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PROBLEMS OF NATIONALISM AND INTERNATIONALISM
A STUDY OF TWO IRISH ARTISTS

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PROBLEMS OF NATIONALISM AND INTERNATIONALISM
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May I say at the outset that I am delighted to have the opportunity afforded by this congress to acquaint myself with various aspects of Latin American art and culture. To date my knowledge of South American art and artists has been (to my loss I am sure) confined to the work of the Venezuelan artist J.R. Soto and the Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer.

As a young student of architectural history I was excited by the elegance of Niemeyer's work in Brazilia and later, at an exhibition in Dublin, by the magical silent visual tinklings of Soto's work.

In this paper I would like to examine and perhaps raise some questions, if not provide answers, upon the theme of regionalism and internationalism in art practice. You will forgive me if I rely on my personal experience as an art critic of contemporary work in my own country Ireland.

I propose, however, to make these observations as a contribution to the general debate within the context of Latin American art which I suspect shares fundamental problems with other nations on the nature of picture making and the artistic process. My intention then is to make an oblique foray into the main business of the conference and I hope that my remarks can be seen to be both relevant and stimulating to both Latin American artists and critics.

My first impression of the work of Soto was that it had a kind of poetical magic that all good art has and that it appealed as much to the designer in me as that of the artist. This was in Dublin in 1971 and his work has remained ever since a favourite icon in my cerebral museum of drawers. More recently in Belfast I viewed an exhibition of the work of Agam a fellow traveller of Soto's and his work was still clever and considered but it didn't seem to excite me anymore. It has been conceived, worked out, exhibited, written about and had historical significance but it seemed somewhat dated. Now perhaps this is on y a temporary lapse in the acceptance at present of this kind of work, vulnerable as some work is to changing states of taste. It caused me nevertheless to ponder the wider issue of international trends and how useful or inhibiting they can be to the developing artist, where the tidal pull of international styles vis à vis national heritage and pernonal interest can be very strong.

With this in mind I now propose to examine the work of two Irish artists Michael Farrell and Robert Ballagh who were provoked initially in their careers by international movements. Unlike a generation before them who looked to Europe, many of the younger generation of artists in Ireland in the 60's and 70's turned to American art for inspiration and stylistic guidance. They also looked to the Celtic past for their roots. (It may be noted that Celtic art is largely although not exclusively abstract and symbolic.) 'Having no Celtic tradition in painting for over 1,000 years, one has to go back to when Celtic art was at its greatest and most important,

for it is true that no pictures of any value concerned with the real problems of picture making have been made in Ireland since the book of Kells, a masterpiece devoid of all mist, wind and whimsey - perfect in harmony and uncompromisingly direct.' (Farrell, 1965) [1]. I would submit that it is the sustenance gained from this awareness of tradition that allows some of the better work produced in Ireland authenticity and avoid anonymity.

While Michael Farrell's early work during the 1960's was abstract and 'modern' it made use of Celtic motifs - the Celtic connection was always there. Work such as 'Contained Motif' (1965) or 'Bank of Ireland Mural' (1967) illustrate the use the artist made of intertwining circular and triangular Celtic motifs; hard and soft forms.

Towards the end of the sixties and early seventies Farrell's work began to change - the political troubles in N. Ireland had already begun and Farrell's work which, to date, had no literary connotations began to respond to the tragic situation in Ulster.

A series of abstract works, his 'Pressé Series', which were purely formal studies now began to take on meanings that put the formal elements of his visual vocabulary to the service of more significant and impelling content. The squelches of 'pop' juice now became blood - the once sterile language of the 'Pressé' series became the passionate "pressé politique' - anonimity gave way to personal identity.

Variations on this theme continued to become more and more reflective on what it means to be Irish and an artist rather than merely an artist. In 'Une Nature Morte a la mode irlandaise' (1975) we witness newspaper headlines of various tragedies chopped up by the now fulminating 'pressé' elements and the use of witty and clever punning in the deadly appropriate French title on the concept of 'nature morte'.

In an interview in the Irish Times 1977 Farrell reflects upon his artistic change:

'... I became interested more in the literary aspects and less in the formal. It put me in a terrible jam, and rethinking the whole basis of my work took a long time.

I've withdrawn from the international stream of art to a more human and personal style than before. I found in my big abstract works that I counldn't say things that I felt like saying. I had arrived at a totally aesthetic art with no literary connotations. I wanted to make statements, using sarcasm, or puns, or wit, and all of these I could not do before because of the limited means of expression I had adopted.' [2]

Farrell by now was living in Paris and from what his new domicile had to offer he chose to deploy Boucher's painting of Miss O'Murphy (herself an earlier Irish emigrant living in France and onetime mistress of Louis XV) as a more potent symbol for the direction in which his artistic and personal concerns were leading.

In one painting of this series the artist lays out Miss O'Murphy like a piece of meat in a butcher's window signifying the various butcher's cuts: 'gigot, fourquarters, le cut, knee cap'. Here, by word play, he both puns upon the name of the artist of the original painting, Boucher, and poignantly comments upon the savagery of the political system and its victims in the North of Ireland (kneecapping is a customary punishment carried out by the I.R.A. for informers and the like.) The artist himself has said of these paintings "They make every possible statement on the Irish situation, religion, cultural, political, the cruelty, the horror, every aspect of it."

Cyril Barrett in a monograph on the artist's work has summed up this series of paintings.

"The 'Miss O'Murphy or Very First Real Irish Political Picture Series" marks therefore, not only a change in 'Farrell's style and artistic interests, but in his attitude towards Ireland". It has become the love-hate relationship of the exile (shared, no doubt, by some residents). But above all it is a personal relationship, based on reflection, not only on Ireland but on himself. That is perhaps the most important aspect of this latest phase. It is not just that he has turned from seemingly impersonal and aesthetically pleasing pictures and reliefs, or more or less objective political commentary, to figurative painting with a literary element. What is more significant is that he has turned from the seemingly impersonal to the very personal, from the seemingly objective to the reflective, the questioning the attempt to objectify and come to terms with problems concerning his own personal position." (Barrett. '79).[3]

I have pointed out that Michael Farrell has drawn upon the internationally available image bank of art historical works for his own personal use but perhaps Robert Ballagh taps this source even more frequently.

Again in his early work he, too, wrought images that were international, in the superficial sense of the word. In a work such as 'Diamond Series I' (1971) Ballagh who had no formal training as a painter was essentially learning the graphic tools of his trade. Like Farrell he used this as a point of departure from which to find his own voice and vision.

Eavesdropping on the artistic process has been a theme in R. Ballagh's work for a considerable time. The painting 'Artist's Studio with Modigiliani print' shows the work itself in the process of being created on an easel within his studio and so the resulting image is a triple regression of an image within an image.

A more recent example of this eavesdropping would be 'The Conversation' 1977.

Here the artist himself in conversation with Vermeer (?) discusses modern art while the painting 'The Conversation' itself has been temporarily removed from its place on the wall.

An exclusive interest in formal structure and technique often leads to abstract painting but Ballagh, apart from a brief flirtation with acrylic medium for formal reasons, has always been a figurative painter.

From looking over his own shoulder Ballagh had now turned to look over the public's shoulders viewing modern, mostly abstract art.

In "Figures looking at an Exhibition" (1973) the personal characteristics of each individual picture viewer can be gathered from how they stand, how seriously they take themselves, the intensity or casualness with which they view the paintings, down to the clothes and mannerisms they adopt. The viewing public is seen from behind and strikes a 'nice frisson' with the displayed abstract work on the gallery walls.

This series is light hearted in mood, in contract to the seriousness of his pictures on a political theme. When I asked the artist did he think that a work of art could have any real effect on the course of events, he replied:

"If you'd asked me ten years ago I'd definitely have said yes - I don't think so now. I think retrospectively it does and I think that important. I don't think art causes revolutions. They are caused by much larger things than works of art. Paintings can however slowly bring change. It's like Chinese torture; it drips away gradually and can change how people feel about things, the way they look at things but nothing instant." [4]

Like Michael Farrell, Ballagh has drawn from well known paintings from the French tradition and also from the Spanish tradition. He has made adaptations of Delacroix's "Liberty at the Barricades" and Goya's "Third of May".

He has explained to me:

"... I decided to paint some pictures that would directly comment on the Northern Situation. I set that as my brief and started to research historically to find artists who had tried to do the same sort of thing. I think I ended up with the most obvious examples from art history." [4]

He pointed out that Picasso, for instance, had used Goya's "The Third of May" for comment on Korea, but had changed it quite radically, as he had also used and changed the "Rape of the Sabines" by Poussin.

"But I felt that these pictures were so strong and so real that I didn't want to interfere with them in any structural way. I wanted, however, to reinforce the content. So I adapted them the way I did into what looks almost poster style, simplified the images but didn't stray very far from the composition of the originals. I was trying to emphasise the content and reinforce the form." [4]

I put it to him that Delacroix's painting relies heavily on bold expression, heavily applied paint in rich colour giving it a surging energy, with France symbolised as liberty leading the people on. His adaptation as I recalled it, renders the original to a near monochromatic image - a static frozen image. It seemed to lack the ability to excite and lead on which is the strength of the original.

"There were then all sorts of dogmas of modernism which I find don't interfere with me now. Then I was a relatively immature artist. The things that I did then as an artist seemed terribly important. I didn't want to develop a personal style - I felt that wasn't the right thing to do. So in those paintings the lines that I drew were kept a constant thickness all the time so they ould not have any personal expressive quality. In other words, the lines could never be gestural or in any way romantic. So there were many forces at play with me then, not just the political. There were formal artistic things being teased out which for a young developing artist are essential — I would treat it very differently today." [4]

While these two Irish artists have served an apprenticeship under the international banner of abstract minimalism they have found it for their purposes both vacuus and restrictive. They appear to belive more in the power of the semi abstract or the representational with visual referrants in the real world. They believe in a nicely struck relationship between technical means and worthwhile subject matter. They also recognise the 'internationalism' of art history. While abstract international art has a worthy tradition it strikes me that one of its limitations lies in the fact that it may easily seduce a young artist who later may find the means at his disposal are not flexible enough or capable of carrying as many individual connotations of meaning or feeling as he first envisaged.

If I may finally return to the work of Soto. His concerns are very different from those of the artists I have been discussing. His works are 3 dimensional and largely above and beyond time and place, and he has apparently refused 'to admit any influence from the natural world' (Popper 1968). His work is undoubtedly international in its scope and appeal. Nevertheless I feel it is tempered by a Latin elan that makes it less anonymous and gives it personality. After all the coka cola bottle is as international a symbol as one could think of but it is also peculiarly American.

1. Artist's Statement (1965) - M. Farrell - A Monograph by C. Barrett '79.
2. Interview 'Irish Times' by Maev Kennedy 1977.
3. Michael Farrell - A monograph by Cyril Barrett 1979.
4. Interview with Liam Kelly, Irish Times 1979.