

Shifting Sands

Artist members

Queen Street Studios

BELFAST HAS ALWAYS been a city in flux, reflecting the very ground it is built upon – the words *béal* and *feirste* themselves making reference to a river and the sandbar that traversed it, a constant but ever-changing feature. Thus, it has always been a city that is hard to pin down, to predict or to define simply in a few words. But perhaps this nuanced identity is its identity, bounded by a sense of persistence, renewal and potential.

Like many arts organisations throughout Belfast, Queen Street Studios (QSS) has a story that mirrors the city itself. Back in the early 80s, there was no studio provision or art suppliers in Belfast, no real gallery accessibility for non-established artists and little support for graduates. QSS emerged in 1984 as a direct response to these challenges, starting on the top floor of a former printers on Queen Street (up 91 steps); with 11 founding members and a grant of £3,000 from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. As relayed by founding member Damien Coyle: “I think it was actually a big sea-change for the visual arts in Northern Ireland. It showed that artists could take control; they could do something for themselves.”

Ten years later, membership had increased to 24, with 68 artists passing through the doors. In 2001 QSS launched a new gallery space to showcase work mostly by emerging artists. Further expansion included the ‘digital studios’ in 2003, which spun off over time to become the Digital Art Studios (DAS). Despite such strides, our premises on Queen Street had seen better days, prompting a move to Bedford Street in 2013. Here, QSS occupied a fine, street-facing gallery with 23 studios spread across four floors. Satellite studios for recent graduates were added four years later at Norwich Union House. All was well until 2018 – our *annus horribilis* – which saw the announcement of Bedford Street redevelopment, a 100% funding cut (later re-instated) and the Primark fire in Belfast city centre, which forced the closure of Norwich Union House.

So in 2019, after 35 years of city centre residence, QSS moved to what was once the Bloomfield Bakery in the heart of East Belfast. This relocation has worked well, with forty artists now occupying 37 self-contained studios and a 354m² refitted exhibition space. 61% of our studio-holders have been professionally active for more than ten years, with a further 25% of studios ring-fenced for early career artists. These details aside, the unfolding story of change and renewal is told best by the artists themselves:

Jennifer Trouton: I joined Queen Street Studios in 1997 on the cusp of the Good Friday Agreement; a recent graduate excited to be part of Belfast’s largest artists’ studios. Less exciting was the crumbling building with buckets everywhere for the leaks and ice inside the windows during the winter. Like the city itself, QSS has endured spending cuts, gentrification and most recently COVID-19, and we have weathered them together. I am proud to have played a role in our development, helping with the set-up of the gallery in 2001, the digital studios in 2003 and the relocations in 2013 and 2019. Despite these upheavals (or maybe because of them), a constantly growing inter-generational community has emerged, critiquing, encouraging and supporting each other. Like any long-term relationship, the dynamics within QSS can sometimes be challenging, but it has been a constant

in my life and the development of my career, and I am very grateful for it. No longer a young graduate, I’m pleased to see a new generation of artists pushing QSS forward with ambition.

Clement McAleer: After a long spell in England where I studied (at Canterbury and the RCA, London) and lived for a further 25 years (Liverpool), I returned to Belfast in 2003. The city is much changed for the better with a real creative buzz in all areas of the arts. I joined QSS in 2003 and settled in quickly, given the variety of practice, exchange of ideas and high level of commitment. Having a gallery space within the studios to showcase exhibitions from around Ireland and the UK is of great benefit and a constant source of inspiration.

David Haughey: I’ve been a resident in Belfast since 1997. Over the past twenty years, I’ve watched the city contort into the odd shape it currently holds. Perhaps it’s true of all cities that nothing remains stable. However, Belfast seems to have an urge to unburden itself from its built heritage, maybe not surprising given the contested nature of this place. From my studio at the East Belfast incarnation of QSS, my time in Belfast appears bookended by the events of the North Street Arcade fire (2004), then the blaze and subsequent demolishing of the ‘Bank of the Four Johns’ (2018). In the past, I have worked with the arts organisation Factotum and made drawings for *The Vacuum*. Their offices were burned in the North Street fire, and I was a key holder in the Norwich Union House satellite studios established by QSS – later abandoned by necessity, due to the fire at Primark. The former blaze coagulated a set of relationships defining much of my twenties, while the latter deposited a large group of artists in the east of the city, myself among them.

Sharon Kelly: In 1989, a few fellow University of Ulster MFA graduates and I made the decision to stay in Belfast, when much of the traffic was going the opposite direction, over the water. We founded Flax Art Studios on the Crumlin Road in early 1990. These were still difficult times, at the height of the conflict and traversing across the city was not always an easy or safe activity. Due to personal circumstances, I later left Flax and rented a small studio with my partner on Donegall Street. A set of encounters with other practicing artists nearby led us to collectively establish Paragon Studios on the same street. We remained there until our eviction, followed by a short-term move to North Street. In 2018 we were left temporarily ‘homeless’ due to re-development proposals and sudden funding cuts. QSS and many studio groups located in the city centre faced similar upheavals – it felt very much like shifting sands for artists’ groups. I took up studio in QSS in March 2019, just after their move to East Belfast and it has been a really refreshing, welcoming and supportive experience. QSS is home to artists of varying ages, backgrounds and career stages and it makes me smile to reflect that I am now one of the ‘elder’ artists! It is great to see how persistently artists have continued their practice over many years and to witness the younger generation availing of the wonderful studio spaces, supported by a very engaged board and administrator. Relocation has provided a fresh perspective and new possibilities; perhaps expanding the layers of experience of operating in this unique city that is Belfast.

queenstreetstudios.net



Family workshop with Catherine Davison, courtesy of QSS.



Gallery at Queen St, courtesy of QSS.



'Moments of Inception', curated by Eoin Dara, 2013, courtesy of QSS.