

Graffiti Bales



If you have traveled the main A4 road between Clogher and Fivemiletown recently you will probably have seen the stack of silage bales colourfully decorated by leading graffiti artist Kev Largey. They have been featured extensively in social media, on BBC and UTV, and in the local and national press.

They are part of Sliabh Beagh Arts *Growth and Decay* program designed to bring the Arts into the everyday lives of rural communities, and more painted bales will appear throughout the district in the months to come.

Why silage bales?

The big round bale is a relatively recent addition to the rural landscape. When they first appeared they seemed alien, like giant overstuffed bin bags left out for collection, but they are so common now that they do not often earn a second glance. It takes some imagination to see them as something that would enhance the community and the environment.

Yet they have their own peculiar character. In size and shape they more resemble the traditional hayricks than the small rectangular bales which became common in the 1970s and 1980s. And like hayricks, they may be evolving their own folk traditions.

Almost from the beginning they were adorned with strange and cryptic markings in white paint. It was rumoured at the time that this was done so that the crows would not mistake their blackness for pools of water and try to bathe in them. Yet crows are intelligent birds; surely it was more a human instinct to mark what is your own and to make it distinct from that of your neighbours.

Silage bales have also been used to communicate protest, mostly recently in the anti-fracking campaign. There is something about a row of bales that suggests painting a letter or a word on each to spell out your message. It is the same instinct that led an earlier generation to plant daffodil bulbs so that when they flowered they would read

G O D I S L O V E

Graffiti bales appear throughout the world: night-time visitors draw smiley faces on bales of sugar cane mulch in Australia, bales encourage riders in the Tour de France, or form part of a Swedish campaign for fair milk prices.

Sometimes the message is more universal and organised, as with the pink 'Barbie bales' that appeared last year in support of breast cancer awareness.

Graffiti bales may have many messages but – as with the corn dollies and other traditions associated with the old hay ricks – they are only temporary. Even Kev Largey's work will be gone in a few months as the bales fulfill their destiny – feeding cattle over the winter.

What remains is the memory. Are we seeing the evolution of a new tradition?

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