

modern ireland emerges

Whatever glimpses of Modernism may have been discernable in the arts during the 1950s, from the 1960s onwards there was a more pronounced shift as Ireland opened up to the outside world economically and socially. In fact, the decade brought with it a whole plethora of challenges to existing orthodoxies and authority of all kinds. The arts developed in an environment in which broader social issues gained ground, traditional Church controls loosened, feminism was emerging, healthcare improved, free secondary education was introduced. In 1973 Ireland joined the EEC. However, an increasing level of violence in Northern Ireland, disguised to some extent by the optimism of the 1960s, was not lost on artists, with many responding through their work, most emphatically after Bloody Sunday.

During the 1960s, thanks to the economic prosperity galvanised by Sean Lemass's trade agreements, industry really took off, with 500 new companies, 350 of them foreign, established during the decade. Such programmes led to increased building of offices and factories and in the process created a market for artworks to embellish them. Liberty Hall was built. Jammet's restaurant was always full.

The decade of the 1960s was a hotbed artistically as well as socially and politically. Architects such as Michael Scott, and in particular Ronnie Tallon, of Scott Tallon Walker, played a pivotal role in commissioning artists to produce works for new corporate spaces. Abstraction and Minimalism in sculpture had an impact on a number of artists at the time. Large-scale works by Brian King, Gerda Frömel, John Burke and Alexandra Weichert were particularly appreciated by architects for their buildings. Equally, in painting, work tended towards the abstract, as seen in the hard-edged approach of Cecil King, Pat Scott's *Gold Paintings* and Louis le Brocquy's Táin-inspired tapestries. Tallon's factory for the cigarette manufacturer, Carrolls, a paean to Miesian Modernity, is one such example. P.J. Carroll became a major sponsor of the visual arts and funded a set of awards at the annual Living Art exhibitions, which was a huge boost. In the early 1970s, the Bank of Ireland, also designed by Tallon, built a formidable corporate collection of key works by the period's artists, which is unequalled even today as there was no cultural institution at that time to assemble such first-rate works for the nation. Gordon Lambert was another leading business figure who collected both Irish and international art and who donated over 300 pieces to the Irish Museum of Modern Art in 1992.

The 1960s art scene witnessed a number of highly influential exhibitions and events. In 1963, the Living Art exhibition, which annually included some international art, presented a major display of American Expressionists including Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell and Mark Rothko. Under James White's directorship of the Municipal Gallery (1960-64) the renowned Johnson Collection of contemporary American Art was exhibited in 1964, and a Francis Bacon exhibition took place in 1965. The Graphic Studio was founded, and the Contemporary Irish Art Society was set up by Basil Goulding to create funding for the purchase of contemporary art. Prior to this, the Arts Council was the sole public body buying art. Although the pioneering Victor Waddington had moved his gallery to London, he continued to support Irish

The 1960s and 1970s saw the visual arts begin to flourish in Ireland, as a new generation of artists responded to social and political change and relative boomtime fuelled both corporate and public art programmes. Head of Collections and co-curator of *The Moderns*, CHRISTINA KENNEDY looks back on a remarkable era...



Michael Craig-Martin,
On the Table, 1970.
Wood, metal, water, rope.
Collection Irish Museum
of Modern Art.

artists and other commercial art galleries such as the Dawson Gallery began to grow. Of particular significance was that of Jamaican art dealer David Hendriks, who as well as representing Irish artists, staged exhibitions of international art, and frequent museum-type shows, such as those of Kinetic and Op Art and Italian Arte Povera organised by Cyril Barrett SJ. George Dawson founded the Modern Art collection in Trinity College in 1959 and, arising from his activities in the 1960s, the History of Art department was founded, and the Douglas Hyde Gallery established in 1978.

In the absence of a national venue for modern art, ROSC, a major exhibition of international contemporary art, was instigated. The brain-child of Michael Scott, supported by the indomitable figures of Dorothy Walker and Anne Crookshank, ROSC was intended as a quadriennial, the first opening in the RDS in 1967. In the event, a total of six ROSCs would take place in various locations over the following 21 years. The internationally juried selections (initially led by ex-Guggenheim Director and Irish American James Johnson Sweeney), did not include Irish artists, a point of much contention, until the third ROSC in 1977, when James Coleman and Brian O'Doherty/Patrick Ireland were included.

ROSC '67 launched International Modernism in Ireland in no uncertain terms, however not as an isolated phenomenon. In fact, it made it very clear to audiences that modern art was very diverse. A remarkable statistic is that ROSC '67 was visited by more than 50,000 people during its three-month duration.

Exciting and all as the early ROSCs of '67 and '71 were, many Irish artists confident in their own idiom maintained a native ethos while incorporating innovation, such as Anne Madden's *Menhirs* and Michael Farrell's large-scale Celtic motifs. Pre ROSC, the Independent Artists Group was formed in 1960. As well as James McKenna and Noel Sheridan, it loosely affiliated diverse artists such as Camille Souter, Charles Brady and Barrie Cooke, all recently arrived in Ireland, and who brought their own distinctive sensibilities. 1967 also saw the set-up of the Project Arts Centre by Michael Kane, John Behan and Colm O'Briain. The 1960s was a prime decade also for other mid-career artists like Tony O'Malley and William Scott.

In 1969 Charles Haughey, in a far-reaching and visionary gesture, abolished taxes for artists, writers and composers and later established Aosdána. It was a time of student upheaval and protests internationally and nationally – a sit-in by students in the National College of Art & Design revolting against the conservative teaching methods caused the president Maurice McGonigal to resign. The renewed interest in traditional

music, part of an international folk revival, reflected in and beyond Ireland by the renown of The Chieftains, The Clancy Brothers, Sean Ó Riada and others, was connected to the rising political consciousness of young people in the 1960s.

The Troubles, epitomised by the Bloody Sunday killing of 13 civil rights marchers in Derry in 1972, and bombings in Belfast, Monaghan and Dublin in the period following, with great loss of life, politicised a number of artists overnight who responded directly in a range of protest work, including Les Levine, Brian O'Doherty/Patrick Ireland and, most viscerally, Robert Ballagh with his chalk and blood drawings on the ground, evoking the white lines drawn by police around victims. Ballagh was one of the main artists whose work, initially on a political theme, most directly connected with the Pop Art movement and its appropriation of mass imagery from TV, now burgeoning in Ireland, and images from advertising and everyday culture.

Joseph Beuys brought a distinctive ethos when he visited Ireland in 1974. A performance artist, theorist and educationalist, he was intent on demystifying art and on demonstrating that art itself is a creative act. He regarded Ireland as "the brain of Europe", and Joyce's *Ulysses* was particularly significant for him. He came to Ireland in the context of his exhibition at the Municipal Gallery, *A Secret Block for a Secret Person in Ireland*, and to offer through his countrywide lectures and drawings a form of utopian hope in the midst of The Troubles.

Conceptual Art, with its emphasis on the primacy of the idea over the physical art object, emerged in the mid 1960s as a reaction to the constraints of Modernism. Examples in *The Moderns* range from Brian O'Doherty's *Ogham* sculptures (he was one of the pioneers of New York Conceptualism), to the work of Irish-born Les Levine, also New York-based, who was one of the first artists to work with video and television and who coined the term 'media sculpture'; to the works of London-based Michael Craig-Martin who showed his cutting-edge conceptual sculptural works, including *An Oak Tree* (1973) and *On the Table* (1971), at the Oliver Dowling Gallery, Dublin in the late 1970s. Barry Flanagan's early sculptures in a conceptual vein were also beginning to be seen in Ireland from this time. Significantly, these artists' ideas and methodologies also confirm their position at the forefront of Post-Modernism, which began to emerge at this time, and their work indicates a point of departure. When Sean Scully asserted "the stripe is a signifier for modernism" he was also situating his paintings in the fragmentary realm of Post-Modernism, with its multiple readings and openness to what art may be, which has characterised contemporary art ever since. ■

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