

More2Life

EYE FOR A PHOTO IN THE GENES

Award-winning Richhill snapper on owing talent to late mum: Page 36

NOTHING POISONOUS AT THE IVY

Sumptuous Belfast spot has lots going for it: Page 37

CHAOS ON CANVAS

Jade Beecroft meets the school art technician whose jam-packed pictures brim with folk tales, historical figures and hidden characters. Pages 34&35

'I love taking parts of history and making them amusing'

Every time you stand in front of one of Laura McKenzie Atkins' drawings, you are likely to spot something new.

It might be a ghost peeping out of a top window of Belfast Castle, nine witches lurking in Carrickfergus Castle, or even her own parents surveying the ruins of Dunluce Castle — her dad clutching a pair of binoculars.

Laura (45) is a fine artist and creator of 'wimmelbild', or 'wimmelbilders' in plural form — a German word for a 'teeming picture' characterised by extremely detailed and often chaotic scenes.

She and her "Doodle Director" husband Scott Atkins (42) spend months researching the history behind her busy artworks, creating stories, sub-plots and mixing historical figures with fictional ideas.

By day Laura is an art technician at Belfast Royal Academy, where she also runs a number of art clubs for students and staff.

In the evenings, she and Scott settle down in their north Belfast living room to work side-by-side on their art projects.

"In my wimmelbilders I experiment, taking the things I'm interested in and pouring them into my piece," she explains. "It's definitely a case of 'more is more'."

"I love the ones where I can take aspects of history and make them amusing, creating funny scenes. I like the idea that every time someone looks at my work, they will see a character or something



Laura and husband Scott at The Yard Gallery, Hollywood

happening that they've not noticed before."

Laura, who is originally from Carrickfergus, has been an art technician for 18 years, following a previous career as a youth worker for a decade with Carrickfergus YMCA, where she also ran art clubs and other activities for PAKT (Parents and Kids Together).

"I've always been really into art," she explains. "I remember doing my GSCE English coursework, and one of the options was to illustrate a children's book, and I thought 'that's for me'. So I always wanted to be an artist."

"I'm also really into ceramics — we have a kiln in school and I teach the kids how to make 'Rootles', which are little root-like creatures with mushrooms growing out of their heads and bodies.

"I ended up taking part in a worldwide project called Game of Shrooms, like a giant hide and seek, and hiding Rootles in the grounds of Belfast Castle for people to find."

Laura initially started taking on side projects as commissions for friends and family. It was Scott who encouraged her to explore drawing for herself too.

CHALLENGE

He explains: "So much of her art was built around what other people wanted and liked, and what was marketable. I was egging her on to do something for herself."

In 2022 Laura joined a Facebook group for creatives and took part in Inky April — a month-long challenge to draw every day.

Scott is a keen scale model builder, so every

evening she sat at her own desk beside his and worked on her first wimmelbild, now known as Castle Teapot — a fictional castle scene that grew more and more detailed each day.

The 12 teapots hidden in the image came about because Scott kept bringing Laura cups of tea to fuel her drawing sessions.

Scott explains: "She drew a little bit of this, and a little bit of that, then she'd ask me what to do in a particular section, and I'd suggest something like a bear poking his head around a corner or a pirate ship in the background."

"It turned into this crazy detailed picture. She posted it online and people loved it."

Initially Laura had no idea she'd created a wimmelbild until someone commented on her post. She looked up the art form and realised that was exactly what she was doing.

Wimmelbilders were originally popularised in German children's picture books, although the most famous contemporary example is Where's Wally.

Laura began experimenting with various fantasy scenes, including Witches Haunt, inspired by Halloween, and her "little bilds" of smaller scenes like Rootle's Homestead and The Shop That Must Not be Named.

"I love taking folk ideas, and stuff from the modern world, and putting it together," she explains. "For example, in Witches Haunt we have a witch on a broomstick delivering a pizza."

Laura then decided to explore her interest in



‘Growing up, my parents often took us out exploring old ruins, churches, castles and graveyards’

Laura McKenzie Atkins (also above) with her Carrickfergus Castle wimmelbild illustration. Right: Her Purple Plum Village commission
© Mathieu Decodts Photography



local history and draw real places in Northern Ireland — the first being Belfast Castle, which is within walking distance of her house.

“I made a leather journal and started filling it with history,” she explains. “I found a ghost story, and the tale of the Cavehill Diamond. I looked at clippings from old newspapers, and researched the family who built it.”

RECCE

“I weaved all those characters and stories into my drawing, as well as the castle cats, of course. I publish a key to my drawings online, so people can read about the history behind them.”

She’s since done wimmelbilders of Carrickfergus Castle and Dunluce Castle, with her retired parents, Ian and Kate McKenzie, helping her recce the sites.

“Growing up, my parents often took us out exploring old ruins, churches, castles and graveyards, and during school holidays we still take day trips now,” she says.

“I included them in my drawing of Dunluce Castle — you can spot them in the top left corner. Dad has a

pair of binoculars because he always brings them everywhere.

“They have all my wimmelbilders on their walls at home, and on their prints I always add them into the drawing — just for them. In Castle Teapot, mum is feeding the chickens and in Carrick Castle they are waving from the parapet.”

Laura says her students and fellow staff at Belfast Royal Academy are super supportive of her art and love her imaginative work.

She’s also started taking commissions for jigsaw artworks, which are ideally suited to her busy scenes.

“I’ve got my eye on another local landmark at the moment, but it’s still in the early stages so the location is a secret,” she smiles. “I often spend a few months planning and researching, brainstorming ideas with Scott, before I start drawing.”

“I also do the European Heritage Open Days every year, where I run a workshop at one of the sites I’ve drawn, like Belfast or Carrick castles. I love meeting people and showing them how to start creating wimmelbilders of their own.”

● **For information visit:** www.lauramckenzieatkins.com

Gardening

Alan Mercer of Hillmount Garden Centre shares his gardening tips exclusively with Sunday Life readers



Ignore rains and keep on watering...

Our gardens should be looking decidedly greener these days thanks to all the rain but please don’t ignore the pots, bedding baskets, containers and displays that you’ve put so much effort into creating, as they may still be in need of some extra moisture from your watering can or hose.

At this time of year, it’s important to water deeply rather than watering little and often as although you might think a torrential downpour is sufficient to keep our flowers hydrated, it’s probably not.

I don’t know about yours but in our garden weeds are growing faster than some of our plants. I appreciate that it’s difficult to keep on top of them with so much rain falling but I would suggest pulling them in between the showers or spraying them with a good weed-killer like Resolva.

Give your roses some tender loving care and deadhead any that have finished. The same applies to lilies, geraniums and petunias in your hanging basket as deadheading will encourage more blooms.

Take a few moments to tie in any climbers like jasmine, clematis and sweet pea. Be careful not to tie too tight as this will interrupt their growth. Stake your tall perennials like delphiniums, as the wind can flatten them even in June.

You could consider sowing biennials like foxgloves for next year’s display now. They are easy to sow but they need light to germinate. Simply sprinkle tiny dust-like foxglove seeds on the surface of moist seed compost and press them down gently without covering them with soil. Be careful when watering so as not to wash them away.

● **If you have a question for Alan, email him at** alan@hillmount.co.uk **or message him on facebook at** www.facebook.com/hillmountgardencentre. **For inspiration for your garden, log on to** www.hillmount.co.uk **and follow them on instagram —** www.instagram.com/hillmountbelfast