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Self-assembly not your thing?

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IRISH ABROAD: The subversive wit of his flatpack-inspired sculpture is a hallmark of Clive Murphy's work, and it's one of the reasons he is becoming a presence on the New York arts scene, writes **BELINDA MCKEON**

IF YOU'VE EVER had to put together a piece of flatpack furniture, you'll recognise this monster. Something like it, with its protruding limbs in brushed metal, its lacquered jaw and its screw-hole eyes, has probably even played a part in your post-flatpack nightmares. The offending creature is *Demonic Interventions With Ikea Furniture*, a new sculptural work by young Irish artist Clive Murphy, which is currently on display at Magnan Metz gallery in New York's Chelsea district. The piece is a bizarre, hulking crossbreed of dismembered Ikea parts, assembled in line with an equally bizarre set of instructions pasted on the gallery wall beside the sculpture.

The instruction sheet is, needless to say, also Murphy's creation. Although it mimics perfectly the cheery blandness of Ikea assembly manuals – those line-drawings of miniature people happily getting on with miniature Ikea parts – Murphy's version channels something much closer to the actual atmosphere of the self-assembly experience, whereby glass-eyed obedience changes to murderous rage in 10 minutes flat. Let's just say a goat wanders into the picture. And that an assembly tool becomes a lethal weapon. And that, at the opening of the exhibition that first featured the sculpture, gallery-goers were treated to the sight of a billy-goat roasting on a spit in the gallery's back yard, and invited to taste for themselves. Well, it beats wrestling with the zillion parts of a Billy bookcase. Doesn't it?

The subversive wit of his Ikea-inspired sculpture (*DIWIF* is just one of the pieces in the series) is a hallmark of Clive Murphy's practice, and it's one of the reasons the Wexford-born artist is becoming a much talked-about presence on the New York scene.

Since moving there from Ireland in 2005, he has created bouncy castles out of black rubber, canvases out of scorch marks, audio-kinetic pieces out of discarded cassette tape, and sculptures out of toasters, neon tubes and cardboard boxes found in the street, among other materials. He has made a series of drawings of the hair of Irish artists (Louis le Brocquy's locks have the look of a whale), a series of public works that render the titles of evangelical sermons in pieces

MAGNANMETZ GALLERY

of cut-up beer cans, and a series of T-shirts adorned with the titles of spam e-mails promising manifold categories of porn.

“I’m less interested in high culture/low culture distinctions than in an idea of a low/low thing,” Murphy says. “I’ve seen plenty of art that turns mundane or kitsch things into something high culture, the way Jeff Koons did with his chrome bunny, or Jasper Johns did by casting his brushes in bronze. And by doing that, you make the thing into a bona fide art object; you edify it. But what interested me much more than edifying a thing was to bring it only to the next rung of the ladder. To turn a cardboard box into an inflatable [as Murphy did for a series of pieces], for example, is not a quantum leap up the hierarchy. It interests me to democratise in that way – to make each rung as valuable as the next.”

Murphy, who studied in Galway and Belfast, lives with his American wife, a high-school teacher, in the Brooklyn neighbourhood of Crown Heights. His studio is in the basement of their building. “I don’t see myself as an Irish artist in New York,” he says. “I’m just an artist who lives here. And there is no expectation, from my gallery or anywhere else, that my work will be somehow Irish.” Nor, even, that it will be somehow of, or about, New York. “The work I do refers to a pan-global experience of contemporary life, the things we all negotiate,” he says. “And those things are fairly generic and ubiquitous between America and Ireland and many other places.” While living in Belfast, Murphy became obsessed with the idea of blowing things up. But not in the sense you might think. As an artist, he felt huge pressure, he says, to represent the Troubles in some way, but that was not an expectation with which he felt comfortable. “I grew up in a village near Enniscorthy,” he says. “I wasn’t qualified to start sermonising in Belfast. I’d be a fake.”