

# The Irish Imagination 1971 – Stereotype or Strategy

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Modernist criticism via Anglo-American channels came to the fore in writing on Irish art in the 1960s and 1970s. It offered an alternative to the deployment of nationalist rhetoric in assessing the value of visual art to Irish cultural life which had been dominant since independence in 1922. The use of a Modernist approach came from wider economic and linguistic factors and above all from the provincial attitude of the art establishment which sought validation from New York or London. This paper focuses on one of the most influential and contentious essays on post-war Irish art, the catalogue text of the 1971 exhibition the *Irish Imagination 1959-71*. It considers how modern Irish art was presented in this text and how this presentation related to the priorities of the art establishment in the Republic of Ireland in the early 1970s. Coming at a crucial moment in the escalation of violence in Northern Ireland and the demise of Modernism internationally, the essay encapsulates many of the contradictions of its time.

The years leading up to the *Irish Imagination* exhibition were pivotal ones for the display and production of art in the Republic of Ireland. Disputes over the National College of Art by students protesting against its outdated curriculum and administration in conjunction with the partisan collecting policies of the Arts Council at the end of the 1960s highlighted the contentious position of visual art in contemporary Irish culture.<sup>1</sup> The former put visual art at the forefront of the media and the prolonged debate concerning the National College of Art and Design bill in the Dáil and Senate in 1971 brought Irish visual art into a new critical focus. In addition to this the period saw the disintegration of civil law in Northern Ireland and the stability of the Republic appeared to be severely under threat.

Sponsored by the Arts Council of Ireland, the *Irish Imagination 1959-71* exhibition was one of a number of satellite exhibitions held as part of *Rosc '71*. *Rosc* was an international exhibition held in Dublin every four years, the first in 1967. A jury of three international critics selected fifty contemporary artists, whose work 'appealed aesthetically to their three individual tastes'.<sup>2</sup> *Rosc*, an Irish word meaning 'poetry of vision', was chosen because it was short and easily pronounceable in English.<sup>3</sup> It also evoked a universal and timeless idea of art that

<sup>1</sup> For information on debate over the Arts Council see Brian Kennedy, *Dreams and Responsibilities: The State and the Arts in Independent Ireland*, Dublin: Arts Council of Ireland, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> 'Address by James Johnson Sweeney, Chairman of the Selection Jury – *Rosc*', *Press Release*, 2 October 1967.

<sup>3</sup> Dorothy Walker, *Modern Art in Ireland*, Dublin: Lilliput Press, 112.

was in keeping with the rationale of the exhibition. No Irish artists were selected for the main *Rosc '67* or *Rosc '71*.

*Rosc* was clearly intended to put the Republic of Ireland on the international culture map. It was closely connected with the tourist industry. The Honorary President of *Rosc*, Minister for Finance, Charles Haughey, revealed the state's recognition of the propagandist values of the venture when he noted that for a 'tourist country it was important to be identified with the best in contemporary culture'.<sup>4</sup> The visitor potential of *Rosc* was reflected in its sponsors, which included Aer Lingus, Bórd Fáilte (the Irish tourist board), and CIE (the national public transport company).

The *Irish Imagination* exhibition allowed the official participation of Irish artists at *Rosc*, albeit in a subsidiary exhibition. It was therefore an important vehicle for promoting contemporary Irish visual art in what was envisaged to be an international forum. The show was held at the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin and offered an idiosyncratic view of modern Irish art, featuring 136 paintings by over 20 contemporary Irish artists. Subsequently it travelled to Boston, Washington D.C. and Philadelphia. The timeframe of the exhibition, 1959-1971, emphasised the significance of contemporary Irish art and cultural life. 1959 marked the beginning of a concerted interest in acquiring and promoting visual art by the Arts Council of Ireland and coincidentally the election of Sean Lemass as Taoiseach.<sup>5</sup> Lemass's government had pursued progressive economic policies that contributed to a dramatically positive shift in Irish economic as well as social life in the 1960s.

The curator of the *Irish Imagination* exhibition was Brian O'Doherty, an Irish critic and artist who had been based in the United States since 1957. Former art critic of the *New York Times*, he was currently editor of *Art in America* and director of the visual arts programme at the National Endowment for the Arts. O'Doherty's dominant role as curator of the exhibition and author of its catalogue essay was unusual in Irish art. He had been invited to curate the exhibition by the *Rosc '71* committee and guided to particular artists by the chairman of the Arts Council of Ireland, Michael Scott and by *Rosc* committee member and art critic, Dorothy Walker. He also consulted, on their advice, with Leo Smith and David Hendriks, the two leading Dublin gallery owners.<sup>6</sup> The show was accompanied by a 100 page catalogue, a lavish production by the standards of the day. Each artist was allotted a full-page illustration and a page of text written by one of half a dozen contributors. O'Doherty laid out the rationale of the show in four short introductory essays.

The exhibition was dominated by artworks which showed an awareness of international Modernism at various levels. Pop and hard-edge abstract work by

<sup>4</sup> Charles J. Haughey, quoted in 'Relics belong to people: Minister Haughey', *Irish Independent*, 13 November 1967, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Sean Lemass (1899-1971) was Taoiseach of the Republic of Ireland, 1959-1966.

<sup>6</sup> Arnold, Bruce. 'Pretentious Show of Irish Art', *Irish Independent*, 28 October 1971, 11.

young Irish artists such as Robert Ballagh and Michael Farrell featured.<sup>7</sup> But O'Doherty's text paid particular attention to the large number of expressive painterly works included in the exhibition. In particular he focused on their stylistic features to explicate the relationship of Irish visual art to modern Irish culture. Ultimately the purpose of the exhibition and the text was to demonstrate that Irish art did not slavishly copy the styles of international Modernism but that it expressed a native sensibility.

O'Doherty identified the 'atmospheric mode' as the key feature of mid 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish painting. This expressive and ambiguous use of form was exemplified in the work of such artists as Patrick Collins and Nano Reid.<sup>8</sup> Its effect could also be seen in the work of more obviously internationally engaged artists such as Cecil King, Louis le Brocquy and Patrick Scott.<sup>9</sup> The 'atmospheric mode' was, according to O'Doherty, demonstrated by the Irish artist's focus on mythical rather than historical time, his fix on the unimportant, and by his reluctance to disclose anything about what is painted.<sup>10</sup> The text suggested that this ambiguous use of form was the result of a problematical relationship between the artist and their native country. O'Doherty argued from a strong formalist position that the stylistic quality of modern Irish painting was in itself a kind of content. This deployment of a formalist approach allowed him to avoid conventional biographical or art historical narratives in favour of a systematic critical method that focused on the

<sup>7</sup> Robert Ballagh (b.1945), Dublin based artist, trained as architect. In the late 1960s he produced pop style works, sought after by corporate and private collectors. Politically aware, he responded to the outbreak of the Northern troubles in his work, most notably in a series of contemporary pop versions of famous history paintings in 1971. Michael Farrell (1940-2000), studied at St. Martin's College, London. His paintings and sculptures of 1960s and early 1970s juxtapose an abstract hard-edge style with Celtic motifs. Emigrating to France in 1971, he turned to producing series of figurative and politically motivated paintings such as *Madonna Irlanda* (Dublin City Gallery, 1977). Such work reflected the artist's disillusionment with Irish political life including the Northern Troubles.

<sup>8</sup> Patrick Collins (1911-1994), one of mid 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland's most highly respected artists. His expressionist, painterly works are concerned with the Irish landscape, especially an imagined West. Nano Reid (1900-1981), studied art in Dublin, Paris and London in 1920s and early 1930s. She developed an individual expressionist approach in her subsequent painting which was fundamentally connected to place and to the landscape. Reid represented Ireland at the Venice Biennale in 1950.

<sup>9</sup> Cecil King (1921-1986), businessman and collector, who, largely self-taught, became a professional artist in 1964. His practice centred on a restrained and sophisticated use of abstraction, after the artist became familiar with the work of Barnett Newman at *Rosc '67*. Louis le Brocquy (1916-2012), a major Irish artist, was based in London and France for much of his career. Self-taught, his work centres on the human figure and by the 1960s focused on the head, a subject inspired partly by the Celt's veneration of the skull but also by metaphysical ideas on the relationship between consciousness and physical matter. Patrick Scott (b.1921), trained as an architect and worked in Michael Scott's practice until 1960 when he became a professional artist. He exhibited as a painter since 1944 and represented Ireland at the Venice Biennale in 1960. In the 1960s he had a series of exhibitions at the Dawson Gallery in Dublin that featured his increasing engagement with abstraction and close understanding of geometric form.

<sup>10</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *The Irish imagination 1959-1971*, Dublin: Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, 1971, 11.

physical characteristics of the artworks.<sup>11</sup> More contentiously, as post-modern critics and historians have noted, this type of Modernist criticism relied on the assumption that visual form could express specific ideas to the viewer and that he or she would at some level empathise with the artist's (unconscious) intentions.<sup>12</sup>

O'Doherty stated that his choice of paintings had been guided by 'quality' and 'taste', a term which recurs several times in the catalogue essay.<sup>13</sup> For example he summarised the achievement of Patrick Scott in the following terms:

Patrick Scott, more than any other Irish artist, responded to international ideas while producing the most consistently excellent body of work of any Irish artist; hints of the atmospheric abound in his work in which impeccable taste is used not only for self-preservation but as a discreet weapon.<sup>14</sup>

This recourse to the idea of taste suggested that the selected paintings possessed inherently positive qualities of the type closely associated with a Modernist definition of aesthetic value.<sup>15</sup>

The formalist criteria used by O'Doherty and his reliance on opaque notions of taste would have been reassuring to members of the art establishment in the Republic of Ireland. It justified the exclusion of a wide array of contemporary Irish art and suggested that the work in the *Irish Imagination* exhibition exemplified the best of Irish art practice. Subsequently Dorothy Walker, who was strongly influenced by O'Doherty, also resorted to the term 'taste' in praising Patrick Scott's achievement. 'Scott is an artist of unerring, absolute taste, which, while encasing the extra-sensitive core of his art, externalises that core by means of a superb and exact order.'<sup>16</sup> She suggested that Scott's technical skill and judgement enabled him to communicate an unspecified but identifiable meaning to the viewer.

Walker's ambiguous and elitist use of language implied that an appreciation of Scott's work came from some inherent sense of discernment which could not be explained or learnt. Pierre Bourdieu has defined 'taste' as the 'faculty of immediately and intuitively judging aesthetic values', in the same way as one can discern different flavours of food.<sup>17</sup> This ability to recognise taste reflects as much on the observer as on the artwork. In line with Bourdieu's theories the description of

<sup>11</sup> See Caroline A. Jones, *Eyesight Alone, Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses*, Chicago University Press, 2005, 60-70.

<sup>12</sup> David Summers, 'Form' 19<sup>th</sup> century metaphysics, and the problem of art historical Description', in ed. D. Preziosi, *The art of art history: a critical anthology*, Oxford University Press, 1998, 135-36.

<sup>13</sup> 'Quality' is a key term in connoisseurial approaches to art history and in the formalist criticism of Clement Greenberg where it is used to evoke the artwork's 'resonance with its historical time'. Jones, *Eyesight Alone*, 70.

<sup>14</sup> O'Doherty, *The Irish Imagination*, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-garde attitudes: new art in the sixties', *Studio International*, 179, 1970, 142.

<sup>16</sup> Dorothy Walker in O'Doherty, *Irish Imagination*, 92.

<sup>17</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, 99.

Scott as a tasteful artist indicates that the critic, through his or her favoured education and social background, is able to recognise the inherent quality of the work without the need to analyse or explain his or her judgement. The presumption is that the reader shares such a privileged experience of high culture and would therefore also agree that Scott was a tasteful artist. This type of criticism departed radically from that of earlier writers on Irish modernist art such as the critic Thomas MacGreevy (1893-1967) and the cubist painter Mainie Jellett (1897-1944) whose criteria for judging art was based on political or moral imperatives, respectively. Their writing was deliberately intended for the general reader and set out to both explain and to advocate a wider understanding of historical and contemporary art and in particular to justify the relevance of Irish visual art to the citizens of Ireland.<sup>18</sup>

O'Doherty's discussion also made use of nationalist rhetoric albeit in an understated manner. It argued that the dominant forms of Irish art such as its indistinctness and its concern with mythical time were an extension of the country's distinctive climate and geography as well as the peculiar sensibility of its inhabitants. Its characterisation of modern Irish painting as deliberately eluding concrete statements of fact echoes the well-established strategies of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalist poetry and song in which allusion rather than explicit political statement was used.<sup>19</sup> In fact the essay itself relies on a similar strategy of indirect statement, hinting at the potential of art to be subversive and to express dislocation and introspection while at the same highlighting the unique stylistic nature of modern Irish painting.

Finally the catalogue essay provided a useful insight into the mechanisms by which this type of Modernist Irish art had come into existence. The cultural and intellectual isolation of World War Two and the following years had, according to the catalogue, ironically been of benefit to Irish artists. Ideas which had already been introduced into Irish art by Jellett and Evie Hone were nurtured and developed during this period of seclusion. The role of the art dealer was identified as vital in the evolution of an informed audience for Modernist Irish art. The power of this audience was closely connected to the Irish Exhibition of Living Art, an annual exhibition of broadly modernist art founded in 1943. This was further enhanced by the Royal Hibernian Academy's failure to influence the younger generation of artists who had in the main rejected academic art.

The writer managed to indicate that there was a close relationship between the cultural, economic and artistic strata in the Republic of Ireland, and that this had

<sup>18</sup> Riann Coulter and Róisín Kennedy, "It is only by learning to fully understand the past that we can most easily come to realise the significance of the present": Thomas MacGreevy, Art Critic and Art Historian', in Susan Schreibman, ed, *The life and Work of Thomas MacGreevy: A Critical Reappraisal*, London: Bloomsbury Press, 2013, 51-64.; E. MacCarvill, ed., *Mainie Jellett: The Artist's Vision*, Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1958.

<sup>19</sup> See Joep Leersen, *Remembrance and imagination. Patterns in the historical and literary representation of Ireland in the nineteenth century*, Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 1996, 81-82 and Brenda Moore-McCann, 'The Politics of identity, Place, and memory in contemporary Irish art' in Noel Kelly, ed. *Art and politics. The imagination of opposition in Europe*, Dublin: R4 Publishing, 2004, 25-31.

a vital impact on the type of visual art which was produced in the state. His essay suggested that a liberating avant-garde centred on the Irish Exhibition of Living Art and a small network of collectors had pushed forward the project of modern painting in a society which was indifferent to cultural progress. The ‘atmospheric mode’ was O’Doherty argued connected to a national self-image ‘as explicated by a small community of artists and audience’.<sup>20</sup> The role of the critical elite in driving forward cultural progress is, of course, a Modernist trope.

The idea that modern Irish art was ambiguous, or indirect, in its forms and meanings was to become a recurring feature of Irish art criticism in the coming decades. It eclipsed the other ideas raised by O’Doherty’s essay. It was seen in the 1980 Arts Council exhibition catalogue, *The Delighted Eye*, which covered painting and sculpture of the 1970s. The title of the exhibition, a quotation from W.B. Yeats, indicates how O’Doherty’s subtle positioning of the Irish artist was lost to later critics.<sup>21</sup> His recognition of the social and economic forces in Irish art was neglected in this account, in which, Irish art was presented as ‘essentially rural’. The writer Frances Ruane characterised modern Irish art in terms of ‘agricultural roots, conservatism, an obsession with the past, and a passion for indirect statement’, and presented the Irish artist as intuitive rather than intellectual or academic.<sup>22</sup> O’Doherty’s essay, by contrast, had stressed the judicious nature of the task facing the local artist whom he noted, ‘has to be as intelligent as any modernist, and perhaps even more self-conscious, since he has more to think about’.<sup>23</sup>

In addition O’Doherty’s suggestion that the ‘atmospheric mode’ in Irish visual art projected a tenuous, and therefore, problematic sense of national identity, was notably absent from subsequent exhibition catalogues associated with the presentation of modern Irish art. They avoided any potentially negative allusion to the meaning of Irish art, and by extension, Irish society. Indeed their critical approach has been described as fulfilling an ambassadorial role for Irish culture abroad.<sup>24</sup>

Much of what has been outlined here in terms of O’Doherty’s method of criticism echoes Tom Duddy’s insightful essay ‘Irish Art Criticism – A Provincialism of the Right’, first published in *Circa* in 1989. The title of the essay refers to O’Doherty’s claim that Irish artists were avoiding a provincialism of the right (nationalism) and a provincialism of the left (internationalism), and taking a mid-way path. Duddy argued for a materialist interpretation of the production of Irish art instead of O’Doherty’s protectionist approach which imposes naturalistic readings on the work. Duddy offered a convincing alternative interpretation of the ‘atmospheric mode’ in which he suggested that Irish artists were strategically

<sup>20</sup> O’Doherty, *Irish imagination*, 11.

<sup>21</sup> W.B. Yeats also featured in the *Irish imagination* catalogue. References to him connoted a romantic, even mythical, view of Irish identity.

<sup>22</sup> Frances Ruane, *The delighted eye - Irish painting and sculpture of the seventies*, Dublin: Arts Council of Ireland, 1980, unpaginated.

<sup>23</sup> O’Doherty, *Irish Imagination*, 12.

<sup>24</sup> Christopher Cappock, ‘Editorial - the art of appropriation’, *Circa*, 14, 1984, 5.

producing a modest version of international abstraction that would appeal to the local art market.<sup>25</sup>

Duddy's call for a materialist interpretation of Irish modern art requires a closer examination of the social and economic contexts in which O'Doherty's essay was written. Firstly the difficulty of maintaining an objective viewpoint in the catalogues of official exhibitions cannot be overestimated. Such shows, including the *Irish Imagination*, were organised and sponsored to promote Irish art and culture. The catalogue essay was therefore part of a propagandist agenda and not the place to find an objective evaluation of the work. Unfortunately there was no alternative space for such an evaluation to take place within the Irish media. Newspapers and magazine reviews were short and left no room for analysis. Paradoxically, as a result, O'Doherty's *Irish Imagination* essay was enormously influential.

Secondly in the absence of serious discourse on the nature of Irish art, art critics and members of the establishment continued to have conservative expectations. The production of visual art was seen as largely an autonomous activity unconnected with wider political and economic life. The introduction of tax free status for artists in 1969, by the Minister for Finance, Charles Haughey, reflected the idea that it was up to the individual to produce art, rather than envisaging a more integrated development of art practice and art awareness.

Thirdly in this period Arts Council of Ireland exhibitions fulfilled a crucial role in creating the canon of modern Irish art. The dearth of books or specialised journals relating to contemporary Irish art, along with the lack of a properly funded museum of modern art, meant that temporary exhibitions had an inordinate importance to the wider public awareness of Irish visual art.

The new reciprocal relationship between commerce and the visual arts in the Republic of Ireland in the 1960s and 1970s had accelerated the production and exhibition of Modernist art in the country. The seeds of this trend had been sown in 1949 and 1951 when the government appointed pro-internationalist figures to the newly formed Cultural Relations Committee and Arts Council of Ireland. This new establishment included many leading businessmen and the role of the corporate sector in the development of contemporary Irish art became even more central after the expansion of the economy in the Lemass era. In this new context traditional nationalist concerns were presented in terms of a backward, insular but powerful sector, which through its control of the RHA and the National College of Art was preventing the reform of the visual arts, and culture in general, in the Republic of Ireland.

The impetus for promoting an awareness of the Modernist art being produced in London and New York came partly from a pragmatic view of the contemporary art world. In the post-war period, a successful artist was expected to emulate, and to refer to, the stylistic canon, which was identified by leading critics, curators and dealers. With a lack of resources and no control over the out-dated education system, those who sought to promote an awareness of international Modernism in Ireland had

<sup>25</sup> Tom Duddy, 'Irish art criticism – A provincialism of the right', *Circa*, 35, 1987 14- 18.

limited options. They used their influence in official advisory bodies such as the Arts Council to further their aims.

The establishment's embrace of internationalism was focused on its preference for a type of abstract or proto-abstract art, much of it concerned with landscape. This approximated to O'Doherty's 'atmospheric mode'. For a number of young Irish artists, especially the Independent Artists, this kind of art was associated with American post-war Modernism and by extension a kind of imperialism. It represented the rejection of other possibilities local, national and European, in which the artist could express a closer relationship with his or her immediate environment. While the Independent Artists whose annual exhibitions began in 1960, offered an alternative to the official view of art, the work of its members was largely excluded from the canon of Modernist Irish art, and from the *Irish Imagination* exhibition. O'Doherty knew little of it and was steered towards the more consciously Modernist artists by his advisors in Dublin. The Independents had a preference for 'humanist' work, which could be either abstract or figurative. 'The defining line was never formalist'.<sup>26</sup> While many of them had trained at the National College of Art, several leading Irish artists whose work was included in the *Irish Imagination* exhibition such as Patrick Scott, Louis le Brocquy and Patrick Collins had received little, if any, formal art training.

American ideas on Modernism had a dramatic impact on attitudes towards Irish art amongst members of the establishment. The American curator, James Johnson Sweeney played a significant role in the discourse on contemporary art in the Republic of Ireland. A former director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, he was involved in most of the key exhibitions of Modernist art in the 1960s. These included *Modern Irish Painting*, a show of American art at the 1963 Irish Exhibition of Living Art, and most significantly *Rosc '67* and *Rosc '71*. His prestigious career as a leading curator of Modernist art in the United States lent his views an unimpeachable authority in the Republic of Ireland where he served as a member of the Arts Council of from 1967 to 1973.<sup>27</sup>

A clear sense of Sweeney's ideas can be gleaned from his writings in the catalogues of these exhibitions. He emphasised the autonomy of the artwork and argued that it expressed a universal, poetic language. In addition Sweeney was conscious of the connection between economics and the development of the art market, both of which he believed benefited from a laissez faire approach. He praised the Irish government for introducing tax-free status for artists which he felt would encourage a similar but presumably more modest setting for the kind of dynamic cross fertilisation

<sup>26</sup> B. Maguire, 'Introduction', *Independent Artists 25th Anniversary Exhibition*, Dublin: Project Arts Centre, 1985, np.

<sup>27</sup> James Johnson Sweeney, (1900-86), born New York, son of a textile importer of Donegal origin. Lived in Paris in late 1930s, edited *Transition*. Curator Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1935-46; director Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1952-60; director Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1961-66. Lived in semi-retirement in Co. Mayo, chairman of selection jury for *Rosc '67* and *Rosc '71*.

of creativity that had occurred in New York in the 1940s after the arrival of the European avant-garde.<sup>28</sup>

Sweeney was part of a tradition of American Modernist critical thinking which extended directly back to Alfred Barr with whom he had worked in the 1930s. Barr had argued that art has its own ‘inherent logic’ and that it is essentially ‘unhistorical’.<sup>29</sup> The individuality and experimentation of Modernist practice was related by him to the idea of ‘freedom’, a central doctrine of American cultural propaganda during the Cold War.<sup>30</sup> As a former member of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom, Sweeney would have been all too aware and supportive of this idea.<sup>31</sup> His close involvement in the dynamics of Irish art endorsed the establishment’s practice of using visual art to promote a positive idea of the Republic on the international stage. His separation of art from politics coalesced with the need to project a serene image of Irish society, one in which the violence and internal strife of earlier decades as well as contemporary social discord was absent. This way of viewing visual art also appealed to Irish collectors and dealers as it endowed artworks with abstract rather than literal values.

O’Doherty’s relationship to Modernist criticism was more complex than that of Sweeney. He had developed his practice as a critic in New York during the period when it was the centre of debate concerning Modernism and when the extreme formalist position of Greenbergian criticism was being questioned. In his own practice as an artist O’Doherty was making conceptual work which showed an awareness of structuralism and post-structuralism. He had been the first to publish Roland Barthes’s groundbreaking essay, ‘Death of the Author’ in the English language.<sup>32</sup>

While formalist analysis continued to be central to his writing, O’Doherty used it to very different ends from that of the older generation of American critics. Unlike Sweeney, he recognised the importance of nationalism to the wider cultural debate in Ireland. As well as its reliance on stylistic analysis and the significance of taste, the *Irish Imagination* catalogue reaffirmed the role of national characteristics and shared cultural experience in the discourse on Irish art. More broadly it also indicated that art had a duty to express this wider sphere. In 1971 the same year as the *Irish Imagination* exhibition, O’Doherty published an article in *Art in America* that called for greater social involvement in contemporary art practice.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> James Johnson Sweeney, ‘Introduction’, *Modern Irish painting*, Dublin: Arts Council of Ireland, 1969.

<sup>29</sup> Pamela Meecham and Julie Sheldon, *Modern art: a critical introduction*, London: Routledge, 2000, 188-89.

<sup>30</sup> Patricia Hills, ‘The modern corporate state, the rhetoric of freedom, and the emergence of modernism in the United States: the mediation of language in critical practice’, in M. Gee, ed, *Art Criticism since 1900*, , Manchester : Manchester University Press, 1993, 143-63.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Wood et al, *Modernism in dispute: art since the forties*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with the Open University, 1993, 142.

<sup>32</sup> Brenda Moore McCann, *Brian O’Doherty/ Patrick Ireland, between categories*, London: Lund Humphries, 2009, 76-77.

<sup>33</sup> Brian O’Doherty, ‘A New Conservatism in the Seventies?’, *Art in America*, March 1971, 23, referred to in Moore McCann, *Brian O’Doherty/ Patrick Ireland*, 31.

In an Irish context the link between stylistic features and racial origins was well established. It had been used in accounts of Irish art by pro-modernist figures of the 1930s and 1940s. Jellett had made connections between abstract Celtic design and modernist Irish art in her writings of the 1930s and 1940s. MacGreevy, in his articles in the *Capuchin Annual* (1942-49), had stressed the relevance of a shared cultural experience of colonialism and Catholicism to understanding a distinctive Irish art.<sup>34</sup> Ernie O'Malley emphasised the peculiarities of geography and climate in his essays on Louis le Brocquy and Jack Yeats.<sup>35</sup> Each of these critics, who resorted to generalisations about the nature of Irish art, were also careful to place the work within a wider European context which was essential to their project for modernism. O'Doherty, in spite of his cosmopolitan situation, was well aware of such references. He had begun writing on art in Dublin in the early 1950s when his mentor was Thomas MacGreevy.<sup>36</sup>

Many of the earlier ideas on form and nationality recur in O'Doherty's essay but are now presented in an opaque manner intended for an elite readership whereas earlier writers on art were much more accessible in their approach. It is notable also that O'Doherty avoided any direct reference to colonialism or political strife. Although he hints at the troubled connection between the contemporary artist and the Irish landscape, 'a repository of projected moods', and notes the conspicuous absence of any reference to the Anglo-Irish or colonial tradition of painting in contemporary Irish art.<sup>37</sup> In an earlier essay on Patrick Collins O'Doherty had linked the indistinct nature of this artist's painting to a problematic post-colonial relationship to the land.<sup>38</sup> Clearly he wished to avoid making such overtly political references in the context of the *Irish Imagination* exhibition as it was intended to be a showcase of Irish culture for an international and especially North American audience. Planned at an extremely volatile period in the Troubles in Northern Ireland, events were to take an even more negative turn in the months following the opening of the *Irish Imagination* show in October 1971.<sup>39</sup>

That O'Doherty was aware of contemporary Irish politics and a nationalist is evidenced by the fact, that the year after the *Irish Imagination* exhibition, with Bloody Sunday acting as catalyst, he devised a *Name Change* performance. As part of the 1972 Irish Exhibition of Living Art he changed his name as an artist from Brian O'Doherty to Patrick Ireland and publicly declared that his work would not be shown in Britain

<sup>34</sup> See MacGreevy Archive – [www.MacGreevy.org](http://www.MacGreevy.org).

<sup>35</sup> Ernie O'Malley, 'Introduction', *Jack B. Yeats National Loan Exhibition*, Dublin: National College of Art, 1945, 6-16; 'Louis le Brocquy', *Horizon*, 14, 1946, 32-37. Reprinted in Cormac O'Malley and Nicholas Allen, eds, *Broken landscapes. Selected letters of Ernie O'Malley*, Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2011, 391-401.

<sup>36</sup> Brian O'Doherty, 'Tom', in Schreibman, *The Life and Work of Thomas MacGreevy*, 251-60.

<sup>37</sup> O'Doherty, *Irish Imagination*, 20.

<sup>38</sup> Brian O'Doherty, 'Ambiguities: the art of Patrick Collins', *Studies*, 50, 1961, 51-56.

<sup>39</sup> On 30 January 1972 thirteen civilians were shot dead by British troops in Derry in an incident that became known as Bloody Sunday. There was widespread revulsion in the Republic, with the British Embassy being burned down.

until the withdrawal of British troops from Northern Ireland.<sup>40</sup> Clearly he felt that his role as a critic did not entail such an overt declaration of political beliefs and it is notable that he retained the name O'Doherty in his work as a writer. Brenda Moore-McCann has argued against a simplistic interpretation of *Name Change* as a response to political events and has convincingly set it within the context of Barthes's critique of the 'Author-God'.<sup>41</sup> Crucially in relation to the *Irish Imagination* essay, Moore-McCann describes *Name Change* as 'a prescient forerunner of the theme of identity and post-colonialism in 1980s and 1990s art'.<sup>42</sup> Despite its status as a conceptual work of art dealing with the construction of identity it was subsequently rejected from *Rosc '77* due to its politically sensitive nature.

While O'Doherty's *Irish Imagination* essay was enormously influential on later official accounts of Irish art it did not succeed in persuading an international audience that Irish art was able to avoid the dominant Modernist canon. This is evident from the reaction of American critics who saw a smaller version of the *Irish Imagination* show when it toured the United States in 1972. One Washington based writer, not convinced by O'Doherty's attempts to explain Irish art within a local context lambasted the exhibition. It 'is so full of American Abstractions and Francis Bacon's English portraits that the pictures on the walls, most of them, scarcely appear to be Irish'.<sup>43</sup>

From the opposite perspective, Timothy Hilton, writing in *Studio International*, argued that the whole *Rosc 71* project including the *Irish Imagination* exhibition demonstrated that Ireland had lost its sense of place and was now a stepping off point between America and Europe.<sup>44</sup> Such responses indicate the enormous difficulties facing Irish artists in the early 1970s when Modernism, while still pervasive, was simultaneously being undermined.

What can one say in defence of O'Doherty's *Irish Imagination* essay? Or, what exactly are its failings? The essay reintroduced the rhetoric of nationalism into the discourse on Irish art at a moment of crisis in international Modernism and in a period of national difficulty when the economic and political stability of the State was threatened by violence in Northern Ireland. Its discussion of the contexts in which post-war Irish art had been produced and its consideration of the role of dealers, patrons and exhibition societies in this gestation was an important recognition of the wider framework in which art is made and consumed. However,

<sup>40</sup> Moore-McCann, 'The Politics of Identity...'; Moore-McCann, *Brian O'Doherty/Patrick Ireland*, 24-39. The performance, originally called *Maze*, took place on 29 November 1972 at Project Arts Centre, Dublin. The photographic record of the event is entitled *Name-Change*. O'Doherty reverted to his own name at a performance at IMMA, *The Burial of Patrick Ireland*, in 2008.

<sup>41</sup> Moore-McCann, *Brian O'Doherty/Patrick Ireland*, 21.

<sup>42</sup> Moore-McCann, *Brian O'Doherty/Patrick Ireland*, 31.

<sup>43</sup> P. Richard of the *Washington Post* quoted in John O'Reilly, 'New in the Arts', *Hibernia*, 17 November 1972, 22.

<sup>44</sup> Timothy Hilton, 'Irish Commentary', *Studio International*, 1971, 247-49. Clement Greenberg reviewed the main *Rosc 71* exhibition in positive terms but did not comment on the *Irish Imagination* show. See 'Rosc '71', *Art International*, 16: 2, 20 February 1972, 12-15.

rather than offering any kind of serious materialist examination of the field of art production in the Republic of Ireland, O'Doherty's historical analysis reinforced the official line of the art establishment. It acted, as Duddy observed, in a protectionist manner.

Ironically the *Irish Imagination* prioritised romantic ideas of the Irish artist in direct opposition to the realities of the contemporary art scene which was one of conflict and intense competition. While diluting these relevant aspects of Irish art, O'Doherty's choice of an oblique language suited the contexts in which the exhibition was staged which were that of presenting Irish culture to the outside world. Its blend of formalism and national stereotyping became the dominant method of presenting Irish art within an international context in the coming decades. It fulfilled the establishment's desire for continuity in the face of potential upheaval.

In hindsight the essay's underlying contradictions can be understood as a serious, if flawed, critical attempt to renegotiate the conflicting concerns of the local context with those of the still dominant international forum. It could even be argued that O'Doherty used the systematic method of formalism to delicately position Irish art within a postcolonial framework. Perhaps one could say that its failure rested on the fact that it used the language of international Modernist criticism to describe the local. It was aimed at an elite rather than the public and the artists who needed to understand the proper contexts in which their visual art was produced. Selective in its choice of artists and closely aligned to the establishment view it is nonetheless a uniquely insightful contribution to the criticism of 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish art.

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