

Writing Irish Art History: A Report

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This article takes the form of both a review and a response to two events which addressed the presence or absence of a critical historiographical tradition in Irish art history. These events were the student-led research day, titled 'Writing Irish Art History', organised by TRIARC in November 2010 in Dublin, and the session, also titled 'Writing Irish Art History', held at the Association of Art Historians' Annual Conference in Warwick in March/April, 2011.¹ The aim of these events was to foreground, in different ways, the role of texts in the production of Irish art history. While the papers in the first session focused largely on the importance and agency of specific texts and their impact on discourses on art, the second session examined the context of criticism as it has developed from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries. The range of contexts addressed included both the close examination of key interpretative documents, and the position of art criticism in texts such as the *Capuchin Annual*, an important Catholic magazine produced in Dublin between the 1930s and 1977, to the texts produced in Derry's Orchard Gallery in the 1980s and 1990s.

In the past decade, several documents have raised the issue of how, where, and under what terms, Irish art history is produced. These include the series of articles in *Circa* by James Elkins addressing the state of Irish art history in Ireland in 2003, following his appointment at the new Department of Art History in University College Cork, and in 2006, at the end of his tenure there.² Contemporary writing about contemporary art was the subject of an Arts Council-funded series of events coordinated by Fiona Fullam.³ Important and formative events in the debate on critical historiography include the session entitled 'Irish Studies and History of Art: Impossible Dialogues?' as part of the 2007 Association of Art Historians annual conference, organised by Lucy Cotter. This conference programme is a key document in a history of the critical historiography of Irish art, recording the important questions which were addressed by art historians and theorists of Irish art history and its construction.⁴ More recently, an essay by Francis Halsall, titled 'Strategic Amnesia: Modernism and Art History in Ireland in the Twenty-first Century', was published in the *Irish Review* in 2008. Halsall's essay addressed several issues surrounding the development of the critical discipline relating to art in Ireland, but

¹ 'Writing Irish Art History' was organised by TRIARC: The Irish Art Research Centre at Trinity College Dublin, on the 20th November 2010, and was supported by both the IRCHSS Reconstructions of the Gothic Past project, and Four Courts Press. 'Writing Irish History' was session – at the Association of Art Historians' Annual Conference in Warwick, 2011. Niamh NicGhabhann and Caroline McGee were the event co-organisers. The papers given at the November event are available as podcasts at <http://writingirisharthistory.blogspot.com/>

² James Elkins, 'The State of Irish Art History', *Circa*, 106, 2003, 56 – 59, James Elkins, 'The State of Irish Art History Revisited', *Circa*, 116, Summer 2006, Response [eight letters responding to the original essay, by Joan Fowler, Lucy Cotter, Maeve Connolly, Mia Lerm Hayes, Róisín Kennedy, Rosemarie Mulcahy, Sheila Dickinson, and Siún Hanrahan, *Circa*, 118 Winter 2006, 45 - 47

³ Art/Writing/Talks <http://artwritingtalks.wordpress.com/>

⁴ <http://www.aah.org.uk/photos/conf%20programme%20final%281%29.pdf>

curiously overlooked the vibrant debate on art and aesthetics which had existed in Ireland prior to the foundation of university courses in art history. Halsall asserted that 'it is only relatively recently that Ireland has had a professional art-historical community'.⁵ While this may be true of a narrowly-defined idea of what a 'professional' art historian may look like, a foundation text such as Fintan Cullen's *Sources in Irish Art: A Reader*, reveals the tip of a continually critical and self-reflexive iceberg which has existed as long as art has been made in this country.⁶ Critics such as Gabriel Cooney have examined the extent to which the discipline of archaeology as it has been practiced throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been shaped by the specific conditions in which it was defined as a discipline in the nineteenth century, and a similar investigation can be applied in relation to the visual arts.⁷ As Philippa Levine as examined in great detail, the foundation work of disciplines of cultural histories was carried out in both a professional and amateur capacity – indeed, the boundaries between the two are so porous that it is distorting to try to impose such distinctions.⁸ Consider Sir William Wilde (1815 -76), for example, whose pioneering work on early Irish art at the Royal Irish Academy, one of the first examples of the 'Three Ages' system being employed in an Irish context, was carried out in spare time left over from his busy career as a path-breaking surgeon – the term 'amateur' does not approximate this endeavour, nor the work of his contemporaries.⁹

The institutional frameworks of art history in Ireland have been strengthened over the past decade – most notably in the establishment of several M.A. and M.Phil courses on the subject, in Universities and Institutes of Technology, and the continuing development of the Irish Association of Art Historians and its journal, *Artefact*.¹⁰ The foundation of NIVAL, the National Irish Visual Arts Library at the National College of Art and Design, and TRIARC, the Irish Art Research Centre at Trinity College Dublin, in 2003, with its stated aim of providing a research facility dedicated to Irish art, reflects this increasing critical interest. Of course, this upsurge in interest in (and funding for) the scholarship of Irish art could be seen in the rather cynical light of its increasing upswing in popularity during the Celtic Tiger era. Indeed, the specific conditions of this period, and its privileging of certain iconic figures or eras, deserve a much larger study. While the lifeline of scholarship on Irish art, architecture and visual culture in the past decade certainly shows more activity in the past decade than before, this has not necessarily been matched by a sustained critical investigation of the terms and conditions of its enquiry. Individual scholars have continued to position their own work in a nuanced and complex relationship to extant commentary – two of the most striking examples of recent years include

⁵ Francis Halsall, 'Strategic Amnesia: Modernism and Art History in Ireland in the Twenty-first Century', *The Irish Review*, Winter 2008, 18 - 35

⁶ Fintan Cullen, *Sources in Irish art: a reader*, Cork: Cork University Press, 2000

⁷ Gabriel Cooney, 'Building the future on the past: archaeology and the construction of national identity in Ireland', in *Nationalism and Archaeology*, eds. Margarita Diaz-Andreu and Timothy Champion, London: UCL Press, 1996

⁸ Philippa Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional: antiquarians, historians and archaeologists in Victorian England, 1838 – 1886*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986

⁹ Michael Ryan, 'Sir William Wilde and Irish antiquities', in Eileán Ní Chuilleán, ed. *The Wilde Legacy*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003

¹⁰ <http://artefactjournal.com/>

Tomás Ó Carragáin's masterful and skilful positioning of his study of early medieval Irish churches as a development within an often bristlingly hostile scholarly tradition to Éimear O'Connor's reassessment of the role of Irish women artists, acts of critical historiography which have been as important as those of discovery and analysis.¹¹ However, with the exception of the documents by Elkins and Halsall mentioned above, the larger questions surrounding critical art historical practices in Ireland, the terms of the discipline as it has developed and the impact of this on the work being produced, in scholarship, the art market and museums, have not yet been the focus of a focused critical investigation.

The *Writing Irish Art History* sessions brought together several scholars who have addressed these issues in their own work, creating a discussion about critical practice, formative texts, periodicals and exhibitions, and the specific conditions of critical cultures as they have existed from at different periods in Irish history.¹² The first session, held at Trinity College Dublin in 2008 and opened by Dr. Yvonne Scott, Director of TRIARC and Head of the Department of History of Art and Architecture at Trinity College Dublin, focused on current student research. The papers challenged strategies which had traditionally led investigation into Irish visual culture – for example, Colleen Thomas's paper on the iconography of SS. Anthony and Paul traversed the boundaries of both nationality and material, from stone carving to illumination. Jennifer Fitzgibbon's research, on the experience of emigration in recent and contemporary Irish art, inscribed a narrative of displacement and alternative strategies of belonging into a canon of criticism which has often focused on art produced within the island itself. Similarly, Jane Humphries' paper looked at several contemporary art practices through the prism of the concept of the 'domestic', rather than adopting a biographical approach, and Mary Jane Boland assessed the challenges of the idea of 'genre' painting in an Irish context. The relationship between texts and interpretation provided the focus for several papers – Keith Smith examined the potential of a seventeenth-century visitation by the somewhat firebrand Franciscan friar, Fr. Donatus Mooney, for the study of the material culture of the period; Tara Kelly examined nineteenth-century commercial metalworking catalogues which were instrumental in creating a canon of early Irish metalwork; Blaithín Hurley looked at the relationship between several nineteenth-century literary texts and visual imagery, and the symbiotic relationship between artists and writers, using the relationship between Charles Dickens and Daniel Maclise as an example; Emma Dwan Reilly focused on theoretical approaches and challenges to contemporary art writing. Two keynote addresses provided important focal points for the day, given by Professor Tom Dunne and Dr. Róisín Kennedy. Professor Dunne, whose own scholarship has been informed by an

¹¹ Tomás Ó Carragáin, *Churches in early medieval Ireland: architecture, ritual and memory*, New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2010, Éimear O'Connor, *Irish women artists, 1800 – 2009: familiar but unknown*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010

¹² The *Writing Irish Art History* sessions were conceived as part of a larger series of works – the multi-strand *Reconstructions of the Gothic Past* project 2008 – 2011, which was based at TRIARC and was funded by the Irish Research Council of the Humanities and Social Sciences. Strand 4 of this project included a study of the historiographical tradition in Irish architectural history, and Irish cultural studies more generally, focusing on the extent to which it had been shaped by the political realities of the nineteenth century. http://www.tcd.ie/History_of_Art/research/centres/triarc/rgp/index.php

interdisciplinary approach to history, landscape and visual culture, addressed the legacy of different historiographical approaches in Irish scholarship. His lecture focused on the interpretation of Daniel Maclise's *Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife*, which hangs in the National Gallery of Ireland, to illustrate the impact of politically-informed historiographical traditions on interpretation. Dr. Kennedy, who has lectured and published widely on art criticism and painting in the twentieth century, examined the development of the discipline of Irish art history in the twentieth century. This keynote highlighted several individuals, from Dorothy Walker (1929 – 2002), an important modernist art critic and Professor Anne Crookshank, founder of the History of Art department at Trinity College Dublin. Kennedy also examined the impact of their major texts on later scholarship: Walker's 1997 *Modern Art in Ireland*, and Professor Crookshank's 1978 *The Painters of Ireland*, which was jointly written by Desmond Fitzgerald, the Knight of Glin, with a foreword by James White.¹³

One of the guiding texts for this event was Jahan Ramazani's important essay, 'A Transnational Poetics', which was extended to the concept of a transnational poetics of criticism – criticism and criticisms which could extend beyond national borders, but also the frameworks of the discipline to engage with others.¹⁴ Reflecting this, actors Nicholas Johnson and Nathan Gordon, from the Dublin-based Painted Filly theatre company devised a piece titled 'Performative Criticism: Beckett and Duthuit', which was based on prose piece *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*, by Samuel Beckett.¹⁵ These dialogues were based on Beckett's debates on art with the French critic and historian, Georges Duthuit, and test the limits of what language can approximate in describing the visual experience, or the creative experience/intention of the artist.¹⁶ The dialogue on Bram van Velde, was performed by Johnson and Gordon, who built a creatively uncomfortable space somewhere between an academic debate and a barely-controlled blazing row, imaginatively recreating the bravado and performance of the big theoretical debates on the nature of art and on the artist's 'necessity' of early- to mid- twentieth century high modernism criticism.

The second session, held as part of the AAH Annual Conference, took place in the University of Warwick. While addressing the same theme of questioning the writing of Irish art history, the papers in this session looked closely at specific events or texts, providing close readings of the methodological approach of each author.

Several of the papers were acts of recovery, tracing the history of the reception and criticism of Irish art: Christopher Jordan spoke on a series of lectures given by John Ruskin in Dublin on Celtic art, events which have largely disappeared from the historiographical record, and Mary Jane Boland gave a detailed analysis of the reception of nineteenth-century Irish paintings from their first exhibition to the

¹³ Dorothy Walker, *Modern art in Ireland*, Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1997, Anne Crookshank and the Knight of Glin, *The Painters of Ireland c. 1600 – 1920*, London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1978

¹⁴ Jahan Ramazani, 'A Transnational Poetics', *American Literary History*, Volume 18, Number 2, Summer 2006, 332 - 359

¹⁵ Adaptation/ Q&A, Dr. Nicholas Johnson, Cast: Nicholas Johnson, Nathan Gordon, Marc Atkinson Assistant.

Samuel Beckett's relationship with the visual arts was the subject of an exhibition held at the National Gallery of Ireland, titled 'Samuel Beckett: A Passion for Paintings', in 2006, coinciding with the celebration of the writer's centenary.

¹⁶ Rémi Labrusse, 'Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit', *Samuel Beckett: A Passion for Paintings*, ed. Finola Croke, Dublin: National Gallery of Ireland, 2006

present day, and the challenges and opportunities posed by interdisciplinary approaches to criticism. Similarly, Róisín Kennedy traced the position and impact of the writing on art in the *Capuchin Annual*, reassessing the importance of this periodical and the extent to which its presence and agency challenges the oft-repeated statements of visual poverty, and general popular disinterest in art in mid-century Ireland. Úna Walker and Gabriel N. Gee contributed close, contextualised readings of key documents – Walker examined the history and impact of the 1960s report on Irish design, commissioned by the Irish Export Board from the Scandinavian Design Group, and Gee focused on the publications commissioned by the directors of Derry's Orchard Gallery throughout the late 1970s to 2003, looking at their unique contribution both in relation to the artwork they accompanied, but also to the critical assessment of the history of Northern Ireland as seen from the contemporary socio-political context of the Troubles. Finally, Craig Richardson, having completed an important analysis of Scottish art since 1960, questioned the validity and benefits of the term 'Irish' art, creating a series of comparisons with the historiography of Scottish art. Richardson's paper queried the conditions of the creation of a category of modern and contemporary 'Irish art', and, crucially, the impact of this on curricula in universities, on state support for both art making and for the purchasing policies of state collections, and on the utilisation of resources in the arts.

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