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**“Feminist Art in Ireland: An Examination of the Factors
Influencing the Development of Feminist Art in Ireland.”**

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I would to express my thanks to Paul O'Brien and Pauline Cummin

Introduction

If I had been a mite more sensitive, it would have been possible to recognise the anger that was mounting under the surface as the decade, (1960's) went on. It was female anger, subtle, veiled but there. It was an anger, the cause of which I only partly recognised or understood. It was a hangover, an almighty international hangover.....I had looked with sympathy upon the oppression of the Red Indian, the American Black, the Northern Ireland Catholic. Now here in Ireland I began to feel terribly , terribly angry.

(Levine, 1982)

This passage aptly describes the mounting awareness and resentment Irish women harboured about their positions in society. Females in Ireland had less opportunities in comparison to their male counterparts because of the laws that conspired to keep them within the home.

Strongly influenced by the tide of rebellion surging across the United States, Irish women began to take action about their positions in Irish society. In 1968, women started to rally together in protest, which was to mark the beginning of the women's movement. A lot was achieved in the early years, the marriage bar was lifted, social security became available for separated wives and equal pay became compulsory. Gradually the treatment of women improved.

The women's movement could be split into two main categories. One consisted of traditional women groups who merged together to form an ad hoc committee. The other involved a small group of professional women called the Irish Women's Liberation Movement (I.W.L.M.) Dahlerup simply categorises the former as being concerned with changing practical laws, and the latter's goal was "to change peoples way of thinking and acting." (Smyth, 1993, pg.249). The I.W.L.M. consisted of articulate and educated women, many of whom had media connection.¹ These women publicly tackled gender inequalities and questioned the nations policies and attitudes towards women.²

However, within this energetic circle there were no women artists. (Kenny,1995). Mary Kenny, a leading member does not even recall any artist helping out with the

pamphlets, poster or banner work.(ibid). No Irish art work reflects the feminist school of thought that was sweeping through the nation.

This situation is in stark contrast with America and Britain, whose art literature took on board gender issues. My thesis is questioning why there was no gender based art work during the 1970's in Ireland and what factors prevented Irish women artists from reflecting this new revolution in thinking that affected the lives of so many women.

I realise that throughout history there have been universal obstacles that women artists have faced, such as their subordinate role in society, their roles as mothers, their limited access to art education in comparison to their male counterparts,..... indeed the list goes on. Consequently many women artists in Europe had few opportunities and little recognition.³

However, in Ireland from the 1850's onwards, women have played a larger role in the art world than most European countries. Why then, if Irish women had been so predominant did Irish art not reflect the feminist theory that emerged during the 1970's? Why were we at least a decade behind Britain or America in exploring gender?

There were indeed a few women artists who had strong roles in the Irish art of the 1960's and 1970's. However, in general, Irish women were put under pressure by the State to be full time mothers rather than having professional careers. I question the inability of these women artists to come to grips with gender issues in their work. I feel the deep rooted conservatism prevalent in Ireland made it difficult for women artists to explore female identity and sexuality so predominant in gender art theory. I will be examining the Catholic Church's influence in State affairs, and how female artists in the 1980's reacted against it.

In chapter two I feel it is important to examine the historical factors which effected the 1960's and 70's art scene within Ireland. Have Irish artists ever portrayed political subjects in their art work? Why was there no feminist art theory? I will also highlight Ireland's isolation and how as a result we always tended to be behind the trends of the

international art scene. These factors inevitably influenced the women artists within the Irish art world.

Chapter 3 discusses the art scene of the 1980's when gender work and subject matter began to emerge. I will be examining the obstacles that some feminist artists encountered through the nature of their work. I will be scrutinising the galleries and the public's general response to feminist art work.

The concluding chapter notes the reaction of Irish artists to discrimination within the Irish art scene. It records the formation of the Women's Artist Action Group and follows its efforts to promote women's art work within Ireland.

Footnotes

1. These women included Mary McCutchan (women's editor of the Irish Independent), Nuala Fennell, (who later became a T.D.), Hillary Boyle (journalist), and many more who are written about in greater detail by June Levine in *Sisters* (Levine, 1982, chapter 8).

2. Two famous writers who were very popular among the public of this era were Mary Kenny (women's page in the Irish Press), and Mary Anderson (women's page in the Irish Independent).

3. For further reading: Greer, *The Obstacle Race*, London, Martin Secker and Warburg Ltd., 1979 and Nochlin, *Women Art and Power and Other Essays: Why Have There Been No Great women Artists?*, New York, Harper Row Publishers Inc., 1988.

Chapter 1

STATE, CHURCH AND WOMEN ARTISTS

A Catholic Society

Unlike Britain and America, feminist art work in Ireland did not progress on a parallel with the women's movement of the 1970's. I feel the conservative society of the 1970's made it very difficult for feminist art work to emerge. Ireland is renowned for its conservatism, with views which are slow to change. Socialists state this conservatism is a result of Catholic involvement in State affairs. (Breen, 1990, pg. 75). In 1984, statistics showed that 80% of Irish adults attended Mass at least once a week, a rate three or four times higher than in most European countries. (Breen, 1990, pg. 105) Catholicism was so important to the Republic because it has always been a major vehicle for Irish Nationalism. As the artist Paddy Graham states,

“Religion in this country has tended to be a set of responses that serves to define the identity of the individual. To be Irish, you had to be Catholic.”

(McAvera, 1990, pg. 92)

Catholicism was a major influence in Irish society, and until today remains an extremely sexist institution. It is a patriarchal society, which does not allow women to become priests. This denies females access to even the lowest power rank within its hierarchical system. Women are denied these opportunities because of their sex. In 1976, the Vatican's declaration on women and priesthood, stated that females could not become priests because they were not “male”, like Christ was. (Beale, 1986, pg 171) This can be defined as “sexist”.

As I previously stated, the art environment is always affected by its society. Catholicism indirectly hindered women artists from expressing themselves in the 1970's. In retaliation, feminist artists of the 1980's questioned the Churches influence in their lives, through their work.

The Role of Women in Irish Society

The Catholic Church places great importance on the family being “the basic unit of society”. (Breen, 1990, pg. 101). The Pope stated that the future of humanity and the Church “depends in a great part on parents, and family life that they build in their homes”. (Beale, 1986, pg. 50)

In order for the family unit to function, the roles of its members have to be clearly defined. The Church modelled these roles on its own patriarchal structure. The husbands were the providers, and therefore had the power role. The wife’s role was that of “mother” and “homemaker”. (Beale, 1986, pg. 7). Women’s roles were emphasised to the country by Pope John Paul II in 1979.

“May Irish mothers, young women and girls not listen to those who tell them that working at a secular job, succeeding in a secular profession is more important than the vocation of giving life and caring for that life as a mother”.

(Beale, 1986, pg. 7)

Socialists agree that the state is “least ambiguous” in the area of the family. (Breen, 1990, pg. 101) The state policy regarding the family and its member role, has been mainly defined by the Catholic Church. We can see the chauvinistic influence of the Church in the 1932 constitution.

Article 41.2.2

“The state shall, therefore endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home”.

(Beale, 1990, pg. 7)

Remaining true to the constitution, the Irish State ensured through their policies, that women would not neglect “their duties in the home”. Marriage bars were introduced and working wives were classed as being dependent on their husbands, therefore they could not pay tax separately. (ibid.). In fact, sexist laws concerning women were so

numerous that forty nine detailed recommendations were made in 1971 for laws concerning women.¹

Irish Women's Role in Art

These restrictions on females made it very difficult for them to pursue a serious career in art. Their national role was that of "mother", not "artist". Pauline Cummins, mother and artist, states how the Churches expectations of wives leaves little time for their own aspirations.

" Having time, feeling you had the right to time, even if you had children - that would all be undermined by Catholicism because you were virginal, then a mother, then self sacrificing."

(Cummins, 1995)

However there were exceptions. Some Irish women played an important role in Irish art at the turn of this century e.g. Evie Hone and Manie Jellett. These women were strong minded, and had privileged Protestant backgrounds. It was also a period of decreased marriages.(Breen, 1990, pg. 103) These factors combined to make these women exceptions to the general rules. As Joan Fowler states, "Preliminary investigation suggests that while a few individual women artists may have been involved in a crucial stage of Irish Art history, the general picture was different." (Fowler, 1990, pg. 57)

Women of the 1960's - 1970's generally found a career in art difficult to pursue. When women entered art college it was seen more as a finishing school for them.(Fitzgibbons, 1995). Ann Fitzgibbons who attended the National College of Art and Design, from 1968 - 1972, recalls that the head of Fine Art disliked women being admitted into the faculty. He classed them as "woolly in the head".(ibid.). The predominant expectations were that women were going to get married, and would keep art as a hobby. They were not taken seriously as training artists.

These attitudes prevailed in the professional scene. Indeed females were not exhibited in the same proportion as their male counterparts. "When we look to the group show

catalogues of the early 1970's as indicators of the number of female artists exhibiting along with men artists, we find they are a very small minority. (Fowler, 1987, pg. 71)

In 1971, only 8% of the Irish labour force were women - a mere fraction in comparison with their British counterparts. (Breen, 1990, pg. 117). This was a direct result of Church involvement in State affairs.

Women's Sexuality in Irish Society

"Eve has gone down in history as the greatest temptress of all time, the model for the seductive nature of the whole female sex." (Condren, 1989, pg. 5)

Eve represents the sexual nature present within all women. The Church deems the sexuality of Eve as sinful and encourages women to suppress their "Eve" tendencies.

These teachings have been reinforced in Ireland from the mid 19th century onwards. Women were made to feel ashamed of their bodies. Females were categorised as "weak and fragile" and had "to be protected from the sexual viper that lurked within them". (Inglis, 1987, pg. 198 -199). In the confessional box people were interrogated about their sexual behaviour, as if it was an intolerable sin. This pressure created an extremely repressed atmosphere in the country.

"Outside the confessional there was a deafening silence. Sex became the most abhorrent sin" (ibid).

In order to protect women from the "sexual vipers that lurked within" (ibid) women were kept in ignorance about their bodies and sex.

I went into marriage with my eyes closed, really and truly. Whatever knowledge there was, my husband had it..... I went into hospital in 1960 to have my first daughter and I did not know how the child was going to be born. Up until the last few minutes before she was born I thought she was going to come out of my tummy.

(Beale, 1986, pg. 89)

When feminism emerged, it questioned the roles allocated to men and women in society. Joan Fowler summed up feminism as “a questioning and requestioning of gender relationships within society”. (Fowler, 1990, pg. 67).

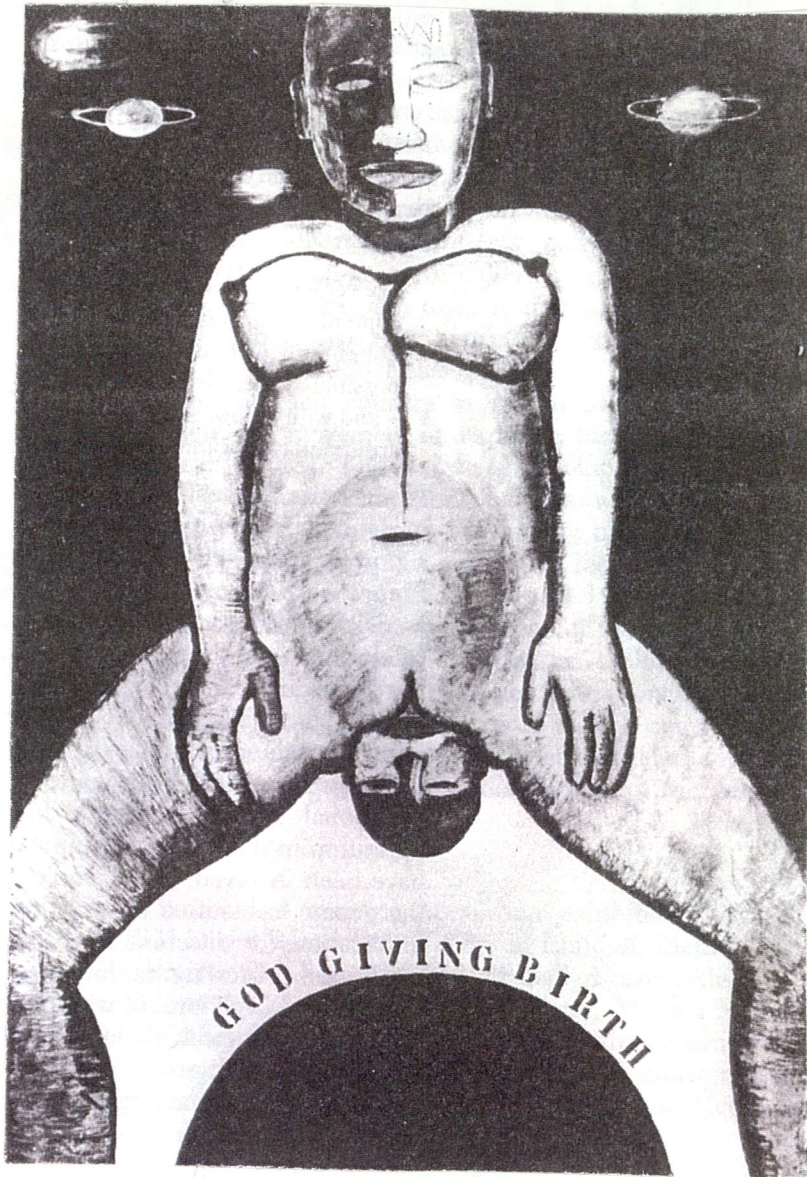
Feminism revolutionised the Art world. Women began to question the role they had traditionally occupied in the Arts. The traditional submissive female nude came under scrutiny. Was it Art or pornography?² Did women find these nudes appealing or had they been conditioned by male aesthetics into appreciating them?³

A good example to examine would be Monica Sjoo’s *God Giving Birth*, 1969, (plate 1). Here she portrays the rawness of sexuality and childbirth”. (Sjoo, 1973, pg. 188). Her painting was bold and powerful and openly explored sexuality and reproduction. In depicting God as a female, she challenged the patriarchal structures within her society.

In Ireland it was more difficult for women to explore their sexuality in such a bold way. The country was so conservative that work in this manner would have created public scandals. As a result female artists remained repressed in their subject matter. Artist Pauline Cummins, who attended the National College of Art and Design from 1966 - 1974, admits that she explored gender in her work at college. She states, “I actually did work in college like that, which I never showed anyone. That work was private, the climate wouldn’t allow for work like that”. (Cummins, 1995)

In her private sketches (plates 2 and 3), she depicts a hand sensually reaching towards the sexual pleasure point inside the female body. These are examples of the type of work that Cummins felt she could not publicly show.

I feel that Irish women could have explored sexual issues in their work, if our country had not been so puritanical. However it took another decade before feminist art work emerged publicly.



(plate1). Monica Sjoo *God Giving Birth* 1969 Oil on canvas



(plate 2). Pauline Cummins *Untitled* 1974 mixed media on paper



(plate 3). Pauline Cummins *Untitled* 1974 Mixed media on paper.

Reactions Against Catholicism

In the 1980's, the Irish public began to question the politics and attitude prevalent in their society. The media began to tackle issues which before had been too sensitive to broach. (O'Toole, 1990 pg.7-11). Public scandals emerged such as the case of Ann Lovett who, at the age of 15, died while giving birth to her still born child, outdoors in front of a shrine of the Virgin Mary. No one in the town had known that she was pregnant. It was cases like this that made people re-evaluate their attitudes towards sex and contraception. Previously taboo subjects like sex were now more openly talked about in Ireland.

Consequently, the Catholic Church began to lose favour.⁶ There was increasing political confrontation between a "vocal, secularised, liberal minority and an increasingly entrenched and embattled traditional Catholic majority." (O'Toole, 1990, pg. 9)

Within this society women began to reject the traditional roles handed down to them. (O'Toole, 1990, pg 11). Women started to have "male" careers for themselves, rather than becoming full time housekeepers and mothers. In 1984, statistics showed that one in every five women were employed. This was a significant increase compared to the figures from the 1970's. (Breen, 1990, pg 177)

Politics and public affairs were only marginally less male dominated than they had been, but within that context women became vastly more active. Female activists pushed for the abortion referendum in 1983, and the divorce referendum in 1986. (Smyth, 1993, pg 264) . These campaigns were unsuccessful, which proved that moral attitudes in Ireland were still deeply affected by the Catholic Church.

Despite these setbacks, women's studies and research developed with remarkable speed, and as Smyth comments, "The work of women artists and writers became increasingly more visible, and their claims for recognition more insistent." (Smyth, 1993, pg. 264). Consequently, with the firm establishment of feminism and a more open society, Irish feminist artists began to emerge in the 1980's.

In the visual arts, many feminist artists have individual objectives and aims. It would be impossible to categorise their work as having a set agenda. However, Joan Fowler does state that, "The fundamental question of feminism is, if humanity is constituted by men and women, why is it that men dominate in terms of wealth, power and sexuality". (Fowler, 1990, pg 57).

Some women artists, who questioned the patriarchal systems in Ireland, inevitably challenged the traditional teachings of the Catholic Church. In 1988, Alice Maher composed four paintings titled *Malcutta*. They were biblical in content and titled - *Coronation, Visitation, Annunciation* and *Birth* (plate 3). She symbolically painted them on second hand stained bed linen, and she makes every physical event into a sexual fantasy. While totally disrupting the traditional representation of sacred objects, she is also criticising the puritanical image of the Church. She questions the environment that she was brought up in which the immaculate conception forms part of the Churches doctrines and Virginity holds particular status as an ideal type of womanhood. (Fowler, 1990, pg 126, 127).

Another female Artist who retaliates against the Churches influence in Ireland, is Louise Walsh. She refers to herself and other artists as "sick of reacting to Catholicism, and anti-women laws in Ireland." (Roth, 1993,pg 5). In her mixed media piece on national identity entitled, *Outlaws, In-laws* (plate 5), Walsh has two images of homosexuals kissing each other, and snakes projected onto their faces. To the Catholic Church the serpent represents evil. However, Louise Walsh reached back to their Celtic meaning . Snakes represented "creativity, rebirth, sexuality and power." She is offering an alternative representation to the Catholic Church on sexuality.

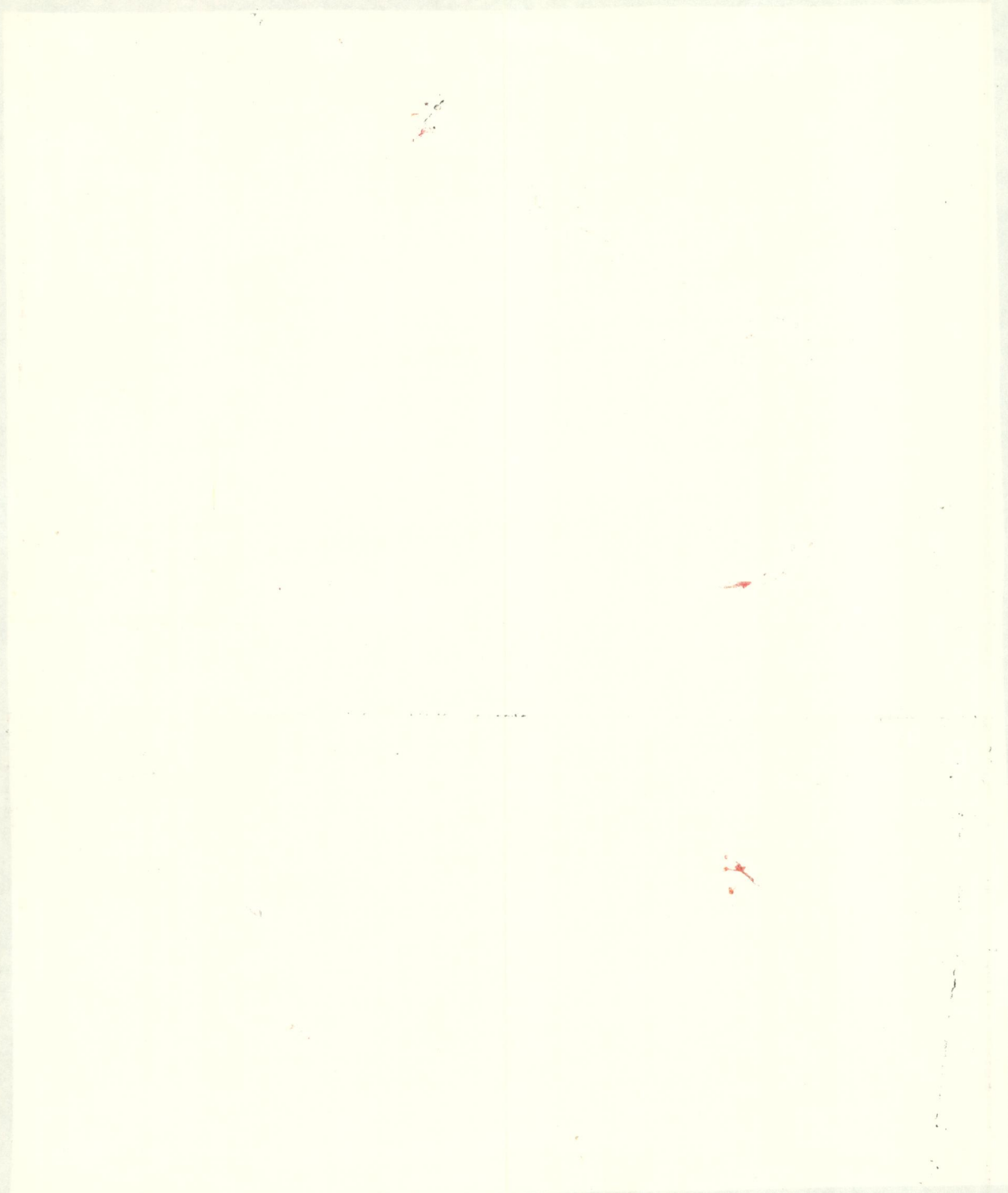
A slide tape piece (plate 6), *Aran Dance*, 1985, by Pauline Cummins explores her personal view of the tactile pleasure of a mans body. Fowler states,

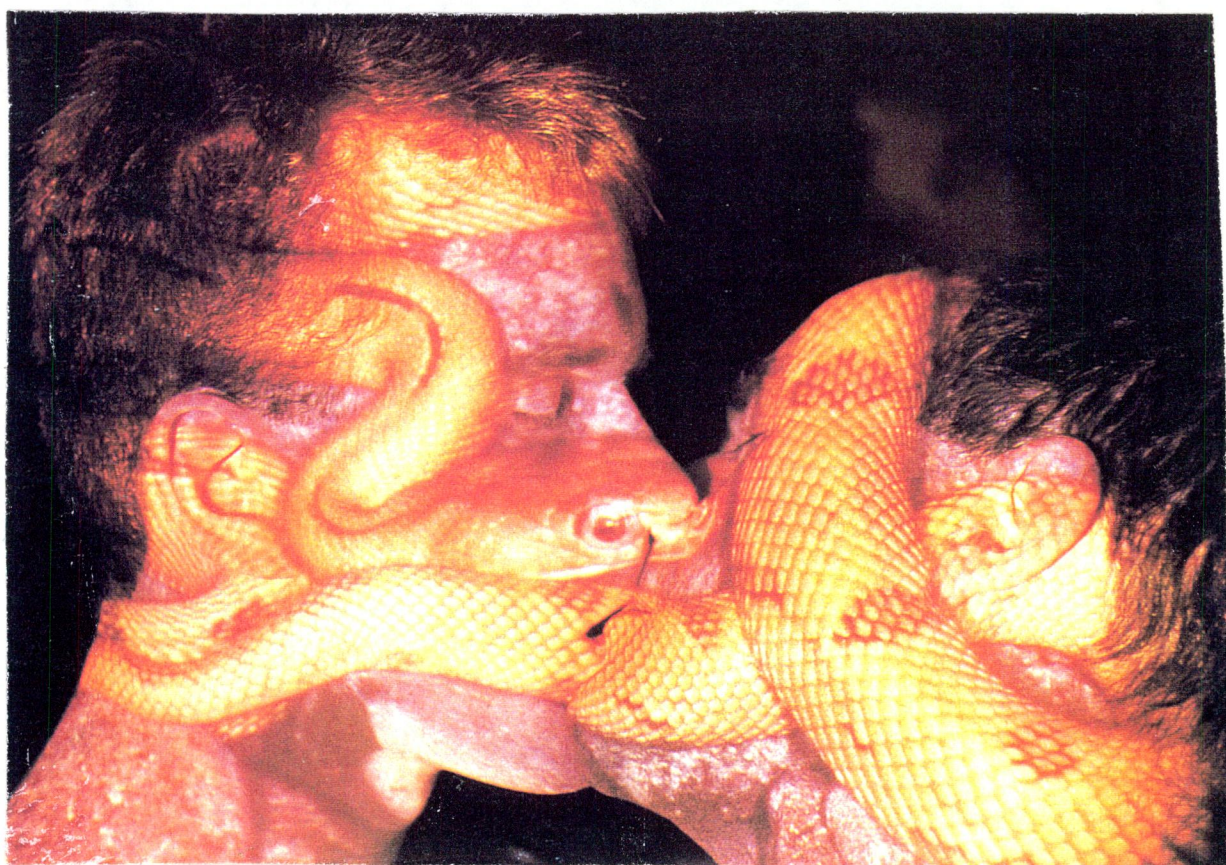
The images gradually evolve from the rhythmic activity of knitting, to the Aran sweater on a male torso, to the naked torso underneath, as she moves from sensuous pleasure to sexual arousal.

(Fowler, 1990, pg. 62).

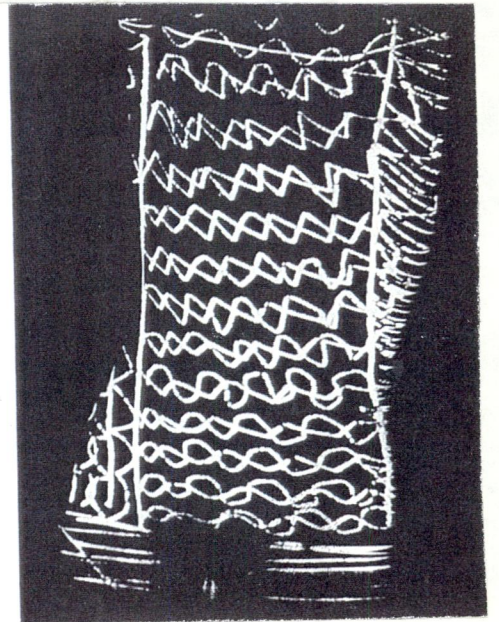
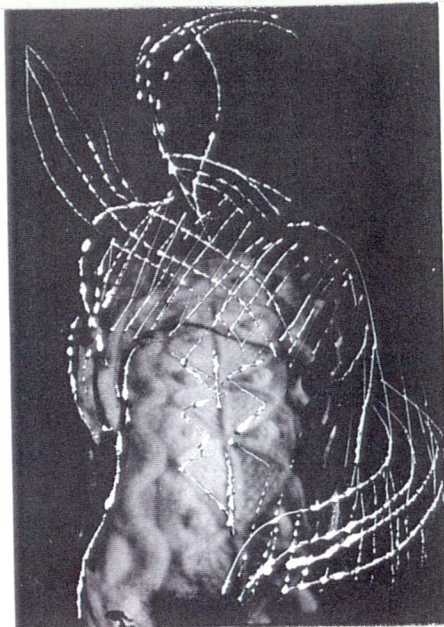
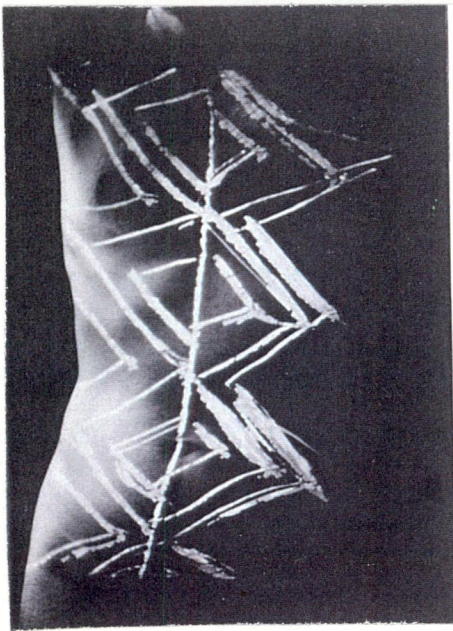


(plate 4). Alice Maher *Malcutta* installation: *Birthsheet* 1988 Mixed media on
bedsheet.





(plate 5). Louise Walsh *Outlaws, In-laws* installation 1991 Plaster, photographs.



(plate 6). Pauline Cummins *Inis t -tOirr* 1985 Photographs from slidal tape installation.

When asked if her work questioned Catholicism, Pauline Cummins replied that she delighted in sexuality and sensuality, that in itself was a reaction to the Church.
(Cummins, 1995)

Footnotes

1. These recommendations were made by , “The Commission on the Status of Women”, chaired by Dr. Thelka Beere. (Smyth, 1993).
2. This question was highlighted in John Burgers *Ways of Seeing*. (Burger, 1972, chapter 3).
3. For further information look to - Robinson, *Visually Female: How do Women Look - Female nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon*. (pg. 252 - 258), London, Camedon press Ltd., 1987.

Chapter 2

THE IRISH VISUAL ARTS

Politics in Irish Art

My thesis questions why the visual arts of the 1970's were not on a parallel with the women's movement. One of the main factors, is that political art has never been fashionable in Ireland.

Since the sixteenth century, Ireland has had a poor tradition in the arts. Artists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were financially constricted to painting portraits and topographical architectural paintings for rich landowners. (Murray, 1995, pg. 7). The political tensions and civil unrest in Ireland made artists reluctant to paint historical paintings depicting these tensions.

One exception is Francis Wheatly (1747 - 1801), who attempted a political theme in his history painting, *View of College Green* (plate 3, 1799). He highlights the independence of that era, but does little to illustrate the growing dissatisfaction of the Catholics which led to the rebellion of 1798. (Arnold, 1969, pg. 109). It has been described as Art of Protestant ascendancy divorced of the population. (McAvera, pg. 43). These types of gentle nationalistic works did little to capture the spirit of the nation.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, Irish Art still remained divorced from politics. This is clearly illustrated by examining the women artists in the early nineteenth century. Women artists like Mary Swanzy (1882 - 1978), who studied under Osburn; Cecilia Harrison (1864 - 1941) - portraitist, and May Maguinness, best known for her traditional paintings, were described by Brian Fallon as being a "remarkable generation of women" (Fallon, 1994, pg. 108), whom

"Were in fact, Ireland's emancipated generation, independent minded and sometimes vocally feminist, notable organisers and crusaders for various causes, sometimes to the extent of becoming sheer busy bodies and meddlers in almost everything around them"

(ibid.)



(plate 7). Francis Wheatly *View of College Green with meeting of the Volunteers on
4th November 1779* 1799 Oil on canvas

They are described here as feminists who were very active and very politically minded. These women would have been aware of the suffragette movement in Ireland, but they chose not to portray this political movement in their work¹. It was all political activity that was divorced from Irish Art not just nationalism.

When Ireland gained its independence artists still did little to portray its true politics. The Irish population were so excited about their independence that they idealised the new state. Brown describes this romantic image of Ireland as

“a cultural life, dominated by a vision of Ireland inherited from the period of the literary revival as a rural Gaelic civilisation that retained pastoral distinctiveness”

(McAvera, pg. 48)

The Irish public changed from the victimised tenant farmers into a land full of peaceful contented peasants. This illusion ignored the general economic misery suffered by the peasants. This myth was promoted by writers such as Synge and Yeats and politicians such as Cosgrove and De Valera (ibid.).

Artists were also expected to portray a pastoral image of Ireland. Brian Maguire states that Artists were expected to supply the smoke for this illusionary smoke screen and...“those who produced the goods in our trade, mostly the Royal Hibernian Academy were rewarded with fifty years control of the Art Education” - Maguire (McAvera, pg. 49)

There were artists who refused to indulge themselves in this nostalgic genre in painting. Artists like Manie Jelett and Evie Hone sought education outside Ireland, Paris was a popular destination (Campbell, 1987, pg. 17). In Europe they were freed from the Irish archetypal art, and instead taught the value of modernism. Consequently through joining the international style, their subjects were in a broader, more international context. Although this more up to date art work offered an alternative to the Irish picture postcard work, it still was not politically orientated.

This situation in Irish art had changed very little until the late 1970's (McAvera, pg. 51 - 52). Consequently when feminism commenced in the early 1970's, Irish artists remained divorced from it in their work. While artists would have been aware of the political movement, it remained in a separate area of their lives. It was the journalists and the writers who publicly commented on Women's issues, not the artists. (Smyth, 1993, pg. 251)

Feminist Art Theory

Ireland has never had international recognition for its visual arts. However, we have received widespread acclaim for our writers. The Irish literary revival produced many fine writers, for example W.B. Yeats who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1923.

Brian Fallon argues that the visual arts were parallel to the literature during the revival (Fallon, 1994, pg.13). Ireland had many fine painters such as Walter Osbourne and William Orpen. However, it was the academic achievements that were noted and applauded. (ibid) He continues that -

Nowhere is the prejudice against Ireland's visual arts more entrenched than in literary circles and literary histories, which give full credit to the literary revival, but treat the Irish Artists of the period as though they were provincial figures.

(Fallon, 1994, pg.12)

Brian Fallon is suggesting that the academics were prejudiced against Irish art. Ireland has had a poor tradition in the visual arts and as a result critics tended to ignore this area. This is exemplified in the feminist movement of the 1970's. Many of the women's issues were written about in the newspapers. Mary Anderson's women's page in the "Irish Independent" (Levine, 1982, pg.138), Mary Kenny's women's page in the "Irish Press", (Levine, pg.116), and Bruce Arnold's "Politics and Politicians", all discussed women's inequality in Irish Society. However, it was only the most basic injustices that were tackled by these writers.

As Jackson criticises -

There has been a tendency over the years to get on with the task at hand without much reflection or analysis. This meant that practical, tangible, survival issues have been dealt with.

(Smyth, 1993, pg. 249)

These journalists did not connect gender concerns to the art world, despite the fact that it has been one of the major areas of discrimination.²

Irish women's art had a very low profile in Irish society and tended to be overlooked since women artists did not involve political subjects into their work and feminist journalists did not refer to the injustices in the art world. Consequently there was a huge abyss between women's art and feminist writings.

This is illustrated very clearly if we compare Ireland to America. From the 1950's until the 1980's, New York became the centre of Modernism. Consequently, the American critics and writers took great interest in the art world. Linda Nochlin, (Art history lecturer in Vassar College) was given leaflets on feminism by a friend. They speculated on women's issues from housework to art production. Nochlin, 1994, pg.6). This was her first contact with feminism. She stayed up,

reading the articles until 2 a.m. making discovery after discovery.
Cartoonish light bulbs going off in my head at a frantic pace. My
consciousness was indeed raised.

(ibid)

A few months later she changed the subject matter of her art seminars to "The images of women in the 19th and 20th centuries". The headings ranged from "Women in Pre - Raphaelite painting" and Victorian literature" to "Pornography" and "Sexual Imagery". Linda Nochlin and her former students such as Paula Harper (who took a leading role in the early development of art history), and Susan Castreras (curator of paintings at the Yale centre of British Art), had produced a substantial amount of written literature on women and art by 1971. She also collaborated with contemporary feminist artists such as Judy Chicago and Marian Schopia, who had

lectured in some of her seminars, (Nochlin, 1994, pg.10). Linda Nochlin was actively interested and visited the women's house in Los Angeles to gather ideas.

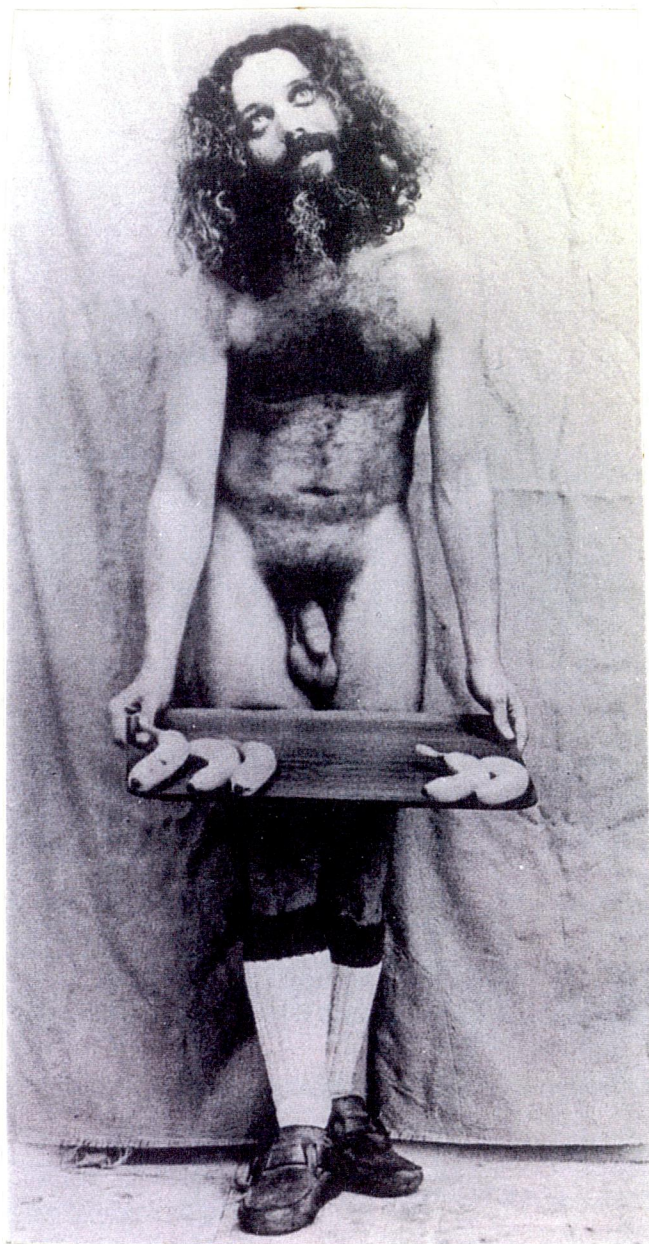
Feminist art literature and gender based art work seemed to be progressing in unison. As Linda Nochlin emphasises - "At that point in the women's art movement, contemporary art making and history of art, insofar as it concerned women were mutually stimulating and interrelated." Nochlin, 1994, pg.10)

Nochlin constructed her own work, titled - "*Buy My Bananas*" (plate 8). It is a photograph of a bearded nude man, coyly holding a tray of fruit at penis level. It was created as a reverse image of the 19th century female version of a female holding apples at breast level entitled - "*Buy my Apples*" (plate 9). She created this piece to illustrate her essay titled - *Woman as a sex object* (1972). (Nochlin, 1988, pg.138, 142).

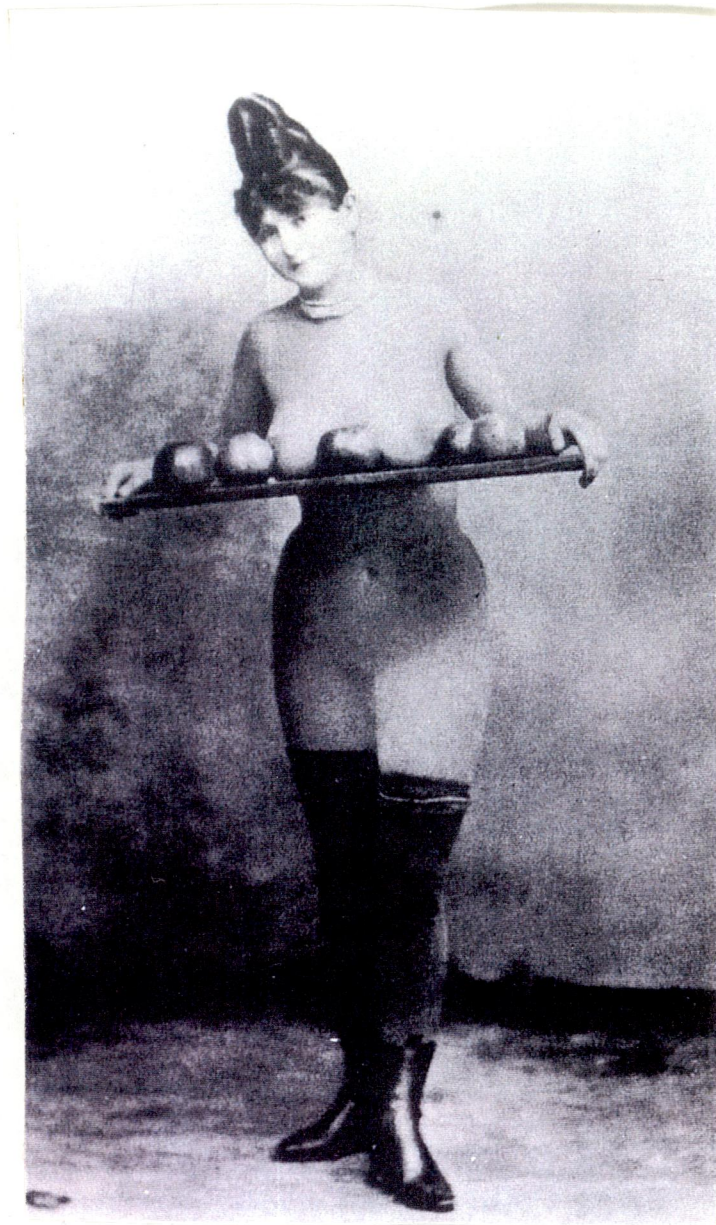
This piece of art work symbolises quite nicely how art and literature in America fuelled each other. This American example differed greatly from the Irish one. The writers and art historians did not relate gender equality to the visual arts. There was no overlapping between the art world and feminist literature. This is one more factor combined with many, that made it difficult for feminist artists to emerge.

The Isolation Factor

Feminist art work and art theory had begun to emerge in America and Britain in the early 1970's. The Irish visual arts have tended to be insular, with little external influence, consequently such feminist art theories were slow to reach Ireland. Ireland suffered unwarranted isolation from the 1930's onwards. Geographical location, prejudice towards Britain and political neutrality in the wars were all factors causing isolation. (McAvera, pg.51). After the 1930's, Irish artists trained abroad, due to the second world war, hence increasing the Royal Hibernian Academies (RHA) influence, which resulted in Irish art becoming more insular.



(plate 8). Linda Nochlin *Buy my Bananas* 1972 Photograph.



(plate 9). *Buy my Apples* Photograph from a late nineteenth century popular French magazine.

William Orpen (1878 - 1931) had been a prominent and influential artist during the Irish revival. He detested the new Modernism and encouraged Irish artists to dismiss the international style that was raging through Europe.

As Brian Fallon states,

It was ultimately unfortunate for Irish art that the influence of his teaching, and his incisive high - powered personality, lasted so long and went so deep.

(Fallon, 1994, pg.89)

Fallon is referring to the RHA (the main exhibiting gallery of the time), and the National College of Art and Design (NCAD), the centre of art education, both of which followed Orpens teachings and ideals. Consequently, both institutions resisted external influences, unable to veer from their nostalgic school of dying 19th century realism.

The Irish Exhibition of Living Art was set up in 1943, (in opposition to the archaic regime of the RHA). Although it exhibited more modern and alternative work, most of its exhibitors were Irish. These artists exhibited their own interpretations of the styles in Europe. However, their concepts tended to be behind the current trends of their European counterparts.

However, during the 1960's, there was a boost in the Irish economical climate. Television became a regular convenience in most Irish households, foreign travel became more possible. Irish society thus became less introspective and far less isolated (McAvera, pg.31).

Subsequently the art world was opened to a greater influx of external influences. In 1967, an exhibition entitled *Rosc* was shown. It displayed work of 20th century Modernist masters. This was the first time ever that the Irish public had access to original modern work. (Dunne, 1990, pg.24). This was one of the first tentative steps linking Irish art with the international art scene.

However, the major influence in the modernisation of Irish art came from the students of the NCAD upheaval. Prompted by tutors Paul Funge, Charles Harper, and Alice Hanratty, students rebelled against their conservative training. The NCAD had tutored their students in conventional art skills and had not allowed for any Modernist influence at all. (Dunne, 1990, pg. 21). The years between 1968 and 1974 saw walkouts and protest demonstrations from the campaigning students, their battle was directed against the RHA ethos and its influence over the NCAD. It was the mid - seventies before any compromises were reached.

The students who emerged from the new style of teaching (post revolt) at the NCAD tended to be more Formalist in their approach to art. Dunne states that it was the activist students of the earlier generation that tended to be more politically orientated in their work. (Dunne, 1990, pg. 22).

As a result of the NCAD rebellion, the visual arts in Ireland became more aware of international trends and influences. Consequently, women artists became more conscious of feminist artists work from America and Britain.

Footnotes

1. The suffragette movement disbanded in 1921. For further information read WARD Margaret, In Their Own Voice: Women and Irish Nationalism, Dublin, Attic Press, 1995.
2. It should be noted that Bruce Arnold was keenly interested and aware of Irish visual arts. He wrote the revolutionary history book entitled, A Concise History of Irish Art, Norwich, Jarold and sons, 1969. However, he failed to link feminism with the art world in general.

Chapter 3

THE EMERGENCE OF FEMINIST ART

Irish Art in the 1980's

After the turmoil of the 1970's, Irish art began to improve immensely by international standards. More regional colleges were being set up throughout the country with their own art department. This helped to tilt the balance of power away from Dublin (McAvera, pg. 52). The Artists Collective, who formed in autumn of 1981, recognised the need for discussion in the art scene amongst artists, and decided to launch the Circa art magazine (Dunne, pg. 26). The Arts Council in southern Ireland encouraged business sponsorship of the arts. Consequently, Bank of Ireland and Allied Irish Bank set about building substantial collections of contemporary Irish Art. These were just a few factors present in the 1980's which ensured the continued improvement of the visual arts in Ireland.

As mentioned in chapter one, there was a radical new openness in the Irish society of the 1980's. Irish people began to face up to social problems that were occurring in Ireland. O'Toole described the 1980's as an era of change and reform. The public began to reject the traditional Ireland, and attitudes started to change (O'Toole, pg. 7 - 10). Irish people wanted to reform their society, and this communicated itself to the art world. O'Toole states,

The sense of Ireland as an invention, a fantasy, as something up for grabs and needing to be refashioned every time a speech was made or a painting begun, became overwhelming.

(O'Toole, 1990, pg. 10).

Irish artists began to look to and comment on the society they resided in. This focus on politics was reinforced by a major movement that swept through Europe (including Ireland), called Neo Expressionism.

This dynamic new style of painting focused on the individual in modern society. The artists of this movement attempted to represent their feelings on canvas through mark, line and colour. While artists focused on insular feelings within they recognised that their emotional state had been influenced by the society in which they lived. (Fowler, 1990, pg. 53,54). Irish Expressionists such as Paddy Graham and

Barry McGuire began to question Irish society and inevitably touched on the general areas of religion, politics and sexuality.

It was during this era of political awareness in the Irish art world, that feminist art began to emerge. Inevitably, Irish women artists had become aware of the feminist art work that had been occurring in Britain and America. Due to feminist publishing companies, (e.g. Women's Community Press), more literature on feminist theories became available. (Smyth, 1993, pg. 265).

Consequently, gender art work began to emerge in Ireland. Like the Neo - Expressionists, women began to explore their identities in context to their society. In questioning their roles in society, women artists also began to explore religion and sexuality. However, unlike the Neo - Expressionists they were not restricted to a particular movement or medium in their art work.

Although the 1980's art scene favoured political art work, women artists still had to face obstacles that hindered them in their art work. This chapter will highlight some of the obstacles they had to encounter.

The Gallery Obstacle

The 1980's was a period when political art work began to emerge. Danny McCarthy (director of Trinskel Art Centre) comments that,

Performance and extended media art lends itself naturally to the work of social and political nature.....Note the way in which the women's movement has taken to these areas.

(McAvera,pg.32)

He is effectively stating that most gender artwork is not object based but more unconventional i.e. video, installations, performance art etc.....Indeed body art progressed mainly through women artists and was the first movement to be influenced by feminism. (Fowler,1987,pg.72). This tradition of feminist media based art became very popular in the 1980's, with Irish women artists such as Pauline Cummins, Louise Walsh, and Mary Duff. However, during this period, "Neo

Expressionist" paintings became very fashionable, consequently media based art work became difficult to exhibit.

Pauline Cummins stated that when she gave up painting in the early 1980's, and started to do media based work, she was forced to exhibit outside of Ireland in places like Denmark, England and America. No galleries in Ireland would accept her work. (Cummins, 1995).

Due to financial pressures, galleries, many of whom have a standard 50% commission fee, sold object based work such as sculptures, prints, paintings etc. While the exhibition of living art encouraged alternate work, it came under considerable pressure during the early 1980's because of its diversity of aims. (Dunne, 1990, pg. 23 - 24)

Female artists who participated in media based work also needed considerable funding because they rarely received financial rewards for their work. While the Art Council had improved since its restructuring in 1973, (Dunne, 1990, pg. 27), it still tended to be conventional about the work it decided to fund.

There is no special funding towards media art either in the North or the South. They are tolerated because they won't go away. Every now and then they are given bursaries, but object makers end up with all the bursaries and exhibitions.

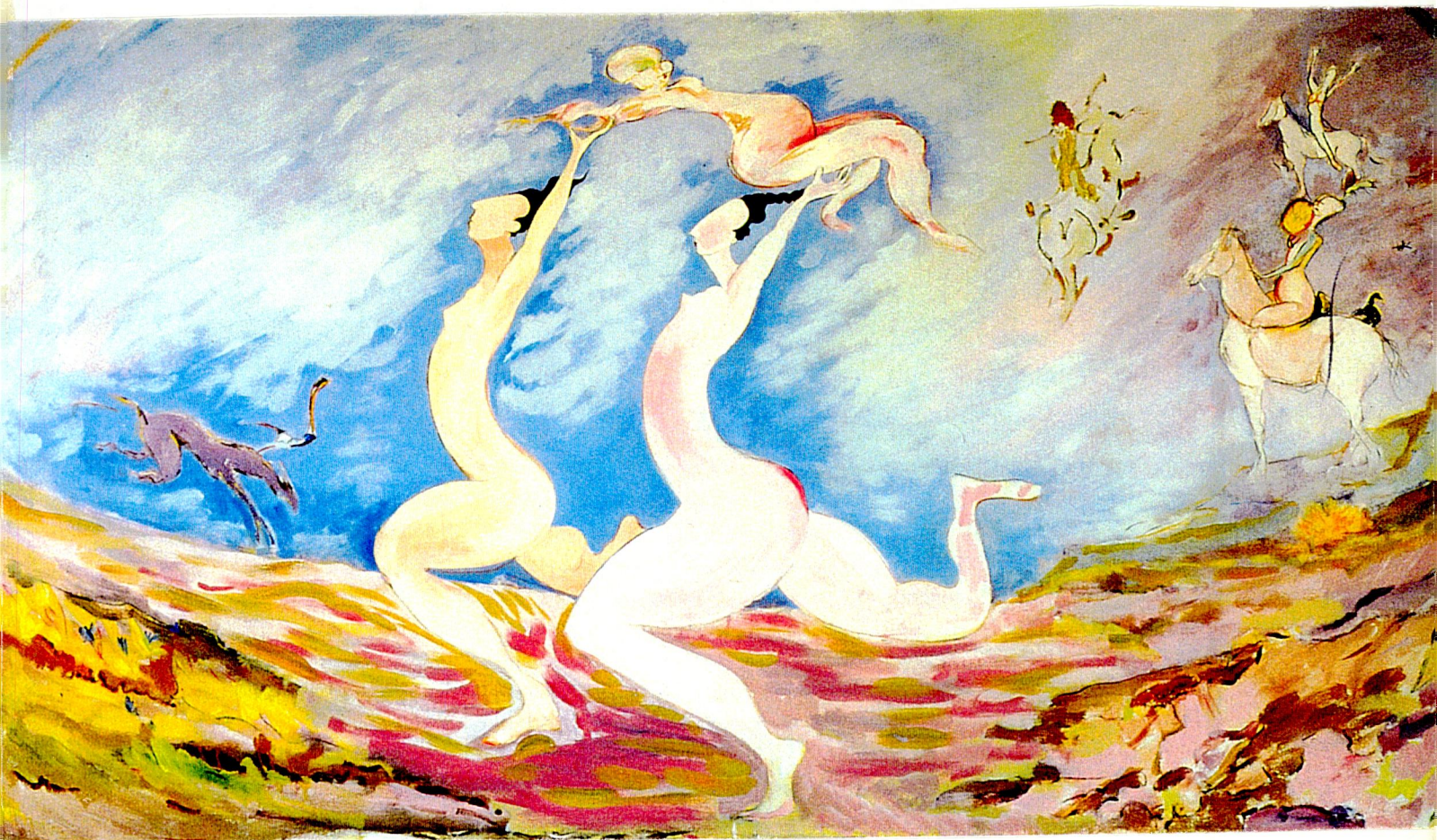
Paddy Gillian

(McAvera, pg.23).

Consequently, female artists found it economically unrewarding to create their art.

A Question of Taste

The Art Councils encourage the commissioning of public art works, by offering bursaries towards these pieces. The companies who commission these sculptures choose subjects that would be pleasant and inoffensive to the general public. Politically or sexually orientated subject matter would be viewed as inappropriate.



(Plate 10) Pauline Cummins, Celebration - The Beginning of Labour 1984
Temporary mural



(Plate 11) Louise Walsh *Monument to Unknown Women Workers* Mockette 1989
Cast Bronze

This would eliminate most feminists art work. The unsuitability of women's gender art work is illustrated by examining two cases.

The first case is Pauline Cummins' temporary mural *Celebration - the beginning of labour*, (1984) painted in the wall of the National Maternity Hospital (plate 10). It was a lively piece, "which was intended to welcome in a general way the event of motherhood." (Fowler, 1990, pg. 62). It was described as causing quite a stir and was given extensive media coverage (Roth, 1992, pg. 8). However, the public did not appreciate this blatant art piece, and the administration painted over it a week later.

Another high profile case was Louise Walsh's proposed "Monument to Unknown Women Workers" (plate 11). Through an administration mix-up, the Artists Research Group (See, 1989, pg.26), thought they had the authority to commission the public work for Great Victoria Street, Belfast. The brief that they set, asked artists to indicate the social background of the area into their design. Louise Walsh had taken into account that the area had previously been a red light district. Walsh produced a maquette of two women prostitutes. She was not glorifying their position, but simply highlighting women's low paid position in society. There were telephones, shopping baskets and cash registers embedded into their figures to represent women's work - both paid and unpaid. The figures were not sexually offensive, in my opinion. As Louise Walsh comments,

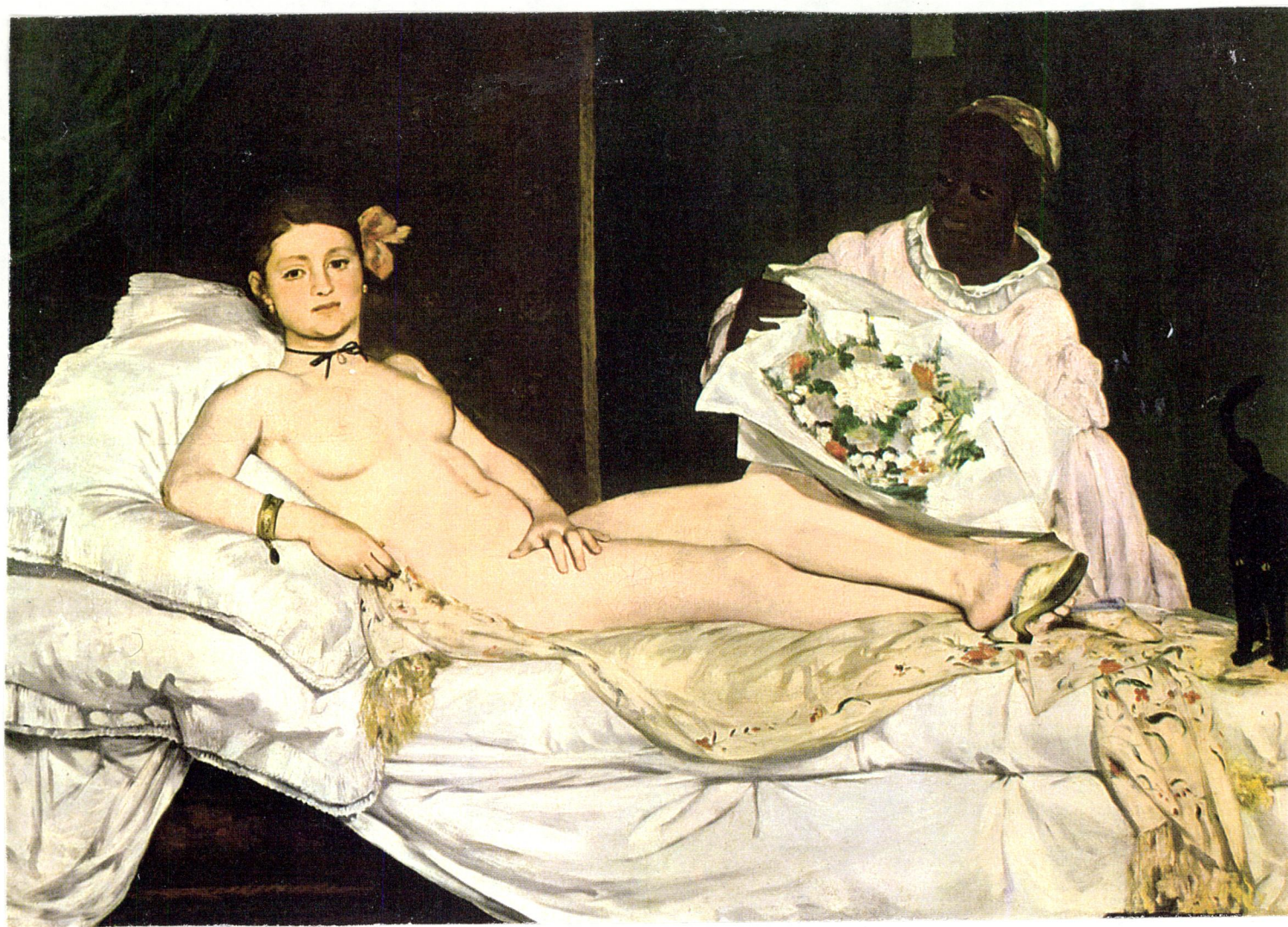
They were working women and it was a matter for individuals whether they were prostitutes or not. They could represent the many women who worked in offices or factories at the time.

(Irish Times, 1989)

However, the Belfast County Council refused to endorse the piece because of its subject matter. Media reports claimed that Councillor Frank Millar stated Louise Walsh had been glorifying prostitution. (ibid) There were over thirty articles appearing in newspapers and a whole range of issues were raised from prostitution to religious morals, to feminism and the importance of public work. (Roth, 1992, pg.8)



(Plate 12) Eamonn O'Doherty *Anna Livia Fountain* 1988 Cast Bronze and Granite



(Plate 13) Edouard Manet *Olympia* 1865 Oil on Canvas

. This raises the question of what subject matter the public generally find acceptable. I would like to compare Walsh's *Monument to an Unknown Worker* with Eamon O'Doherty's Anna Livia fountain (plate 1988), in O'Connell Street, Dublin. This is a typical representation of a semi-nude female, in submissive repose. This depiction of women throughout the history of art by male artists commentated and perpetuated the subordinate place of women in society. The dynamic spectator (predominantly male) and the subject (a passive female) was often accompanied by voyeuristic implications (Burger, 1972, pg. 50 - 54).

The pose of the female nude in the *Olympia*, (plate 12) by Manet(1863), evoked adverse reactions and caused much controversy, mainly due to the woman's occupation - Olympia being a stock name used in contemporary French literature for a prostitute and blatant flaunting (Great Artists, pg. 432). This painting created a new dynamism between spectator and subject, the challenging impertinent gaze causes a sense of unease and discomfort.

In the same manner Walsh's piece questions the social conscience about prostitution. People were still uncomfortable with the openness about prostitution and reacted against it.

In my opinion the Anna Livia fountain represents a return to the age old depiction of women as submissive beings in a passive repose. It is not threatening, it falls comfortably on the spectators eye, viewed at a glance, an unconscious effort is all that is required before the spectator moves off to buy the groceries or catch the bus.

Some feminist artists challenged the traditional representations of women. Their openness and honesty about their own sexuality, often disrupted the conventional image of beautiful women. This discourages sponsoring for public works, as generally they are not to the publics tastes. Not all gendered work can be placed in this category, I am merely highlighting the obstacles and hostilities some women artists encountered.

Chapter 4
Steps Forward

The Formation of W.A.A.G.

Such obstacles typified the attitudes feminist artists faced in the 1980's. This situation was brought to public light in an article entitled *Women talking to Women* (Circa, 1987, pg. 20 - 25). They complained about the lack of funding groups received from the Arts Council in comparison to Britain. By the advent of 1987, there had been only two possible occasions for women to show their work separately from men - *Women on Women*, at the Fenderseky gallery in Belfast in 1986, and in the same year a group of exhibitions organised throughout the country by feminists in conjunction with international Women's Day (Circa, 1987, pg. 25)

However, later that year, with the combined efforts of the Douglas Hyde Gallery and the National Gallery of Ireland, the Irish Women Artists' exhibition was organised. While it highlighted the historical achievements of women artists, it did not focus adequately on contemporary female artists (Cummins, 1995). The contemporary artists were placed in the Douglas Hyde Gallery - a small basement gallery housed in Trinity College with limited public access. Joan Fowler stated that, "The exhibition suffered from lack of overall co-ordination and was neither a survey nor an issue based event, but to some extent it provoked the creation of the Women Artists Action Group." (Fowler, 1990, pg.56).

Indeed, some artists were dissatisfied with the exhibition and felt more emphasis should have been placed on the struggling contemporary women artists. Jenny Haughton (who has set up the Temple Bar Studios, Dublin), organised a meeting between eight contemporary female artists including Una Walker, Louise Walsh, Alice Maher and Pauline Cummins. They discussed the serious problems many women were experiencing in trying to exhibit their work. As a result they formed the Women Artists Action Group (W.A.A.G.). Pauline Cummins volunteered as Chair person and moulded it on the American system that she had encountered in the United States. (Cummins, 1995).

W.A.A.G. felt that feminism was “the most important development in art and art making since Cubism”. (Cummins, 1989, pg. 2). While many individuals had responded to feminism they had found it difficult to gain acknowledgement from the Irish art establishments. W.A.A.G. was to provide the first concerted, collective response from these individual women artists. They organised “all women” shows in order to

give women artists the confidence to trust in their own abilities in order to overcome the negative evaluation resulting from pervasive discrimination against women.

(Cummins, 1989, pg. 3).

Their first undertaking was in the Projects Art Centre. This entailed four projectors operating simultaneously, showing the work of ninety women artists. Coinciding with the show, a series of talks on women’s art was organised. The aim of this project was to highlight the large amount of women artists who were working throughout Ireland. (Cummins, 1995). It offered these women an opportunity to publicly show their work in Ireland instead of being forced to exhibit abroad.

As a result of this project, W.A.A.G. was offered a show in the Guinness Hop Stores, entitled , *The Inarguable Women’s Artist Action Group* exhibition (1987). Their next show in the promotion of women artists was, *Art Beyond the Barriers W.A.A.G. 2* (1989), and was held in the Royal Hospital , Kilmainham. These shows helped the advancement of gender art work in Ireland.

“All Women” art shows had first emerged in New York in 1973 with the “*Women Choose Women*” exhibition. It took Ireland another fifteen years to produce “all women” artist shows.

Conclusion

My thesis has tackled social factors concerning the development of feminist art in Ireland. I originally questioned why feminist art did not coincide with the women's movement. In examining the reasons why gender art did not progress in the 1970's, I also found it necessary to examine the factors that influenced its progression in the 1980's.

Irish society of the 1970's was extremely conservative due to the influence of the Catholic Church. I felt that constraining laws in Ireland made it very difficult for women to pursue full time careers in the art world. Their roles were classified as "mother" and "housekeeper" not artist. The puritanical views prevalent in Ireland hindered women artists from exploring female sexuality so common in most gender art work. Consequently, through their work, feminist artists rebelled against Catholicism in the 1980's.

I have concluded that the backwards art scene of the 1970's affected the type of art work women produced. Politics was not an area to be pursued in subject matter. Feminist writers in Ireland dealt only with the basic issues. Consequently, no conclusive feminist art theory emerged. The Irish arts tended to be far removed from the international scene, effectively isolating women artists from the gender art that was emerging in America at this time.

Irish feminist artists began to emerge in the 1980's. However, they experienced many difficulties. Some women artists work was not very profitable due to the media used, and distasteful subject matter.

Due to the obstacles women artists were experiencing, W.A.A.G. was formed. Its aim was to provide support for their work in Ireland. Although W.A.A.G. disbanded in 1991, it was indeed instrumental in promoting gender art work in Ireland. Consequently, gender art work in Ireland continues to grow.

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