

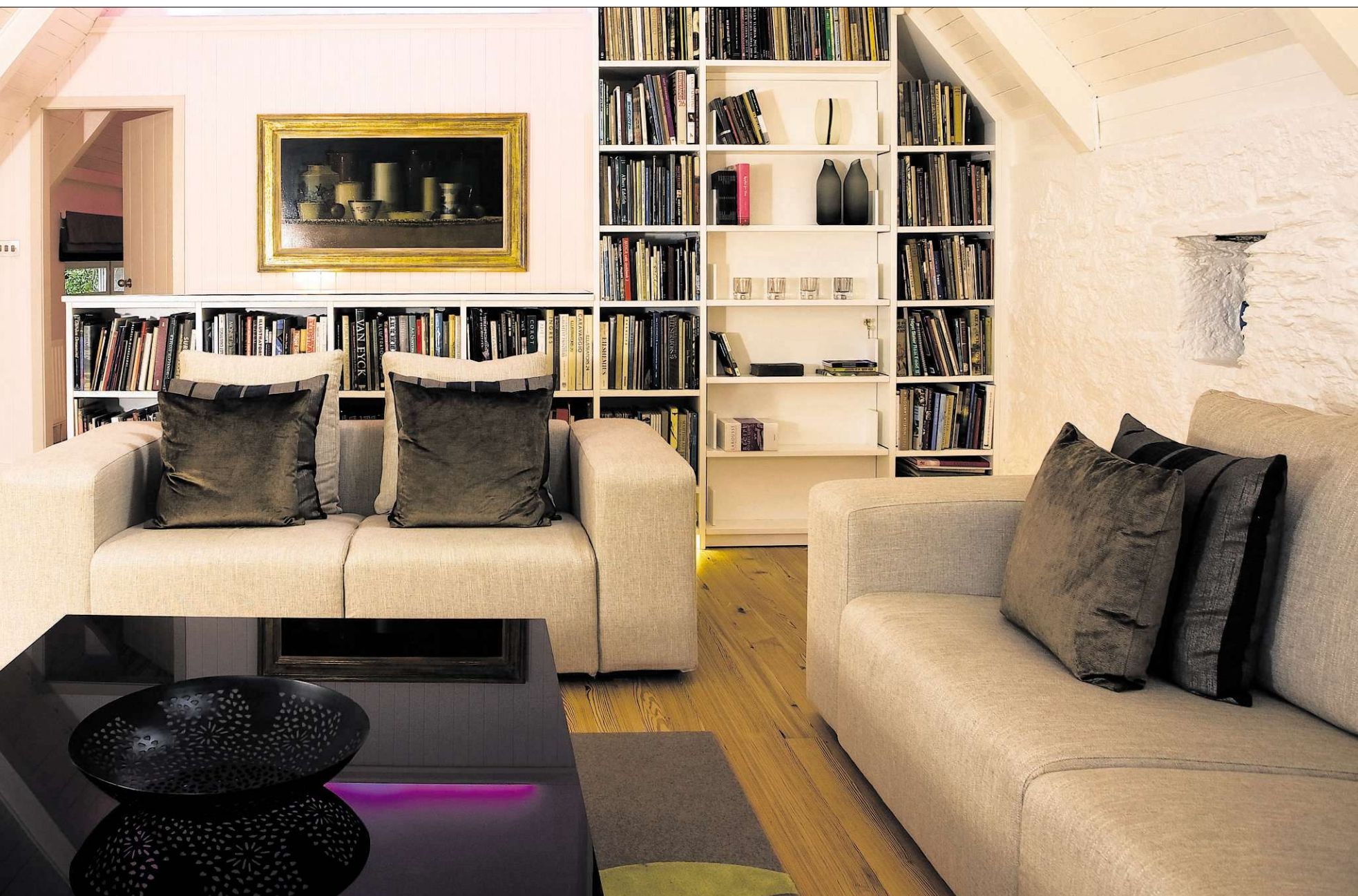


# ARTIST AT HOME

A move to the banks of the Slaney has given artist Mark O'Neill new inspiration. He talks to **Gemma Tipton** about peacocks, painting and 'Pop Idol'







**IT FEELS LIKE** a little piece of heaven. You turn off the main road and drive along a narrow riverside track, which dips and climbs and then rounds down to a beautiful thatched former mill house, with its own working water wheel, on the banks of the Slaney. There are dogs, chickens, horses and peacocks, although artist Mark O'Neill, who owns the house, isn't sure that the peacocks weren't a mistake. They're loud, not terribly friendly and it'll be a year or so more before their tails grow.

Even though the house has been here for centuries, O'Neill and his menagerie are relative newcomers. He bought the property a year ago, and spent the intervening months living in one of the nearby cottages while doing it up. The former owners were Chicago-based Irish property developer Sean Conlon and his sister Fiona. "They're good friends with Michelle Pfeiffer, and she has stayed here and drunk in the village pubs. There were rumours that she was buying the place, so I think the locals were a bit disappointed to get me."

The house may have an idyllic setting, but it was rather gloomy inside. Built in an era when shelter was the most important thing, it had low ceilings, and almost ignored the gorgeous surrounding grounds.

"When we first visited the property it was all dark and turning in on itself," recalls Maria Fenlon, who designed the interiors. Working with O'Neill, who is one of Ireland's most successful artists, Fenlon opened up windows to give a greater sense of the rushing river, installed mirrors and polished surfaces, reflecting back the

outside beauty, and added chunky furniture and lots of white paint. There's nothing dark about the place now, and it pulls off that useful feat of being both bright and airy, and cosy and welcoming. There is, however, none of O'Neill's own work on the walls. "Of an evening when I'm sitting down," he says. "I really don't want to be looking at my own work, and thinking, that dog's tail is crooked."

It could be seen as surprising for an artist to call in another professional to design their own living space. How do two visually creative individuals work together? Whose "vision" wins, and are there epic arguments? "We pushed each other," says Fenlon, diplomatically. "But I've benefited from Mark's input hugely, and the property is amazing, so it was the design brief from heaven."

Fenlon and O'Neill have been friends for years, teaching art together at one stage, before Fenlon switched from sculpture to interiors. So, following the break-up of a relationship, when O'Neill left the Regency gate lodge he had been living in, he knew who to call.

"I knew she had gone into design," he says, although he also remembers an uncomfortable moment or two: "I thought: but what is Maria's taste like and I did think it would be awkward to bypass her – but as soon as I saw her website, I knew we could work together."

One of the reasons O'Neill engaged a designer was the desire for something different. "The old house had been full of antiques, with paintings floor to ceiling. I loved it, but people change and move on. I reassessed what I wanted, and this

#### ARTISTIC EYE

Far left, the artist Mark O'Neill. Below, his pet dogs make themselves at home







house was begging for something different.”

During the remodelling and redecoration of the house, O'Neill, who has an exhibition this month at James Adam's in Dublin, painted in one of the cottages on the grounds, while taking time out to make enormous lunches for everyone working on the project. “It was great fun, a great atmosphere,” says Fenlon, although perhaps not the most conducive situation for an artist with a show coming up. O'Neill agrees, admitting that sometimes he'll do anything rather than paint.

The new setting is inspirational, however, not least because, along with the house, the previous owners left behind a handful of donkeys and two horses. One of these, a striking grey, has become a model and muse for a new series of paintings. Add this to the peace and quiet, and the beauty all around, and it is a fairly ideal spot for an artist to work. That was part of the brief behind the design. “If you solve the home, it frees the mind for the things you really want to do,” says Fenlon.

Famous for his paintings of country scenes, cows, dogs, chickens and gentle landscapes, O'Neill is discovering that the house and grounds are also affecting his work in other ways. “At the moment I'm all about bigger-scale paintings than I've done for quite a while, and I want them to look like paintings, so I'm using bigger brushes. It's living here – it's about nature, being gutsy and bold, everything that nature is.” He admires the work of Nathaniel Hone and Walter Osborne, adding that “all artists, whether they want to admit it or not, are inspired by artists of the past”.

His work has found many admirers, and before Damien Hirst made the headlines for creating an exhibition for direct sale at auction with Sotheby's in 2008, O'Neill had consigned 180 works to Adam's in 2006, selling all of them under the hammer. How does he feel about that “other” art world, the one which is populated by the likes of Hirst, Jeff Koons and Tracey Emin? “There are so many artists in this generation, the big names, the Damien Hirsts, and it's all about shock value, but there's little else, there's no con-

tent really. When you look at anything else, like furniture, or any craft, there's real skill going in there. And I think in the future there will be a showdown with the charlatans, because skill is what will endure. We'll get over this *Pop Idol* TV celebrity culture thing.”

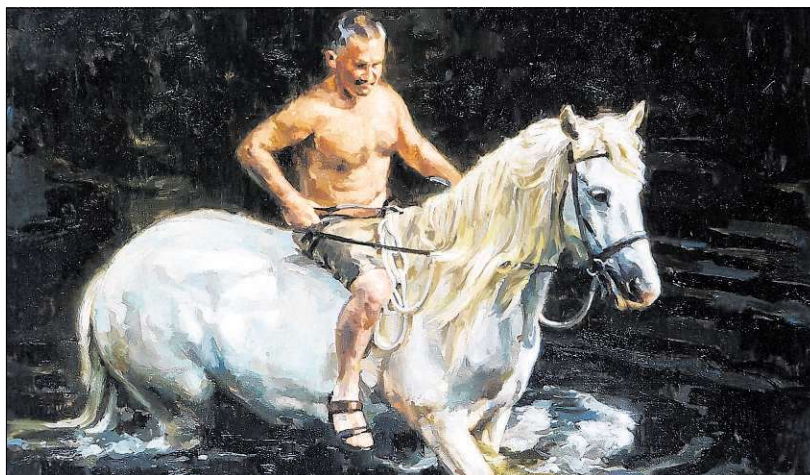
I tell him that Sarah Jessica Parker's production company is currently casting a *Pop Idol*-style TV programme to pick America's next top artist. “It appals me,” he says, half joking. “But I'd win it . . .”

O'Neill was born in Liverpool, and spent his childhood moving from one place to another, following his father's work with Unilever. “We travelled, two years here, two years there: South Africa, Nigeria, Mauritius, Peru, Drogheda. But Drogheda was my favourite, so when I made a career for myself and could move, I came to Ireland.”

The career O'Neill made was as an illustrator, specialising in the covers of romantic novels, and creating six consecutive images for Catherine Cookson. “On number two or three, she rang me to say she wasn't totally happy with the male model. So she described what her hero looked like – and I was kind of getting into it myself. Her ideal man was pretty much along the lines of mine: dark, brooding, rugged.”

Friends and family were co-opted into modelling, and possessions from the family home used as props. O'Neill's sisters were regular models, and were squeezed into corsets, hired for the occasion. Imagination came into play, “because my friends don't necessarily look like Heathcliff”, and on one occasion, when Fenlon had called by, she found herself in a shawl and tattered dress. “I was Kathleen,” she remembers. “When I got married, Mark gave me the original painting.” We discuss how, at one point, the romantic fiction giant, Mills & Boon, replaced the painted poses on their covers with photographs, and it wasn't a success.

“I think a painting has a bit of bravado,” says O'Neill. “It's that which makes a painting something you'd want to live with – where there's



**TOP** Mark O'Neill's house on the banks of the Slaney, and (above), his painting *Black Slaney*. A handful of donkeys and two horses left behind by the previous owners of the house have become models for O'Neill's work

room for the viewer to put something of themselves into it. With photos, all the answers are there. “There is a romanticism in my work,” he adds. “You're trying to make life that little bit juicier, that little bit brighter. But you're still holding back a little, holding back from being kitsch and chocolate-boxy.”

With the exhibition approaching, does O'Neill have nerves? An exhibition is different from an auction, he tells me. “At auction things are turned totally on their heads. As an artist, all you can do is what inspires you at the moment, and paint it as good as you can, but you never know what people are going to like. I'm a little bemused by dogs. Would I want a picture of some one else's dog? And yet dogs are so popular.

“Artists who sell work are lucky people,” he says. “We work from home, I've got the kettle on, the dogs with me. An artist's life is not bad. So if I sell a painting, I'm a lucky guy. I don't wake up in the morning and worry about the recession, because I'm living in Ireland in a beautiful place, I can paint pictures, I have my health. Life is good.”

Mark O'Neill's exhibition is at Adam's in Dublin, October 19th–23rd. [www.jamesadam.ie](http://www.jamesadam.ie). Maria Fenlon's website is [www.mariafenlon.com](http://www.mariafenlon.com)