

CHAPTER 11

CONTEMPORARY IRISH ART

As this is such a large subject, we will confine ourselves to a small few artists, namely Brian Bourke, Michael Kane, Brian Maguire, Seán McSweeney, Eithne Jordan, Nancy Wynne-Jones and Martin Gale. All of them are mature artists whose work is in many private and public collections. It could be said that all of the above artists, with the exception of Martin Gale, belonged to the New Expressionism, an Irish art movement originating the 1980s. Michael Kane is often held to be the father of the movement.

BRIAN BOURKE

Brian Bourke is interested in humanity but it is for his original take on the Connemara landscape and particularly the Knockalough paintings with their emphasis on colour and line. See his painting *Knockalough Winter*.

BRIAN MAGUIRE

Brian Maguire was born in 1951. His art is noteworthy for its social comment and is mainly concerned with injustice and suffering. He is obsessed with the plight of prisoners. Much of his work has been about them and he has worked directly with them in prisons. See his *The Foundation Stone (Mental Home)*, 1990. **The Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin.** This picture shows a long grey hospital corridor, open to the sky and flooded with yellow sunlight and the green of the outdoors. At first glance this could be a pointer to a mood of optimism, but this hope of escape is mitigated by the phantom-like face at the bottom of the picture. Grey, like the walls of the hospital, the face has become part of the institution and is directed, accusingly towards the spectator. This a large painting and the paint is applied in broad generous washes. ‘I do not know where the painting will end when it starts; things become clear while working’ – Brian Maguire.

EITHNE JORDAN.

Group of Women 1986, Private Collection.

(See publication, *Eithne Jordan* published by Gandon Editions). While living in Berlin in the 1980s Eithne Jordan produced a series of Expressionist heads which she wouldn’t class as portraits, as exemplified in *Split Face 1*, 1988. There is an element of humour in these works because of the child-like approach, but underlying this is a sense of sadness and melancholia. Eithne Jordan now lives in France and her latest show in the Rubicon Gallery, Dublin showed a completely different approach – warm sunset views of houses and other buildings near where she lives, capturing a mood of serenity and desolation.

SEÁN MCSWEENEY. ***Bogland***

Seán MacSweeney (born Dublin, 1934) has successfully married Abstract Expressionism to the colour and light of the West of Ireland landscape. Individual paintings are not tied to a particular locale except in a general sense. He lives near the sea in north-west Sligo and draws his inspiration from the shoreline and more especially local bogs and bog pools. He goes back to the same bog pools to capture the effect of the changing weather and seasons. MacSweeney is collected world-wide. He exhibits in Dublin, Belfast and London. In July 2004 he had an exhibition in the Kenny Gallery, Galway.

NANCY WYNNE-JONES. *Good Morning Nephin. 2001* and *Nephin at Sunrise. 2001.*

(See publication, *Nancy Wynne-Jones at Eighty* published by Gandon Editions.)

Sean McSweeney, Brian Bourke and Nancy Wynne-Jones are among a small number of artists who have given new life to the generations-old tradition of painting the landscape and seacoast of the West.

Nancy Wynne-Jones (born Wales, 1922) is another contemporary landscapist who into her old age has recently done some of her best work in North Mayo. She is a little less into abstraction than Seán McSweeney but what both have in common is a gestural approach to painting. In other words, their paintings are finished with a flourish of rapidly executed and improvised brushstrokes, resulting in an effect of liveliness and immediacy. Although Nancy Wynne-Jones' paintings look hurried, she is on record as saying that she would spend up to a month on a painting, working most days. She has been influenced by Jack B. Yeats and has a great admiration for the late Patrick Collins who interpreted the landscape in an abstractly poetic way. See his painting, *A Place with Stones*. Of contemporary Irish artists, she has said that she most admires the work of Seán McSweeney 'with whose approach to landscape I feel very much in sympathy'.

Nancy Wynne-Jones has said that going to Mayo on a Ballinglen fellowship in 1994 was a turning point in her life and in her work. "It immediately excited me. The landscape wasn't like any I had seen before. I became delightedly aware of the immensity of the space around me, and the urge grew somehow to possess it in my work. I had time to think and absorb the feel of the land. The sacred mountain appeared and disappeared. I found the bogs." The sacred mountain, of course, was Nephin. Her obsession with Nephin is akin to that of Cezanne with Mont Sainte-Victoire in France. The following quotation indicates how she deals with the problem of portraying vast open spaces within the confines of a small canvas.

In any wide landscape, especially a flattish one such as a wide bogland, there is a large amount of undefined nothing between you and the distance. Wide space and air in-between is something that interests me very much. I have attempted in some of my paintings to animate the space between my eye and the further reaches of my landscape with a variety of metaphors for the air in-between. I do not see air as empty. It seems alive and full of incident, it is coloured in itself, and your eye picks up and transfers colours from the land and sky. I began to try to make my strokes and stabs and smudges of paint themselves fill the space between the mountains and my possessing eye.

It will then be obvious that Nancy Wynne-Jones eschews direct representation, making no attempt to include details such as flowers, shrubs or grasses in her paintings. Her aim is rather to evoke the spirit of a particular place. She decries much of what passes for modern art (so called Post-Modernism) because of the implication that it has no real meaning – a kind of pastiche of the art of the past - due to the belief of the artists that life itself has no meaning. She thinks that goes with a total lack of any belief in the spiritual nowadays. "I think there is no point in art if it has no spiritual significance. After all why do it if there is none" - Nancy Wynne-Jones.

MARTIN GALE.

The Weather in Mayo. 2000, Private Collection. *Once a Sailor*, 1999, Private Collection. *A Search* 1999, Private Collection. *The Outsider* 1981, Merrion Hotel Collection. These images, and others, can be accessed in the publication: *Martin Gale Paintings*, available at the **RHA Gallery**, Ely Place, Dublin.

In his photo-realistic landscapes, with or without figures, the work of Martin Gale (born in England) is a complete contrast to that of the latter two artists. His raw response to the landscape is a complete departure from the art of such figures as Paul Henry and other traditional notions of romance and nostalgia associated with the West of Ireland landscape. His people are often as isolated and desolate as those of Edward Hopper. Seldom interacting with each other, they are often lost in separate thoughts that have nothing to do with the scene they inhabit. Lone figures, as in *Once a Sailor*, stand staring out over a bleak sea at the edge of the painting as if trying to recapture some wonderful past while all around them are the raw realities of their present condition, symbolized by an untamed, almost primitive landscape and lowering clouds above. In Gale's landscapes all appears normal but there is an uneasy tension between people or between the people and the landscape. Some figures obviously dressed as visitors, don't seem to belong in a place, others are leaving or seem longing to leave. Like the figures in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, although rooted in the here and now, they seem in a state of longing for an existence beyond their present condition. In a sense we can all identify with that predicament. Who doesn't have some private *Tír na nÓg* or other lurking at the back of his/her mind?

Like Nancy Wynne-Jones, Martin Gale also worked for a period of some months in North Mayo during the winter of 1999, staying with friends in Ballycastle. He stayed long enough to absorb the spirit of the place and to experience the life of the people and the countryside in all kinds of weather. He prefers the drama and low winter light to other times of the year.

A series of Mayo paintings followed this visit, such as *The Weather in Mayo*, 2000, (page 122). Who can invest a rain-drenched ploughed field with a sense of magic and mystery? This painting is a fine panorama with a ploughed field, the foreground furrows almost drowned in pools of water reflecting the dark threatening sky beyond the horizon, the furrows leading the eye in dramatic perspective to hilly grasslands. The scene is punctuated by a scattering of farm houses in the distance. A lone figure facing the edge of the painting, fully clad in weather gear, seems hell-bent in getting out of this godforsaken landscape.

Although his wintry landscapes depict and harsh realities of rural life they still show a people prepared to grapple with the fragility and uncertainties of their daily existence. Despite the sense of estrangement and the rawness, the paintings are still beautiful because of Gale's ability to transform the commonplace and to give us a unique and otherworldly vision of our landscape and our place in it.