

Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks: Irish road to modernity has no straight lines


The collective works in our series show how molten and defiant Irish artworks can be

© Sat, Oct 15, 2016, 06:00

Fintan O'Toole

 Follow @fotoole

Follow @@fotoole

 “Modern” is a funny word in Ireland. In other countries, modern implies a straight line of development, from rural to urban, from agricultural to industrial, from traditional to cosmopolitan, from an oral culture to one steeped in technology. In Ireland as it emerged over the past century, there don't seem to be too many straight lines.



WB Yeats, writing in 1938, evoked an image of modernity, not as a clean progression from darkness into light, but as a primordial soup of chaos drowning poor old Ireland:

We Irish, born into that ancient sect
But thrown upon this filthy modern tide
And by its formless spawning fury wrecked

Even for those artists of a less apocalyptic bent, the promise of modernity – that the dark past is over and done with – is never even close to being fulfilled.

The things you encounter over and over in this series are the return of the repressed, the uneasy relationship between past and present, and the difficulty of forming an official culture that can contain the imaginations of Irish writers and artists.

Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks is not a canon of approved masterpieces in literature, theatre and the visual arts – which is just as well, since it is not at all clear what that canon would consist of. If you were to pick up almost any of the works at random, you would find, metaphorically speaking, that they are all sharp edges and odd angles. And this is true regardless of the period in which the work was created.

One of the basic stories of cultural modernity worldwide is that of initial neglect or derision followed by acceptance and celebration. To be “modern” in one sense is to have become sophisticated enough to be blasé about strange and challenging art.

In this way of thinking about modernity, a culture is modernised when it is no longer discomfited or disoriented by the odd, the experimental, the new. But in the Irish case, we might ask whether by this definition modernity ever really happened at all.

ADVERTISEMENT

Hostile receptions

It is striking how many of the visual artworks on the list faced hostility or incomprehension. A photograph of Mainie Jellet's *Decoration* (1923) was displayed in *The Irish Times* alongside one of a strange-shaped onion with the headline "Two Freak Pictures". John Hughes's Monument to William Gladstone (1925) was sent to Wales because it had become a national embarrassment to the Irish Free State. John Lavery's *The Trial of Roger Casement* (1930) only went on open public display this year.

Michael Scott's Busáras (1948), the most important work of Irish architectural modernity, was fraught with delays, often derided and completed only with severe modifications. Louis le Brocquy's masterpiece *A Family* (1951) was offered as a gift to the penniless Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery, only to be rejected. Patrick Scott's *Girl Carrying Grasse* (1958) was not purchased by the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery because councillors deemed that to do so would be "robbing the ratepayers".

Patrick McSweeney's modernist Cork County Hall (1965) has been radically remodelled in recent years. Some bookshops refused to stock Eavan Boland's *In Her Own Image* (1980), in part because of the explicit drawings by Constance Short. Pauline Cummins's *Celebration: The Beginning of Labour* (1984) was painted over by the National Maternity Hospital, which commissioned it. Eilís O'Connell's *Great Wall of Kinsale* (1988) was also painted over by the local authorities of the town.

Abbey rejects

Similar stories abound in the literary and theatrical sphere. State censorship was brutally deployed against writers such as Kate O'Brien, Frank O'Connor and John McGahern. The national theatre, the Abbey, actually rejected Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* (1954), John B Keane's *Sive* (1959) and Thomas Murphy's *A Whistle in the Dark* (1961).

The Abbey also dropped Teresa Deevy (1936) for no apparent reason and alienated Sean O'Casey (1926) by rejecting *The Silver Tassie*. It is sometimes tempting to think of the modern Irish canon is better thought of as a cannon for artists to be fired out of.

It is not a scientific measure, but it is nonetheless interesting to ask how many of the 98 artists or collectives on the list (Jack Yeats and James Joyce each feature twice) have either made most of their careers in exile; had work banned by the State; had work obliterated or substantially altered without their permission; or had important work rejected by official Irish institutions.

This gives us some measure of alienation – 24 of the 98 artists fall into at least one of these categories, a quarter of the total.

Even this, moreover, probably understates the degree of marginalisation experienced by artists. Flann O'Brien, for example, is now recognised as one of the great comic novelists of the 20th century. But his literary reputation is largely

posthumous. His Cruiskeen Lawn column in *The Irish Times* was much better known than the dazzling *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and his masterpiece, *The Third Policeman*, was not published at all until after his death.

Irish language marginalised

Most striking is the position of Irish-language writers. The State had one major positive cultural project: the revival of Irish. (It also had a negative cultural project of preserving an imagined national purity against the threats of alien adulteration.) It would seem obvious that the great writers in the language would therefore be recipients of official support and patronage, feted and rewarded as national treasures.

However, the work of Seán Ó Ríordáin's (1971) was marked by his sense of personal isolation and the stigma of tuberculosis. Máirtín Ó Direáin (1961) expresses a similar sense of social and cultural displacement. Máirtín Ó Cadhain (1949) was interned by the State for IRA membership and only very late in life received semi-official recognition as a professor in Trinity College Dublin. The original Irish-language prose modernist Pádraic Ó Conaire died in near-destitution in 1928.

ADVERTISEMENT

If the acceptance of modernity was no easy matter for the State and its semi-official cultural institutions, it was by no means straightforward for artists themselves either.

In Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (a play so Irish that it might have been considered for the list), Marjorie Tyrone rejects her husband's urgings that she forget the past: "How can I? The past is the present, isn't it? It's the future, too." This might be a motto for Irish artists over the past century. Modernism's desire to be shut of the historic past is seldom shared in any uncomplicated way by the artists on this list.

Always the revolution

For a start, there is no possibility of treating the 1916 Rising as a point of departure, a foundational act that creates a new future. Even revolutionary violence itself continues to resound over the decades, sometimes as a main theme (in O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*, O'Connor's *Guests of the Nation*, Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's historical novel *Dé Luain*, J. Farrell's *Troubles*, Robert Ballagh's *Northern Ireland, the 1,500th Victim*, and Shane Cullen's *The Agreement*) and sometimes as a persistent undertone (in Michael Farrell's *Madonna Irlanda*, Seamus Heaney's *North*, Deirdre Madden's *Molly Fox's Birthday*, and Lavery's Casement painting). Nothing can ever quite be over and done with on an island with so many unresolved questions of national identity.

And then there is a literal return of the repressed. There's a notably ghostly air to many of the works on the list: from Harry Clarke's shimmering *Eve of St Agnes window* (1924) to Elizabeth Bowen's *The Demon Lover* (1945) to the revenant soldiers in Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1985), to the

ghosts of Lily Mathews in Stewart Parker's *Pentecost* (1987) and the title character's brother in Marina Carr's *Portia Coughlan* (1996).

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952) summons "all the dead voices", and it is notable how many of the voices and images in these works are either dead (whether Casement or Hilary Heron's James Connolly or Che Guevara in Jim Fitzpatrick's famous print, or the dead of the Great Famine in Alanna O'Kelly's *The Country Blooms, a Garden and a Grave*, or Frank Hardy in Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*), about to die (Portia Coughlan or the title character of *The Quare Fellow*), or not yet born (Louis MacNeice's *Prayer Before Birth*). Liminal states attract the Irish imagination more powerfully than the supposedly clean spaces of modernity.

The art of repression

The State's own repressed secrets slip out eventually in art. The entrapment of women in the domestic sphere is powerfully evoked in works as disparate as *Katie Roche* (1936) by Teresa Deevy and John McGahern's *The Barracks* (1963). The pain of bachelor farmers is memorably etched in Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* (1942). The plight of the "illegitimate" child is at the centre of *Sive*. The Magdalen laundries are evoked obliquely in Deevy's play before being explored to devastating effect in Louise Lowe's *Laundry* (2011). The industrial schools are part of Francie Brady's dark narrative in Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* (1992).

And, of course, this interest in returning to the past can also be a source of creative inspiration. The notion of "revival", so powerful in the era of the 1916 Rising, is never really lost.

It may be a matter of formal return to ancient inspiration, as in works as disparate as the Sam Maguire Cup (1928), Oliver Sheppard's *The Death of Cúchulainn* (1935), Máire Mhac an tSaoi's repossession of older idioms in *Margadh na Saoire* (1956), Barrie Cooke's Sheelah-na-Gig paintings (1960) or the revisiting of *The Táin* by Thomas Kinsella and Louis le Brocquy (1969).

ADVERTISEMENT

Or it may be the exile's return to an imagined homeland or ancestral landscape, as in Maeve Brennan's *Christmas Eve* (1974) or Hughie O'Donoghue's *Tawnanasool* (2001). These are all, in their own ways, Irish revivals.

Forged in the smithy

This constant process of shifting, circling and returning may not amount to any straight story of emerging modernity. But that may be why the creative spirit remains so obviously alive.

In the first work on our list, Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Stephen Dedalus proclaims his ambition "to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race". The 99 works that follow show that

the artistic conscience of the nation remains defiantly unforged. It is too fluid and molten to be given a hard, definite shape. Therein, perhaps, lies its glory.

Read every work in the series

1916 A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, by James Joyce

1917 Men of the West, by Seán Keating

1918 Seacht mBua an Éirí Amach, by Pádraic Ó Conaire

1919 The Signing of Peace in the Hall of Mirrors, Versailles, 28th June 1919, by William Orpen

1920 The Lobster Fisherman at Dusk, by Paul Henry

1921 Back to Methuselah, by George Bernard Shaw

1922 Ulysses, by James Joyce

1923 Decoration, by Mainie Jellett

1924 Eve of St Agnes window, by Harry Clarke

1925 Monument to William Gladstone, by John Hughes

1926 The Plough and the Stars, by Sean O'Casey

1927 Ardnacrusha hydroelectric scheme, by Thomas McLaughlin and ESB

1928 The Sam Maguire Cup, by Hopkins & Hopkins

1929 An tOileánach, by Tomás Ó Criomhthain

1930 High Treason, Court of Criminal Appeal: The Trial of Roger Casement, by Sir John Lavery

1931 Guests of the Nation, by Frank O'Connor

1932 Skywriting over Dublin, by the Eucharistic Congress

1933 The Winding Stair, by WB Yeats

1934 Devoted Ladies, by Molly Keane

1935 The Death of Cúchulainn, by Oliver Sheppard

1936 Katie Roche, by Teresa Deevy

1937 Come Gather Round Me Parnellites, by Jack B Yeats

- 1938** Pray for the Wanderer, by Kate O'Brien
- 1939** Irish Pavilion, New York World's Fair, by Michael Scott
- 1940** Tinkers' Encampment: The Blood of Abel, by Jack B Yeats
- 1941** An Béal Bocht, by Myles na gCopaleen
- 1942** The Great Hunger, by Patrick Kavanagh
- 1943** Three Graces, by Gabriel Hayes
- 1944** Prayer Before Birth, by Louis MacNeice
- 1945** The Demon Lover and Other Stories, by Elizabeth Bowen
- 1946** The Becker Wives, by Mary Lavin
- 1947** Bust of James Connolly, by Hilary Heron
- 1948** Busáras, by Michael Scott
- 1949** Cré na Cille, by Máirtín Ó Cadhain
- 1950** Island People, by Gerard Dillon
- 1951** A Family, by Louis le Brocqy
- 1952** En Attendant Godot, by Samuel Beckett
- 1953** Cape and gown, by Sybil Connolly
- 1954** The Quare Fellow, by Brendan Behan
- 1955** Aer Lingus summer timetable, by Guus Melai
- 1956** Margadh na Saoire, by Máire Mhac an tSaoi
- 1957** Irisches Tagebuch, by Heinrich Böll
- 1958** Girl Carrying Grasses, by Patrick Scott
- 1959** Sive, by John B Keane
- 1960** Sheela-na-Gig paintings, by Barrie Cooke
- 1961** A Whistle in the Dark, by Tom Murphy

- 1962** Ár Ré Dhearóil, by Máirtín Ó Direáin
- 1963** The Barracks, by John McGahern
- 1964** Wolfe Tone, by Edward Delaney
- 1965** Cork County Hall, by Patrick Sweeney
- 1966** De Luain, by Eoghan Ó Tuairisc
- 1967** Aspen 5+6, by Brian O'Doherty
- 1968** Viva Che, by Jim Fitzpatrick
- 1969** The Táin, by Thomas Kinsella and Louis le Brocquy
- 1970** Troubles, by JG Farrell
- 1971** Linte Liombó, by Seán Ó Ríordáin
- 1972** Structure, by Michael Kane
- 1973** Da, by Hugh Leonard
- 1974** Christmas Eve, by Maeve Brennan
- 1975** North, by Seamus Heaney
- 1976** Northern Ireland, the 1,500th Victim, by Robert Ballagh
- 1977** Madonna Irlanda, by Michael Farrell
- 1978** Jim Larkin statue, by Oisín Kelly
- 1979** Faith Healer, by Brian Friel
- 1980** In Her Own Image, by Eavan Boland
- 1981** Belfast after Pollaiuolo, by Clifford Rainey
- 1982** The Hunt by Night, by Derek Mahon
- 1983** Bligeard Sráide, by Michael Davitt
- 1984** Celebration: The Beginning of Labour, by Pauline Cummins
- 1985** Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme, by Frank McGuinness

1986 Reading the Sky, by Paula Meehan

1987 Pentecost, by Stewart Parker

1988 The Great Wall of Kinsale, by Eilís O'Connell

1989 Self Portrait, by Tony O'Malley

1990 Madoc, by Paul Muldoon

1991 Untitled: Philippe Vacher, by James Coleman

1992 The Butcher Boy, by Patrick McCabe

1993 Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha, by Roddy Doyle

1994 The Country Blooms, a Garden and a Grave, by Alanna O'Kelly

1995 City Drawings, by Kathy Prendergast

1996 Portia Coughlan, by Marina Carr

1997 Teacup, by Dorothy Cross

1998 Cead Aighnis, by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill

1999 True Nature, by Willie Doherty

2000 N3, by Tom de Paor

2001 Tawnanasool, by Hughie O'Donoghue

2002 The Agreement, by Shane Cullen

2003 New Sexual Lifestyles, by Gerard Byrne

2004 The Four Directions, by Alice Maher

2005 The Sea, by John Banville

2006 Mothers and Sons, by Colm Tóibín

2007 X-PO, by Deirdre O'Mahony

2008 Molly Fox's Birthday, by Deirdre Madden

2009 Bocconi University, by Grafton Architects

2010 Room, by Emma Donoghue

2011 Laundry, by Louise Lowe

2012 Commonage, by Culturstruction, Rosie Lynch and Hollie Kearns

2013 Parallax, by Sinéad Morrissey

2014 Saw Swee Hock Student Centre, London School of Economics, by O'Donnell + Tuomey

2015 Silent Moves, by Aideen Barry, Emma O'Kane, Ridgepool Training Centre and Scannán Technologies

READ MORE

- » Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks: 2015 – Silent Moves, by Aideen Barry, Emma O'Kane, Ridgepool Training Centre and Scannán Technologies
- » Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks: 2014 – Saw Swee Hock Student Centre, by O'Donnell + Tuomey
- » Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks: 2013 – Parallax, by Sinéad Morrissey
- » Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks: 2012 – Commonage, by Culturstruction
- » Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks: 2011 – Laundry, by Louise Lowe



Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks

A century of creativity: This project by The Irish Times and the Royal Irish Academy assesses Ireland's literary and visual arts over the past century

MORE FROM THE IRISH TIMES

ilm

Star Wars: The Last Jedi new video – what we learned

Food & Drink

Where to buy the best ice-cream in Dublin

Interiors

'Keep my mess in the bedroom': inside Kenzo's new Parisian home

Fine Art & Antiques

From Easter Rising lots to vintage tractors – what's selling in the auction rooms

SPONSORED

The Dublin story at the heart of Powers Whiskey

Boora Fairy Festival fundraiser for Barretstown

Ageless beauty: "We need to embrace natural beauty more"

How a Best Managed Company award accelerates success

ADVERTISEMENT

ADVERTISEMENT