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Michael Mulcahy -
A Neo-Expressionist?

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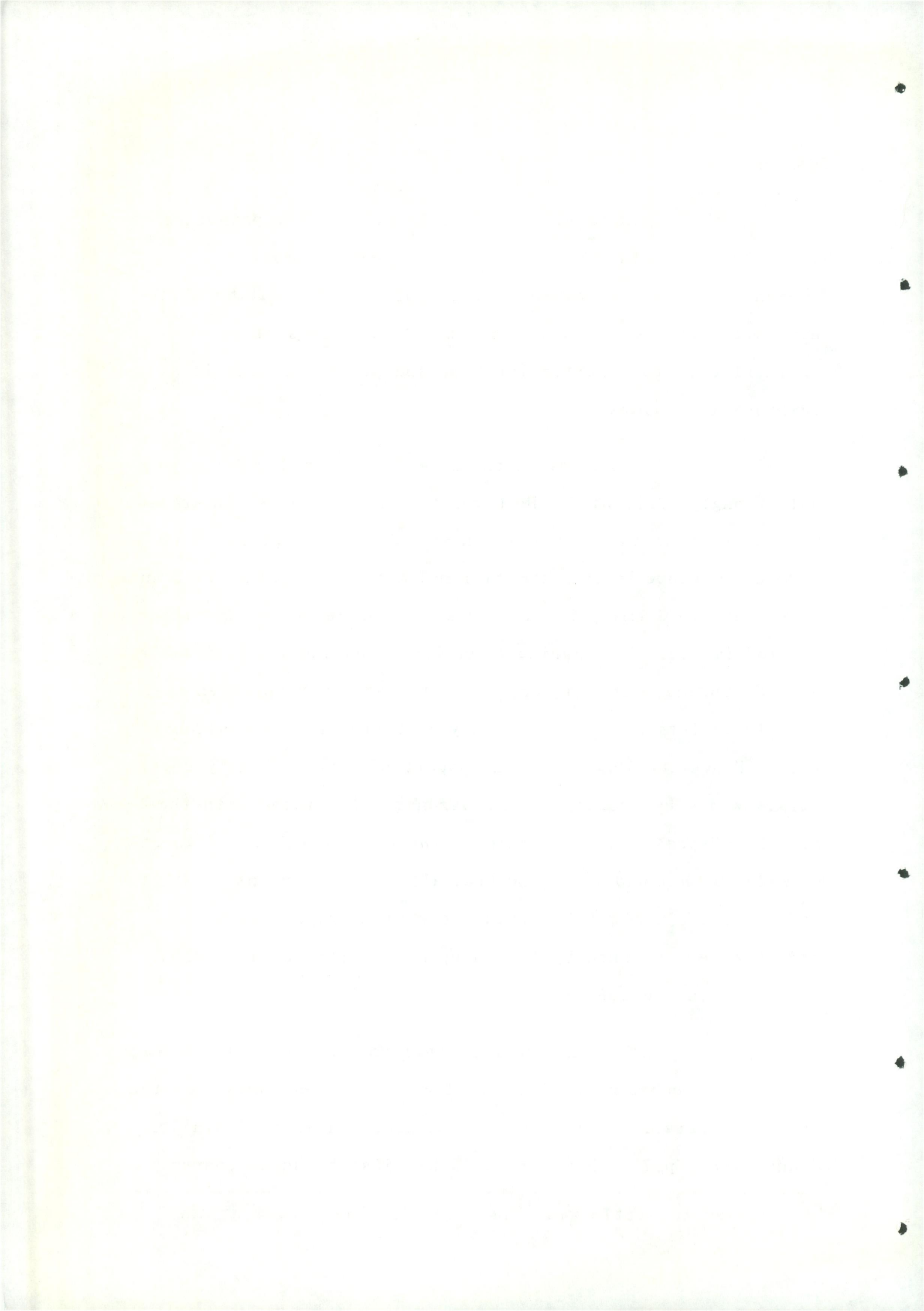
Introduction

This thesis sets out to explore the paintings of Mick Mulcahy within the context of the Neo-Expressionist Movement. The artist himself finds this categorization quite unsatisfactory¹, as it seems to make the artist's efforts pertinent only to a particular time and place, to make it "fashionable", almost.

It is however, the movement with which Mulcahy is most strongly affiliated. He began to pursue a career in art at the beginning of the 1980's which was when Neo-Expressionism assumed dominance on the international art scene. In America and Europe, and in Germany in particular, it broke the mould of the art experimental '70's during which Conceptualism and Minimalism reigned supreme. The latter movements had never appealed much to Irish artists in general as they preferred the expressionist style. Hence the 1980's were an opportune time for the younger artists who subsequently became strongly affiliated with the Irish Neo-Expressionist Movement. These include Brian Maguire and Paddy Graham who were, and are, also quick to point out that their work isn't "Neo" but rather a continuation of the principles established by the Independent Artists since their foundation in the 1960's.

In Ireland, representational art had been the norm even in the decades preceeding the 1980's. Expressionism was the preferred artistic vehicle of the painter placed in isolation (Meany, 1983, p.7). However, this has just begun to change.

¹I discussed the title with him on an informal level at the Taylor Gallery, Dublin, in November 1992



Geographically, culturally and conceptually there was a certain alienation from the artistic mainstream in which the Irish artist chose to work, in contrast to his Continental counterparts. This changed, however, when figurative painting with an expressionistic twist re-emerged on the international art scene at the beginning of the '80's. Ireland seemingly was up to the minute with the latest art trends and could boast quite happily her very own home-grown Expressionists like Mick Mulcahy, Brian Maguire and Paddy Graham and of course other such artists which proves to a certain extent the natural nativeness of the expressionistic style in artistically isolated countries.

It must be noted, though, that Neo-Expressionism was not about three superstars becoming the lions of Irish art. Many other artists like Brian Bourke, Charles Cullen, Michael Keane, and Michael Cullen are also important within the Irish art context.

While Neo-Expressionism is an important manifestation of the '80's, one can find it tempting to place greater emphasis on the *writing* about art rather than paying the works themselves the attention they so richly deserve. Of course art criticism has a part to play in painting appreciation. It enriches the viewer's understanding of art and attaches them to both time and place as well as fixing important pieces in a viewer's mind. However the scope of the artwork is so much richer than the whens, whys and wherefores. The problem in pursuing such aspects is that it becomes easy to avoid the more important social, sexual and spiritual statements which the



paintings make on a one-to-one basis. To quote perhaps an extreme but factual case in which Peter Fuller criticized American art commentators for being quite insensitive to the spiritual qualities of neo-Romanticism, simply because they felt that "its spiritual qualities [could be] interpreted as a pathetic refusal of modernity". Hence, they criticized the work badly in the light of a contemporary trend, rather than at face value (Fuller, 19-?, p.70).

When researching art works it is very difficult to discuss the spiritual and psychological make-up of the artist and stay within respectable and accepted boundaries. There seems to be an unspoken rule only recently articulated by Sixten Ringborn as a restrictive attitude, now elevated into a formulated principle. "Even if this ['this' being certain questionable spiritual and psychological influences in an artist's life] were all true and fully documented nonetheless it had better be left unsaid" (Ringborn, 19-?, p.73). This idea of boundaries to discussion is acceptable to a certain point when, for example, an artist's character is being scrutinized. However, it does become somewhat cumbersome when it inhibits discussion of the metaphysical aspects of an artist's work.

Whatever about the unspoken rules regarding the History of Art one rarely hears an artist say "This/these are my subjective explorations. Please don't take them seriously but enjoy them as art" because the artist when in pursuit of truth does not know with certainty how much truth there is displayed on his canvas for all to see. Joan Fowler, in her excellent

essay briefly discusses the Neo-Expressionist, Anselm Kiefer who was very much in the forefront of the movement in Germany. "His project is much more ambitious [than engaging in the now most basic understanding of expressionism as representing felt emotions through line and colour] attempting as it does to get to the heart of human existence"(Fowler, 1990, p.53).

Most art critics would agree that one can come to art in order to have one's perceptions of reality opened up. At its most basic, art teaches us to see things we might not have noticed before. At its most powerful, art acquaints us with states of mind with which we are unfamiliar, or of new philosophies or ways of interpreting life. Kandinsky and Mondrian, for example, used Abstraction - the divorcing of colour and form from representational aims - in order to communicate significant truths about man, namely his thoughts and feelings. Theosophy and Anthroposophy, both philosophically and spiritually fed their artwork.

Thus a dynamic relationship between the artist and the viewer is initiated by the paintings. This relationship involves the artist showing the viewer how to see, how to perceive reality on a different level. Mark Rothko's work is to my mind one of the strongest examples. His powerful canvasses speak of Nihilism. They silently articulate the philosophies of Nietzsche as they are intimately concerned with the bleakness of our spirituality in the absence of God. In order to fully appreciate his work the viewer must to some extent readjust his world view if only temporarily to empathize with that of the

artist. This is true also of Mulcahy's work.

All works of art rely for their success, to a greater or lesser degree, on the triangular correspondence established between the viewer, the work of art and the world of the artist. Thus, although a piece of art may not be making a totally truthful statement, a painting still must be anchored in the real world in order to be identifiable by its audience. Take, for example, "You Forgot Your Present Mary" by Michael Mulcahy - in which the woman and the man depicted are both nude, sexual metaphors of desire and receptivity are found in the genital area, as flowers. The man is racing/leaping practically towards the woman holding a piece of foliage that is penile in appearance. The woman is rendered with two huge labia depicted as an iris-like flower. Obviously, it is not necessarily true that these metaphors are an accurate assessment of general human sexuality.

It is interesting to examine an artist who is strongly affiliated with the Neo-Expressionist movement while trying to empathize with the artist's world view. I believe this empathy must be achieved through the language the art piece itself uses; technically, symbolically, emotionally and perhaps spiritually. For not only can one pay tribute to art for its power to present itself as absolute truth (even if only in the artist's experience) but it can also entertain the viewer with possibilities to linger over, think about and digest. This is a definite aim in my examination of the work of Mick Mulcahy as opposed to a mere discussion of art trends.

Chapter 1 - Definitions and Background to Neo-Expressionism

Definition of Expressionism

Expression, according to Chamber's Twentieth-Century Dictionary, is the act of forcing out by pressure through an act or mode or utterance, representation or revelation. The stylistic term *expressionism* has been strongly associated with the arts in general, dance, music, film - and not just painting. In the context of painting in the 80's this broadly speaking means the manifestation of figurative, loose, vapid brushwork and massive, big canvases awash with buckets of paint. The word "expressionism" has become a blanket term much like "Post-modernism" in its descriptions of the (visual) arts. According to Ann Carlisle "expressionism" is a complex and significant word which contains a variety of meanings (Ann Carlisle, Expressionism or Communication, Circa No.10, May-June 1983). Its frequent and indiscriminate use does not help to clarify it either.

In addition, "expressionism" in visual art conveys with it the inextricably linked idea of emotions expressed on canvas. The strength of emotion pulsing through the artist's veins, making itself known and felt when it expresses itself through the artist's paintings, is, I feel, taken for granted as a basic tenet of expressionism. In other words, emotions are expressed through art as a movement of style. Joan Fowler calls this the most basic understanding of expressionism - "representing felt emotions through line, mark or colour." She explains further that when it is the artist's intention to imbue the painting with an emotion like 'anger' then the mark, line or colour the artist employs in the representation of 'anger' is already inscribed in the painting as a set of conventions through which the viewer may



be able to understand and empathise with the anger" (Fowler, 1990, p. 53). In addition, it is a "fundamental tenet of Expressionism that the true creative impulse springs from a source deep within the individual at a primal level of emotional life, untouched by knowledge of academic art, art history and indeed history at large" (Cardinal, 1984, p.1).

According to Anne Carlisle, the work of young children is frequently studied as an example of unaffected expressionism. Children's art is naive, innocent and subjective. What children lack in artistic control they make up for in their imaginative response to the amazing new world which surrounds them. They are unaffected by deficiency of technique, lack of skill or pressures to communicate. They are capable of producing, almost as casual by-products, "powerful, personal and vivid images or symbols" (Carlisle, 1983, pp. 13-14) which may appear to an adult as obscure, cryptic and subjective gestures. These often pass unheeded because of lack of skill or the inability to communicate in adult terms. Yet the young child makes true art just in emotionally responding to their new world (Ibid.). As children grow older, their paintings make a shift from being predominantly retinal to predominantly conceptual (Ibid.). The instinctive, retinal response to one's surroundings is characteristic of expressionistic work. The approach is very similar and the world around is view with childish eyes. Such paintings need to be viewed innocently in order to be fully appreciated.

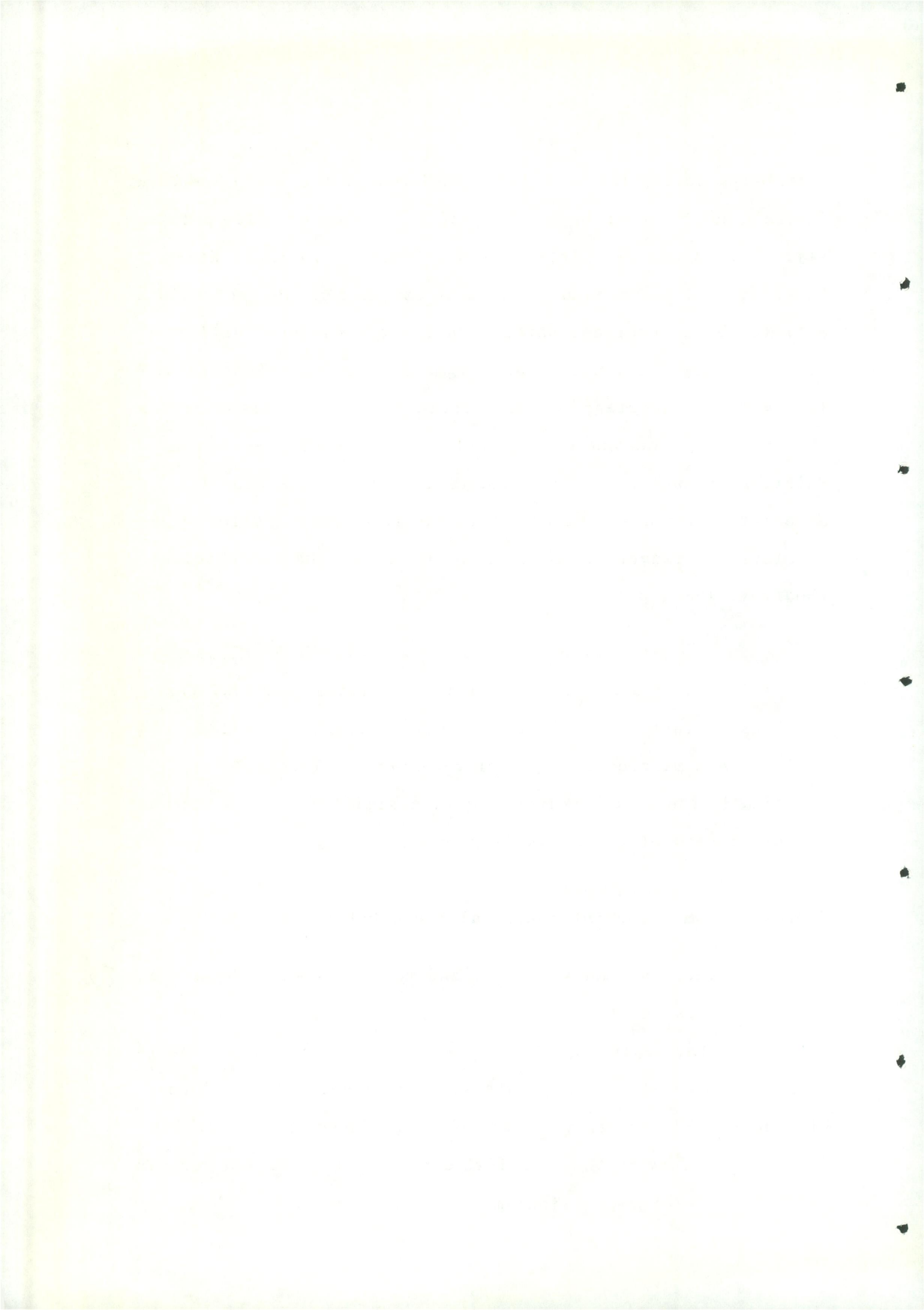
The Neo-Expressionistic movement spontaneously came

into being during the late 1970s in Germany, Italy and New York. It could not be described as Academic, abstract or belle peinture style. It disdained prettiness and beauty. In fact, Neo-Expressionism embraced amateurism on the part of the professional artist. This involved, paradoxically, professional artists crudely using line, colour and pigment like student artists. This general acceptance of what could be called substandard or "bad painting" was one of the hallmarks of Neo-Expressionism¹. Painting is done both loose and fast, a technique usually associated with abstraction. This has since been applied by New Painters to "imagery from the real world and the subconscious" (Godfrey, 1986, p.11).

Neo-expressionist paintings are also (not unlike their expressionist predecessors) sensitive barometers for registering emotions of lust, self-hatred, despair, alienation and helplessness married to hopes of redemption. Thus this type of painting is the most immediate way of assimilating the public and private facets of the artist's persona.

Expressionism - the international scene before the 1980's

There are many periods and movements which have been dubbed expressionist in one way or another, prior to the German artists at the beginning of this century. One could include in a list of "expressionist" painters, Michelangelo, Rodin, Turner, William Blake, Caravaggio, and Da Vinci. These are all artists who do not belong in the twentieth century yet fulfilled certain core elements of expressionism (Cardinal, 1984, p.). Never-



theless, the expressionist *movement* is strongly identified with this century. This began with the German Expressionists who were active prior to World War I from 1905 - 1916. They included Ernst Kirchner, Emil Nolde, Franz Marc, Vassily Kandinsky, Egon Schide and Oskar Kokoschka. They influenced their successors in the European Avant Garde movement such as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Maurice de Vlaminck and Georges Roualt, many of whom can be considered expressionist. So one could continue, citing examples from the post-war expressionist currents in the 1940s until the late 1970s, incorporating people like Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Frances Bacon, and Joseph Beuys. All this is prior to Neo-Expressionism.

Expressionism in Ireland prior to the 1980's

Expressionism in Ireland goes back to before the 1940's and was a fragile predecessor of Neo-Expressionism. Ireland used to an artistically isolated country. According to John Meany, figurative expressionism dominates in such lands. "Like other isolated European countries, figurative Expressionism became the major style in painting..." (Meany, 1983, p. 7). Since there were few outside influences imported, Expressionism continued to fascinate Irish artist. To quote John Meany again, "much of the painting from the early half of the century lacked the individuality and strength of Yeats and tended to be safely

¹In fact, John Meany in enlisting various names for the Neo-Expressionist Movement gave two of the names as "Bad Painting" and "Punk Painting" (Meany, John - Expressionism Revamped, Circa Magazine No. 10, May-June 1983, p.4).

provincial. The human figure and landscape dominated as a

subject and abstraction was rarely a concern" (Ibid., p. 5). Jack B. Yeats, an Irish Expressionist and a foundational artist, was noted for his innovation. He chose to be a Romantic Expressionist. Mulcahy, when he was living at Helvick Head from 1982 to 1983, paralleled Yeats' preferences for the sea and landscape as rural subject matter. Hutchinson, in describing some of Mulcahy's paintings, wrote: "The pictures are rapidly painted: they are all surface, with dashes of pigment whipped against the canvas as though driven there by a cutting wind" (Hutchinson, 1983, p. 72). The same is applicable to Jack B. Yeats.

During the 1950's and 1960's artists in Ireland continued to paint figuratively, representationally and expressively. This style of painting remained the driving force in Ireland. "It was rarely threatened by abstraction and experimentation as was the case abroad" (Op. cit.). However, after World War II, Ireland became more exposed and open. There was a greater availability of images. Provincialism had begun to dissipate.

Openness to art styles and movements conceived abroad was encouraged by the Irish Exhibition of Living Art whose main exhibition was held every year. In this exhibit, artists were encouraged to experiment using ideas which were assimilated from abroad. To quote John Meany, "The Irish Exhibition of Living Art has represented the increasing internationalism of Irish Art" (Ibid.). Incidentally, the Exhibition was generally not taken to belong to the working class of Dublin's society. Thus there

was a class divide complementing the increasing ideological conflict within Irish art. That is, Irish art as opposed to internationalism, provincialism versus cosmopolitanism and insulation versus openness.

The other main annual exhibition was the Independent Artists' Exhibition. Hutchinson has referred to the Independents as "the matrix of Irish Expressionism (Hutchinson, 1990, p. 81). Mulcahy exhibited with this group and was strongly associated with them from 1970 to 1983. This portfolio includes their twenty-third exhibition at the Douglas Hyde in 1983. Thus Mulcahy, like Patrick Graham and Michael Cullen, at the early stages of his career could have been described as a latter-day Independent. Indeed, Joan Fowler has pointed out that the artists involved with the movement of Neo-Expressionism in the 1980's (which includes Mulcahy) have always avoided the Neo-Expressionist label "as too restrictive and for the moment, too fashionable" (Fowler, 1990, p. 53). "They were and are keen to point out that their work was not new but a continuation of the principles established by Independent Artists since their formation in 1960" (Ibid.). She quotes one of the principles of the Independents as "a commitment to human rather than stylistic issues" (Ibid.).

Thus artistic conditions of insulation in the nineteen forties and fifties would have made Expressionism an ideal artistic vehicle. This resulted in the young growth of an Expressionist, indigenous tradition, developed and nurtured by Independent artists, and coming to full flowering with the

advent of Neo-Expressionism. For, as Roger Cardinal has said, "Expressionism for its part, asks its audience to attend to its products without any thought of any outside frame of reference" (Cardinal, 1984, p. 31).

Expressionism rejects all tradition. This rejection of references outside itself, all art preceding it, and its subjectivity about present circumstances would also have made it the ideal artistic vehicle for the predecessors of Neo-Expressionism in Ireland. Lacking a strong "indigenous tradition" which John Meany defines as "We began the century with no indigenous tradition as the preceding centuries had been dominated by British Academic art and the political situation which would have made artistic activity difficult" (Meany, 1983, p. 7). Expressionism, because it is subjective, personal and individualistic was born, in an artistic vacuum and an immediate need to make art now, not when Ireland had time to catch up with the rest of Europe. In the 1980's, some Art in Ireland was dubbed "Neo-Expressionist". Prior to this, however, it was Expressionist.

Mulcahy the Expressionist

Expressionism is a dynamic style of painting, it is pure impulse, it is diverse. It can be extreme. It can be pure subjectivism. It can be schematic, crude and brash. It can be very creative. Expressionism can be identified with the urge to create and to express. Theoretically it can manifest itself at any time in any culture, in any part of the world. The knowledge

of art history, academic art, technique is superfluous and indeed may interfere with the creative process. "It is a fundamental tenet of expressionism that the true creative impulse springs from a source deep within the individual at a primal level; of emotional life untouched by academic art, art history and indeed history at large" (Cardinal, 1984, p. 1).

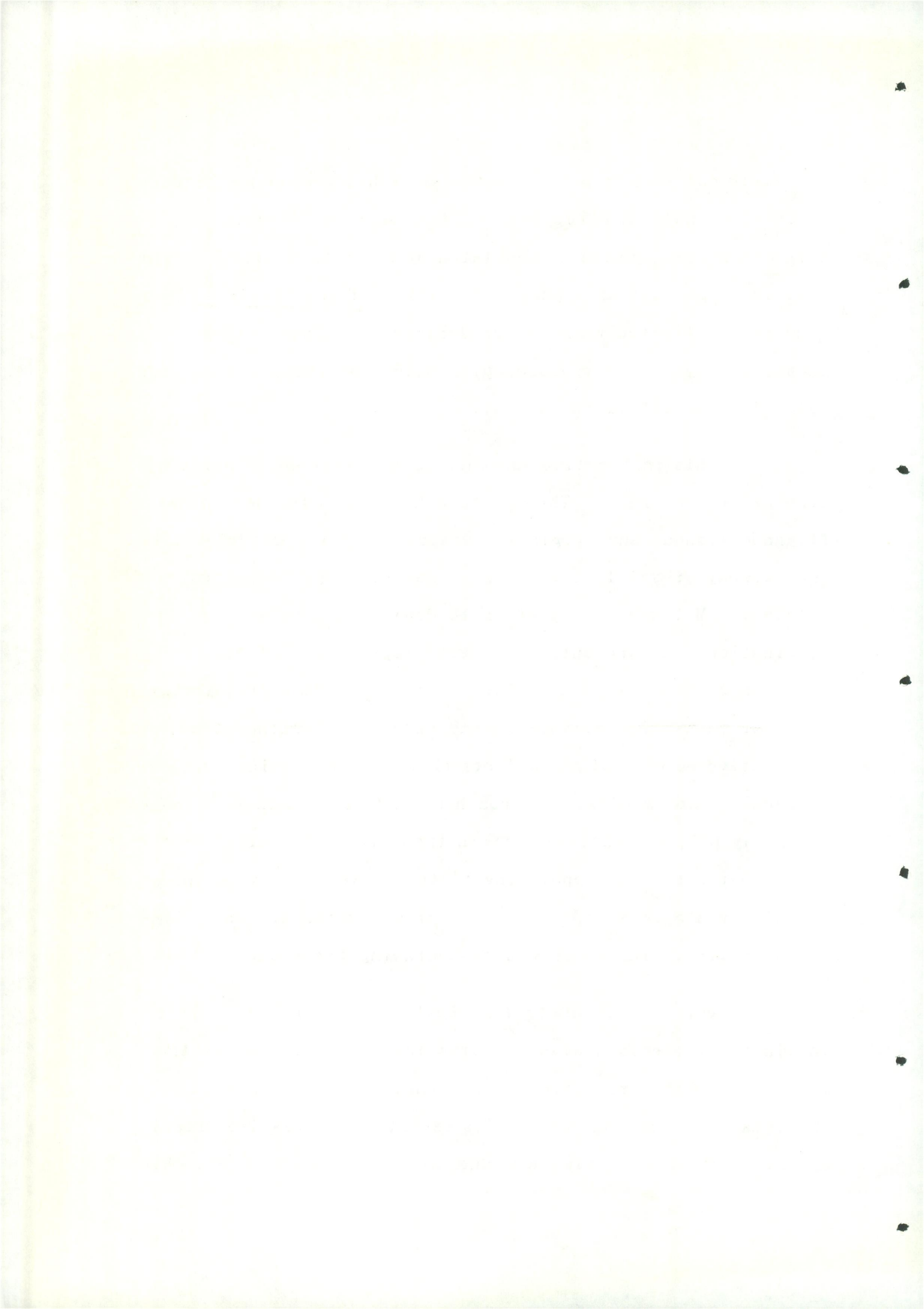
The Expressionist ethos finds parallels not only in Mulcahy's painting style/technique, his mystical view of nature, his disdain for intellectualism, his preference for a lack of cerebral control and careful visual observance of externals, his lack of fascination with painting techniques and art history, and his vivid energized brushstrokes. The International Neo-Expressionist ethos is found in Mulcahy's celebration of male sexuality, his espousal of primitivism, and his depiction of the sexually available (natural) woman. He shares with his Irish contemporaries a fascination for depicting the male nude, an enjoyment of sensual paintwork and a desire to recreate the world on canvas. Mulcahy holds as his own, a penchant for bright vivid colours, schematic mark-making and lush use of pigment. He also enjoys mixed media and adds different materials to his paint. "Pitch, bitumen, gold leaf, acrylic oil, watercolour, pencil, graphite, oil crayons, oil pastels, conte crayons, flies, feathers, unspun wool, beeswax, turf mould, smoke, earth from Ayers Rock" (Walker, 1985, p.1).

Mulcahy, the expressionist, prizes instinctive knowledge above all intellectual experience which gets in the way of immediacy (Hutchinson, 1989, p. 14, 15). This finds its

parallels not just in his art but also in his personal attitudes to intellectualism. Mulcahy wishes to make the creation of his work unaffected by will or modulated by the intellect. I presume this is in pursuit of a pure and unaffected creativity. "Your mind is not limited when you're dealing with instinctive knowledge...you're not preoccupied with your intellect or your value judgements" (Ibid, p. 14).

This instinctive approach is very evident in paintings like *Australian Bush*. This picture has obviously been drawn freehand without any original, outside or source material like photography or still life (such as masks, twigs, branches, shields). Mulcahy thus prefers to draw on memory and imagination. He presents subjective impressions of the appearance of such objects. This has resulted in a flat abstract motif of masks, faces, shields and undergrowth rather than informative records of the objects themselves. The instinctive, unplanned, unpremeditated approach tends to result in such images which may be quite satisfactory in themselves (visually) to the artist but rather disappointing to the viewer. This is one of the disadvantageous aspects of non-premeditated art and occasionally it lapses into a weak drawing technique.

Mulcahy, in *Australian Bush*, has given free rein to instinct. There is a disappointing lack of variation in the marks made. The brushstrokes are long, sweeping and boldly calligraphic. Once an artist gets caught up in creative, flowing and instinctual work, simple technical variations get overlooked,



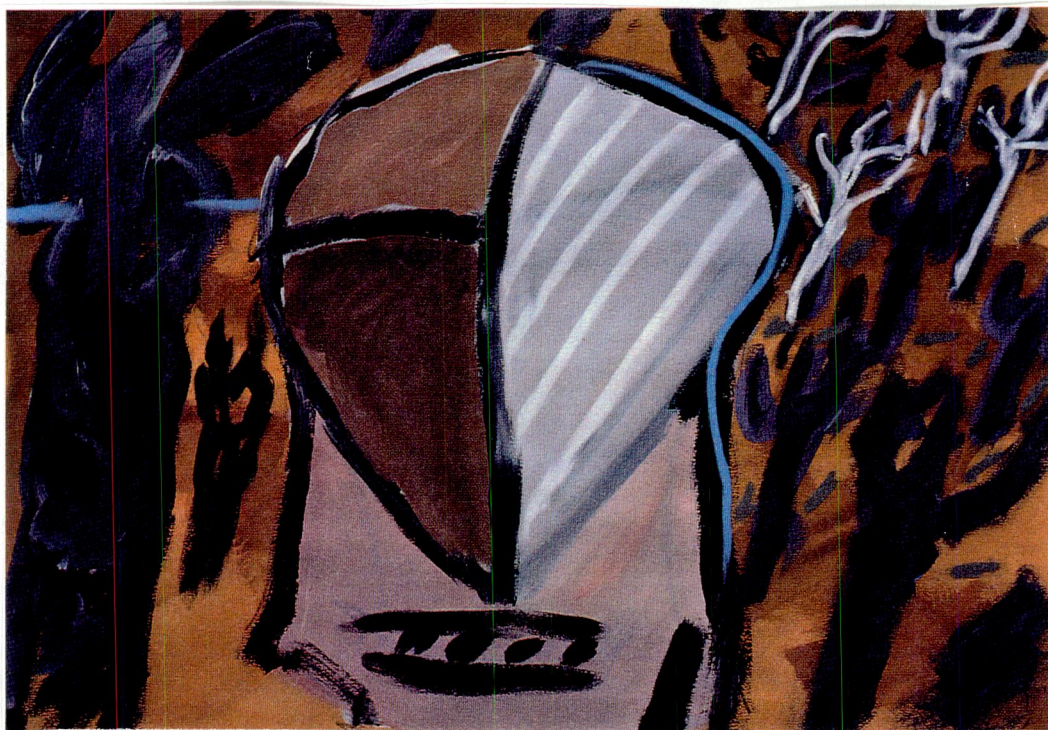


Fig. 1 Michael Mulcahy *Australian Bush* 1985



such as changing the size of the paintbrush. Australian Bush displays, to a minor extent, a potentially negative side to instinctive expressionist painting. On the other hand, the expressionist painter may disagree and point out that it is his intention to transmit feeling rather than observation. As Jawlensky said, "Each time I run my brush along the same outline, I am not drawing attention to the object depicted but to the emotional intensity from which the creative gesture springs" (Cardinal, 1984, p., 103). Thus the primary aim of the artist is not to depict what the objects looks like but rather use it to enjoy the experience of creativity.

An expressionist tenet is, according to Cardinal "a disdain of cerebral control" (Cardinal, 1984, p. 103). Mick Mulcahy does not wish to be intellectually in control of the art-making process. His pronouncements fit in with those of Emil Nolde - "it's great when a painter can paint instinctively and with a certainty of attention, as he breathes or walks" (Ibid., p. 23) or Van Gogh - "Emotions are sometimes so strong that one works without knowing one works" (Ibid., p. 23). Or, as Mick Mulcahy said, "Before, I was in charge of the process, it was Mick Mulcahy doing this and that: in these I became the servant rather than the master. You open yourself up to the greater forces of the universe" (Hutchinson, 1989, p. 15). Here we have the artist's assertion of intellectual irresponsibility in the making of the art piece. Instinct is virtuous to Mulcahy as an Expressionist. Instinct is partner to emotional directness. Expressionist works, produced instinctively, are characterised by the least amount of conscious intervention and the maximum amount of spontaneity.

Expressionist artists at the beginning of this century, like Mulcahy, elevated Nature in both work and speech. They like to be near nature, to paint landscape, to use it as a vehicle for their subjectivity. Cardinal lists and quotes phrases that these artists used in conjunction with their feelings about nature: "indivisible being (Marc); "that something that trembles in every object of the material world (Jawlensky); "the living features of all eternity" (Nolde). Nolde wanted to operate his paintings, for example, in choosing colours, "as Nature [does] when she creates her own forms and shapes" (Cardinal, 1984, p. 82, 83). Expressionist artists in general have a close affinity with nature. Cardinal summarized their attitude toward nature as "nature mysticism". He also suggested, therefore, that there was in general a tendency on the part of the Expressionist artist to entertain intimate connection through sensation and intuition with the unitary whole of Nature (Ibid., p. 82).

Mulcahy in his infatuation with nature is reminiscent of two of the greatest Expressionist (Post-Impressionists), Van Gogh, and Gauguin. Van Gogh delighted in the landscapes of Arles, Provence, and Gauguin ecstatically embraced the South Sea Isles. Mulcahy is quite similar in his preoccupation with the exotic landscapes of Australia, India and Africa. This penchant for exotica, the natural and the rural, seems to be unique to Expressionist artists. That is not to say, however, that Mulcahy has ignored urban scenes because he visited Berlin in 1986.

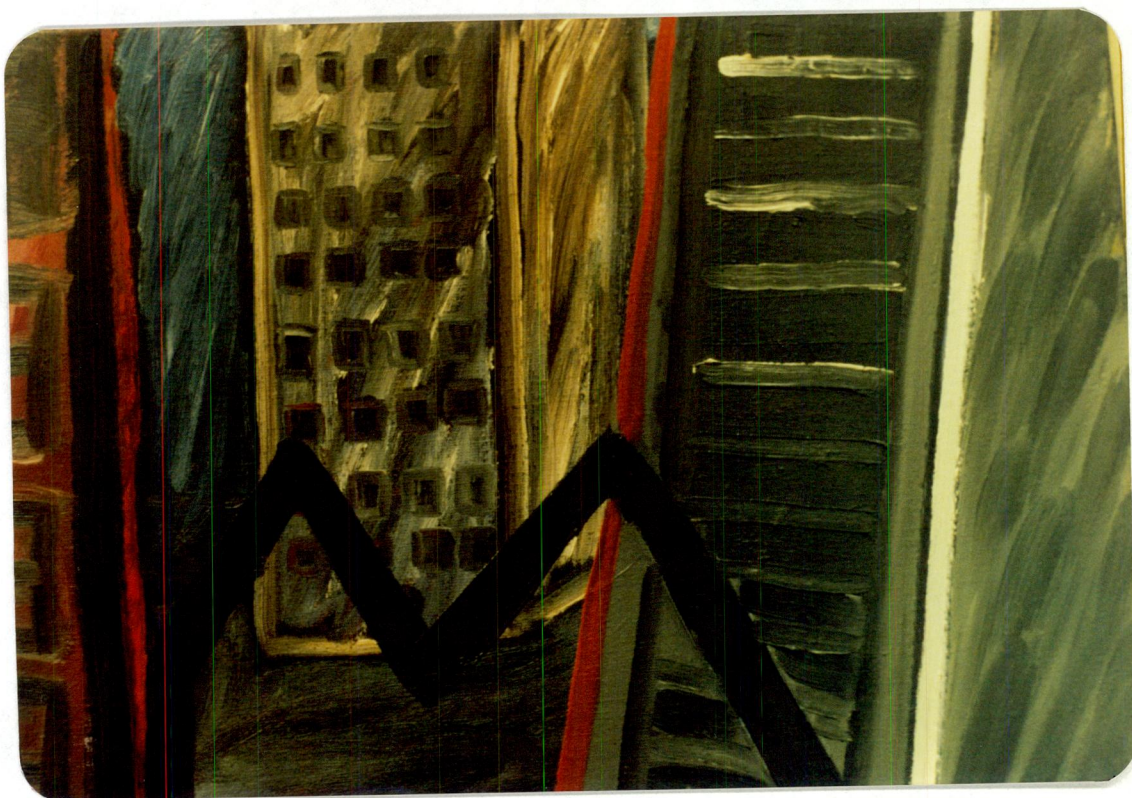


Fig. 2 Michael Mulcahy *Berlin Painting* (detail) 14x18cm



To quote Roger Cardinal, "Expressionists can be obsessed by city life and yet yearn for country life" (Cardinal, 1984, p. 10). Mulcahy also can be obsessed with country life and yet yearn for city life. He has placed an Expressionist antithesis within his body of work.

Expressionism was, in its original ideological context at the beginning of this century, a form of individual resistance against the technological lifestyle. To quote John Hutchinson, "In its early context, Expressionism was a form of resistance to the encroaching forms of technological and urban life" (Hutchinson, 1990, p. 78). Here Mulcahy has ably and briefly adapted this theme as an exception to his usual subject matter.

Neo-Expressionism in Ireland during the 1980's

The Neo-Expressionists in Ireland were Paddy Graham, Brian Maguire and Michael Mulcahy. They were Expressionist artists who emerged at an opportune time in Irish Art history. Neo-Expressionism was the banner under which they became well-known, united and touted as the examples of the Irish manifestation of an International movement. According to Joan Fowler, "Recognition [of Neo-Expressionism] came with the Documenta 7 and Zeitgeist exhibitions held in West Germany in 1982 and 1982-1983 respectively" (Fowler, 1990, p. 67). In Ireland, recognition came in January 1983 with Making Sense: Ten Painters 1963-1983 which opened at the Project Arts Centre, Dublin. Michael Mulcahy was included in the exhibition and displayed four works, *Magician's Sun at Dawn* (1981), *Swimmer and*

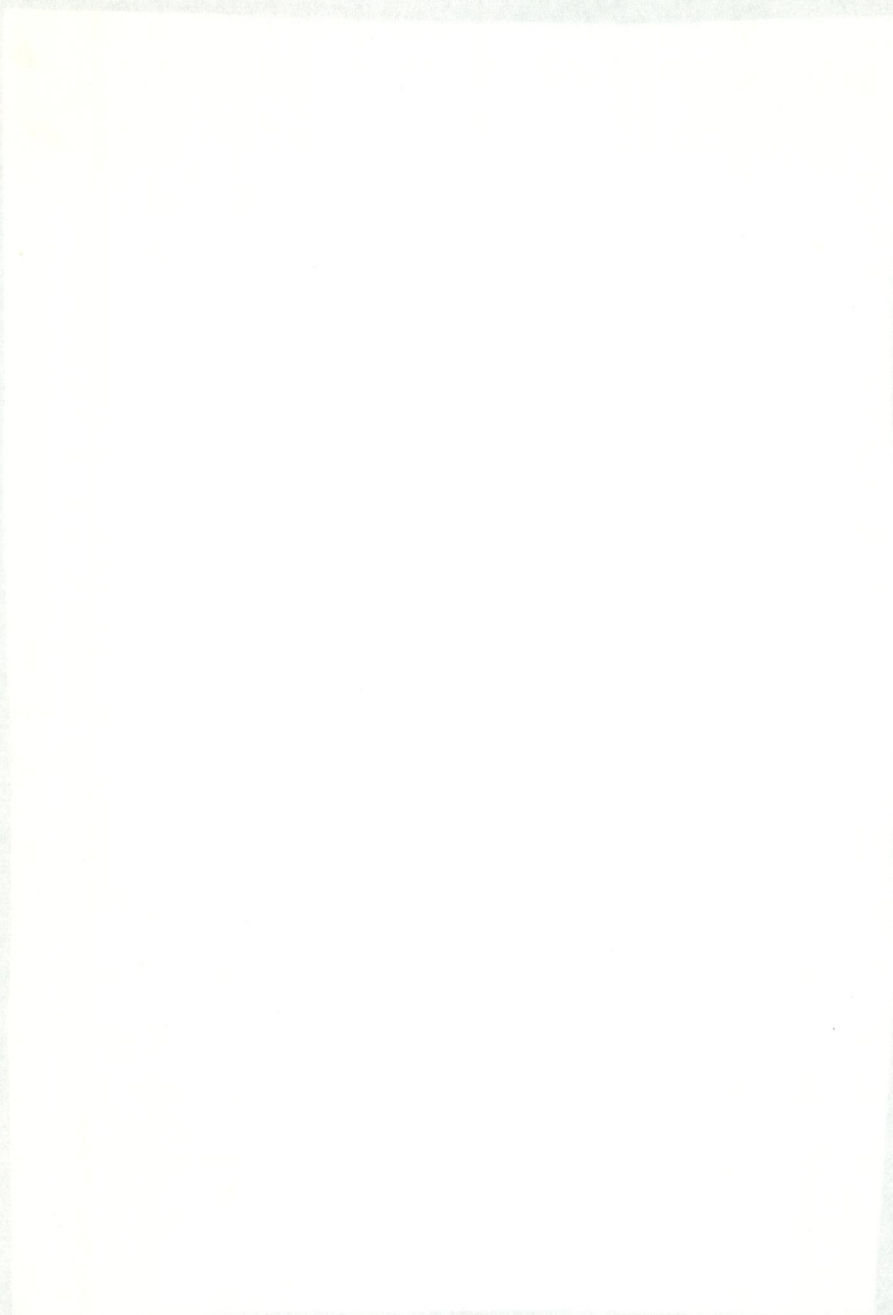
fish (1982), *You forgot your present Mary* (1982), and *Liebesszene* (1982).

In his review, John Meany said, "All of the ten artists chosen have exhibited regularly with the Independent artists" (Meany, 1985, p. 21). He also said that their technique and imagery belonged to the male expressionist tradition of Soutine, Scheile, Esnor, Beckmann, Bacon and many others (Ibid.). In addition, Lucy R. Lippard cited the "indigenous roots" of neo-expressionism in Ireland in the '60s as well as in the influential shows of Egon Shiele, Karl Appel and the late Pablo Picasso in the 1970's (Lippard, 1984, p.)(Sharpe, 1984, p. 1).

However, Mulcahy is dissimilar to Paddy Graham and Brian Maguire insofar as he did not choose to identify with or overtly discuss aspects of Irish society. Mulcahy seemed to bypass pressing religious, social and sexual matters which preoccupied Graham and Maguire. This was quite unprecedented as it seemed to be inevitable that Irish artists would prophesy against "a church-ridden Irish society " through their work (Fowler, 1990, p. 54). Mulcahy chose not to do so and picked another arena in which to drive the vehicle of Expressionism. The reintroduction of religious motifs into International art was synonymous with Neo-Expressionism. Graham and Maguire fit perfectly into this plethora of quasi-religious imagery. For example, Rainer Fetting painted "Crucifixion".



Fig. 3 Rainer Fetting *Kreuzigung (Crucifixion)* 1982 400x300cm



Julen Schnabel painted *God and St. Francis of Assisi*. The re-emergence of an "old-fashioned visionary core" was made more of in New York than in Dublin. Not surprisingly since art shaped by social and religious concerns was inevitably accepted as the norm in Ireland. New York would have experienced the contrast between decades of self-referential abstract art and old-fashioned religious characters as being more pronounced.

To quote Henry J. Sharpe in discussion of Brian Maguire and Paddy Graham, "Expressionist artists feel strongly and seek to translate these same feelings as directly and in as undiluted a form as possible into the medium in which they are working" (Sharpe, 1984, p. 2). In this respect, Mulcahy is less expressionist than Maguire or Graham. As Mulcahy has not created any narrow focus in which his feelings about the reality of the countries he has visited is clearly and objectively explored, the viewer is at a loss as how to emotionally empathise with Mulcahy.



Fig. 4 Michael Mulcahy *A bit of thunder and lightning coming*

Oil on canvas 165x195cm



For example, Anne Carlisle made the observation of *A bit of thunder and lightning coming* by Michael Mulcahy that there is something about the painting that leaves one in doubt as to whether the scenario is to be viewed as a tragedy or a joke. "...on the one hand the mood of the painting strains to be profound especially evident in its use of sombre colour and on the other it parodies itself, though I suspect unconsciously, with its jokey drawing and parrot faced figures" (Carlisle, 1983, p. 15).

The depiction of primal emotions such as sorrow, pity, rage or anger on Mulcahy's part, is lacking in Mulcahy's work. Clearly the lack of angst married to an ambiguous emotional response on the artist's part shows us that the claim to Expressionism is stronger on the alternative grounds such as Nature Mysticism. Though outbursts of deep feeling and "Intense emotions intensely expressed" may be, according to Roger Cardinal, the watch-word for the Expressionist artist (Cardinal, 1984, p. 24), there is a lack of such raw emotion in Mulcahy's paintings. This is in sharp contrast to some of his Irish contemporaries, for instance, Brian Maguire.

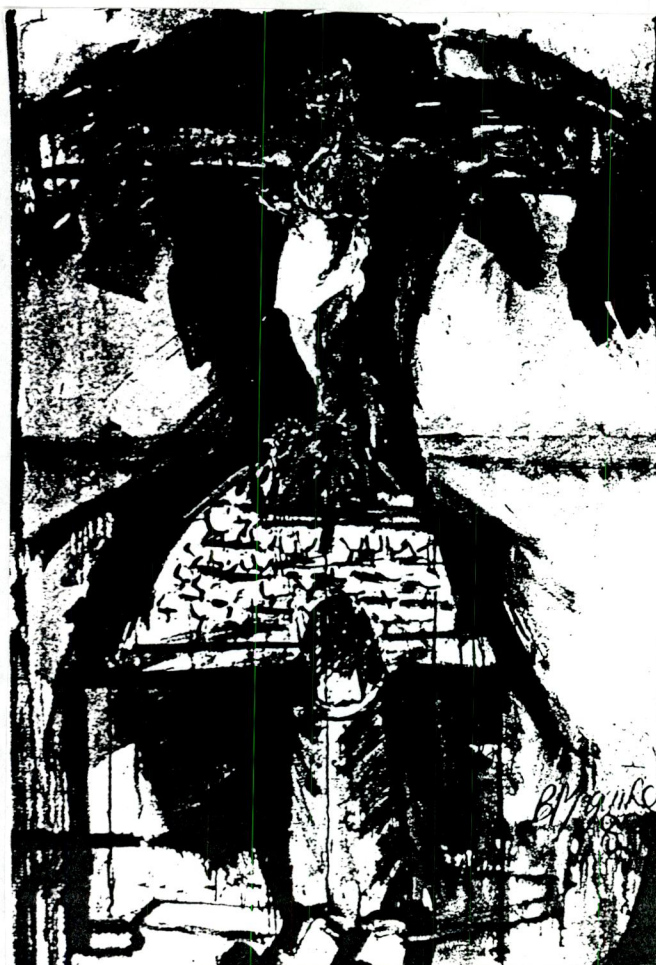


Fig. 5 Brian Maguire *Child before Catholic Statue* 1984

Acrylic on Canvas 137x106cm



Maguire is more expressive of emotion than Mulcahy. He is a brutally honest and direct painter. The viewer does not find it difficult to empathise emotionally with Maguire. For instance one realises from viewing *Child before Catholic Statue* that Maguire feels strongly about negative spirituality. He is very emotive about Irish Catholicism. He expresses and exposes his emotions of cynicism, frustration and questioning very clearly. He has painted his subject with unparalleled savagery. It is not a piece of trite piety, nor an encouragement to indulge in ritualistic religious rites. Rather this painting seems to be an impotent cry of rage against the death of a Stranger, the meaningless responsibility of which is loud at the door of the practising Catholic. Not only is *Child before Catholic Statue* an affirmation of the nature of Catholicism but it is also a questioning.

Mulcahy's expressionist emphasis lies in his close affiliation with nature and his instinctive approach to painting. The affiliation with nature he has developed into an espousal of Primitivism. Paradoxically this makes him more strongly associated with neo-Expressionists who are not Irish, like Mimmo Paladino. The emotions, vulnerability and sincerity of Maguire and Graham's work is what differentiates them hugely from Neo-Expressionists in Germany, Italy, America and Scotland. Salome, David Salle, Julien Schnabel, Bruce McLean; names which were associated with neo-Expressionism abroad, are cases in point.

Lucy R. Lippard did make the observation that "as someone who usually dislikes the grandiose of much recent

expressionism" (Lippard, 1984, p.) [she] responded positively to some of the Irish branch because "at its best it seems gutsier and closer to the East side than the more expensive versions" (Sharpe, 1984, p. 2). Also as John Meany has said of the Irish Neo-Expressionists, "The work of many of these artists has, to me at least, a great deal more integrity and honesty than the superficial expressions of many painters in more developed countries" (Meany, 1983, p. 7). The artists concerned were producing works as part of an ongoing "new tradition" (Hutchinson, 1990, p.).

After Neo-Expressionism, the Irish public began to have a relationship with Art which had not existed prior to the 1980's. The massive four-fold retrospective held by the Douglas Hyde - A New Tradition: Irish Art of the '80s bore witness to this. It seemed as though Brian Maguire, Paddy Graham and Michael Mulcahy discovered a new artistic identity which completely rejected traditional notions inherent in the phrase "the Irishness of Irish Art" with all its connotations of sheenagigs, shamrocks and small-scale muddy painting. When Neo-Expressionism first came to light the sophistication and universality of the canvases immediately became apparent to the gallery-going public. There was a feeling that at last Irish Art had come of age. The Irish Neo-Expressionists shared a sense of fresh encounter with the mundane. The forthrightness and aggression of the New Irish Painters was apparent in the sensual paintwork. Not only did one perceive in these paintings a sense of particularity combined with a sensitivity to internationally acceptable high art, but there was a sense of the authentically

Irish and the authentically modern being reconciled. Perhaps this was achieved by New Painting's attempts to deal simultaneously with conflicts within Ireland and conflicts within art but their representations did not deal with reconciliations. Instead the viewer is invited, as I was, to make his own decisions about the tensions between the traditional and the contemporary, the new and the old, the romantic and the prosaic, the vision and the reality.

Chapter 2- Mick Mulcahy and Primitivism

Connection between primitive culture, Mick Mulcahy and Neo-Expressionists

World view - A set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently about the basic make-up of our world (James W. Sire - The Universe Next Door, p.17, Inter Varsity Press, Great Britain, 1988).

Mick Mulcahy has not participated in the "postmodern world view." This phrase has been coined by John Hutchinson in conjunction with Neo-expressionism. "The postmodern world view contains within it seeds of disorientation, absurdity and fragmentation - in short, of alienated pessimism. The Neo-Expressionists, in keeping with this shift in consciousness, have tended to depict human subjects in extreme states of confusion and discomfiture, and their styles often reflect the breakdown of traditional measures and standards. Julien Schnabel, David Salle, George Baselitz, Ranier Fetting, Francesco Clemente and Sandro Chia are cases in point (John Hutchinson, "Myth and Mystification", A New Tradition, Irish Art of the Eighties, p. 80, Douglas Hyde Gallery, Trinity College, Dublin 1990). Hutchinson has also pointed out that Mulcahy, unlike his European peers has lacked "any sense of irony of ennui". This is, I feel, because he has a world view which differentiates him from other Neo-Expressionists.

The world view Mulcahy has adopted which spiritual informs his work is different to that which his European and Irish counterparts have adopted. It is a world view which is animistic, shamanistic and primal in origin. This alternative world view has made confrontation with social, religious and sexual issues avoidable.

While his peers like Schnabel and Clemente "have rifled through the imagery of primitive or pre-industrial peoples and found a new impetus in this," (Brian Fallon, Mulcahy show at Douglas Hyde Gallery, Irish Times, 21/4/89), they seemed to have left it at that and have not used their paintings as advertisements for the authenticity of primitive culture. Mulcahy on the other hand, takes Primitivism one step further and enthusiastically extols primitive lifestyle, spirituality and culture at every given opportunity, both vocally and visually, using his paintings as props.

Shamanism and Mick Mulcahy

Shaman - priest or witch doctor claiming to have sole contact with the gods (Oxford English Dictionary)

Shamanism is as old as Paganism but has been applied in a new cultural context - painting. The new concept of the shamanistic *artist* has become synonymous with Mick Mulcahy. "The painter is a counterpart of the tribal shaman, a magician capable of transmuting the material of canvas, pigments, brushes, and the world of opaque facts into imaginative works charged with transcendent, spriritual meaning" (Aidan Dunne, Mulcahy, Douglas Hyde Gallery, Trinity College, Dublin 1989). Mulcahy, it could be argued, because his paintings are visionary and other-worldly, qualifies as a seer. The shaman-artist, unlike materialists, sees behind the ordinary and beyond the mundane. Like the witch doctor of primitive peoples he can act as a spiritual mediator, visit their (spiritual) realms and record his findings on canvas. It should be noted, however, that according to John Hutchinson, Mulcahy's shamanistic style is not just one aspect of his work,

but rather is "central to the full appreciation of his paintings." (John Hutchinson, Mick Mulcahy: plugging into the primitive, Sunday Press, 23/4/89)

Mulcahy was invited to Australia in 1984. When he got back, the Douglas Hyde Gallery staged the exhibition "From Alice Springs to Kanganaman". Dorothy Walker pointed out that Australia had become "in certain lights a new California, a place of working in the sun with easy sea-shore pleasure". In Mulcahy's paintings, however, "there is not a kangaroo or a koala bear in sight...it is not a tourist dream of Australia". Like a true shaman, Mulcahy did not perceive the ordinary in the shape of "new materialism, or even of new material" but instead, according to Walker, succeeded in searching out the old spirits - the spirit of culture (Dorothy Walker, From Alice Springs to Kanganaman, Taylor Gallery, Dublin, 1985).

The shaman/artists are dreamers. They have access to unseen realms; they can make visions tangible. The spiritual realm is one they are comfortable with. They feel as much a part of it as the physical one for they mediate between the two. The role of the shaman provides an intoxicating ideal for the artist to aspire to. It requires a great deal of creative ability along with a supersensitivity to spiritual things.

Animism and Mick Mulcahy

Shamanism originally belonged to the branch of religion known as animism, and not to art - at least not until recently. James W. Sire defines animism as the "general outlook on life

that underlies primal or so-called pagan religions" (James W. Sire, The Universe Next Door, p. 167, Inter Varsity Press, Great Britain, 1988). Brian Fallon made the observation that curiously enough, the rites of most primitive peoples (for example, their art) somehow tend to be rather alike (Brian Fallon, Mulcahy show at Douglas Hyde Gallery, Irish Times, 21/4/89).

The common denominator of animism which underlies most pagan religion involves several basic beliefs: firstly, the natural universe is inhabited by countless spiritual beings, often conceived in a rough hierarchy, thus the universe has a personal dimension. Also, these spiritual beings range in temperament from vicious and nasty to comic and beneficent; thirdly, for people to get by in life the evil spirits must be placated and the good ones wooed by gifts and offerings, ceremonies and incantations. It is here that witch doctors, sorcerers and shamans come in useful through their long arduous training/subjugation of a ruling daemon or, at the very least, the ability to control the spirit world to some extent. Ordinary people are therefore much beholden to their power to cast out spirits of illness, drought, and so forth. Lastly, there is an ultimate unity to all of life; that is, the cosmos is a continuum of spirit and matter; animals may be ancestors of men, people may change into animals, trees and stones may possess souls (Op. cit, p. 167).

Mick Mulcahy and Joseph Beuys

Mulcahy's gravitation towards primitive peoples is

reminiscent of Joseph Beuys. Beuys, in his search for pre-civilized consciousness, influenced Mulcahy and other artists like Anselm Kiefer. Beuys was the first European from the industrialized era to become an artist and shaman. It was a new role which he adopted as a full-time artist. He found it appropriate to his work in a more than figurative way. He performed mysterious and obscure rituals using felt and fat. Beuys, like Mulcahy, only became an artist after a long and difficult spiritual crisis during which, I presume, he tamed his ruling daemon. In any case, Mulcahy shares his affiliation to primitive peoples. Like Beuys, he attempts to transcend Western civilization. Beuys wished to evoke the symbols of pre-civilization but he did not look back nostalgically to it, imagining it to be a more authentic way of life which, by contrast, Mulcahy tends to do in his fascination with primitive peoples.

Beuys was also concerned with the potential dissolution with the polarity between Eastern and Western philosophical outlooks. He was active in this field during the seventies. Mulcahy cites the spiritual exercises of Zen mystics and Indian sages as examples of peoples who, like primitives, he believes are still in touch with natural and spiritual forces. Mulcahy, according to Brian Fallon, has cult objects in his studio. This includes a small brass figure of Indian origin - "The Birdman Garuda". Mulcahy explained to Fallon "that it was a symbol of a certain stage of human development or enlightenment which could involve transformation into the other shapes of natural and animal creation. This was the kind of spiritual energy which [he

was] trying to tap into in [his] art." (Brian Fallon, Drawn by primitive people and culture, Irish Times, 16/8/89, p. 12.) This attraction toward the east and its alternative spirituality was characteristic also of Beuys.

Beuys' connection with Neo-Expressionism is very strong. Many of Mulcahy's European counterparts, Walter Dahn, Jorg Immendoerff and Anselm Kiefer are numbered among his students. This alone would have been enough to make him noteworthy, as having made a substantial contribution to the movement as a whole. Also according to Godfrey (Tony Godfrey - The New Image, Painting in the 1980's, pg. 17, Phaidon Press Ltd., Great Britain 1986), Beuys put great importance on drawing. Very probably when he was acting as teacher to these students who later became noteworthy themselves he would have taught them this. As Godfrey, in discussing Beuys' aims and ideals, has suggested that "It is through drawing that the subconscious most easily speaks, where elements from autobiography, myth and history may meet and combine." This triumvirate is extremely common of Neo-Expressionism.

Beuys also seems to have created a role for art and the artist which had been bestowed on Mulcahy by various critics after his first one-man show at the Lincon Gallery in 1982. Beuys articulated the role extremely well. His definition of art goes as follows: "It is the transformation of substances that is my concern in art, rather than the traditional aesthetic understanding of beautiful appearances. This is precisely what the shaman does in order to bring about change and development;

his nature is therapeutic."(Ibid., pg. 17.)

According to Godfrey, Beuys believed that the spiritual poverty of this age, with its historical traumas, constitutes a collective wound, which art alone can heal by taking men and women back to their real being in the world. Beuys believed art would lead to a better world, a transformed society based on the creativity of each individual. At the root of this transformation or redemption lies an acceptance of the physical world as being more than inert physical fact. Redemption through art is a belief that Mulcahy and Beuys hold in common, although Mulcahy believes that redemption comes through *primitive*-oriented art and culture, as articulated by Dorothy Walker (Dorothy Walker, From Alice Springs to Kanganaman, Taylor Gallery, Dublin, 1985.)

Mulcahy's enjoyment of primitive peoples and cultures

Mulcahy enjoys primitive cultures. He has visited primitive peoples in the Sahara -Northwest Africa (1973-5), the South Pacific (1984-5), India, (1984-5), Australia (1985), Africa (1988), North Korea (1992). He has, therefore, quite a considerable amount of experience of living in primitive cultures. He does not mind sleeping and living rough when he is abroad. He told Brian Fallon in an interview (Brian Fallon, Drawn by primitive people and cultures, Irish Times, 16/8/89) that he spent some of his holiday in the south of France working and sleeping rough in a pinewood forest on the hills. This shows a strong preference for a non-urbanized lifestyle.

This fondness for primitivism is synonymous with the

manifestation of Neo-Expressionism. Many of these artists have an interest in primitive cultures. Mulcahy has had it in the extreme ever since 1973 when he visited the African Sahara. He fell in love with the lifestyle of the nomads and integrated for almost a year. He wore the Jellaba - a one-piece hooded garment-travelling through the desert in the middle of a drought. "If you misjudge the water you need and the next well is too far on, you're f***ing dead" (In Dublin, 13-16th June 1983. The Magical Adventures of Mick Mulcahy). The nights were cold and the days were hot. He travelled mostly by night - "At night the sky pressed down out of the cold clean air. He felt he could reach up and pick the stars like flowers" (Ibid.). Mulcahy adapted to the customs of the non-white peoples; and where he did not adapt, he approved of them.

Mulcahy intermingles culture and spirituality. He feels that there is an inherent virtue in being part of an impoverished, primitive lifestyle. "There was no surplus, I mean you don't get big fat men wandering around the Sahara looking for a pint of Guinness" (Mairead Byrne, To Kiss the Moon, p.57, The Sunday Tribune Magazine, 26/7/81)... "Africa was a godsend for me. It opened me up to the essence of things" (Op. cit)... The Arabs themselves were a lesson to me: they watched so carefully, saw so clearly, and lived so fully." John Hutchinson has called Mulcahy's North African travels "a nodal point in his development both in fact and symbolically" (Hutchinson, Plugging into the Primitive, In Dublin, 13/4/89). Mulcahy "drew sustenance from the unspoiled instinctual life he observed there" (Ibid.). This is because Mulcahy was comfortable in primitive Africa and found

it to be a very moral society. To quote Aidan Dunne, "Mulcahy's arena is one of elemental heroic, mythic absolutes" (Dunne, *Limits of Desire*, p.5, 1989).

In this general way, Mulcahy feels that primitive culture is moral. Civilized morality is usually produced by religion but religion is unnecessary if morality is already part of the culture.

There are other aspects of primitive life which appeal to Mulcahy. As late as 1989 he still appreciated nomadic pre-industrialized peoples more than Westerners. He extolled their many virtues for they satisfied his ideals. In 1988 he visited the Mali people in West Africa. When Mulcahy showed the natives his drawings, he found them an appreciative art audience and was very impressed with their response. Perhaps he found his Australian and Irish art audience too blase. In any case the Mali got a lot of stimulation and communication from "a piece of paper with a couple of marks on it" (Hutchinson, In *Dublin*, 13/4/89), said Mulcahy.

Note of Primitive Paraphernalia in Mulcahy's paintings

Mulcahy's show at the Lincon Gallery in 1982 was very imaginative and Dorothy Walker commented on his use of imagery, describing it as "vivid and colourful" (Walker, 1982, p.). She was referring specifically to the painting *Swimmer and fish*. "The painting is a stunning work of pictorial art." It has "the true poetic inner structure of multiple layers of meaning and significance, of metaphor and symbol."

Mulcahy paints a fish as a menacing small monster. The swimmer is a man "full of energy and purpose". He symbolizes the artist, perhaps, swimming through life and through difficulties. Perhaps the sea is a symbol of the career he has chosen, his life's craft, in this case painting. The seascape is quite elemental. So are demons. Animals pepper his paintings. Men are confrontive, women are confronted. The elemental, heroic, mythic absolutes appear once again as identified by Aidan Dunne In primitive lands there are no polite shades of grey, or so Mulcahy would have us believe. There are heroes and villains. Animals that look intelligent, almost capable of speech, and fish that are small but menacing monsters.

The tendency for Neo-Expressionist artists to interest in primitive cultures manifests itself strongly in their paintings, which are often embellished with primitive motifs such as masks, flowers, non-white women, jungle foliage, moons, skulls, sticks, sickles, shells and other exotica. It is a rather an easy form of primitivism. Brian Fallon called it "instant" - "an intellectual tourism, a new exoticism." (Brian Fallon, Mulcahy show at the the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Irish Times, 21/4/89)

Perhaps because of the subject matter, it was inevitable that Mulcahy used abstract motifs reminiscent of primitive paraphernalia to decorate his paintings shown at his exhibition at the Taylor Gallery in 1985 (From Alice Springs to Kanganaman [Papua New Guinea]). This was after a period of time spent in the South Pacific, and showed the results of his integration with the people there. In his works, he painted

coloured women in dense black pigment, skulls, masks, stylized heads, penises, and large decorative plant forms.

A Discussion of Primitive Landscapes in Mulcahy's work

Mulcahy is not the only Neo-Expressionist artist to tackle landscape painting, so do Anselm Kiefer, Julian Schnabel and Francesco Clemente. Nevertheless, Mulcahy is different insofar as he seeks out landscape in its most extreme forms - burning deserts, dense jungles, towering mountains and raging seas. This is more than evident in "From Alice Springs to Kanganaman". He paints pictures of the Australian outback which have romantic titles like Sepik River as the Sun goes Sleeping, In the Beginning, Beneath Ayers Rock, Glasshouse Mountains and Moon over Townville. It must be emphasized, though, that while Mulcahy seems to enjoy painting primitive landscapes, he is not a landscape specialist. To quote Dorothy Walker, he taps into the spirit of the land itself, the desert, the sacred mountain of Ayers Rock and the tropical rain-forest. He paints a landscape not for topographical purposes, but to express its overwhelming spirituality. He paints it so that it looks mysterious and primitive. By doing so, he spiritually baptizes and transforms geographic entities into visions.

The other reason why Mulcahy is not a strict landscape artist is because he transforms trees and undergrowth into penises, and foliage into stylized heads. In Sepik River the leaves of the tree make up the mouth of a beast. On top of the tree there are three erections that look like candles. In addition to all this, the large brown area is depicted both as

the head of a beast and a landscape. Unlike other Neo-Expressionist artists who paint landscapes, Mulcahy's primitive landscapes tend to necessitate dual interpretations. An example of this is found in the painting *The Name they gave Her is Mary*. To quote Joan Fowler, "The top half of a woman fills the left side of the canvas and a tree enters from the right and seemingly fingers its way towards her head while the line of her breast appears to form the stem of a flower" (Fowler, 1985, p.36). This is typical of Mulcahy's dualistic approach; what he draws looks like two things, yet they are depicted at one and the same time.

Primitive Irishness and Mick Mulcahy

Most European Neo-Expressionist artists, especially the German ones, are rather nationalist, such as Basalitz, Penck, and Lupertz. Mulcahy is no exception to the rule.

John Hutchinson described an exhibition of Mulcahy's as having become more visionary, more Irish" (Hutchinson, 1989, p.15). Mulcahy's weakness for native culture includes the Irish one and he waxes lyrical on this also. Mulcahy drew an analogy between language and the psyche of its native speaker by briefly contrasting the difference between Irish and English people, using the differences between their native languages. "The whole way of thinking in Gaelic is so different from English. It is less mystical than Irish. Irish enters into a realm of spirituality instead of the logic of the straight line" (Ibid.). He feels nostalgic about native culture of any sort, be it language, recreation, or art, for he feels it is more fundamental to the peoples who produced it, and this base encompasses their

spirituality. Thus he could also be arguing that this adaptation of a foreign language (in this case, English) could be one reason put forward to explain the imperfections of the Irish people. The English language did not suit their psyche. Mulcahy described it as such: "English has a precise structure; it is a language of right angles, a language of imposition on Nature" (Ibid.). John Hutchinson called this "mystical nationalism" (Ibid.).

As an Irishman, Mulcahy feels strongly about natural things: natural man, natural landscapes... He likes nature wild and free. That is one reason why he approves of Irish culture in the form of the Book of Kells - "it's full of the unity of nature". He does not feel that Irish culture imposes on nature; men and animals are treated in the same way. He says that "Irish culture is more in touch with nature than with man's intellectual perceptions and disciplines" (Ibid.).

Dorothy Walker articulated Mulcahy's aims very succinctly. "Ireland is one of the few countries in Europe where psychic energies are still alive: if the present activity in all the arts were boldly encouraged, these energies might coalesce with the energies of the 'under-developed' peoples of the world to save humanity from its self-destructive follies. The imaginative sanity of art may yet be the new redemption, the new liberation" (Walker, 1985, p.).

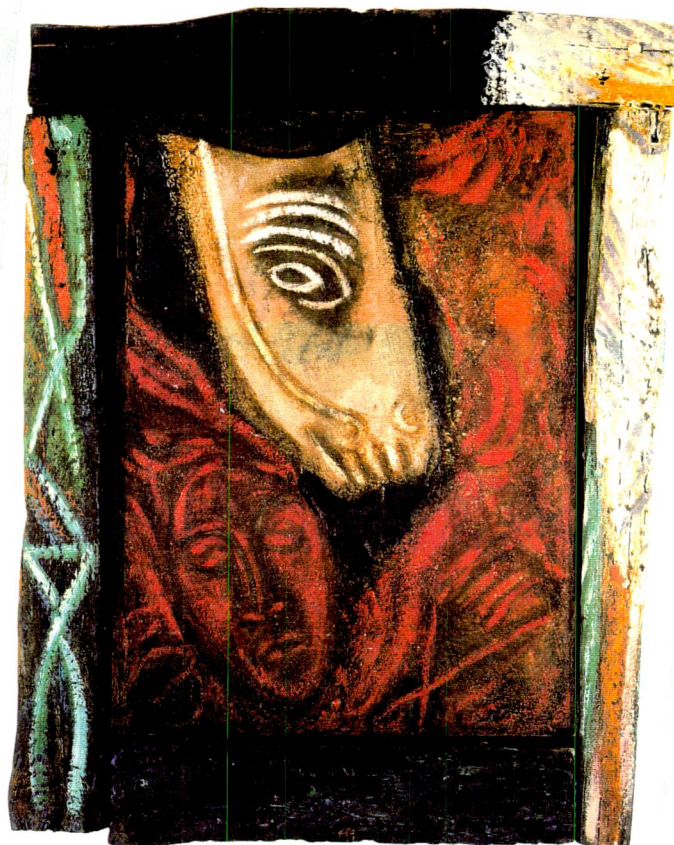


Fig. 6 Mimmo Paladino *Noa Noa* 1983 Oil on panel
53x40cm



Chapter 3 - Secondary similarities

Ideological similarities

After the hype of the early '80s has died down, what is the retrospective assessment of Neo-Expressionism from the perspective of the '90s? Certainly it became a tuning fork for our Postmodern times. It produced work "which didn't fit into the 'official' formalist history of painting as being a relatively straightforward progression from Cubism to Post Painterly Abstraction" (Godfrey, 1986, p. 10). Its relationship to other waves of Expressionism in the twentieth century also made it a controversial movement. Expressionism aims to cut through knots of complexity to the directness of emotion and indeed this is one of the characteristics common to its different manifestations at different moments in history. In this respect, the Neo-Expressionists demonstrated interest in common with their predecessors in Germany in the early part of this century. While there were stylistic similarities, the ideological context had changed. Originally Expressionism had been a form of artistic resistance against urbanization, alienation, modernization, war and fascism; in its new context it was more concerned with artistic confusion, and in the face of pluralism, the deficiencies of a demystified world and the search for a new artistic identity. On the other hand, both Expressionism and Neo-Expressionism looked like re-rehearsals of masculine alienation and confusion dressed up in frenzied brushstrokes of creativity.

Neo-Expressionism was, to some critics, synonymous with the desacrelisation of art in favour of the art market (Gablik, 1984, p. 8/Fuller, 1985, p.). Paradoxically it was, however,



a movement which attempted to re-use religious imagery, myths, fables and stories. Schnabel, Chia, Clemente, Paladino and Mulcahy all have attempted to diffuse their work with the supernatural, the invisible and the heroic.

The Navigator by Michael Mulcahy is an example of a Neo-Expressionist attempt at re-mythologization. This painting has struck a cord with the art-going public and is by far Mulcahy's best known work. The title refers to St. Brendan the navigator, a fool-hardy explorer who according to Irish myth was a monk who discovered America.

According to the voyage of St. Brendan, it was a precocious trip taken across the Atlantic in a small, crude sailing vessel, involving numerous encounters with whales, mermaids, storms and near-starvation. In the account, St. Brendan was not the only man, there were other monks involved in the perilous journey. In this painting, however, the Navigator is depicted as completely on his own. In solitude he faces a dark wilderness. The sea and sky against which he is outlined are midnight black and blue. The density and weight of the colours seem almost impenetrable.

There are, however, sources of light and areas of brightness. The Navigator himself is not in darkness. His head and naked torso are chalky pale. Illuminated from within by moonlight the whole seascape is in shadow but he is not - he is metaphorically a negotiator of the spiritual, physical and mental wilderness. He is full of instinctive wisdom. While to the ignorant and the unenlightened the situation may look dark and hopeless, the Navigator is in his element and he knows no fear.

Nature is also a source of illumination in this painting. The only other entities which cast light on the canvas are the rocks in the background - fiery red and yellow. They possess an inner source of light. They glow with a slow thunderous burn. Are they dangerous to the Navigator as they glow and beckon seductively or do they symbolise his one hope of security? They do not distract the Navigator. He stares straight ahead impassively. He is a powerful symbol of existential man lost in a spiritual wilderness, seeking to find and create his own meaning.



Fig. 7 Michael Mulcahy *The Navigator* 1982 159x169cm
Collection of Vincent and Noleen Ferguson



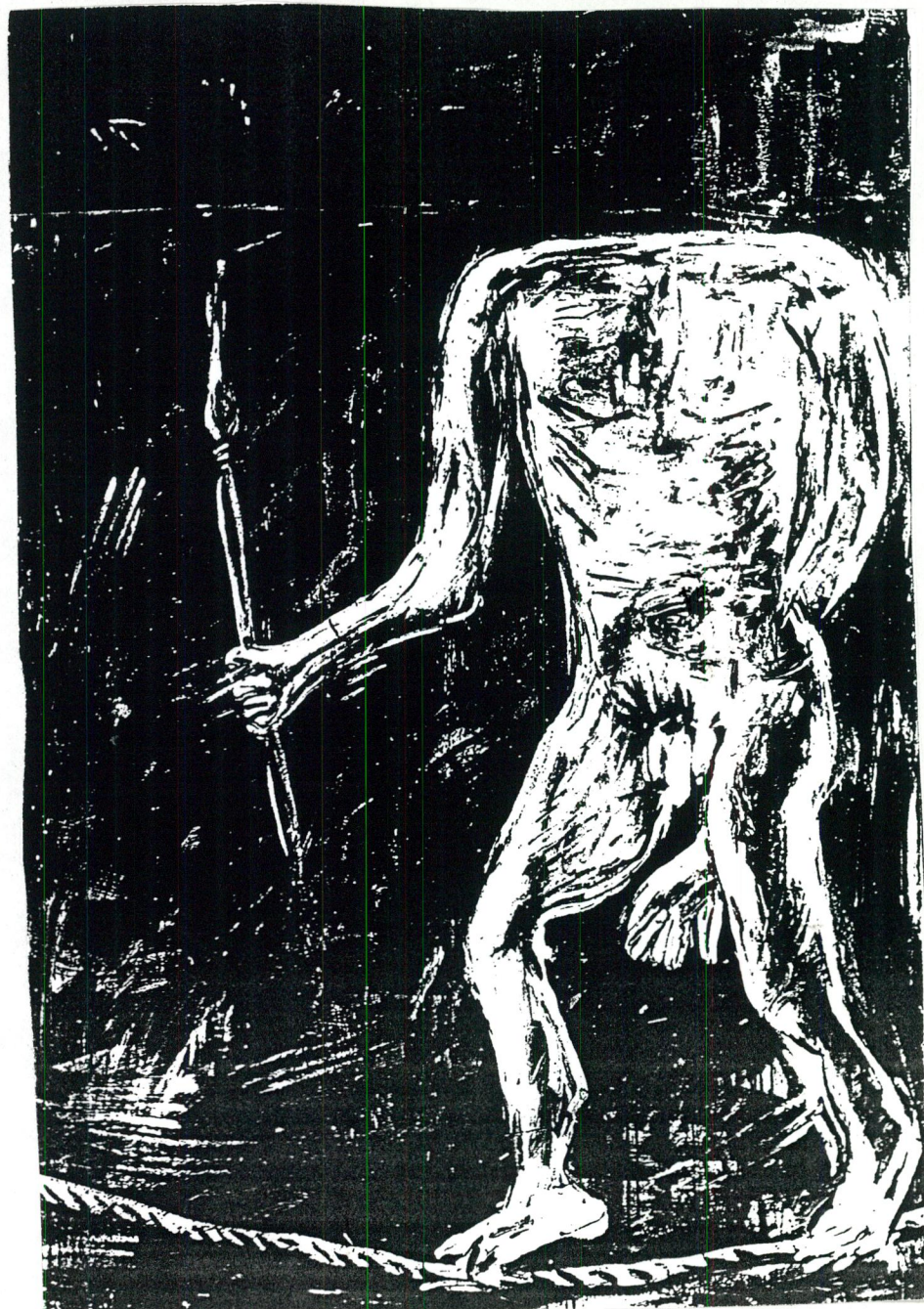


Fig. 8 Walter Dahn *The Painter in search of the Icon of the Twentieth Century* 1983 Dispersion on canvas 210x150cm
Private collection



Walter Dahn, the German Neo-Expressionist painted *The Painter in search of the Icon of the Twentieth Century*, which is thematically close to Mulcahy's, *The Navigator*. Here too we see a male figure lost in darkness. He is also negotiating a dark wilderness, on a tightrope. As in *The Navigator* the surroundings are dark, dense and seemingly impenetrable.

The naked male figure is isolated but he gives no heed to this. As he has no head and thus no face he is lacking in identity. This figure is also in the forefront of the painting. He is a bright figure in the darkness as he feels his way along. Here the artist is seeking out the icon of the twentieth century and his only guidance is a single taper/paintbrush. In seeking out the icon he is perhaps seeking out his own face, "his own identity? He is naked, lost in an existential wilderness. What does he have left except his own body and its functions?" (Godfrey, 1986, p. 20)

Mulcahy was Neo-Expressionistic his attempts at re-mythologization, which was in synchronisation with the aims of other Neo-Expressionist artists like Dahn, Kiefer, Schnabel, Chia, Clemente and Paladino. They also chose to ignore the prosaic and create a separate reality - one which they had visualised and was of their own ideals. Indeed one of the threads that runs through Neo-Expressionism as a whole is its brave attempts to remystify art. Gablik questioned if Neo-Expressionism was a true renaissance of sacramental vision, an attempt to reconstitute a world of archetypal symbols forgotten by our society and to bring back the light of their meanings (Gablik, 1984, p. 89)

Certainly, the spiritual re-baptism of art, if that is what it is, has been made in no way definitive, not least by Mulcahy. He has stated as one of his aspirations, that when people go into [his] exhibitions that "they come out enriched, they come out curious, that their consciousness would have been raised to a level that wasn't there when they went in" (Hutchinson, 1989, p.). But the "spirituality" of Neo-Expressionism, if there is such a thing is not definitive in the way that say 'Christian spirituality' is. Indeed Gablik is adamant that the "spirituality" she refers to is "not that of routine church-going or religious dogmas as such" (Gablik, 1984, p. 93). She refers to it as "sacramental vision. She feels that the Neo-Expressionists have not succeeded in realizing the vision. The "essential inner attitude" was missing and "the devotional frame of mind" necessary was not there (In this context she was citing Julien Schnabel as a particular example). Peter Fuller held the same views as regards the importance of "a shared symbolic order" which he felt Christianity had once provided (Fuller, 1985, p.16).

Mulcahy like other Neo Expressionists sought artistic redemption through the use of myth¹.

¹According to John Hutchinson's essay, Myth and Mystification in A New Tradition: Irish Art of the Eighties (published 1990), pp. 77-78, ideas about myth have evolved in these principal ways:

- a) C. G. Jung, struck by western women's alienation from a sense of purpose and fulfilment argued that it was precisely because of a repression of archetypal myths and symbols that most of us fail to reach "spiritual maturity". These are, according to Jung, made accessible to us through dreams.
- b) Claude Levi-Strauss proposed that Western society had repressed mythic use of thinking into the unconscious mind. He held that all human minds shared a sense of primal logic. In his view the function of myth was that it was a symbolic expression of aspirations and hopes incompatible with conscious experience.

As such, a soothsayer's role is assumed if one believes that the artist uncovers the archetypal dreams and symbols of our collective unconsciousness and then depicts them. Mulcahy actualizes a capacity to do so by choosing the myth of the heroic negotiator of "spiritual and physical wilderness" (Dunne, 1989, p. 5). The characters who people his canvasses are the Abbot of Shellig Michael, St. Patrick, Neptune, St. Brendan the Navigator, The Immaculate Conception and the Aboriginal Kidichi man. Aiden Dunne describes Mulcahy's world as a "supposedly exalted mythic realm" (Dunne, 1989, p.5). Internationally the German Neo-Expressionist, Anselm Kiefer is one of the strongest examples of an artist "concerned with the absence of spirituality in our lives" (Fowler, 1990, p. 53).



Fig. 9 Anselm Kiefer *Grane* 1982 Woodcut on paper

166x157cm



Kiefer, like Mulcahy, is also quite representative of the tendency of Neo-Expressionism as a whole to choose ancient subjects matter and invest it with heroism. Kiefer chooses to depict a horse - Grane - who leaps into the flames at the end of Wagner's Ring of the Niebelung (Godfrey, 1986, p. 154). Grane is depicted as strong and noble with a powerful and strong body. He stands on embers, flames and fire. He is surrounded by a swirling mass of flame. Usually horses are afraid of fire. This horse stares ahead stoically. The ground on which the stallion stands is dissipating, swirling and evaporating wildly. Above all this flux and flow the horse himself levitates. He is a heroic and mythic horse. Like Pegasus, the winged horse of Greek mythology he is other-worldly not because he is adorned with wings but because he is adorned with characteristics of bravery and courage. To quote Godfrey, "Here as elsewhere, Kiefer is seeking to re-integrate our past with the world of myth, and with all our collective past. It seems that art alone can give shape to what otherwise will be repressed" (Ibid.).

The role of the artist as soothsayer is one of which Joan Fowler is sceptical. "But equally we might be sceptical over the artist's assumed soothsayer role in guiding us to a more spiritual perspective. Is the artist the vehicle through which we gain insight of our spiritual loss?" (Fowler, 1990, p. 54)

One characteristic of the Neo-Expressionist movement was the blaze of publicity it received. It was quickly ushered onto the International centre stage. Peter Fuller has pointed out that "The New Spirit was immediately endorsed, not just by the Royal Academy, but by every modern art museum in the Western

world" (Fuller, 1985, p.5). Ireland was no exception. "Neo-Expressionism was the first and last art movement of the seventies as far as the art public was concerned" (Op. cit, p. 53)... "the press splashed art and artists across colour sections. 'The magical Adventures of Mick Mulcahy' ran on In Dublin cover story" (Ibid.). The onslaught of publicity for this new movement was a smaller version of what was happening abroad.

Essentially there was a marketing of the artist's persona; for example, Sandro Chia, the Italian Neo-Expressionist publicised an amazing incident in his early life which became part of his fame. The story itself is unusual, abnormal, idiosyncratic. It has marked him out as different and exceptional. Chia when he was thirteen years old was catching fish, from a river with his hands. He slipped on the river bed and knocked himself out on a stone. Subsequently he was unconscious for a week. When he woke up he found that he had reached puberty. Not only that, he had also developed a fascination with art. He had none before the accident. "Whether or not this anecdote is strictly true it is typical of the way in which Chia has sought to remythologize both life and Art" (Geoffrey, 1986, p. 69).

The same mythologization is found in Mulcahy's career. The myth is synopsisized in the Making Sense Ten Painters 1982 Catalogue -

"A certain kind of popular mythology can be very seductive - our mundane sensibilities, so stereotyped and so starved of real novelty, crave at least a whiff of the extraordinary, albeit at a safe distance. We'll enjoy stories about outrageous people - those who have kicked over at least some of the traces. And we enjoy stories about outrageous artists far more than we enjoy art."

"Michael Mulcahy at the age of thirty is more than touched by legend - the wild man, the street clown, the painter of bizarre flamboyant canvases. He enjoys it, of course, this reputation, but it also irritates him more than a little."

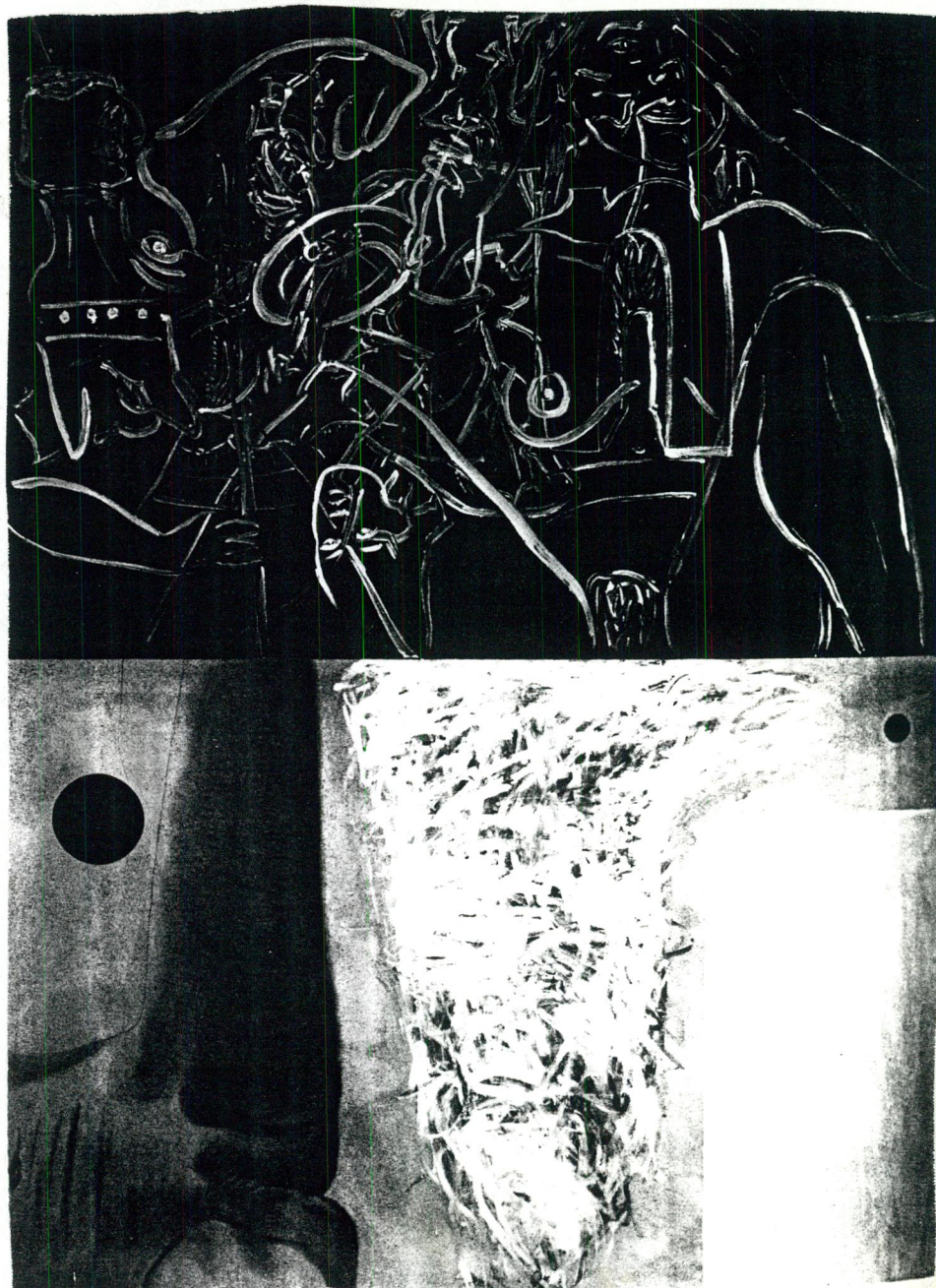


Fig. 10 David Salle *Zeitgeist Painting No. 3* 1982 400x300cm



The permission and licence the Neo-Expressionist have given themselves in portraying the female form is displayed to the extreme in David Salle's work. An artist who is extremely exploitative of 'found' imagery - material in the shape of miscellany - toy boats, wallpaper designs, television sets, orange transistor radios...he also uses pornography magazines as source material. When he culls his figurative imagery he traces the photograph he wants directly onto the canvas¹. His paintings because of the source material border on the obscene and his best known paintings include lewd displays of the female body. Of course feminists are less than enthralled by the results and have accused Salle of "selling soft-soft porn masquerading as New Wave Art" (Godfrey, 1986, p. 141).

Mulcahy is also Neo-Expressionist in his depiction of women as being passive/sexual/receptive/objects of desire. Within Neo-Expressionism, the feelings and desire of men were exhaustively examined and analyzed. The movement was quite exclusive to men². The artists involved especially in Ireland - Mulcahy, Graham, and Maguire - were quite unrestrained in their exposure of male sexuality, they used expressionism for exploring the male psyche.

¹Though Salle is Neo-Expressionist and objectifies women, he is dissimilar to Mulcahy who is a traditional/semi-traditional painter. Mulcahy does not use photography in his work or cull images from the mass media.

²Susan Rottenberg was the only female artist associated with the movement.

As John Meany said, "That no women artists were included [in Making Sense Ten Painters] is probably no accident as the recurring theme in this show is male anxiety and isolation. Anguished self-portraits and phallic images abound on the wall. The few images of women are depicted in a nervous caricatured way" (Meany, 1983, p.).



Fig. 11 Michael Mulcahy *You Forgot your present Mary* 1982

Oil on canvas 136x170cm



According to John Hutchinson "the concept of the artist as a person of exceptional sensitivity who was able to articulate resistance to the conventions of Bourgeois life, had its origins in 19th century Romanticism" (Hutchinson, 1990, p. 78). Mulcahy has become a personification of this concept for the general public. This concept (myth) has contributed to his popularity¹. Mulcahy's rise is synonymous with Neo-Expressionism. A lot of obscure talent trailblazed to fame as part of this movement. Baselitz, Immendorff, Penck, Clemente are examples. Neo-Expressionism received a lot of publicity and a lot of new names were ushered on to the international stage as a result.

In Mulcahy's paintings "the analogy between women and nature is explicit" (Fowler, 1990, p. 54). Labia are flower petals, grasses are penile and breasts are foliage. Woman is part of the earth, more of nature than man; receptive, fertile objects of desire. This analogy did not excite much controversy. As it was Neo-Expressionist, a sexual treatment of the female nude passed unnoticed. Joan Fowler did however point out that "...it is a consuming audience which can gain dubious pleasure from this sort of invitation to witness man let loose in the jungle and women quite often the prey. It is in these areas that Mulcahy should examine his exuberance and question his premises and objectives" (Fowler, 1985, p. 36). In this exhibition the theme of primitive women was represented by "four small canvases featuring a female image in dense black pigment with gold pubic hair and seen against vivid red" (Ibid., p. 35).

As Mulcahy analogizes between women and nature he is,

as Joan Fowler has argued, displaying a belief in an Expressionist ethos¹ - that art can facilitate a more intense experience than that encountered in "ordinary" existence. The 'intensity' is paralleled by sexual experience, the expression of which is not the higher goal. Subsequently, the woman thus is seen according to this expressionistic ethos, primarily as a gateway to a more intense experience and "as man enters the bliss of endless nature" (Fowler, 1990, p. 54), so too does the process of art-making lead to a point of self-forgetfulness. The similarities outlined above are mainly ideological.

¹"Michael Mulcahy's exhibition of paintings, inspired by his travels in Mali in West Africa attracted over 12,000 visitors to the Douglas Hyde yesterday, one of the highest attendances ever for an Irish artist" (Irish Times, 11/6/89).

²Mulcahy shares this Expressionist ethos with his contemporary Patrick Graham.



Fig. 12 Michael Mulcahy *The Immaculate Conception* 1990

Oil and Pastel on Canvas Taylor Galleries, Dublin



CONCLUSION

In my title I have questioned the validity of Mick Mulcahy's association with Neo-Expressionism. The exploration involved definitions of terms such as Expressionism and Neo-Expressionism.

Mulcahy is an Expressionist because he romanticises and mystifies nature (Cardinal, 1984). He is an instinctive painter and prefers the art-making process to be free from cerebral control. Nor is he fascinated by art history or various techniques of drawing and painting. These are all, according to Cardinal, characteristics of Expressionism.

There are crossovers and blurred lines between Expressionism and Neo-Expressionism. Both focus in on the ego, on the person of the artist, "the personal experience of the artist is profiled both in the artwork and in the lifestyle outside the artwork" (Fowler, 1990, p. 56).

There are also characteristics of Neo-Expressionism which are peculiar to that movement only. These are primitivism, and the influence of Joseph Beuys. Gablik pointed out in her book that the Neo-Expressionists attempted to re-mystify art (Gablik, 1984) - another characteristic of Mulcahy's work which was pointed out in chapters two and three respectively .

Mulcahy is an Expressionist artist to a certain degree but he was a Neo-Expressionist also. As Roger Cardinal has said, "There are many independent artists who do not join groups" and "Expressionism is not only an anonymous stereotype to which individuals had to conform" but was also a "spontaneous combustion of individual talents" (Cardinal, 1984, pp.12-13). To conclude, it is a spirit of creativity which is primary in

Mulcahy's work and is not an affiliation with passing art trends. Therefore, I conclude that in some areas Mulcahy is Expressionist and in others he is not. The title, however, in no way fully defines him as an artist, nor his artwork.

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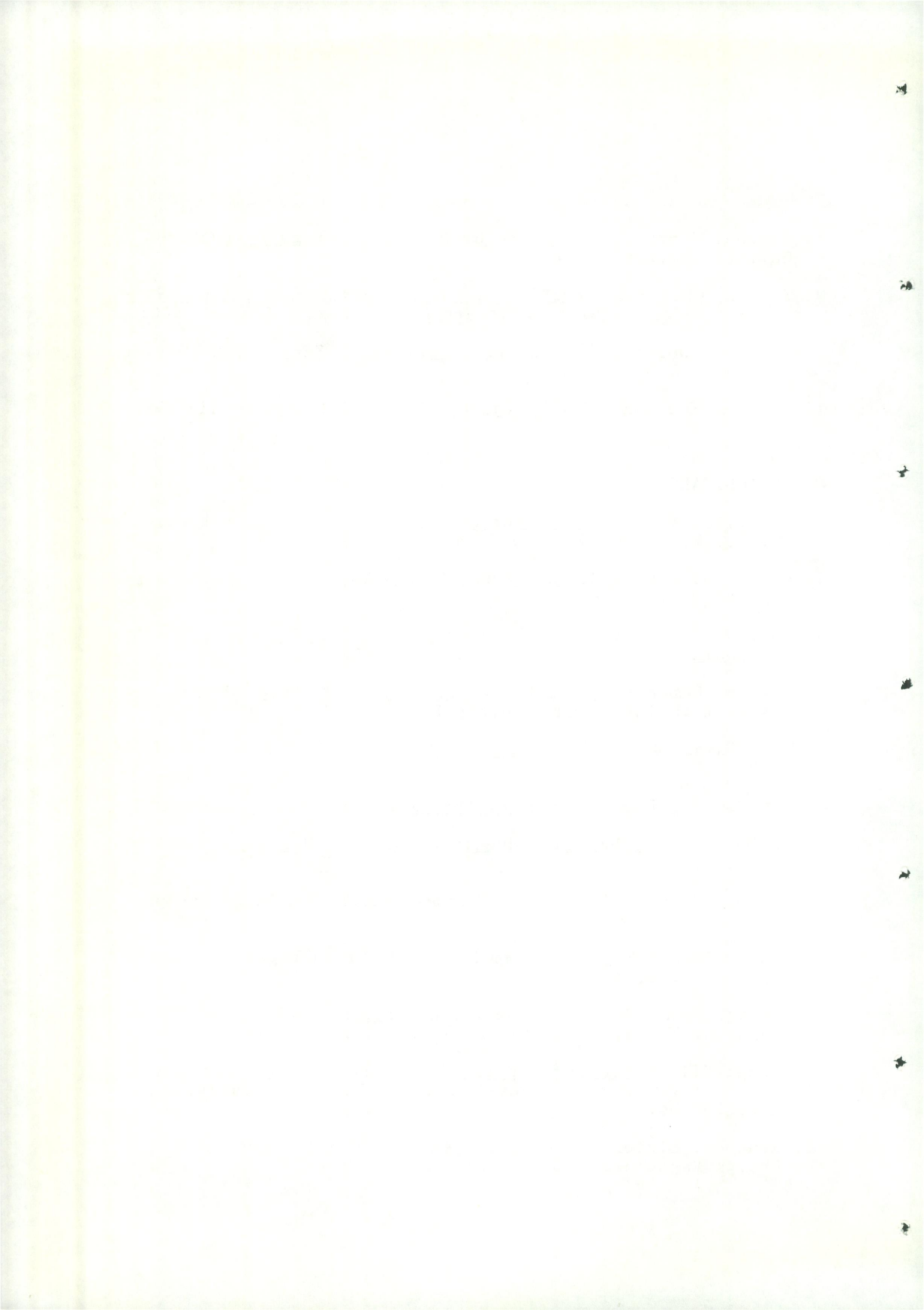
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 - b) John Hutchinson - Myth and Mystification
4. Dunne, Aidan - Mulcahy (Douglas Hyde Gallery, Trinity College, Dublin 1991)
5. Joachimides, Christos M. and Rosenthal, Norman - Zeitgeist (Martin-Gropius-Bau Gallery, Berlin 1982)
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2. Carlisle, Anne - Independant? (Circa Magazine No. 11, July-August 1983, p.14-15)
3. Fowler, Joan - Michael Mulcahy: From Alice Springs to Kanganaman (Circa Magazine No. 24, 1985, p.34-35)
4. Fuller, Peter - Beyond the veil, stars and stripes? (Art and Design Magazine, Academy Group Ltd., 1987)
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2. Fallon, Brian - Mulcahy Show at Douglas Hyde Gallery (Irish Times, 21st April 1989)
3. Hutchinson, John - Mick Mulcahy: Plugging into the Primitive (Irish Sunday Press, 23rd April 1989)
4. Hutchinson, John - Young Artists: Michael Mulcahy (Irish Times, 24th June 1982)
5. MacAvock, Desmond - Michael Mulcahy at the Taylor Gallery (Irish Times, 26th April 1989)

APPENDIX

MICHAEL MULCAHY

- 1952 Born in Cork
1969 Foundation Course, Crawford School of Art, Cork
1970-73 Fine Art, National College of Art and Design, Dublin
1973-75 Lived and worked in Northwest Africa, travelling through Morocco, Western Sahara, Mauritania, Senegal and Gambia
1975-77 Street Performances, Dublin
1978 Street Performances, Dusseldorf
1984-85 Lived and worked in Australia and travelled to Papua New Guinea and India
Lives and works in County Cork and Helvick Head

Selected Individual Exhibitions

- 1981 Gorey Arts Centre, Wexford
1982 Lincoln Gallery, Dublin
1983 Triskel Arts Centre, Cork
Project Arts Centre, Dublin
Black 7 Gallery, Kinsale, Co. Cork
1984 The Library, Dungarvan, Co. Waterford
T.A.E.F. School of Art, Townsville, Queensland
Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne
1985 Gary Anderson Gallery, Sydney
Taylor Galleries, Dublin

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1968-83 Project Arts Centre, Dublin (intermittent)
1970-80 Irish Exhibition of Living Art, Dublin (except '73, '74)
1970-83 Independent Artists, Dublin (intermittent)
1981-83 Lincoln Gallery, Dublin
Cibeal Cincise, Kenmare, Co. Kerry
1982 S.A.D.E., Cork
Paris Biennale, Paris (audio visual)
MAKING SENSE, an Arts Council touring exhibition
(curated by Henry J. Sharpe)
1983 Two-man Exhibition (with Michael Cullen), Clonmel Arts Week,
County Council Buildings, Clonmel, Co. Tipperary
1984 Fifth Biennale of Sydney (PRIVATE SYMBOL: SOCIAL METAPHOR),
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
Townsville Pacific Festival, Perc Tucker Regional Gallery,
Townsville, Queensland
Gary Anderson Gallery, Sydney
Ralph Martin Gallery, Townsville, Queensland
Raintrees Art Centre, Cairns, Queensland
THE OCTOBER EXHIBITION (sixteen Irish artists), Project
Arts Centre, Dublin (touring exhibition curated by Michael Cullen)
Taylor Galleries, Dublin

COLLECTIONS

- The Arts Council of Ireland
Contemporary Irish Arts Society, Dublin
Trinity College, Dublin
Kilkenny Art Gallery Society, Kilkenny
Ulster Museum, Belfast
Allied Irish Investment Bank, Dublin
Institute of Chartered Accountants in Ireland, Dublin
European Investment Bank, Luxembourg
V.A. Ferguson, Dublin
Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, Townsville, Queensland
Townsville Arts Society, Townsville, Queensland
Power Gallery of Contemporary Art, Sydney
Australian National Gallery, Canberra
Gordon Lambert, Dublin

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AWARDS and BURSARIES

- 1972 Living Art bursary to make "Silver Fish", a film
1973 Living Art bursary to construct an environmental piece for the entrance to the exhibition
1982 First Prize for drawing, S.A.D.E., Cork
1983 Arts Council materials grant
1984 Department of Foreign Affairs travel grant for Sydney Biennale
Townsville Arts Society First Prize for painting, Townsville Pacific Festival, Queensland
Irish Book Design Commendation for "Bligeárd Sráide", by Michael Davitt (designed by Vermilion, illustrated by Michael Mulcahy)

Taylor Galleries, 6 Dawson Street, Dublin 2. Tel: 01-776089.
The exhibition is open daily 10 a.m. - 5.30 p.m. (Saturday 11 a.m. - 1 p.m.) until Saturday 27th July 1985.

