



Dietrich working in Cairo, 2013

Dietrich Blodau: Artist, Teacher, Socialist

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The 1959 poster for the City of Dortmund's annual garden festival depicts a graphic drawing of a smiling coal-smudged miner holding a bursting red flower. It was the work of 22 year-old Dietrich Blodau who had won the prestigious design competition. The use of the mine worker to promote the new nationwide event of municipally displayed nature perfectly encapsulated the modernist post-war spirit of reconstruction with its promise of a better life with jobs, homes and leisure for working people. But it was no coincidence that Blodau chose a working class "hero" as his motif; throughout the sixty years of artistic production which followed, he has remained constant in his motivation for ordinary people and a decent society, as well in his care for the natural world.

Blodau was born in 1937 in Recklinghausen in the industrial region around the river Rhine in Germany. After an apprenticeship in carpentry, his talent for drawing led him to graphic design at the *Werkkunstschule* in Dortmund [1959–1963]. He worked for a short time as a designer in Lausanne in Switzerland before deciding to extend his studies in the more open discipline of Fine Art at the *Hochschule der Künste* in Berlin [1963–1967]. It was here that he met fellow artist, Carol [née Holloway] who became his partner. At the age of nineteen, Carol had been settled by her parents into a "respectable" job at Samuels gown store in Manchester, England, but after a year or so picking up the pins after ladies' fittings she had taken flight to Paris. Moving on to Berlin, she was able to realise her ambition to study art and also joined the Diploma in Fine Art. In 1960s Berlin, Dieter and Carol were immersed in an artistic, politically radical environment which suited them both. After graduation, and with a baby son to care for (Peter, b. 1967), the Blodaus, like many artists of their generation started to look not just for a way to make a living, but for a new way to live.

The Blodaus initially moved to a cottage in Wales, and tried to make ends meet selling their pictures at Lancaster Gate in London. Carol also began to study again at the Ruskin School of Art in Oxford, but found it to be stiflingly conservative after her Berlin studies. A German artist friend, who was taking a residency in Ireland, heard that the Limerick School of Art was recruiting internationally for a specialist in printmaking. Dietrich was offered the post – paid one pound per hour for twenty hours a week – and so the Blodaus took a venture into the unknown, arriving in Ireland in 1971.

The simplicity of rural Ireland suited them. Like other well-educated friends from Germany and the USA hoped to escape the snowballing consumerism which followed post war austerity. The Blodau's had no illusions about "self-sufficiency", but sought an unmaterialistic way of life. Like

many people in Ireland at that time, they had no motor car, and cycled and hitchhiked their way around, the young Peter on the front of the bike. For five pounds a week they rented a small house in the woods by Curraghchase which had remained uninhabited for some years. It had neither running water or electricity, and before they could take up residence they had to shoo the cows out of the ground floor. At that time, the Limerick School of Art occupied only one floor of three-storey building in Mulgrave Street with just forty to fifty students. It was through the vision of the school and city leaders that the plan was made to expand and develop the school, partly through the recruitment of staff from abroad, of which Blodau was the first.

Blodau saw that there was lots to be done. He converted a cleaners' room in to a photography lab, and waving aside local sensibilities, introduced life drawing using a live model rather than plaster figures. At that time, printmaking was barely known outside Dublin, but little by little Blodau succeeded in getting together sufficient equipment for etching and lithography, and later silkscreen, to enable students to specialise in printmaking as an independent discipline at Diploma level. Blodau's enquiries for lithography stones led him to Dublin's Phoenix Park, where the Ordinance Survey had used stones for a drawn map of the whole of Ireland, but had no further use for them; the first etching press was built by engineers in the University, and the first silkscreen press Blodau made himself. Progressing to the position of Head of Department, Blodau built up fully equipped printmaking workshops, resembling the kind of facility he had known in Dortmund and Berlin.

Within their community of artist friends the idea hatched to buy up one of the large estate houses left standing empty and convert it into an art school. In 1972, the Blodaus chose "Abbey House", surrounded by green fields on the edge of Rathkeale, their first permanent home in Ireland. Taking on this creaky old house which with its enormous, damp rooms was an audacious venture, but one that seemed full of possibilities. Whilst the art school did not take off, they were able to run international summer courses in the 1970s, attracting students from America and Germany. Besides the Blodaus, the tutors were US-born Howard Konnick and Carol's brother, Peter Holloway. They secured funding to build up a full print workshop in the basement of the house.

In the summer months, the hall of the house was converted into a stage, a theatre group from Leeds bringing productions of Shakespeare for local audiences. For both this pioneer generation and those to follow, Abbey House has over decades offered a retreat of creative occupation and relaxation for countless visitors. In this house, Carol and Dietrich raised two more children, Nina (b. 1979) and Alex (b. 1982). Today the Blodaus live there with Nina (interior designer), her (Cuban) husband Kenny and three of their four grandchildren. Peter – also via Berlin and Paris – now teaches drawing in Cairo, and Alex works in construction in Australia.

Dietrich Blodau's contribution to the development of printmaking in Ireland went well beyond his work at Limerick School of Art. He saw that graduates also needed facilities after they left art school and was instrumental in setting up further open printmaking studios, and later an exhibition space in what to this day is successful as the Limerick Printmakers. Together with colleague Charley Harper and others, Blodau went further still in raising the

cultural profile of Ireland as it developed, setting up the EVA – Exhibition of the Visual Arts in 1977 – originally for Limerick artists and now an international event. Their aim was to change the perception of what art could be, away from the staid offerings of the city museums at the time. Berlin's "Graphotek" also gave Blodau the idea to set up a similar art lending system at the library of the Mary Immaculate College in Limerick.

In the 1980s, Blodau recognised the importance of making the art of printmaking accessible to the wider public in Ireland and organised numerous events, exhibitions and auctions of prints. Proceeds from "The Print Auction", running for fifteen years, helped to finance international trips for students – at a time when it was extremely rare for students to make trips abroad. In the 1950s during one of the high tides of anti-Communist sentiment in the West, Blodau had travelled from Dortmund to visit East Berlin. He was surprised how "normal" it was, with friendly people and good theatres and bookshops. Unbothered by general opinion, Blodau made family holidays to the East and chose destinations such as Moscow, Leningrad, and Prague for student trips.

Working with the Irish-Soviet friendship society, supported by the Communist Party in Ireland, Blodau brought the work of Moscow students to the Belltable Gallery in Limerick, as well as exhibiting the Irish students' work in the Soviet Union. In the 1990s, in defiance of the USA embargo, Blodau sought to strengthen cultural ties and to fundraise for Cuba, again organising exchanges and exhibitions with Havana and Limerick printmakers. He also has maintained a close relationship with his native Germany, here too creating opportunities for many students and artists to internationalise their work. He keeps close ties with the Berlin *Druckwerkstatt* in Kreuzberg where he prints his own lithographs.

Although more preoccupied with promoting opportunities for others than positioning himself in the art market, Blodau's commitment to his own artistic output is tireless, and continues to grow and vary. Moving easily between printmaking, painting and drawing, his work shows equal assurance with graphic and urban details as with voluminous land and cloudscapes, plants and flowers. His work has been exhibited in numerous venues and is represented in Limerick City Gallery of Art, Limerick University Collection, The Arts Council of Northern Ireland, the Berlin City Collection and the Havana City Collection.

Everything about the work and life of Dietrich Blodau speaks of his authenticity. But this epithet has been spoilt by its misappropriation and overuse. It is just as hard to describe Blodau and his work as modest or unassuming, as even these carry a certain self-consciousness which is entirely absent. Perhaps the best term is "steadfast", though this too sounds far too dull for someone whose quiet manner belies his ardour. The Ireland which Blodau made his home in the 1970s has changed almost out of recognition; in spite of his extraordinary achievements in giving so much to the artistic life of the country, Dietrich Blodau is unchanged – the ordinary person and the flower can stand for his outlook today as much as it did sixty years ago.

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