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Title of Paper: HANGING AROUND THE TEMPLE - LOITERING WITH INTENT

Sub-title: Greek Aesthetics: Feeling, Meaning and Form in contemporary Art, Sculpture and Architecture with particular reference to Irish Art.

Abstract: The paper addresses the following issues:-

1. The relevance of Greek aesthetics to contemporary art, sculpture and architecture.
2. Parallels between contemporary Irish art and sculpture and ancient Greece.
3. Literary/linguistic concepts within post-modern classicism.

It includes discussion of the work of the following Irish artists:

T. P. Flanagan

Colin Middleton

Patrick Scott

Clifford Rainey

and also refers to the work of the American architectural firm S.I.T.E.

It is intended to use slides to illustrate works cited in the paper.

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## HANGING AROUND THE TEMPLE - LOITERING WITH INTENT

At present contemporary art and design activity is eclectic in nature drawing formal and spiritual guidance and direction from many diverse sources. These sources may vary in the international arena from Zen inspired performance and ritual through to Celtic land forms and tumuli. Much work makes use of the new media/technology in video and sound and painting as gesture and expression has had something of a revival.

This multivarious nature of contemporary art may well be part of the crisis of the avant garde but at least it has allowed us the opportunity to examine afresh the relationships between art and design and central to this issue has been questions of language and syntax within Post-Modern Classicism.

With this background in mind it is my intention in this paper to examine the relationship of art and literary ideas in relation to contemporary art but particularly with reference to sculpture and architecture; to acknowledge the continuing relevance of Greek aesthetics to contemporary practice and also to strike some parallels between Irish contemporary art and the Greek heritage.

Someone once said, I think it was Lawrance Durrell, that Greece was like Ireland, cut loose and towed into the Mediterranean. He was thinking I believe, of the people, the landscape of the Irish western seaboard and of course the light.

Irish contemporary art has been both praised and criticized for having a literary bias. The world wide reputation of Irish literature headed by Joyce and that splendid itinerary of his 'Ulysses' has been a great source of inspiration for Irish artists. And there still exists a close relationship between poet and painter particularly in the North of Ireland. The word 'Rosca' used for our international exhibition held in Dublin every four years means 'poetry of vision' in Gaelic and testifies to the literary thinking of the organizers.

Now while younger Irish artists have responded to international styles and movements there has been a group of artists who have responded in a poetic way to that constant Irish theme, landscape. The Irish have always, whether at home or abroad, had an enduring sense of place. The indigenous stylistic source is, of course, the work of Jack B. Yeats, and his romantic expressionism while the subject matter is a hybrid of myth and fact. John Berger, writing about Yeats the artist has said:

contd.



"... and it may well be that this kind of romantic but outward-facing expressionism is the natural style of art for previously exploited nations fighting for independence - modern classicism requires an industrial society."<sup>1</sup>

A few generations removed from Yeats artists like T. P. Flanagan and Colin Moddleton, both Ulster painters, have continued this literary engagement with landscape but have checked and tempered their romantic inclinations with classical structuring and use of composition and line. *THE SUBJECT MAY BE UNRULY BUT IT IS ORDERED AND DISCIPLINED BY A CLASSICAL GRAMMAR AND PHRASING.* Examples of this are Flanagan's 'Gortahork Series' and Middleton's 'Composition ~~Castle Archdale~~ *CLOUD, DRUMRUSH*'. The use of the diptych in a 3:2 ratio, the informal feeling for the Golden Mean and the deployment of line as a means of orchestration within the composition to control and offset mass - all this declares a debt going back to ancient Greek example. This is not to deny other influences at work with these artists but there is an easy facility for a formal vocabulary of proportion and harmony muted but as indelable as a watermark.

By contrast it is noticeable that another Ulster artist, Roy Johnson, who has worked under the banner of Systems Art for some time, now finds the need to break out of the straightjacket of geometrical and mathematical permutation and break this formal idealistic purity for more overt gesture: Compare his 'Square and quadrant series' (1979) with his more recent 'Circa struct' series.

Harold Osborne writing of Greek aesthetics has drawn our attention to the literary nature of the Greek experience.

"The aesthetic terminology of the ancients was evolved primarily in the context of their theory of public speaking or rhetoric and then applied in the first place to poetics and secondarily to art. As will be seen, their conception of art was primarily a literary one. Ut pictura poesis: a painting is like a poem."<sup>2</sup>

This conception of art we share with the Greeks. Something else we share is the concept of light as dramatic protagonist. The light in Greece emphasizes form, the Irish light dissipates form and is forever changing. To quote Seamus Heaney the poet writing of T. P. Flanagan,

"... What invites the eye back again and again is the fetch of water and air, their constant flirtation, their eternal triangle with a moody light."<sup>3</sup>

Light in the work of Patrick Scott at times retreats to its geometric purity and source in the sun; at other times it is subtly 'raised' off the raw canvas as



pattern and directional line. Scott trained as an architect and while he responds to Celtic tracery and use of gold, his debt to Greek tradition and Irish literature is underlined by Dorothy Walker.

"His open-ended linear or circular forms, with no beginning and no end also appear in traditional Irish music, but have had their most revolutionary expression in the work of the great Irish writers of this century, Joyce, Beckett and Flann O'Brien. What is remarkable in Patrick Scott's work is that he re-finds the old formal elegance as part of the modern epiphany. He seizes the passing form as an epiphany of the permanent, expressing the Irish love of paradox, e.g. the permanent significance of the transient. His open-ended formalism combines a kite-like flying geometry, a portable aesthetic, with classical Greco-Roman formal values and architectonic structures."<sup>4</sup>

Works such as "Goldpainting 38" (1966) and "Goldpainting 33" (1965) illustrate that art, design and taste are inextricably compounded in the work of P. Scott.

Paradox, wit, superb craftsmanship and taste also mark the work of the Northern Irish Sculptor and draughtsman Clifford Rainey. While formal aspects of Greek aesthetics have only indirectly affected the work of those Irish artists discussed so far, Rainey responds directly to Greek example by way of archaeological remains.

The summer of 1974 was spent travelling around Greece and its islands. The Greek light he has described as 'White light' - its attraction understandable in an artist whose principle material has been glass. 'Waiting for the Morrow with the knowledge that Yesterday's gone' illustrates this time traveller's response to a past of a different place and climate but one that is universally imprinted on our collective sub-conscious. In the 'Bristol Column' the column in silver plated bronze and glass becomes a potent symbol shot through with a poignant Surrealism.

His themes are decay and time; his materials glass, bronze and marble, their inherent characteristics juxtaposed with care and irony. Rainey has said:

"I don't think I've ever made a piece of work that is actually complete."

He clearly expects the spectator to extend and complete the experience. Clifford Rainey's work in the spirit of ancient Greek precedent is about ideas rather than superficial appearances.

Among his visits to antique sites has been Ephesus reminding him of Shelly's poem 'Ozymandias', the fragment and infinity:



"... 'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away. "

'Shelly Poetical Works' ed. by T. Hutchinson,  
Oxford Univ. Press

He has also incorporated into his work references to the failure of conservation on the Acropolis sanctuary. The conservationists replaced the original bronze ties, coated in lead to prevent rusting, with iron rods which have since rusted causing damage. Rainey was quick to see the sculptural possibilities of this destructive and weathering process in his own work. Rusting metal pins break the purity of his glass 'objects' and as on the Acropolis

"... the metal is cracking the glass which is actually there  
to hold it up in the first place."<sup>6</sup>

This oxidization of metal and the development over time of a patina of verdigris on surface underlines the concept of metamorphosis that is at the essence of his art making. The column becomes 'St. Sebastian' or 'Belfast after Pallainolo' broken like a rock rift - a sacred icon which then is replaced by an icon of contemporary international currency - the coke bottle. The drums of this 'coke' column, pierced by rusting arrows, eventually fall and disintegrate and we are back to the fragment and the sands of time - glass as material and idea.

If Clifford Rainey worships at the temple that iconoclastic architectural group in America S.I.T.E. loiter with intent. They have taken the concept of the well serviced shed, the rectangular 'temple' box and used the facade to carry the language of an incisive rhetoric and the art of public speaking so beloved by the Greeks to the suburban supermarket place. S.I.T.E. see architecture not as design but as art - a vehicle for expressing ideas not merely providing for functional need.

In works such as 'Indeterminate Facade,' 'Peeling Building' and 'Notch Project' they pun with the idea of 'BEST' through conceptual ambiguity and inversion and with reference to romantic ruin. The French critic Pierre Schneider has seen it as the 'New American pessimism'; I see it simply as a clever, humorous but serious attempt to avoid architecture as style and decoration and to encode the facade once again with meaning. The 'Notch Project' also responds to the instability of the Californian Coast subject as it is to earthquakes. The naturalism of its 'fragment' is justified environmentally and becomes a piece of urban sculpture with an integral and meaningful relationship to the parent building. Unlike so much architectural sculpture it is not conceived as an afterthought.

As Charles Jencks has pointed out:

"Mass culture has opened classicism to the masses as well as the classes (just as it has debased the canons)"<sup>8</sup>

The Best buildings I believe are a particular illustration of this.

I have tried in this paper to examine the relationship between art, design and literature and linguistic concepts.

I have also looked at cultural parallels between Greece and Ireland. I hope I have made it clear that we continue to look over our shoulders for reassurance to our Greek Godparents.

#### References:

1. John Berger: 'Selected Essays and Articles, The Look of Things' Penguin Books, 1972, p.59
2. Harold Osborne: 'Aesthetics and Art Theory, An Historical Introduction' Longmans, p.5
3. Roderick Knowles: 'Contemporary Irish Art,' Wolfhound Press, 1982. Entry p.74 on T.P. Flanagan by Seamus Heaney
4. Dorothy Walker: 'Patrick Scott' The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Trinity College, Dublin.
5. T. Hutchinson ed. by: Shelley Poetical Works, Oxford University Press
6. Sunday Independent, March, 7, 1982 - Clifford Rainey as quoted by Cairan Carty.
7. S.I.T.E Architecture as Art - Academy Editions P. Schneider as quoted on p.25
8. Charles Jencks 'Post Modern Classicism' Academy Editions, 1980, p.5