

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (WI)

June 9, 2002

Irish art, in all its diversity, is emerging would Into the light

JAMES AUER Journal Sentinel art critic

The English-speaking world has always had a soft spot in its heart for the plays, poetry, novels, music and acting genius that emerge with astonishing regularity from the land of the shamrock.

Irish literary giants like Oscar Wilde, Sean O'Casey, George Bernard Shaw, William Butler Yeats and John Millington Synge are known to every British student, and to most Americans.

Irish-American director John Ford is an icon of the Golden Age filmmaking. Maureen O'Hara, Peter O'Toole, Tyrone Power and Errol Flynn typify Ireland's gifts to Hollywood.

But when it comes to painting, sculpture, photography and printmaking, the memory banks of most Americans go blank.

This particular void in the consciousness of the average art fancier is being remedied through Sept. 29 by a small but special show, "Home and Away: Contemporary Irish Art," in the upper gallery of Marquette University's Haggerty Museum of Art.

It's not a large selection of work -- just selected pieces by eight contemporary artists, all still active, and most deserving of the appellation "mid-career."

But it proves that Irish culture doesn't have a blind spot when it comes to pursuing the visible, rather than the verbal, arts.

Nor is Ireland indifferent to the potential and achievements of its growing visual-arts community.

Realism, abstraction, collage, non-traditional uses of photography -- all appear to thrive inside the country, and within the ever-expanding Irish diaspora.

Citizens of the world

Annemarie Sawkins, who curated the show for the Haggerty, conceded that Ireland is far better known for its musical and literary traditions than for its visual arts.

But, she said, important changes have taken place recently within the country that augur well for a burst of creativity of all kinds.

Membership in the European Union has strengthened Ireland's economy, and this has permitted the national government to assist artists by giving them career subsidies and free advanced-art educations.

"There's a very active community of Irish artists throughout the world," Sawkins said, "but most artists are trying to be part of the international art community. They'd rather be seen as part of an

international dialogue than categorized as Irish."

David Gardiner, who teaches English and heads the Irish Studies program at Creighton University in Omaha, Neb., agreed that leaving Ireland, at least for a time, could be helpful to an aspiring artist.

"Sometimes," Gardiner said, "an artist has to leave a place in order to deal with it effectively."

The eight image-makers represented in this show are "seeing with their eyes, not with their minds," Gardiner said in a telephone interview. "They're not imposing preconceptions upon Irish thought and culture."

By settling down in England or America and attempting to establish careers there, the present crop of Irish visual artists is following in the footsteps of celebrated expatriates of the past like Wilde and Shaw, who took advantage of the opportunities available in London but never really cut their Irish roots.

Not easily categorized

Furthermore, said Gardiner, there is a tradition of linking words and pictures in Irish culture. For instance, Jack Yeats, brother of famed poet William Butler Yeats, did sketches in the company of Synge, while the latter was writing from the west of Ireland for the Manchester Guardian.

"The visual and literary arts in Ireland were always very closely aligned," Gardiner said. "The literary arts were simply more accessible. It's easier to buy a book than it is to carry a painting or put together exhibits."

Notions of displacement and loss continue to characterize -- and, more often than not, unify -- Irish art, according to **Elizabeth** Frances Martin, an Irish-American graduate student who lives in New York and helps clients acquire 19th- and 20th-century paintings from Irish easels.

Martin worked with Sawkins in assembling "Home and Away."

Martin denied that artists of Irish ancestry are easily categorized, or that they are bound together by a common mind-set.

"I'm more interested in looking at these people as artists who are from Ireland, than as Irish artists," Martin said.

"It's really diversity that we are celebrating here -- and an abundance of choices."

Strength in universal themes

Certainly, a multitude of choices characterize the show, whose opening Thursday coincided with the national meeting of the American Conference for Irish Studies at Marquette. The conference, which began Wednesday, concluded Saturday.

The only still photographer in the show, Peter Hendrick, is also one of the exhibit's more original voices. His full-color studies of "Conversations at Night," in cities from New York to Barcelona,

resonate with the nervous energy of the metropolis.

Brash, blurry, fully saturated, intentionally off-kilter, they speak of the danger -- and emotional tension -- implicit in being out on the streets, armed with a camera, after dark.

Elizabeth O'Reilly, a painterly realist, shows a batch of economically brushed oils on board that mysteriously and harmoniously blend social involvement with stylistic detachment.

Her small-scale canvases veer persuasively from the seashore, with its jagged cliffs and roiling waves, to a remote island from whom its inhabitants were removed by government order.

Both series ache with concern for the Irish sea, soul and soil. The studies of abandoned rooms, on the now-deserted Gola Island, are particularly affecting.

Working in a far larger scale, with oil glazes that lend depth and luster to intensely personal visual conceits, Darragh Hogan evokes a tremendous sense of the power of water in "Port Authority."

Equally satisfying is "The Yellow Hammer." In it, Hogan plays with the essential qualities of paint even as he challenges us to find the tiny, almost unrecognizable bird that gives the painting its title.

J. Kieran McGonnell dabbles in personalized fantasy as he places Anubis heads onto the shoulders of an assortment of fashionably garbed human beings in a trio of wildly imaginative oil paintings with monoprint.

The images, which transport his blank-faced creatures into art galleries under various circumstances, might be read as studies of alienation, or thought projection -- or simply wishful thinking on the part of a smart young painter seeking exposure.

In any event, their strength lies in their universality, rather than their undiluted Irishness.

Another of the show's contributors, Helen O'Leary, boldly challenges several of the usual stratagems of contemporary abstraction by offering a series of small, almost childish pictures, executed in egg and oil on linen.

O'Leary works compactly rather than extravagantly, making her points with economy instead of grandiosity. She is not afraid to let the child inside her come out, and she has lighthearted, unaffected fun with layering, dots, smears and uneven lines.

Considerably more literary, in his use of words and symbols, is John Spinks, who builds his work autobiographically, using book pages and diary notations to turn aspects of his personal life into two-dimensional memories.

The best of the lot is a picture in which he uses his father's diary and notebooks as raw material for a composition that is at once poignant and respectful.

Also revealing, and just a bit touching, is the piece Spinks calls "Captiva." In it, he deals explicitly with the Florida island on which Robert Rauschenberg lives and works. Clearly, a mentor relationship is in the making.

Augmenting the two-dimensional works in the show are two brief color/sound videos, "Faint" and "The Persistence of Vision," shot and edited by Susan MacWilliam. Even Ireland is not immune to the lure of the digital.

IF YOU GO

What: "Home and Away: Contemporary Irish Art"

Where: Haggerty Museum of Art, N. 13th and W. Clybourn streets (Marquette University campus)

How long: Through Sept. 29.

How much: Free. For information, call (414) 288-1669.

Copyright. All Rights Reserved.