

Scene and herd in west Kerry

“I EAT them, wear them and paint them... I owe them something, don't I?” laughs Dingle-based artist Kelly Hood, a woman who quite literally is outstanding in her own (or her neighbour's) field.

A skilled painter and artist who specialises in local and animal scenes, in a super-realist style (and currently most strikingly in black and white), Kelly has seen a coterie of Irish celebs embrace her cow paintings in particular.

'Cows in the Hood' paintings now hang in the homes of Tommy Tiernan, Terry Wogan, sundry RTE types such as documentary maker Michael McCormack — and even Sir Terry Wogan.

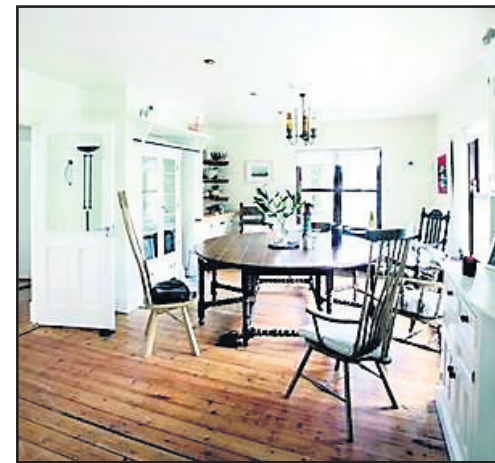
Let the byre beware might be the cry as effervescent Kelly strains over a five-bar gate, pads through the cow pats and returns to her studio to bring the photographed images back to life on her canvases.

Born in London, to a British dad and a Kerry mother from Ballydavid, she moved to west Kerry at the age of 10 with her folks, and younger sister, picking up Irish (and the paintbrushes) along the way, and fetching up after local national school, and then Dingle's convent school, in Limerick's College of Art, whence she graduated in 1999.

Now, she gets back to Kerry as much as she possibly can to paint, working in the field with a camera and then carefully working up those super-real 'are they photos or paintings?' images in her studio in Dingle — though she's photographed here in the glorious surrounds of local Greenlane Gallery owner Susan Callery's modern and art-filled private Dingle townhouse. The Greenlane has a sister Paris gallery at Ile Saint Louis, and Kelly's Kerry cows which went on exhibition there over Christmas, were also to feature on RTE's Nationwide.

She says she's getting good at distinguishing a Hereford from a Holstein, and a heifer from a bull, and in the last two years has developed a bit of a grá for her quietly curious bovine neighbours although she's equally adept at

Tommy Barker meets a Kerry-based artist never short of a willing model and who's been milking them ever since



Contemporary artist, Kelly Hood, was born in London, moved to Dingle at the age of 10, and now returns as often as possible, to paint cows.

people or lobster pots, hens or horses. “I think I have a touch of mad cow disease because it is very difficult to identify what it is that makes me want to paint cows,” Kelly says, adding “trying to understand the appeal for others is more difficult.”

She puts it down to Irish 'herd instinct': “part of it is the cows' curiosity and quiriness that makes them a good subject but also the fact that they are (and always have been) part of the Irish landscape. Cows are so wrapped up in the identity of Ireland that they are part of everyone's roots, I think.”

Instance? Kelly spent her own childhood holidays helping her granny Mae on her farm, and

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remembers driving the imaginatively-named 'Daisy' to the parlour and a milking pail.

She's been milking them, in a professional sense, over the past two years in particular, turning her cow images into Kerry Gold.

“Each of the cows I paint is a real individual that I met in

person, had eye contact with, perhaps talked to. I took that memory home, thought about it when I painted, working with the buttery oils mixing pure pigments into real life colours and brushing that colour onto a fresh, white canvas until it emerged as the soul of the

individual, and that moment in that cow's life will live on forever.”

Farmers in her locale are now used to her hopping over a ditch, going eye-to-eye with a drooling cow, photographing it and then recreating it (she's adept with a camera, and worked for a while as a graphic artist/photographer with the Limerick Post.)

“Living in Dingle, I'm never short of a willing model. I found my first, Spike, in 2008 and we bonded over a barbed wire fence. She snorted sweet breaths at me through her velvety nostrils as a globule of spittle dangled from her whiskery chin. I determined then that I would paint her — and one cow lead to another,” she laughs.

Pictures: Denis Scannell