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# Top Irish artist Kevin Sharkey on coming from homelessness to being more successful than ever

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**Kevin Sharkey**



Top Irish artist Kevin Sharkey has told how he came back from homelessness to become more successful than ever.

The controversial painter was living in a tent in a camping park in 2016, after falling victim to the housing crisis.

But now he’s back running his own gallery off Dublin’s Grafton Street, where his work has recently been bought by a Picasso collector.

Sharkey, 60, told the Irish Mirror: “It’s a long way from having nothing, to having the best exhibition in town.

“My focus was to use my talent to climb back not just into the arena, but to the champion’s arena.

“It meant sticking to a plan and getting on with painting and varnishing, delivering, promoting and selling, with no days off.

“Being an artist means life is fraught with good times and bad times, mistakes, lessons and successes.

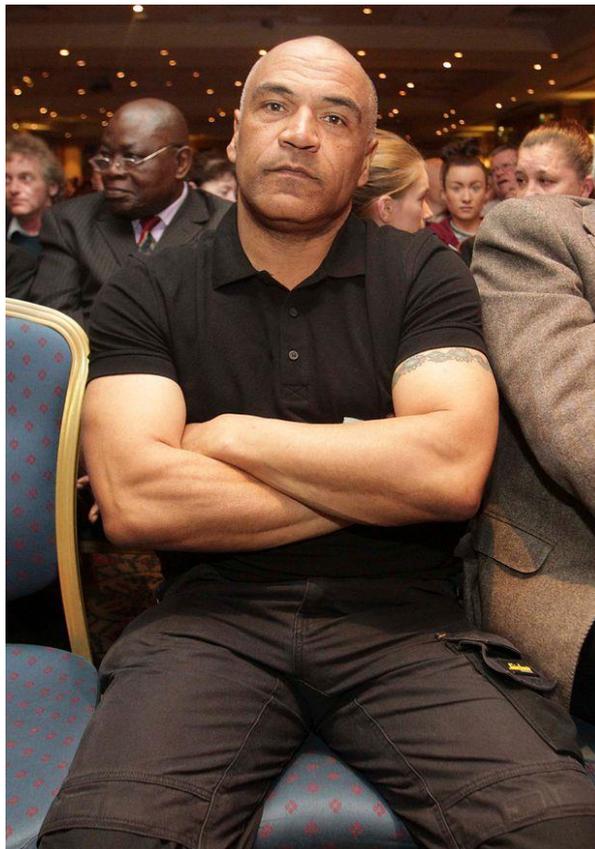
“When I see my paintings now going into beautiful homes, it’s so far away from the lowest point of the journey.

“But you can’t let it beat you. You have to always remember what could be. As Oscar Wilde said: We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.”

The Donegal man’s gallery on upmarket Dawson Street in Dublin is attracting a wealthy clientele, with paintings priced from approximately €5,000 to €50,000.

One of his fans is Irish-based art collector Mel T Sutcliffe, whose personal gallery contains works by Pablo Picasso, Francis Bacon, Jack B Yeats and Lucien Freud.

“He has 20 of my paintings. It has elevated me into the big boys’ club. For a self-taught artist, that’s an incredible compliment, and it’s incredibly important to me.”



**Kevin Sharkey**

It’s Sharkey’s latest comeback in a rollercoaster life and career.

During the Celtic Tiger, Kevin was the toast of the art world and made millions as an international artist with galleries in London, Dublin and New York.

Known as one of Ireland's highest-selling painters, Sharkey's works are owned by celebrities including Kate Moss, Bob Geldof, Michael D Higgins and Enya.

He made millions but managed to lose it all in the bust, saying he'd pumped all his earnings back into the economy, opening galleries and so on.

His fortunes fell in the recession and things worsened until he ended up homeless six years ago, dependent on sheltered housing for a number of months until he found accommodation.

He said at the time: "I'm proof that becoming homeless can happen to anyone. This is the reality of the crisis. Don't think you're immune."

It has worsened in the intervening years, affecting almost everyone. Why has this happened?

Always politically-minded, Sharkey believes the problem stems from a nation that has lost its sense of identity - and its spirit of community and society.

"The banks in Europe seem to run most of the politicians and their goal is not for Ireland but for Europe.

"I was brought up as a youngster in Donegal to stand for the national anthem, at a time when it meant something to be Irish. These are simple things, but they are the backbone of my education and culture. A Government of such a country has an obligation to its people."

He's come back from the brink and says after his eventful life, he sees our time here as a series of chapters, some good, some bad.

He has recently written his extraordinary life story - of adoption, abuse and industrial schools - and is preparing to give it to a publisher.

The book is titled: *It's The Devil Himself*, which is what Sharkey says his late adopted mother used to say about him.

Sharkey was born in a Dublin 'mother and baby' home, the son of an Irish mother and a Nigerian father who was a student in the Royal College of Surgeons at the time.

He grew up in Killybegs in Co Donegal, after being adopted by a family, and was, as he says: "The only black kid in the county."

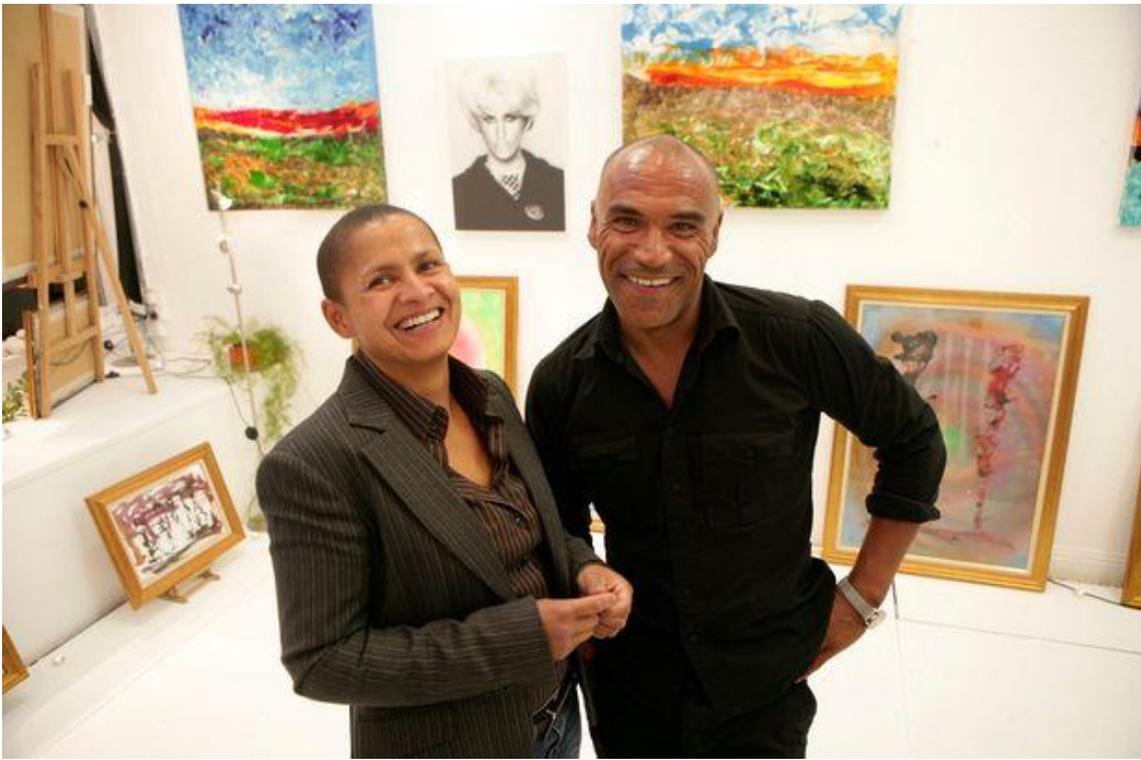


He tells how he didn't see another black person until he was 13.

"My identity has never been in question - but when people look at me, they see my father and not my mother. They're looking at me like I'm a black man and I'm thinking: I'm a Donegal man. I'm as Irish as they come, I had 37 medals for Irish dancing at the age of 11.

"When I went to London later on in life, I met all these black people. I didn't know about soul music or Otis Redding or Aretha Franklin. Where I grew up it was Big Tom and the Mainliners and Bridie Gallagher songs."

He suffered a childhood of abuse before being sent to foster care at the age of 12 and then to St Joseph's Industrial School in Galway.



**Kevin Sharkey and Shaz Oye**

He remembers as a boy in Donegal ensuring never to smile in family photographs. "I was afraid my real mother might see me smiling," he explains. "And if she thought I was happy in my new family, she might not come back for me."

He adds: "It was traumatic, but I always understood I was in a very unusual situation and took mental notes of what was happening. It's a story of love and violence and forgiveness and healing, racism and aggression. All the things that shape you as a person.

"My biggest goal in life, apart from the art, is to bring some justice to the injustices that happened to me as a child."

After growing up in Killybegs, a town of "fishing and farming" it was as a teenager in Galway he started painting as a means of escape.



**Kevin Sharkey at a special meeting of Carlow County Council** (Image: Dylan Vaughan)  
He went on to work as a chef, a model, an actor and a TV presenter before he realised he was an artist.

Despite a troubled start - or perhaps because of it - he went on to be a trailblazer in Irish life: activist, artist and at one stage, presidential candidate.

Kevin was the first black presenter on Irish television, when he hosted RTE's Megamix show in the 1980s.

He is now one of the most successful Irish painters of all time, having sold more than 10,000 paintings.

Known for being outspoken, he is not afraid to put his head above the parapet even in the age of cancel culture.

"If you're an independent minded person, you have to say something, even if it's not PC," he says. "You don't have to go along with the programme.

"When challenged, I have to say: That's my way of looking at things. I respect your beliefs, but it has to go both ways."

It's Sharkey's unshakeable self-belief that has brought him back from the brink to back on top. What's the secret to it?

"One of my favourite expressions is: 'Aren't I great?'" he jokes.

"Because we were brought up in a culture where we weren't told we were great, where we were squashed.