

ART REVIEW; The Irish Struggle For a Visual Poetry To Call Their Own

By ROBERTA SMITH
Published: June 25, 1999

The Irish have a big presence in New York right now, and St. Patrick has nothing to do with it. Four prominent institutions -- uptown and down, as well as in Long Island City, Queens -- have conspired to put quite a bit of Irish culture on display, forming what is being called an "Irish Arts Celebration."

In fact, the word celebration is only intermittently justified. It certainly fits the New York Public Library's "Such Friends: The Work of W. B. Yeats," a magnificent array of books, manuscripts, letters and prints pertaining to the prolific life and volatile times of that Irish poet and playwright.

But Ireland's towering contribution to 20th-century literature, frequently touched on in the Yeats exhibition, far outstrips its achievement on the visual front. The three other exhibitions, reviewed here, which survey modern and contemporary Irish art, leave much to be desired in purely artistic terms, although they are frequently engrossing for the picture they give of Ireland's intensely troubled history and of the burden it places on creative intelligence.

The art exhibitions include "When Time Began to Rant and Rage: Figurative Painting From 20th-Century Ireland" at the Grey Art Gallery and Study Center at New York University; "0044," a show of 20 Irish artists living in London, at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in Long Island City (the title refers to the telephone dial code from Ireland to England), and "A Measured Quietude: Contemporary Irish Drawings" at the Drawing Center in SoHo.

Grey Art Gallery

"When Time Began to Rant and Rage" -- the title comes from Yeats -- opens with paintings made before World War I, when James Joyce was writing the short stories that would eventually be published as "Dubliners," bringing a new compression and psychological clarity to the short story form, often by revealing the daily tragedies of working- or middle-class Irish life with searing precision. Nothing in this exhibition of nearly 60 paintings by some 40 artists equals Joyce's youthful originality; the works are almost uniformly indebted to French Impressionism and Post-Impressionism and other outside influences or bogged down in a parochial, illustrational realism.

Either way, it is impossible to look at most of the canvases here without the name of other artists springing unbidden to mind: Degas, Sargent, Courbet, Homer, Dali, Larry Rivers, Francis Bacon. Only rarely are these names beaten back by the pictorial or emotional realities of the work at hand. (This happens in the other two exhibitions as well: the names and mediums change, but the echoing persists.)

In its early sections, which are the most interesting, the show provides aching reflections of Ireland's painful history and its cultural strivings. In particular it makes palpable the tensions between artists who wanted to keep abreast of international (mostly French) developments in art and who studied or lived abroad, and those who disdained modernism and celebrated subjects like Irish rural life or the struggle for independence and who saw their art as part of the Irish cultural nationalist movement that led to the Easter Rebellion of 1916.

Thus one can see Sean Keating's "Men of the West" (1915), a somewhat illustrational rendition of three raw-boned Irish freedom fighters who strongly resemble American cowboys, across from William Leech's "Interior of a Cafe" (1908), a beautifully painted study in subtle browns and muted whites that suggests attention to Degas, or Sir William Orpen's "On the Beach at Howth," an Impressionist-flavored idyll from 1910. More arresting is Sir William's "Ready to Start -- Self-Portrait" (1917), which shows him in a British military uniform looking intently into a mirror, in a room that might have been painted by a latter-day Vuillard.

The artist who most convincingly knit together Irish themes with an original, contemporary painting style was Jack B. Yeats, the poet's younger brother. Working in a loose Expressionistic manner that has something in common with Soutine's (and was devised at roughly the same time), Yeats painted charged places, like the grave of Wolfe Tone, the 18th-century politician who is considered the father of Irish nationalism. Less specific is an image of people hurrying across O'Connell Bridge in Dublin, their postures imbued with psychological tensions that bring Joyce to mind.

Another artist to look for here is Gerard Dillon, whose deft manipulations of color and space give a quirky vividness to "Island People" (1950) and "A Self-Contained Flat" (1955), curvy and angular respectively. The latter includes multiple images of the artist moving through the red, prismatically fused spaces of his London basement apartment.

P.S. 1

The Grey Art Gallery show ends in a preponderance of mawkishly political, often Neo-Expressionist paintings from the 1980's, which could squelch any interest in contemporary Irish art. But things perk up a bit at P.S. 1, where Peter Murray, curator of the Crawford Municipal Art Gallery in Cork, has brought together the work of 20 Irish artists who live and work in London and whose efforts sometimes address Irish themes.

Like Willie Doherty and Paul Graham, Paul Seawright, for example, confronts "the troubles" with a camera, making large color photographs of the desolate no man's land that is usually created, mostly by burning, between Catholic and Protestant communities in Belfast.

The show's most impressive moments are supplied by women. In Frances Hegarty's haunting video "Autoportrait," flickering (strobed) images show the artist in a state of rising and ebbing distress as if she were suffering a fit of paranoia, grief or a near-death experience.

Liadin Cooke summons a quiet elegiac force by combining things that are specifically Irish with things that aren't. Her "Blue Book" is a book that juxtaposes letters written during the 1940's and 50's to a woman in County Kilkenny (where Ms. Cooke found them in an old house) with

photographs she took of an old, empty house in London. A modest floor sculpture consists of 21 rough little aluminum balls, casts of clay dug from a field in Cross Gregg.

Tina O'Connell's three installation pieces riff on Post-Minimalists like Robert Smithson, Carl Andre and Lynda Benglis without losing their identity. Daphne Wright ventures some fairly original Post-Minimalism of her own, with an installation dominated by tall craggy outcroppings of aluminum foil, each accompanied by its own tiny foil sea gull.

Siobhan Hapaska is here, with sculptures in formed plastic whose surface perfection is as sleekly enigmatic and as unsatisfying as ever. And so is Kathy Prendergast, who burst on the international scene at the 1995 Venice Biennale with delicate maps of the world's capitals. Here she marks time in several senses of the word.

This time her drawings crowd together all the world's lakes and rivers, reducing explicit geography to seemingly random marks. She also shows several beautifully wrought sculptures that attempt to capture life's circular rhythms and sometimes succeed.

I recommend her "Grave Blanket," an intimidating object made with white yarn and marble chips, and "The End and the Beginning II," a spool of thread made with three generations of human hair. More obvious and less interesting is "The End and the Beginning I," which consists of a baby's bonnet adorned with strands of white hair.

The Drawing Center

"A Measured Quietude," which also takes its title from Yeats and has been organized by the Drawing Center and the Grey Art Gallery, shares a few artists with the P.S. 1 show. It is similarly uneven and is even more dominated by highly professional examples of Minimalism and Post-Minimalism. Thus the exceptions stand out.

These include odd little drawings by Ms. Cooke, which combine images suggesting primitive maps and cross sections of bones, tunnels or landscapes with cryptic quotes. The words turn out to be from Sade, but they tell of an arduous journey involving a monster and a dungeon filled with the bones of its victims, which seems more in keeping with "The Iliad" or "The Odyssey."

Colin Darke, the most overtly political artist here, makes elegant little drawing-texts by copying the writings of Lenin and Trotsky in minuscule script onto cigarette papers, a well-known method among political prisoners in Northern Ireland for passing secret messages. These are pieced together to resemble handmade newspapers and punctuated with images of Lenin or of a well known remnant of the troubles, a sardonic sign once seen all over Belfast that reads "You are Now Entering Free Derry."

Across the street in the Drawing Room, the Drawing Center's projects space, the Irish artist John Kindness concludes the proceedings on a high note by transposing the Attic vase style of classical Greece into a monumental black-and-white wall drawing that resembles a handsome fresco. It depicts Herakles (as the Greeks called Hercules) as a Belfast youth meeting the challenges of the street with fearless, slightly robotic aplomb.

Much of the work in these last two shows exemplifies what may be one of the underlying paradoxes of contemporary art. As its styles become increasingly international, the real challenge is not to overcome parochialism but to make these styles personal.

That requires not so much going out into the world but going deeper into the self, with the intent of finding not only a personal subject but also a personal form.

"When Time Began to Rant and Rage: Figurative Painting From 20th-Century Ireland" is at the Grey Art Gallery, 100 Washington Square East, Greenwich Village, (212) 998-6780, through July 24. "A Measured Quietude: Contemporary Irish Drawings," is at the Drawing Center, 35 Wooster Street, SoHo, (212) 219-2166, and at its Drawing Room across the street, through July 30. "0044: Contemporary Irish Art in Britain" is at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, 22-25 Jackson Avenue, at 46th Avenue, Long Island City, Queens, (718) 784-2084, through Aug. 29. "Such Friends: The Work of W. B. Yeats" is at the New York Public Library, Fifth Avenue at 42d Street, (212) 221-8089, through Sept. 11.