



Flora Kerrigan – Rediscovering a Film Pioneer

Running time: 1h approx. | N/C 12A

Performing live: Paul G. Smyth (piano)

5:30pm on Thursday 20 March 2025

Restored with support from ACE – Association des Cinémathèques Européennes and the EU Creative Europe MEDIA programme

Flora Kerrigan is an amateur filmmaker who belongs in the canon of Irish film and animation, and whose work undoes the common assumptions that there were few women filmmaking in Ireland during the 1960s and that there were few people engaged in animation practice. Kerrigan's rich tapestry of film forms and subjects evidence the extent to which a focus on amateur filmmaking expands Irish film history and hints at the exciting and often risqué attitude of Irish youth at the time – something often forgotten in the popular myth of 1960s Ireland as an oppressive period dominated by conservative and sexist catholic morality. Kerrigan's films offer a welcome exception to this, and are even more remarkable given she made these films in her late teens and early twenties!

Born in Cork in 1940, Kerrigan's creativity and artistic drive found an outlet at the Crawford Art College, where she studied art and met with a network of other artists who were to become her collaborators and, often, actors in her live action films. This passion for art and filmmaking led her to join the Cork Cine Club in around 1959 where she became a



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highly productive member, acting as secretary for the Club for a time, regularly exhibiting her live action and animated films and holding workshops on animation. She largely worked in black and white, filming in 8mm, created her own hand-cut animation and meticulously recorded the splices and edits for her films.

For a filmmaker who – in recent decades, had been largely forgotten in filmmaking circles – she was ever present in local press in the 1960s, where she must have been perceived as a novelty. An *Irish Examiner* interview from 17 March 1961 with the headline "Cartoon Film Maker" said "Tall, blonde, willowy 20-year-old Flora Kerrigan ... is piling up awards for 8mm films ... Last May she started to make cartoon films and to date she has completed eleven. She tells me that it takes almost 2,000 cut-outs for a two-minute cartoon. It's work that requires infinite patience but it is very satisfying ... She likes to work on a good plot and she feels that amateurs concentrate over much on holiday and home movies." This latter quip was possibly a comment about her Cork Cine Club colleagues who exhibited the more traditional Cine Club fair of travelogues and family films. Along with regular reviews of her films in local newspapers, she also received national attention for her films, with her animation *Moonshine* screened on the only national television channel in Ireland at the time, RTÉ. Kerrigan was also connected to well-known early animator, John Horgan, who is considered one of the foundational figures in Irish animation. An early hand-made film programme from Flora, thanks Horgan for helping with the organisation of her exhibition.

However, one need not try to secure Kerrigan's legacy by connecting her to other filmmaking legends. Her own legacy is that of a highly original and perceptive filmmaker who could turn her hand to any film form. Her live action films are joyous and sensual, full of youthful mischief and ambition. But what we find especially unique is the overt representation of taboo eroticism and a concern with representing female sexuality and desire, unusual for this time in Ireland. Kerrigan also had a distinct sense of her own authorship, evident in the many title cards used throughout her films introducing 'a florafilm production'.

In her collage of early 8mm film experiments, carefully titled *Early Animations* (c 1960) on the film roll, we can see Kerrigan developing and honing her skills and particular creative signatures. Featuring several different experiments with stop motion, including object animation, claymation and hand drawn animation, Kerrigan plays with character motion and performance. We see characters being drawn into existence and ornamental figurines dance. Despite the films' emphases on form, Kerrigan's dark humour is discernible in, for example, the eery movement of a doll and the ballet dance of a stick figure.

Kerrigan's sensual *Dream Maker* (c 1960s), made only a few years later, suggests a far more advanced maturity in subject matter and tone, while retaining a concern with physical



gesture and the movement of bodies, this time of two women drifting into a dreamy and passionate encounter with each other. In the film, which leans on the delicacy of the actors' performances – a slow caress of a hand, an intimate return of an imagined gaze – one woman grapples with the intimacy extended to her. In Kerrigan's home-made programme that included *Dream Maker* a caption that accompanies the film title reads "aha! this one you'll never see", perhaps anticipating the scandal it could cause.

Moonshine (c 1963), an animation tackling the futility of the space race and the generation of space junk by those nations vying for the ability to claim 'firsts' in space travel, imagines a moon overwhelmed with the level of objects being strewn into its orbit. A press review of *Moonshine* following its broadcast on RTÉ described it as "an extremely witty little piece of interplanetary whimsy dealing with the history of space exploration" (9 April 1965). While undoubtedly whimsical, the film also represents far more serious concerns far more – the folly of nation states in pursuing ego projects and the susceptibility of Ireland to this trend. This is perhaps an issue that resonates today, with the reemergence of space travel for the wasteful billionaire class.

These films are a sample of the slapstick, humorous, dark, melancholic and politically charged films by Kerrigan, now part of the Flora Kerrigan Collection held at the Irish Film Institute Irish Film Archive. Preservation of the films is ongoing, and the larger collection includes films submitted to, and successful in, amateur film competitions around the world. Given the recognition that her films received at the time, it is only fitting that they are available to view again in public forums.

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Sarah is Associate Professor of Media Studies at Maynooth University in Ireland. She has worked on projects, in partnership with the Irish Film Archive, aimed at increasing the visibility of women's amateur filmmaking in Ireland.



Irish Film Institute

