

How the garden glows

Neither Kinsale nor Ireland has seen anything like it: a collaboration between a 'punk' gardener and a sound experimentalist that combines jewelled sculptures and hidden iPods. It's a long way from the Chelsea Flower Show, writes **Philip Watson**

You know that something's different as soon as you walk through the gate. There, on the other side of the limestone archway that leads to one of Ireland's most spectacular historic buildings, Charles Fort near Kinsale, you are greeted by a shifting spectrum of sounds that are at once eerie and familiar.

There are echoes of Gregorian chants sung by the Glenstal monks; ringing digital sounds that resemble the calls of insects, birds and frogs; ethereal harp music; silvery jazz singing; and swirling recordings of the wind, rain, sea and weather. The effect is unsettling yet appealing, and the source remains a mystery.

Further on, in the ruins of the old governor's house, brightly jewelled sculptures – part resembling plant, animal and human life and some as much as 10ft tall – are hiding in crevices, climbing walls, or hanging out of windows. Along thin carbon fibre poles that shoot 20ft up into the air like antennae are smaller globular growths that re-

call the shape of wasps' nests or cuckoo spit.

Elsewhere are huge angular structures made of aluminium, chrome and glass, surrounded by patterns of geometrically assembled cactuses. Down beyond the imposing fortress walls, around 100ft offshore in Kinsale harbour, is another vividly adorned form that looks like it's heading our way. Everything seems to be seeding and spreading out, and you are not sure if this visitation is friend or foe. The atmosphere is alien, unexpected, ambiguous. One thing that is certain, however, is that Kinsale – and Ireland – has never seen anything quite like it. An installation created by radical horticultural artist Tony Heywood and sound artist David Toop, the work, titled *The Calling*, has been two years in the planning and nine months in the making, and today is the extraordinary centrepiece that launches a revived Kinsale Arts Week.

"I usually create gardens and installations using plant material but, because this work has to last more than two months and plants often need a lot of care and attention, I decided to work almost entirely with inert materials – but inert materials that look as if they've naturally taken on certain forms," says Heywood. "I want it to appear as if something has just gently landed on

"This is a very atmospheric and quite haunting place, and I'm trying to create a sense of surprise, anticipation and unease – like a 1950s science fiction movie sort of thing," continues Heywood, his infectious enthusiasm rising even higher. "I hope people get attracted to and involved in the work, but I'd like them to feel slightly uncomfortable too – and I think that's okay."

This pleasingly contradictory mood is reflected and accentuated by David Toop's "digital-biological" soundscape – an evocative and ever-shifting selection of processed and natural sounds randomly shuffled and played by iPods hidden within the installation. Speakers are also cleverly concealed with steel wool coloured to resemble moss and set high up on walls and ramparts.

"I thought of engaging with the whole political and military history of the fort, but decided that that seemed too obvious – that a sudden burst of musket fire could sound a bit corny," says Toop. "So I thought it better to work with contrast and the greater context and atmosphere of the place."

Toop says he wants to bring to life some of the



the fort and is quite comfortable.”

The Calling is also a response to the turbulent history of the 17th-century bastioned fortress – it was named in honour of King Charles II, besieged and conquered by Williamite forces in 1690, remained a British garrison until 1922, and largely destroyed during the Civil War – and to local legends and myths (for example, that there is a ghost dwelling within the fort named the White Lady).



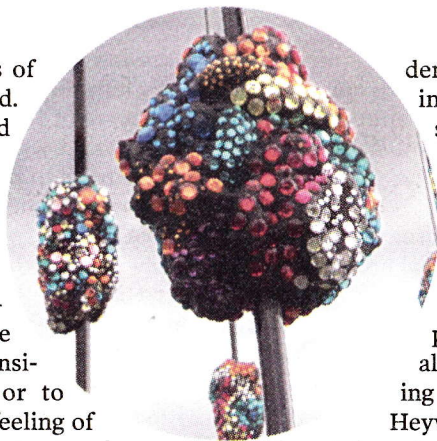
'In some ways, *The Calling* is completely mad – but I think we need madness in our lives'

physical and ambient aspects of the fort that could go unnoticed.

"You often see tourists and visitors to sites such as this walking around in a semi-glazed state because they've seen and ticked off so many attractions that day – you wonder how much they're absorbing," he says. "I can use sound to make people more sensitive to their environment, or to create a slight dissonance or feeling of the unexpected. I want people to stop for a second and listen and become aware of elements of this extraordinary place that they might otherwise miss – whether it be the ruined nooks and crannies of the governor's house, or things such as birdsong, the sound of the sea, or the changeable weather."

Toop, who is also a respected musician, writer and sound curator, is further fascinated and inspired by a characteristically eclectic range of influences – from the mythological Lady Gregory stories (especially those involving talking birds) and the legend of sirens calling from the sea to the resonant drones of uilleann pipes and the ghost stories of Wilkie Collins.

There is also a process of cross-fertilisation with fellow Englishman Tony Heywood. Toop is a keen gardener, having created a small Zen gar-



den in the backyard of his house in London; Heywood is a passionate music fan and jazz drummer. The installation is certainly the creation of two artists who are a very long way from the Chelsea Flower Show and the top 40 (although Toop has, in fact, appeared on *Top of the Pops* with alternative new wavers the Flying Lizards).

Heywood has built a series of experimental gardens – using materials such as crushed glass and shredded titanium alongside traditional mixed plants and hanging baskets – during his time since 1984 as head gardener at the Hyde Park Estate in London, and created such playfully expressionist pieces as *Mulch* – a "turf sculpture" he grew at a London gallery – and a garden in which a large balloon filled with water blew freely among spiky agave. It is work that has led to him being described variously as an "avant gardener", "the gardener the punk movement needed but never got", and (most famously) "the Damien Hirst of horticulture".

Rigorous polymath Toop has written critically acclaimed books on music, memory, ambience and sound, released several solo albums, collaborated with such fellow artistic adventurers as Brian Eno, John Zorn and Steven Berkoff, and in



2000 curated the UK's largest sound art exhibition, *Sonic Boom*, at the Hayward Gallery in London. He is also a regular visitor to Ireland, and is co-curator of *Sound Out*, an exhibition of outdoor sound art to be heard around Cork in September.

Still, for all this restless innovation, *The Calling* remains resolutely approachable and accessible.

"Charles Fort has had a colourful past, but this has to be one of the most dramatic events it has ever seen," says Mareta Doyle, curator of the installation and chair of this year's Kinsale Arts Week. Doyle is the impresario and arts enthusiast responsible for raising an impressive €102,200 for the project from such sponsors as Cork 2005, Cork County Council, the Office of Public Works and local businesses. "In some ways, *The Calling* is completely mad – but I think we need madness in our lives." ♦



The Calling is at Charles Fort, Kinsale, Co Cork from 10am to 6pm until Sept 12. Admission is €3.50 for adults, €1.25 for children/students. www.kinsaleartsweek.com

Opposite:
A tourist captures *The Calling* on film, and above: curator Mareta Doyle. Photographs; Daragh Mac Sweeney/Provision