



Breaking open a confessional seal

Trina McKillen: 'I wanted a purpose but I didn't know what it was'

Visual artist Trina McKillen's childhood in west Belfast ensured she would have a deep attachment to the Catholic Church. Her own mother's feeling of betrayal in the face of the child abuse revelations compelled her to explore that darkness, pain and ambiguity in her work. Her new installation Confess is provoking sorrowful and profound reactions in the US, writes Marion McKeone



By **Marion McKeone** | Feb 3, 2019

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When Trina McKillen was a child in Anderstown, west Belfast, the Catholic Church was literally a place of safety and refuge. "I grew up dodging bullets on the way home from school. For us as children, the church was the one place we felt safe," she says.

During the bloody mayhem of the North in the 1970s, McKillen and her classmates would take refuge there when their school was evacuated because of bomb threats.

The second youngest of nine children born to devout Catholics, her family moved to Dublin when she was 11 years old. Her father, a respected businessman, had been repeatedly threatened. She attended a convent school in Chapelizod before graduating from the National College of Art and Design. (In the interests of full disclosure, I attended the same school as McKillen but had not met her in the decades prior to her exhibition.)

Like thousands of other Irish students, she obtained a J1 visa; she soon found herself making giant graphic sculptures for a Los Angeles graphic design studio. "I had a little space and I'd make things like giant lipsticks. I loved it. I knew this was where I wanted to live."

When she finished her degree, she moved to Los Angeles seeking work in the film or music business. It was 1989; there wasn't much call for artists and designers in recession-battered Dublin.

Through a mixture of luck and tenacity, she persuaded Alex McDowell, the British narrative designer and creative director, to give her a job as his assistant. McDowell, who worked with Stephen Spielberg, Tim Burton and Terry Gilliam, became her mentor and friend. Within a short time, she was working as a production designer and art director on music videos, films and commercials.

Soft-spoken and self-effacing with a glimmer of mischief and a mordant Belfast wit, after a bit of nudging McKillen concedes that she worked on music videos like Madonna's Vogue. Rattling off A-listers she worked with is of little interest to her. But life was good in Los Angeles. She married songwriter Billy Steinberg, who wrote huge hits for Whitney Houston, Cyndi Lauper, Madonna, Roy Orbison and the Pretenders; and they had a son, Ezra. After he was born, she segued into the field of fine art photography.

But in 2006, two things happened. McKillen was diagnosed with melanoma and cataracts. "I really thought I was going to die, and it made me think about my life. I felt I had been living in a sort of fear," she says.

Surgery to treat both conditions was successful but the desire to change her life remained. "I just didn't want to live my life the way I had been living it. My son was nine years old at the time and I wanted to teach him that it was important to be brave, not to be afraid to say what you think and believe. I wanted a purpose but I didn't know what it was."

Deciding she wanted to live differently was the easy part. She had no idea how to achieve it.

By that time, stories of the horrific abuse of young children by the Catholic Church had started to emerge in the US and Irish media. McKillen had retained a deep connection to her Catholic faith, and the stories affected her very deeply.

She started making little squares out of scraps of Irish linen. Her father's sisters had worked in the linen factories in Belfast and working with the fabric made her feel a connection to her past.

"Whenever I was going home to visit my mum and dad, I'd have this plastic bag full of little squares.



Marble, metal and wood elements all feature heavily

I think my dad thought, 'My daughter is a lunatic,'" she says with a grin.

"He kept asking me, 'What are they for? Why are you making them? What are you going to do with them?'" And I kept saying, "I don't know. How about if they just make me happy?" Her mother assured her that was the best reason to do anything. Her father joked: "Well, I hope there's big money in Los Angeles for little linen squares."

She continued sewing. "I was drawn to the ritualistic element. It felt like praying, or meditation."

An idea began to form, and the linen squares started to make sense. To her they now resembled poultices that were used to treat a wound or infection. As a child, she had been terrified by the blood and gore of the Stations of the Cross. "We'd be told it was because of our sins. We learned about guilt and darkness instead of love and light.

"So I decided these would be the Stations of Hope. Instead of guilt and darkness, they [the stations] should be symbols of light and hope." And like a poultice, the light would draw out the darkness within the church.

In 2010, during a family gathering to celebrate McKillen's parents' 60th wedding anniversary, her mother told her she had been so devastated by the cover-up of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church that she had stopped going to Mass.

"My mother was a devout Catholic all her life. Then she told me she couldn't go to Mass any more, and look at the priest in the face after hearing what they had done to the children. It affected her so deeply. The Church had been her heart and soul and this just ripped it away from her," she says.

"It made me feel so angry. I thought if my mother feels she has no home in the Catholic Church any more, there are probably thousands, millions more like her."

On the plane on the way back to Los Angeles, McKillen started sketching a confessional booth. It would be transparent, allowing in light. The child would sit. The priest would kneel and ask forgiveness.

Back in her studio, she immediately started working on designs. She made a plexiglass model with a miniature white chair and commissioned a glass technician to work on preparing the glass for the installation that would form the centerpiece of her 'Confess' exhibition. But when he arrived, he took one look at the tiny chair in the plexiglass booth. "Immediately he said: 'I know what this is.' And he turned around and left and never came back."



Ceremonial robes form a pivotal part of the installation

Despite this and other negative reactions, she persisted, grappling not just with challenges of construction and engineering but with her own fear of drawing attention to herself, of how her interpretation of something so dark and full of pain would be received.

The glass confessional took three years to build. Various elements had to be designed, moulded, baked in clay and then cast in brass. Specially designed flight cases had to be made so that the glass, marble, metal and wood elements could be safely transported and reassembled in exhibition spaces.

The installation, named *Forgive Me Child For I Have Sinned*, is stark and deeply affecting, an exquisite reflection on the dark and harrowing nature of abuse and its cover-up by the Catholic Church.

During the construction process, McKillen attended a Snap (Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests) meeting in a Washington DC hotel ballroom.

“There was so much pain,” she says. “All these middle-aged and elderly people. They couldn’t escape the trauma of what happened to them. These were the people I would see standing with placards outside churches trying to get people to listen to them.

“They were walking around in the world with these wounds. And they were older now – no one was seeing the children they were when this happened.

“I just felt I had to do something to acknowledge that pain, to give it a form, to do something that would be cathartic as well as making a statement about what happened.

“But I didn’t want it to be ugly and dark and scary, I wanted people to see the exhibition and have a visceral reaction to what it symbolised, not to the symbols.”

So McKillen got to work on what would become the third part of her *Confess* exhibition. Through eBay and Etsy, she bought First Communion dresses from all over the world. Two original altar boy vestments were used as patterns for garments made with Irish linen and lace sourced from religious vestments and other places that made lace for the Church.

On the front of each communion dress and altar boy vestment, she embroidered a keyhole with an entwined serpent. “St Peter holds the key to heaven, but the entrance is obstructed by the serpent; it’s the symbol of the abuse blocking the entrance to heaven,” she says of her design.

The rows of communion dresses and altar boy vestments, suspended by steel filaments and moving gently, are eerily evocative, a ghostly symbol of the trauma that stunted the survivors’ emotional and spiritual growth. It’s a searing indictment of the Church leaders’ failure to acknowledge the extent of the abuse and the massive global cover-up that was instituted by dioceses and sanctioned by the Vatican.

The project took almost a decade to complete. McKillen says she “sat with it” for another three before allowing friends to see it. “I didn’t want to upset people at first. I had to learn how to speak about it without my heart pounding in my chest.”

It was first shown in Phoenix, Arizona before opening at the Laband Gallery at the Los Angeles Loyola Marymount University, where it will remain until March 23.



A detail of a confession box in the installation Confess

A Catholic university may seem like an unlikely forum for an art exhibition that reflects the trauma of child abuse by the Church. McKillen says Fr Allan Deck, a Jesuit Professor of Theology at Loyola, author and former director of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, threw his weight behind the project after it was championed by Kevin T Peters, an English professor and head of the University's Irish Studies Programme, and by the Laband Gallery's director Karen Rapp.

Initially fearful of confronting the issue, McKillen stresses that her exhibition isn't borne of a hostility towards the Church. Rather, she says, it arises from a love for it and a grief at the pain it has inflicted. Her father, now 94, urged her on. "What you're doing needs to be said," he told her.

So far, it has attracted hugely positive reviews. McKillen hopes it will travel to Ireland, the North and Britain.

McKillen's siblings include the fashion designer Mariad Whisker and property developer Paddy McKillen sr. Sadly, her mother didn't survive to see Confess come to fruition, dying a year ago of Alzheimer's disease.

When McKillen showed her the portfolio of sketches and designs several years ago, she responded: "Well, aren't you some pup!" It was something she used to say to her children when they had achieved something remarkable.

"I admired my mother for not going back, but I was angry that she had been deprived of her spiritual home and solace at the age of 84. The next time I saw her in a Catholic church was at her funeral seven years later," McKillen says.

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The glass confessional took three years to build



Confess, almost a decade in the making, originated in sketches that McKillen drew on a transatlantic flight to Los Angeles

