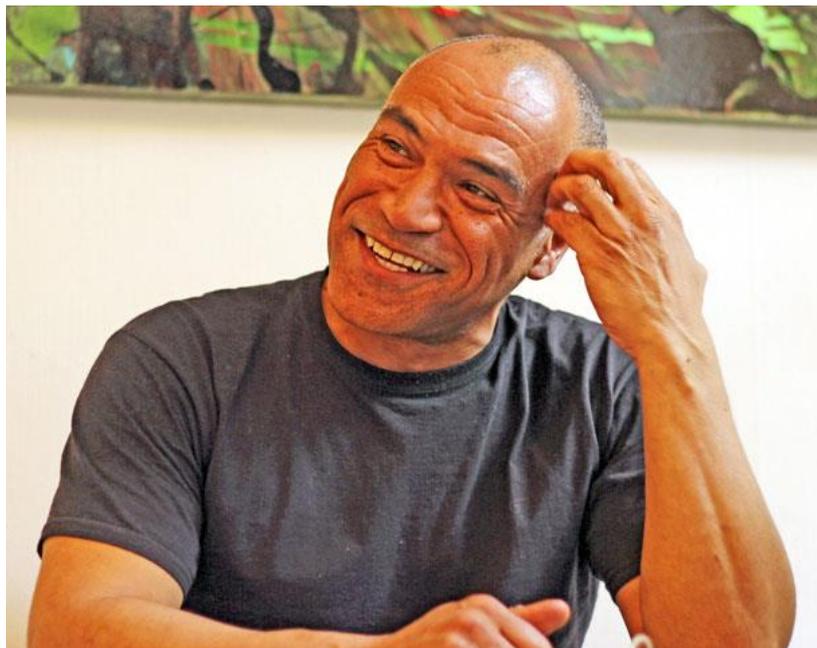
Kevin Sharkey joined Sinn Féin in September of last year.

“Why? Because it’s the best ticket in town at the moment.

“Sinn Féin is the most exciting political party that I can find and it’s probably peopled by some of the most dedicated, focused and,” he says, pausing before he adds, “principled people. I didn’t find that in politics much.

“I grew up with Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the usual and my family and people around me voted that way but, ultimately, it’s the same old show, it’s the same old thing.

“In terms of rooting for the small guy and woman, it’s Sinn Féin that does the business.”



Kevin has been impressed not just by the party's political progress but by its leaders' character.

“Gerry Adams – legend, absolute fucking legend,” Kevin says, inhaling deeply, giving his pronouncement added emphasis. “That’s a man who will be talked about long after you and me are forgotten, a statesman and a man of incredible integrity, belief and principle.

“When I looked at the party and met Mary Lou [McDonald], what I found was a group of solid people who believed in something rather than being on the gravy train, feathering their own nests or lining their own pockets.”

You can see the Dáil from Kevin's gallery at 35 Molesworth Street and his admiration and affection for Mary Lou McDonald shine through.

“When I see Mary Lou in the Dáil talking about the Rehab bosses and other issues and you see that this is a woman who has not just a huge heart but someone who uses her day, her brain, her family, her life to create a better Ireland for all of us.

“I joined Sinn Féin because I believe Sinn Féin are the future.”

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