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SEÁN FINGLETON:

AN IRISH EXPRESSIONIST LANDSCAPIST

by

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INTRODUCTION:

Of Authenticity, Originality

and Creative Work

In this essay I address the matter of Seán Fingleton's painting as being historically continuous with a 'tradition' of personal autobiographically - centred painting which has flowered in Ireland since she gained her independence as a sovereign nation from Britain in 1921. I call it a 'tradition' here, but it consists more in being a set of creative strategies adopted more or less perforce by those painters who were and are moved by concerns of establishing a certain distinctness or difference from received ideas of painting and of the painterly creative impulse in their work, not merely for the sake of difference in itself, but in order to respect and serve a sense of personal honesty and of cultural integrity so they can be satisfied their work derives its substance from a real experience which is particular in its distinguishing respects to its society, Irish in the present instance.

I present Fingleton as being this type of painter and examine his oeuvre in this light, accepting the sincerity of his endeavours while reserving judgement largely till the last chapter on the merits and demerits of his work as they have appeared.

It is a regrettable fact that work that partakes of this sort of 'tradition' I mention, while being full – and there is none fuller – of the most intense sincerity can often work against the full realisation of the artist's artistic abilities. These abilities can hereby be side-tracked into a striving to preserve embattled cultural identifications which may perhaps seem retardataire to an international observer. However, these cultural identifications, local, provincial and perhaps even naive or quaint to international eyes, can be the ground from which a new vision and a new sensibility can arise, as it informs the formal constructs such a sensibility creates with the novelty of its new and wondering sensing of this ground. However, conservatism and derivativeness are a danger which often results from this approach to creative work and which helps to sustain the provinciality of much of this type of endeavour. It is a question of the degree and depth of 'originality' of the individual artist's vision.

All artists cannot be the most original or the most profound. For each such exceptional practitioner there are thousands of less enlightened souls plodding away according to their lights and helping the whole collective endeavour along in their little ways without

each one plunging us into a new era with their 'originality'.

> The slowness of historical change, the fact that any epoch always contains a great deal of the last epoch, is never sufficiently allowed for [in theories of where society is heading]" (George Orwell: "James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution" quoted in Orwell : 1970 p. 207).

Landscape-based painting seems to be a very conservative and retardataire artistic undertaking in the present age, particularly to observers who are from an urban background, as most of them are today. As a landscape-based painter, Fingleton's work allows me to examine these issues of authenticity, originality and creativity which I see as being central to the practicing of art in a relatively marginal cultural constituency such as Ireland.

I have therefore begun this essay with a review of the development of the practice (the 'tradition' I refer to above) of personal, autobiographically-centred painting as it occurred in Ireland since 1921, with a particular emphasis on the landscape-based version of it, prefacing my account with a look at landscape itself as a geure.

I then proceed to an exposition of Fingleton's actual career and oeuvre and an analysis of his achievements therein, expanding from an account of the critical literature extant on his work in the published domain.

I conclude with an assessment of the values of his achievements and their limitations.

CHAPTER 1

The Historical, Painterly Context

Concerning the 'peculiarness' of landscape painting as an undertaking in 1997, we must recognize that landscape painting has had a long, fruitful and even heroic history in Western Art, whether it was painted directly from nature in the field or constructed afterwards in the studio. Several times it was the lynch-pin that opened the door to a new development, most famously and spectacularly perhaps with Impressionism which made of the preparatory *étude d'après nature* of the Academy's students of the late 18th and early 19th centuries a whole art in itself, bringing studio practice back into the field, and back face to face with the visual artists' ultimate, original and arbitrating source, Nature 'her'-self (Galassi '91). Today, as a painterly form, Landscape Painting exemplifies Painting itself as a practice to many and is doubly embattled both within Painting and within Art in general which latter, it is sometimes claimed, no longer needs Painting and certainly not Landscape Painting to realise itself.

Within the contemporary context Painting is embattled by demands concerning its 'relevance' to today's society, for Painting, it must be said, has not been found to be particularly suited to the addressing and the expressing of the modern urban experience. Film and television have taken over from her here. (Benjamin 1968 pp 234-6). Nor has Painting proved notably successful at expressing the experience of postmodern bureaucratic technological society. With the concentration of critical activity today on the mythologies of the 'decentred' subject and of the 'discourses' of gender, race, class, language and signification, Painting finds its modes of articulation coming into question as being typical of the outmoded, 'totalising' world view dominated by the single individual sensibility or temperament as represented in modernist art practices through Modernism's cult of individuality. These perceptions of Painting may however be merely part of the reactive pendulum-effect of one intellectual age's succeeding another and reacting to its antecedent's tenets by imposing their opposite as soon as it proves feasible. In this regard, Post-modernism *would* replace the cult of Individuality with the cult of the Collective or of the Absolutely Social, the personal with the impersonal or the anti-personal, as it seems indeed to be attempting to do.

Part of the difficulty for Painting is its 'closure' as a technology, the fact that for one it has hardly changed in five hundred years, especially for oil-painting, the exemplary

type of painting. Its technology is simple and sufficient unto itself in the sense of being able to offer complete expressive ranges to the artist chromatically, tonally and texturally. This latter quality could be seen to communicate a certain complacency within Painting about Painting's having an intrinsic validity outside of and even in defiance of Time and its effects on History and Culture (e.g. 'Progress'). But Painting's self-confidence as a medium seems to be able to withstand many of these criticisms only as long as the painter involved can make and sustain a leap of credulity between the 'world' of Society and the 'world' of Painting by resolutely establishing and maintaining himself within the latter as his proactive centre within the former.

This raises the question of whether it is still physically possible to maintain one's stance within Painting in Contemporary Culture and Society and actually survive in it, economically as well as creatively. It depends on the painter's audience and whether that audience can sustain him in his practice by paying him a living wage and also by sustaining an ongoing critical and enthusiastic engagement with the matter of his oeuvre. There can be little doubt, however, about Painting's attractions as a site of resistance to the 'all-appropriating onward march of orthodoxy'. This attraction has itself a long and heroic history and is a peculiarly modernist aspect of Painting's cultural role, although it is not by any means her only cultural attractiveness. European painting since 1800 has achieved a quite inordinate cultural prestige as a result of its revolutionary character; its very unorthodoxy has proved to be one of its most winning qualities. Even today their whiff of defiant rebelliousness causes us to look at these canvases as at captive wild animals : lethal but for the containing institutional framework. Indeed, it could conceivably be argued that only with the transfer of the centre of artistic innovation from Europe to America at the time of the Second World War and afterwards that painting's role in Society as a culturally central activity really got called into question. Easel-painting is really a European cultural invention which like many such cultural inventions are fairly specific to their generating locale and do not travel well. American painting since 1945 is fundamentally a different thing from European painting and it is regrettable that European painters have felt it necessary to follow this foreign example since then. However this imitative urge is no longer so strong as it was and European painters can go back to doing 'European' painting if they

wish without feeling intimidated by other types of painting, while learning from them.

Within this worldwide host of painters Ireland has fielded her own array of talents. To this day there exists a culture of Painting which has never stopped since its inception centuries if not millenia ago, although the tradition has not been seamlessly homogenious in its development up to the present: influences have been multifarous and contradictory, much to the benefit of the practice, from the manuscript illuminations of the monks of a millenium ago to the more derivative easel painting done between 1640 and 1920. Particularly since the establishment of the Irish Free State (the "Saorstát") in the early 1920's the variety of painting practices in Ireland has been healthy enough, whatever about their subtlety, profundity or universality of significance.

In fact the latter matter of universal significance in Irish painting has been problematic for its exportation: much Irish painting has tended to confine its relevance and address to the locale of its birth, this marginal island of $4^1/_2$ million which is barely a country, let alone two. Much of the painting of the last 75 years has undertaken a task that was seen as different from the tasks addressed by painters in Europe and America. The latter two, particularly the Europeans, had a cultural self-confidence and self-reliance without equal and were pushing ahead with realising the cultural implications of Modernity, upholding the myth of Progress and the cult of Individual Originality through the avant-gardist fetish of constant and unremitting innovation regardless of its consequences or social and cultural side-effects. Futurism's involvement with fascism in Italy is a reminder of where extremism in any field can lead and also of how modernism in its various guises related to other issues of the time, notably national cultural self-determination and self-assertion.

The Irish painters that came to their majority around the time of the foundation of the state responded to this climate of innovation and the new 'liberation' that was occurring in the visual arts with an excitement which went hand in hand with the new-found 'liberation' of the Irish homeland from colonial domination. There was a new sense of personal responsibility in the "forging of the as yet "informed consciousness" of the

newly sovereign nation by 'forging' one's own consciousness's form through art. All of the artists of significance from this generation learned to work within the modes of pictorial organisation invented by the continental Europeans, some following more closely and literally the theories of practice learned there than others. Mainie Jellett and Evie Hone in particular come to mind as practicing self-conscious cubists for instance (Pl.1).

However though they all took on the innovations of pictorial organisation invented and 'discovered' by the Avant-Gardists the emphasis in Ireland seems to have been on harnessing these stylistic innovations for the expression of a 'native' experience of an intensely personal kind. Much of the work has an anecdotal or a locally very specific quality to it, whether its Norah McGuinness' (1903 - 1980) idiosyncratically rendered sites (Pl.2) or Harry Kernoff's 'comic realism', the people and places of his daily life affectionately and quirkily portrayed (Pl.3). With the next wave of artists coming to their majority in the thirties there appears a deepening and an intensifying of this personal narrative in their work. Colin Middleton, Gerard Dillon, Tony O'Malley, Patrick Collins, Louis le Brocquy and George Campbell – many of them from the North of Ireland, and mostly largely self-taught artists with the crusading intensity of such self-made practitioners, all developed idiosyncratic styles of a very personal sort. Indeed a characteristic of much of their work is a playful variety of styles within each person's oeuvre while all the time concentrating the focus of each piece on its expressive character (Pls. 4 & 5). As Vera Ryan wrote a propos of Tony O'Malley:

> O'Malley went beyond registering the visible to suggesting aspects of experience not easily amenable to visualisation: the sensation of solitude, of silence, of the air rendered breathless by rapid bird flight, of place marked by human experience, of mood invoked by sound.
> (Brian Lynch (ed) 1996 p68). (Pl. 6).

and Patrick Heron:

> his visual curiosity is...practically without limitation...in the sense that the sensitivity has never confined his work to a consistency of style or idiom which would restrict its basic configuration to a limited formal range. (ibid p. 144). (Pl.7).

and O'Malley himself

> .....I would regard a painting with composition as a rigid frame in which I was going to be imprisoned... (Ibid. p. 242).

It involved preserving an openness on the artist's part to every nuance of his (or her) inventive and expressive urges and of being able to accommodate as many of these nuances of inspiration in the work. For this, the work had to have an enormous formal flexibility to it and had to be capable of compassing both figurative and anecdotal elements together with abstract formal compositional and structural aspects within the same painting. A purist formal aesthetic would only have been a hindrance to this sort of expressive enthusiasm, this sort of childlike sense of freedom in the managing of the pictorial means, this sense of the liberating joy of painting itself.

> There is a thing in art that continues all the time, and that is that purism in art is also a kind of puritanism. Its not admitting anybody in...and I'm not really an aesthete you know. I think there is dross and dung on things that you do. (Tony O'Malley, quoted in Brian Lynch (ed) 1996 p. 68).

For many of these artists this liberating joy was a great discovery: painting was not a normal nor even a conceivable activity for people from their backgrounds so their discovery of it as a creative possibility for themselves was indeed like the discovery of a new and unimagined paradise in their very hands.

The majority of these painters were concerned to establish a reliable centre to their pictorial motivations by stressing their inspirational sources as being home-grown rather than imported. Personal mythologies were founded and articulated and sometimes defensively developed to a greater or lesser extent (as in Gerard Dillon, Tony O'Malley and Patrick Collins) depending on the nature of their sense (1) of originality and (2) of what constitutes for each of them pictorial significance. Concerning Gerard Dillon, James White has mentioned his "resistance to being taught – some stubborn conviction that he must find his way without help." (James White 1994 p. 32).

With this development there occurs an inward-looking turn to the development of significant imagery in Irish Painting. While the Europeans felt comfortable with their sense of themselves many of these Irish artists had to excavate their consciousness to find an imagery they could identify with and work with and feel was their 'own' in an expressive sense. I believe this predicament has held and still holds true for many Irish artists from that day to this. Gerard Dillon, Patrick Swift and the whole so-called "neo-expressionist" turn of the 1980's including Patrick Graham and Michael Kane all partake of this anxiety of signification and of personal expression in their work, a crisis of identity or rather of identification of their cultural 'selfhood'.

> In the more vulnerable of conditions, one is more likely to arrive at a moment of truth of being an artist, rather than the other conditioned *act of* being an artist. The act is dependent for its life on awareness of trends, styles, fashions and tastes, while the former is about breaking dependencies through understanding conscious, then unconscious and even subconscious elements of conditioning. This of course can lead to fearful truths and confession to self wherein lies a truth. Art such as this comes off the backbone and shatters the delusion of facility as talent. (Patrick Graham, 1984 p. 33).

The generation of artists that entered upon their majority prior to 1921 or even prior to 1900 were not confronted with the same creative difficulty because it was unthinkable in the colonial situation that prevailed in Ireland then. They either pursued an 'academic' Naturalism or Realism à la Barbizon and Courbet (Nathaniel Hone, Seán Keating, Sir John Lavery, Walter Osborne) (Pl.8), or tested themselves in the experimental fields of Impressionism and even (tentatively) Post-Impressionism (Roderic O'Conor, Mary Swanzy) (Pl.9). By and large though, notwithstanding the conscientiousness of their achievement, it was substantially derivative in content as well as form even if powerfully wrought in its way.

The 'Saorstát' generation (those coming to their majority in 1921) devoted a new intensity and urgency to the problem of forging a new schema of pictorial identification such as to satisfy the crisis of identification into which the new Irish state's collective psyche was plunged upon the achievement of independence.

The degree of individuality and of local difference realisable in painting between one Society and another is put in perspective by the fact that Painting is painting no matter where it is found. To be utterly original one would have to invent a new art altogether along with a uniquely specific cultural content, which is a cultural improbability for such a small country as Ireland no matter how idiosyncratic and marginalised it might be.

One strand of practice became particularly favoured by the new independent Irish School, namely landscape and particularly the painterly celebration of particular places rich in local detail and in associations particular to each artist, a landscape rich in autobiography, the home place, wherever home may be at the time, in one's domicile or in one's birth place. This is perhaps the richest vein of this and the following generations of Irish artists: Painting as Autobiography, whether it is landscape, interior, portraiture or even abstraction (Pl.10). Irish society had never suffered the spiritual indignity of undergoing an Industrial Revolution so that the old spiritual philosophies of Humanism and even Scholasticism still animated peoples' identifications of self-hood. As Thomas Carlyle pointed out concerning the fate of such values under Industrial Revolution, writing in 1829:

> Not the external and physical alone is now managed by machinery, but the internal and spiritual also....Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand. They have lost faith in individual endeavour, and in natural force, of any kind. .....Their whole efforts, attachments, opinions, turn on mechanism, and are of a mechanical character. (Thomas Carlyle: The "Signs of the Times" quoted in Williams 1951 p. 86).

This was the very antithesis of what these painters were (and are) struggling to realise through their work and Seán Fingleton as we shall see is continuing that struggle in his own way in his work.

CHAPTER 2

Seán Fingleton's Career to date

Seán Fingleton was born in Donegal in 1950, the son of a Bank Manager (father) and a District Nurse (mother). His art career had its tentative beginnings at home drawing "all over the walls" his life around him. He has mentioned in our interviews together (October & November 1996 & January 1997) his father's love of fishing and shooting and his own antipathy to the horrors of killing the unfortunate victims of these 'sports'. He mentions a drawing he had done of a rabbit which drawing his father particularly admired. He has some difficulty reconciling this admiration of his father's with his father's practice of killing rabbits in the field by shooting their heads off. Later on in 1985 the rabbit, now transformed into a hare, will get the image of its lifeless corpse flung visually across a self-portrait of Seán's to clinch the tensions of the image in an arrestingly vital if violent gesture which flings mortality straight into the face of the artist-hero, questioning the heroic pretensions of portraiture as a form, its aspiration to immortality, and also his own aspiration to immortality as an artist (Pl. 19).

This professional application to painting and drawing may be said to have begun during a working sojourn in London from 1973 where he joined classes after work in life-painting and life drawing. In 1975 he undertook a diploma course in Letterkenny R.T.C. in art where his teachers included Declan McGonagle, the later director of the Orchard Gallery in Derry, the I.C.A. in London and I.M.M.A. in Dublin. Upon Fingleton's graduation in 1979 he attended degree-level studies in NCAD for a short period.

He started exhibiting professionally in 1978 at the Independent Artists annual exhibition and exhibited regularly with them up to their last exhibition, their 27th annual, in 1987, also sitting for the first time on the organising committee for that year. The event that was to launch him onto the national stage however was his winning of a G.P.A. Award for Emerging Artists in 1986 along with Eithne Jordan, Alanna O'Kelly and Philip McFadden, 'pipping' many now illustrious names such as Dorothy Cross, Willie Doherty, Pauline Cummins, John Kindness and Anita Groener amongst others at the post for the prize!

Since then he has experienced an impressive degree of patronage and exposure, as his Curriculum Vitae readily demonstrates. He has exhibited regularly at local and

international level in both group and solo exhibitions, representing Ireland in 'Celtic Visions' 1988, where he showed with, inter alia, Sidney Nolan, Albert Irvin, Tony O'Malley, John Bellany, Elizabeth Magill and Felim Egan, and also in Expo 1992 in Barcelona. He is also represented in the 'Great Book of Ireland' of 1991 wherein are gathered original works by selected Irish visual artists and calligraphic transcriptions of work by selected Irish poets.

His solo exhibitions have seen him in the Orchard Gallery, Derry (1990), Taylor Galleries, Dublin (1991), as well as in galleries in London (1996) and Tokyo (1990).

He has exhibited and worked in close proximity with Ronan Walsh from 1986 - 1988 with exhibitions in the Cork Arts Society (1986), the Riverrun Gallery, Limerick (1987) the Wexford Arts Centre (1988) and in Kingston, Ontario (1992). Since 1993 he has been exhibiting with the RHA as well.

He is well represented in public and private collections including the permanent collections of I.M.M.A., the Arts Council of Ireland, the Department of An Taoiseach, the European Parliament, Allied Irish Bank, Bank of Ireland, Woodchester Bank and others. He has been a member of Temple Bar Gallery and Studios since 1985.

In the 10 years since his GPA award his work has undergone several metamorphoses. Up to 1986 he was exploring painting with a view to crystallizing the formal matters of a personal iconography, subject-matter, treatment, style and symbolism, a period of apprenticeship spent in the relative isolation of obscurity. With his GPA pictures (titled 'Alone' I & II) (Pl.22) depicting a loan boatman rowing his craft in a heavy turbulent sea without a glimmer of sky, daylight or horizon visible, he found his way in all those formal matters suddenly, all together. His subject was his feeling of himself in the world, his treatment was a heavily textured expressive impasto of pure colour applied more or less straight from the tube and imparted to the picture with a slashing palette-knife technique, his symbolism a 'maternal' naturalism.

These factors have remained the same in his painting to this day. All that has changed are the particulars of each painting's iconography and colour balance. Within those changes, however, significant alterations of emphasis have occurred over the years. With the G.P.A. pictures he treated of the sea, after that he worked using domestic animal and livestock imagery (Pl.27) within a now characteristically turbulent and expressively textured landscape – based background. In the early '90s he addressed the imagery of the sea again, but this time treating of it as the foil to an imagery of rugged and precipitate cliff-faces. Since then he has returned to painting landscape, but this time without the animals, just pure, unadulterated land and vegetation, with scarcely any traces of human habitation or involvement, except perhaps a road, a hedgerow, or (rarely) a building, hardly ever a figure (e.g. Pl.45).

With regard to the genesis of Fingleton's iconography it can be seen that he followed the example of his forebears in Ireland and devoted himself to visualising his personal view of life by visualing firstly the life he saw around him and secondly the impact this life had on him.

Even in London he had painted a triptych, now in Kildare Co. Library, which forcefully presents these two aspects of his concerns (Pl.11). It is a picture ostensibly of an underground station but also with references to a mental hospital corridor where an individual is shown being (mentally) torn in two opposite directions by the screaching violence of the trains on either side of him flying in opposite directions out of the two side panels of the picture, tearing it apart while in the centre panel a figure (a self-portrait?) tries to 'hold himself together' as an individual. This central figure holds the picture together but only just. The tension between the figure and his surroundings could not be more graphically presented, and it could be said that the figure's effort to maintain his unitary sense of self in this antagonistic modern environment becomes the subject of the picture.

Indeed, the image of the individual as a self-contained unity is never present in Fingleton's work. The individual is always contextualised within a larger framework of forces, his unitariness always under question and always beset with disintegrating foils

represented in many ways, as animals, weather, Nature, always set up in conflict with and antagonistic to the self, the individual, whether overtly or covertly represented in the picture (e.g. Pl. 31).

After studying in Letterkenny where the tuition involved the straightforward, unproblematised representational portraiture of people (Pl. 16), things or environments, this image expressed Fingleton's dissatisfaction with that academic complacency. His experience of life and of his self-in-life vociferously contradicted it. It could be argued that representationality itself came to represent the Stable, the Composed, the Unitary, the Renaissance Individual, in a post-individualised world for Fingleton. The fact that he never foregoes it could be said to indicate a lingering nostalgia for this unitary type of identity in a knowingly post-unitary view of experience.

After his return to Dublin in 1979 he worked for a time as an assistant careworker in a geriatric hospital and out of this experience he produced a body of drawings of patients lying beyond recovery, prone in their beds, awaiting death, available now only to Death (Pl. 12). Here was a presentation of Individuality isolated under almost laboratory conditions to be scrutinised for any possible originariness that it may possess. Death can be seen as the apotheosis of the individual in this world, the most forlornly individual and isolated event that can happen to a person, maybe *the* individualising event, the completion of a life as if to say 'this was an individual life'; whatever about that it is certainly an individual death (Pl. 13). These drawings he exhibited with the Independent Artists in these years where, inevitably, they were noted, and their bald account of experience registered.

After this experience, Fingleton strove to return to a more positive, celebratory subject-matter to restore his sense of vitality and work to communicate it. Already it can be seen that his mode of encounter with life registers as an existential one: the anxiety of the individual adrift on the sea of life. The addressing of issues in a politically canny way was never part of his practice.

After a period seeking the celebratory in his bedsit lifestyle and trying to turn it into art

(Pl. 17), he finally turned to his greatest source of celebration, the landscapes of his youth in Donegal. Once he connected with this rich source, he never abandoned it. His references to anxiety became subsequently oblique and implicit, and always addressed from this emotional centre of landscape as 'heartland'.

However, this find took him a long time to accept. Before finally accepting it, he continued to address questions of figures in the pictures, representations of selfhood. In his 'bedsit' pictures, he had depicted himself or others in conjunction with several animal devices, a rooster, a crow, or a hare as cited earlier (Pl. 20). These animals took on a strong symbolic quality in the pictures and this power they had led him to address them as subjects for pictures in themselves (Pl. 23) with landscape sneaking in originally as summary background for these iconic devices. His pictures of crows and roosters became well-known up to the late '80s and gave rise to much of the critical enthusiasm for his pictures' emblematic' quality during the '80s. However, as emanations of his emotional condition they proved unsatisfactory: their exposition as the symbols of an emotional life showed up their inadequacy in that role. An adult emotionality requires more accommodation than is to be found in the symbolism of the Lone One, which is more an adolescent symbolism, a journeyman symbolism of exile and of being adrift in an amorphous context. It was time to address the context, the background, until now only sketched in (Pl. 28).

With this turn, he moved away from the birds and replaced them with a more grounded iconography, and also a more maternal, feminine one, cattle (and sometimes other domestic animals), but this time always contextualised in the land (Pls. 27, 29).

Many have found some of these pictures difficult to assimilate. Their subject-matter has a tranquility and a literally bovine muteness which seems to be divested of address. Their passivity irks those seeking to be accosted by artworks. The perception of art as polemic forgets the tradition of artmaking as a spiritual seeking of harmony, balance, stillness. Indeed, to some, this aspect of art does not exist. However, these pictures stand as a point of contemplative stillness in Fingleton's oeuvre while he regroups and reorients himself towards the subject matter of his Heartland, the consciousness of

which is still here only forming.

The awkwardness of the drawing of the cows leads him to distance himself from them and eventually to leave them behind. Perhaps their blatant maternality became too cloying a subject and had to be put at a distance.

During this period he had reverted to the practice of drawing and making painting studies direct from observation of the landscape *en plein air* (Pl. 34). He would often travel back to Donegal for this specific purpose. But living in Dublin made this an awkward arrangement and so he took to doing it round Dublin itself. He went where it was practicable to go to paint or draw, to quieter places where he could work without being disturbed (Pls. 35, 46). These placed included parks, the Dublin hills, the canals and Howth Head. The city itself was always too chaotic and distracting a place to paint in *en plein air.* The parks, while tranquil and conducive to a sort of lyricism, were too tame to satisfy his sense of the sublime and of the dramatic. The subject to which he became drawn was the Cliffs at Howth overlooking the sea (Pl. 47).

While these were tame compared to the Atlantic coastline, they were sufficiently 'wild' and rugged for his purposes as compared with the other subjects that were available to hand. In the course of several years he built up a substantial portfolio of swift pastel drawings (Pls. 35, 51, 52) and closer, more 'observed' studies in oil or acrylic from these subjects (Pls. 36, 37, 47), and was able to use these to fuel his studio practice of large, freely-rendered canvases which is the heart of his practice.

With the cliff paintings he realises much of the potential latent in his free and thickly-textured manner of painting (Pl. 38). The textures of his knifework gel convincingly with the rough and rugged materiality of the subject, while the sea enables him to indulge his taste for formlessness in his textural swirls, while also giving him ample opportunity to explore the blue to violet end of the colour-spectrum as he depicts the depths as well as the surface of the water (Pl. 30). Some of these sea passages are amongst the most cogent examples of his painting to date. Also in these paintings he gives full attention to the tertiary colours, the browns and ochres and dull greens that he

uses to build up the sides of the cliff faces and the underlying rocks, much of it in shadow. These paintings have rightly received more attention than many of his contemporary paintings of parks or other landscapes.

However, it has been the latter types of subject that have provided the material for his work after the 'Cliffs' series.

Parks, fields, gently-rolling hillsides, and country roads have with their very 'quietism' enabled him to attend to the intricacies of his painting without the distraction of 'sublimeness' in the subject. Any significance now has to arise from the image's facture as it is realised in the painting.

The vegetation takes on the role of figuration formerly fronted by the animals and people but without the singularity of individuality of these (Pl. 39): trees now appear as *unus inter pares,* individual manifestations of a greater homogenious collectivity; vegetation as a sort of passive community populating the land or public space of the world, regimented according to mankind's dominion but redolent not so much of that as of their own (unharnessed) vitality in and of itself. The concern is not with the Government of Life, but with Life itself as the datum to be focussed on and celebrated (Pl. 40).

Fingleton focusses attention on this vitality by – as ever – 'hamming-up' his painterly treatment of the vital elements in the scene. The treatment of the paint becomes the signifying agent within the framework of translation that is the represented scene. It is not the tree or the field itself that signifies, but the image of the 'tree' or 'field' *transmogrified* (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary: transformed *utterly* or *grotesquely)* into one of Fingleton's appropriately manipulated paint passages. Within this specialised 'dialect' of painting Fingleton has succeeded in expressing himself with some force (Pls. 50 & 49).

CHAPTER 3

Analysis and Critical Reception

of his Work

The variations in the critical reception Fingleton's work has evinced highlight the shifts in public appreciation for his changes in subject-matter over the years as well as documenting the perceived significance or otherwise of his work by the public during that time.

The critical record is scanty and brief, and is concentrated mainly between 1986 and 1991 and involves reviews from four different hands, with negligible or unintelligible comments extant from one or two others.

The most extensive reviewing occurs at the hand of Aidan Dunne (Sunday Press 14/12/'86 & 10/5/'87, and Sunday Tribune 13/11/'88, as well as at least one substantial catalogue essay, for the Orchard Gallery Show in 1990) and of Desmond McAvock (Irish Times 24/12/'86 and 11/5/'87, as well as a modest catalogue introduction for the Taylor Gallery show of 1991).

Aidan Dunne's effusions develop from a wary, oblique and almost niggardly appreciation in '86 to a more affirmatively appreciative one in '87 to an almost emphorically eulogistic one in 1988. His catalogue contribution of 1990 sustains the appreciation but in more measured terms and from a more sober perspective, after which there appears to be a silence.

The '86 review is of Fingleton's first major appearance as a painter capable of sustaining a substantial presence in a gallery with the potential to handle a one person show with cedit. He is seen in the first two-person show of his career with Ronan Walsh in the original (and best) Temple Bar Gallery space, then on the first floor of the building, a pretty massive space for a novice to take on (Pl. 24).

Dunne credits the two artists with "making an intense, gutsy exhibition", describing Fingleton as "very much a figurative artist". The show contained much work from the previous two years, ranging from clown-like imagery painted with scumbled brushwork

from '84 (Pl. 20) to more generalised figurative images painted in his more flamboyant and assured palette-knife technique of '86. The more assured works came from the then most recent body of work that included his successful submissions to the G.P.A. competition in the previous month (Pl. 25).

Dunne appreciates the loftiness of Fingleton's evident ambition and stresses his appreciation of the symbolic strength of his figurative imagery "rich in...relevance" which reminds him – somehow – of Gerard Dillon interestingly enough, since Fingleton had known Dillon and had frequented his abode on numerous occasions during the last 2 years of Dillon's life during which visits he would hear many exhortations of encouragement and anecdotes concerning his life and career from the old painter. Dillon's joy in pictorial creativity communicated itself to him and was a source of much inspiration and encouragement to him during his formative years. Dillon's "I am always trying to see with a child's innocence and sincerity" (James White 1994) was a touchstone to his creative joy which Fingleton always remembered, cherished and strove to emulate in his own career. Fingleton remembered Dillon and Arthur Armstrong as "very generous and jovial guys", and this applied likewise to their advice about painting. For me, these general encouragements to paint and to make painting enjoyable seem to be the core of Dillon's legacy to Fingleton rather than there being much overt continuity between their imageries, even in Fingleton's formative phase.

However, Dunne expresses in this review a difficulty with accepting Fingleton's treatment of his figurations:

> figurative motifs sit heavily against this choppy skin of paint...

and

> The agitated impasto of the surface just doesn't seem to relate to the composition or the drawing. Its like a stylistic mannerism applied regardless of context.

I would suggest that, in this first substantial exhibition, there is a certain truth in these assertions, but that Dunne is here also recoiling at a palette-knife technique that has not perhaps quite jelled yet but which, as Fingleton later pointed out in interview, is a technique which, paraphrasing a remark on it by the artist Mick O'Sullivan who having tried the technique himself, learned to appreciate Fingleton's fluency with it, "those who don't paint cannot appreciate". So it is a specialised and unorthodox though nevertheless a methodical technique which perhaps takes some getting used to, about the appreciation of which there is a learning curve involved for the viewer.

In his later reviews, he is more positive, even abut the paintwork: In '87 he writes

"By and large the painter has grasped the nettle and painted honestly, directly and well."

> Fingleton's contributions were always striking, always marked by their clarity and intensity. [The exhibition] boasts an almost palpable sense of excitement in the freedom and expressive possibilities of painting and is consequently continually enlivening and inspiring. (Dunne 1987).
>
> In his handling of paint (pasted on with a knife...) and his approach to landscape, he...echoes Seán McSweeney and most of all, perhaps, Jack B. Yeats. (Dunne 1987).

[However,] "It somehow stops short of....[being] a genuinely compelling account of Ireland and Irishness,...but the potential is there..." (Dunne 1987).

In 1988, Dunne throws his caution to the winds and exclaims that "Fngleton's paintings and drawings .... have a terrific vigour .....

[It is] "as if Fingleton is engaged in a fierce, physical battle to convey the tangible presence of the animal(s) and the space [they] occupy." (Dunne 1988).

I quote Dunne at length because of all the reviewers extant, he seems to be the only one to have made any substantial effort to come to terms with Fingleton's work as a credible artistic project, and while his writing tends towards the euphoric and the overblown, he is the only one to have attempted the job of putting Fingleton's work into verbal critical perspective, including an articulation of the remarkably dense paint surfaces' role in the paintings which no other reviewer has attempted.

perspective, including an articulation of the remarkably dense paint surfaces' role in the paintings which no other reviewer has attempted.

Dunne in his catalogue essay (1990) refers to the sculptural quality of the thick, worked impasto and to both the physicality and the "hard-won monumentality" of its effect in the paintings. He sees it as significant of the artists' struggle to make the painting, which in turn he sees as being expressive of "creative turmoil, the romantic identification of the artist's inner state with the turbulence of the world he describes, an emphasis on expressive qualities and on the difficulty of painting." (Dunne 1990 p. 5).

Fingleton's painting derives its expressive force from the manipulation of a basic central trio of formal elements, namely color, impasto and relief-sculpting of the thick paint surface. Of these three, the first and third, color and relief-sculpting, operate as expressive variables, while the second, the sheer impasto, constitutes a passive but ineluctible presence in the paintings, as much an extension of the support (the stretched canvas or board) as a part of the 'painting'. His 'painting' per se, that is, his expressive manipulations that conjure up his image, takes place within the rich impasto as much as 'on' it: his paintings partake of both the visible and the tactile to a marked degree much like Auerbach in one sense but very different in another sense. For whereas Auerbach's impasto serves the visible legible aspect of the drawing in a supportive but secondary way, Fingleton's manipulations of the impasto act as an abstract counterpoint to the visual chromatically-rendered representation: in his knife textures the abstraction is as complete as in a Pollock (Pl. 49). This counterpoint creates a great expressive tension in the work on one level, but on another it brings the painting into a different arena of achievement than straight-forward 'landscape painting' as such. The two ways of working, the chromatic and the relief-knife work create a 'representational – abstract' painting, which is more than two paintings in one but a hybrid of the two that act in concert to produce that new entity, the representational – abstract hybrid, which is of a different genre than either taken separately.

According to Fingleton himself, his color, which he "likes to keep simple and fresh" because it is "more beautiful that way", laid down in luxious marks and ridges of paint with the palette-knife, has a "singing quality", a lyrical expressive resonance in the

coloured mark which is like a "singing wire", and is obliged by virtue of this very quality to be "tied down to the earth" with a heavy materiality of medium reminiscent of earth itself: a singing quality contextualised in a heavy materiality but not diminished one whit by that. He strives to maintain that 'singing' ecstasy by intensifying it while (or even by) intensifying the 'clay', the materiality, by not stinting the coloured pigmented medium, the colour and applied vigour of which generates much of the 'lyricality' in the painting.

There are several aspects to his materially dense paint surfaces. Firstly they constitute the metaphor of physicality or 'clay' or 'earth' which operates as a bed or context for his chromatic and textural flights of expression. Then there is the textural element within the materiality which acts as a sort of 3 dimensional drawing (or high relief), and within which drawing with the knife is another lyricism or expressive means which can accommodate some of the harder, grittier emotions than the color seems to address, so that it can act as a sort of 'bass' to the colour's 'treble', setting the tangible defining parameters of the images' aerial spatiality. The space in the pictures could not be bodied forth without the stressed delineators in materiality of those parameters; the land, a tree, a 'distant' hill, the cliff at the edge of the sea all act as delineators here, and in bodying forth the space, the space reciprocates by clothing them in aerial chromatic light, in 'glory' (Pls. 33, 41, 42). Fingleton has described himself as an "eye that does not want the colours of the world to fade", perhaps because he knows that there is more to the world than colour, than the merely visual or retinal.

The material reality of the medium (oil paint) replaces the realism in the appearance of the subject as a principle of the painting's realisation, and the particulars of the appearance of the subject are appropriated by the artist to be used as vehicles for the expression of his symbolism. Firstly he 'plays' with his subject's appearance without transforming it beyond recognition. He recognises and mobilises his subject's appearance as a vehicle for *his* symbolic assertions which are conveyed in and through the manipulations of the paint as the form of the appearance of *his* subject. To establish his expressive purposes he is obliged to abolish any rival realism from the picture so his account alone shall reign there. He colonises the subject and mobilises it for his own purposes alone.

The thick paint is used as a means for registering the expressive content of his knife-work and recording it for recovery by the viewer. His knife work becomes legible by means of the very thickness of the paint itself.

While he takes great liberties with appearance he does not ever dispense with it because on a formal level it is useful as a way of disciplining the applications of paint and colour without having to answer questions of what each brushstroke signifies 'transcendentally' as it is applied. He only asks that it looks and works right within the scheme of the pictorial representation being worked on, which is a workmanlike type of attitude to making his pictures.

Having in recent years confined his attention largely to landscape, his colour and texture palettes have settled into themselves and clarified his task for him, focusing the job so he can concentrate on his manoeuvrings within these parameters. He has established routines of subject - and colour - content which provide challenge enough most of the time but out of which he can step if he wishes to experiment with unusual effects (Pl. 32). A practical routine of arrangements is an important base for any practice to progress from. It provides a stability for his practice which without it might never quite gel into its potential significance.

Once he has decided on the subject to be painted and has organised in general terms his compositional schema vis à vis subject, colour and brightness in his mind, he sets about realising it while all the time attempting to maximise the vividness of his depictions according to his stylistic schema. In particular, vis à vis his Naturalism, he says he is interested in depicting the feeling of the wind and the weather as well as the physical objects of the scene (Pl. 48).

His subject-matter is utterly and deliberately unpretentious, straightforward landscape views taken gratefully and decidedly at face-value as if to say 'This is where painting starts: daylight on the Earth and on the things of this world, faced and recorded (depicted); a youthful encounter, akin to a waking in Eden.'

CHAPTER 4

Concluding Remarks

I have explored Fingleton's painting chronologically in order to generate a sense of the 'voyage of discovery' which is undoubtedly an aspect of his practice.

In all his paintings he addresses each time some straight-forward "matter-of-fact, almost documentary image" (Dunne 1990 p4) from his daily life. Formally they may be said to act as vehicles for his expressive treatment, a spur to his inspiration and a means of generating variety to maintain the sense of novelty in his daily round of facturing. They also maintain a sense of challenge, for each subject will present a new combination of colours, tones and shapes to be composed and interpreted anew with each painting, thus counteracting the danger of his practice reducing to the formulaic. They also constitute a second level of symbolism, a specification and particularisation of the symbolic generalities of his overall style, a particularisation which focuses the generalities onto everyday specifics as a daily 'test' of their validity and applicability.

There is a two-way process here which has to do with Fingleton's relating to and addressing an *audience.* If one is striving to communicate something one must address oneself to an audience that has some appreciation at least of the significations of the terms one is using if one is hoping to win them over to appreciating one's general 'message'. To this end one must couch one's 'message' in terms that are legible to one's audience. But to which audience does a painter address himself? Necessarily he must display his work to one and all in order to reach those who appreciate his 'terminology', his mode of visual referencing. And they will be found amongst those who "make themselves available to the work" (Dufrenne 1973), or more immediately those who belong to the same cultural 'stock' as the artist, who share his vocabulary and interpretative frame of reference. The degree to which the works transcend these limited communities and garner the attention of different, other communities to their significations is a measure of their universality of significance and of their social cultural importance (the 'depth' of the work). It is also a measure of the work's 'truth' in that communication is a sharing of common things, things of the real world rather than private selfish fantasies (though the capacity for fantasy may be a truth of the human 'world', shared by all humans). It is a measure of the artist's truthfulness to return us through his work and our 'alienation' in its imagined world to truths of the real world

and of our common experience as humans (Dufrenne 1973, Part I).

Thus Fingleton in his work starts off from the real, the everyday – a field, a cow, a cliff – and through his treatment of it takes us through his experience of it so as to make it our experience too so that we are returned to our experience of the real and thus to the world again but with his experience added to and enriching our own.

Concerning this experience that is conveyed through the work, there are variations of profundity, depth, seriousness and topical relevance evident throughout the oeuvre depending on his subject-matter, treatment and the maturity of his grasp of these aspects at the time of painting. For instance, in his paintings of the early 1980's (his 'bedsit' period as I called it earlier) he addresses images of individuals in simple interiors – rooms – which achieve a high degree of psychological intensity (Pls. 14, 15, 18, 21). The spectator is pushed up against the image of a person looking back at him from within their privacy, as if exposed to scrutiny in the act of being private, an exposure which can feel almost embarassing to the viewer. We can read their private concerns and preoccupations from the paraphenalia scattered round the room and even from the decor. We can almost tell their income from some of them!

Evident throughout is a sort of naiveté in the undertaking. It derives from the very straight-forwardness of his approach to his subject-matter, a sort of full-frontal single-point perspective straight onto the scene. This sort of unblinking directness of approach can again make the more wary spectators feel embarassed. His pictorial planning tends to be confined to the arranging of basic colour masses across the canvases rather than with properly engaging with the very subject-matter he has selected. There are exceptions throughout his oeuvre and these tend to be the more 'satisfying' pictures, like many of the cliff paintings and some of the earlier figure-and-interior pieces. In these more 'successful' pieces the perspective is more considered and more articulated than the others. However, some of his less perspectively articulated images still come off satisfyingly because of an equally concentrated attention given to some of the other elements, like the realisation of the colour and the light (Pl. 43). Some of the large landscapes have this quality, as do some of the drawings (Pls. 35, 51, 52), simple

though they be. Some of the figure paintings from the early to mid 1980's are credible by virtue of their visionary intensity of iconography like 'New Knowledge' of 1984. The fact that he has scored so many 'hits' consistently over the years is proof of the worthiness of his undertaking. However, he does not make it easy for himself by plunging directly into the painting with so little worked out beforehand. But his very techniques of expressive painting (often 'expression-ist') militate against the possibility of a coolly premeditated approach being operable. The palette-knife technique in particular needs a lot of free improvisatory opportunity to be wrought into something credible and may not be manageable if wielded in too carefully pre-planned a pictorial situation. It is of the essence of the technique that the picture be moulded within its (the knifework's) enactments rather than that the knife-work be made to achieve its renderings in too confined a situation which is alien to its nature.

Unfortunately this dichotomy between the representation's objects and the pictorial idiom of its facture (the means of pictorialisation employed) serves to hinder the full realisation of either's potential within the pictures. This dichotomy goes through every binary relation we have noted in the work: the materiality and the visuality of the work, the three-dimensional representational space and the two dimensional pictorial visual idiom, figuration and abstraction, texture and colour. There is an imbalance apparent between the two, a failure of final resolution. They may reach a maximum of realisation together in a piece but the essential tension is not resolved for once and for all. Even in the best pieces the dichotomy reaches a state of truce rather than a final resolution. As Dunne put it, they "stop short [of being] a genuinely compelling account... but the potential is there", though we must doubt if this potential will be fully realised now, for the work is made to satisfy two audiences, those who buy and enjoy it as a manifestation of landscape in a contemporary(-ish) style and Fingleton's own ambition to make of his work a personal expression of as much intensity as the pleasing of his public (i.e. other) audience will allow. Perhaps if he was in a position to make paintings without necessarily having to make them pay he would be freer to develop his genuinely painterly ambitions in his work. So we have another – this time a social and personal – dichotomy, the commercial and the aesthetically expressive, an irresolution between the private and the public which is a matter of his daily life and really not of

~~daily life and really not of~~ art.

So while we can applaud his aspirations to expressive joy and to the "apotheosis of the ordinary " (Dunne 1990) manifestly visible in all his work we must regret the fact that his artistic wings are so clipped. A failure of nerve perhaps, but not of verve!

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Mainie Jellett (1897 - 1944)

1. 'Achill Horses' 1941
   Oil on Canvas 24 x 36"

Norah McGuinness (1930 - 1980)

2. 'The Swan, Kilkenny' 1943
   Oil on Paper 14 x 19"

Harry Kernoff (1900 - 1974)

3. 'Sunny Day, Dublin' 1943
   Oil on Canvas $23^1/_2$ x $29^3/_4$"

Gerard Dillon (1916 - 1971)

4. 'Self-contained flat' 1955
   Oil on Board 48 x 72"

5. 'Whit Sunday' 1957
   Oil and Sand on Panel $24^1/_2$ x 37"

Tony O'Malley (b.1913)

6. 'Winter Silence' 1965
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7. 'Spring Rook Box for Janie' 1986
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8. 'Quayside with Fishermen mooring a Galway Hooker' 1974
   Oil on Board 35 x 32"

Roderic O'Conor (1860 - 1940)

9. 'The Bathers' c.1920
Oil on Canvas $28^{3}/_{4}$ x $36^{1}/_{4}$"

Tony O'Malley (b.1913)

10. 'Worktable and Silence' 1985
Oil on Board $15^{1}/_{2}$ x $25^{1}/_{2}$"

Seán Fingleton (b. 1950)

N.B.: All works are oil on canvas unless otherwise stated.

11. 'Underground' Triptych 1982

12. 'Old Soldiers' 1982

13. 'Hospital Patient' 1982

14. 'Child by a Window' 1982

15. 'Meditation' 1983

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17. 'Music' 1983

18. 'Land of Dreams' 1983

19. 'Self-Portrait with Hare'
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20. 'New Knowledge' 28 x $36^{1}/_{2}$" 1984

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22.	'Alone II' Oil on Board $41\frac{1}{2}$ x 46"	1986
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29.	'Of the Earth'	1990
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38. 'Cliff with Rocks' 53 x 39" 1995

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48. 'Trees by a Yellow Field' 24 x 32" 1996

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50. Detail of Pl. 49

51. & 52. Drawings 1995
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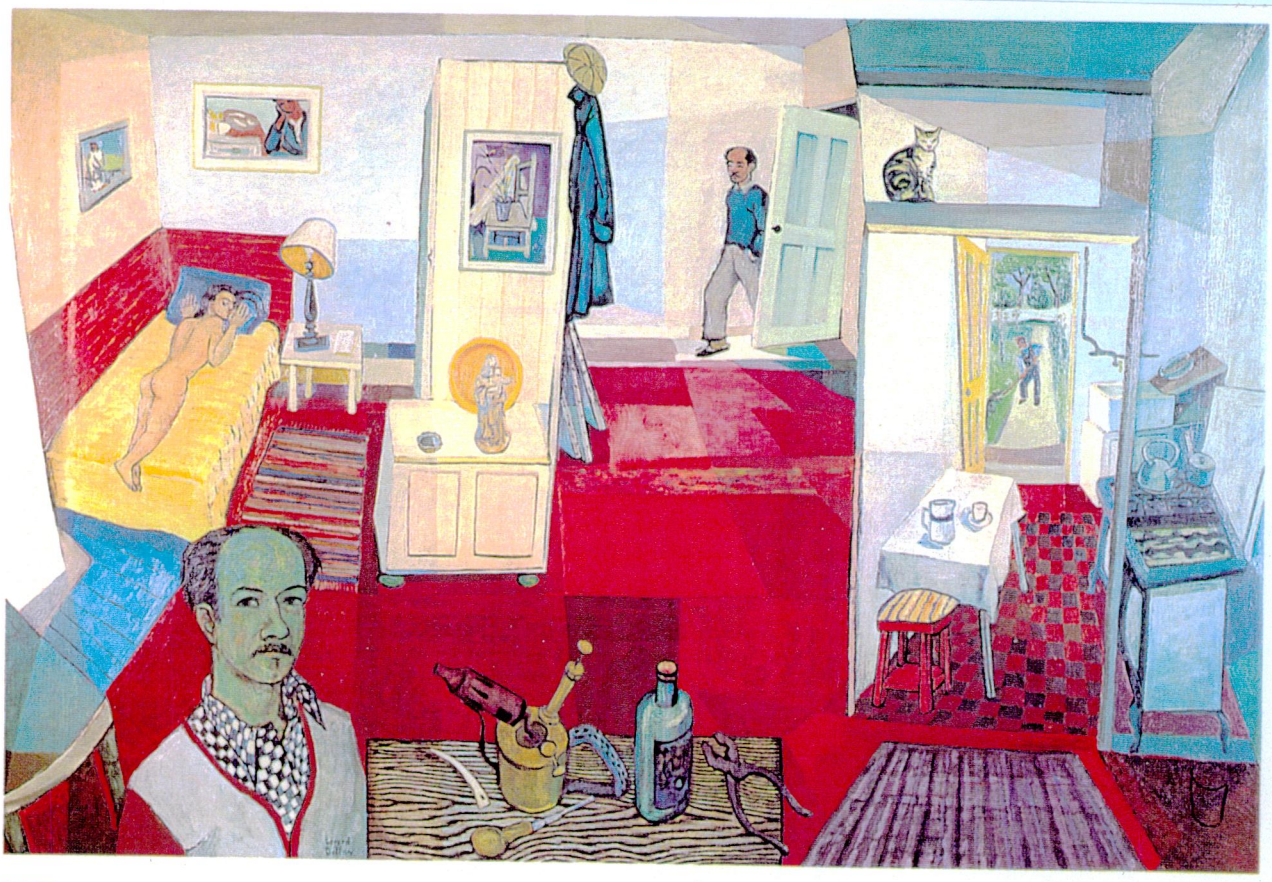
Pl. 1

Pl. 2

Pl. 3



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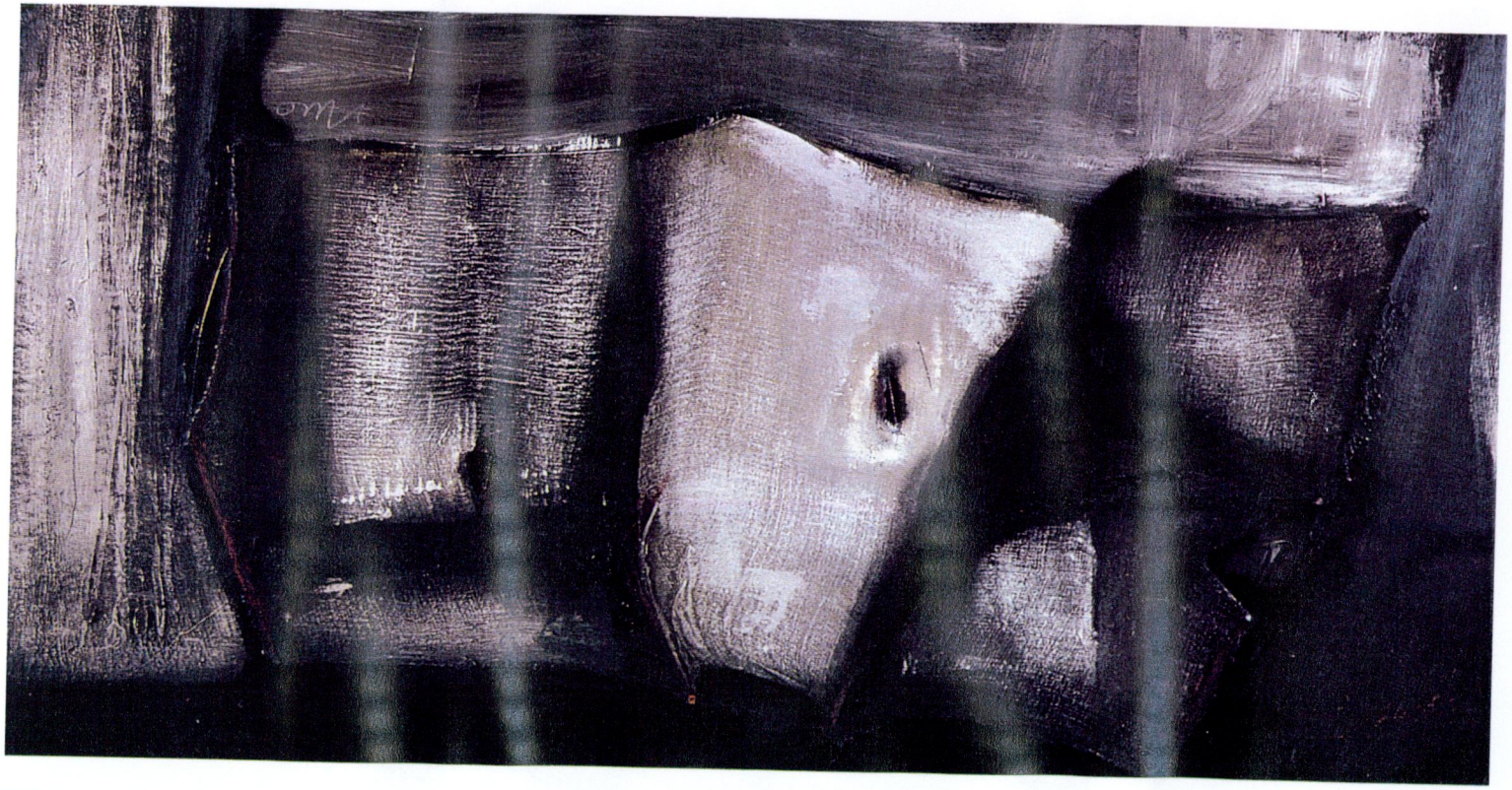
Pl. 7

(Pl. 6 →)



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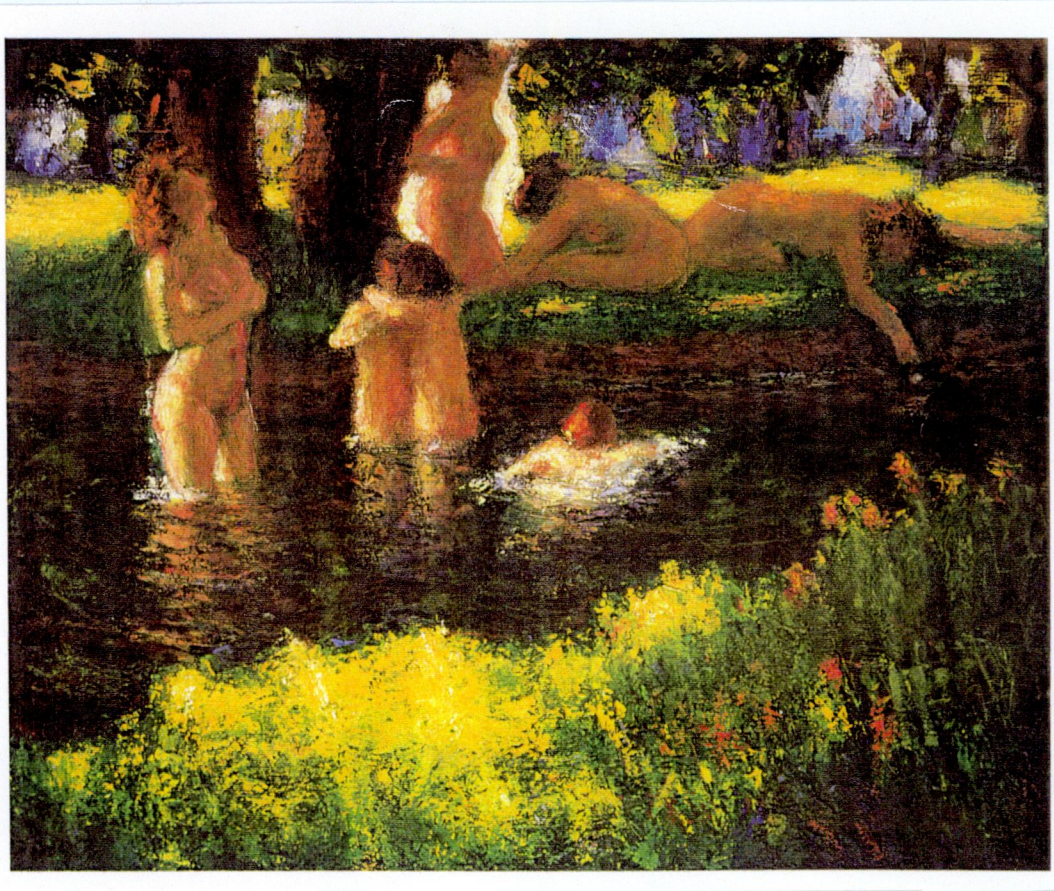
Pl. 8



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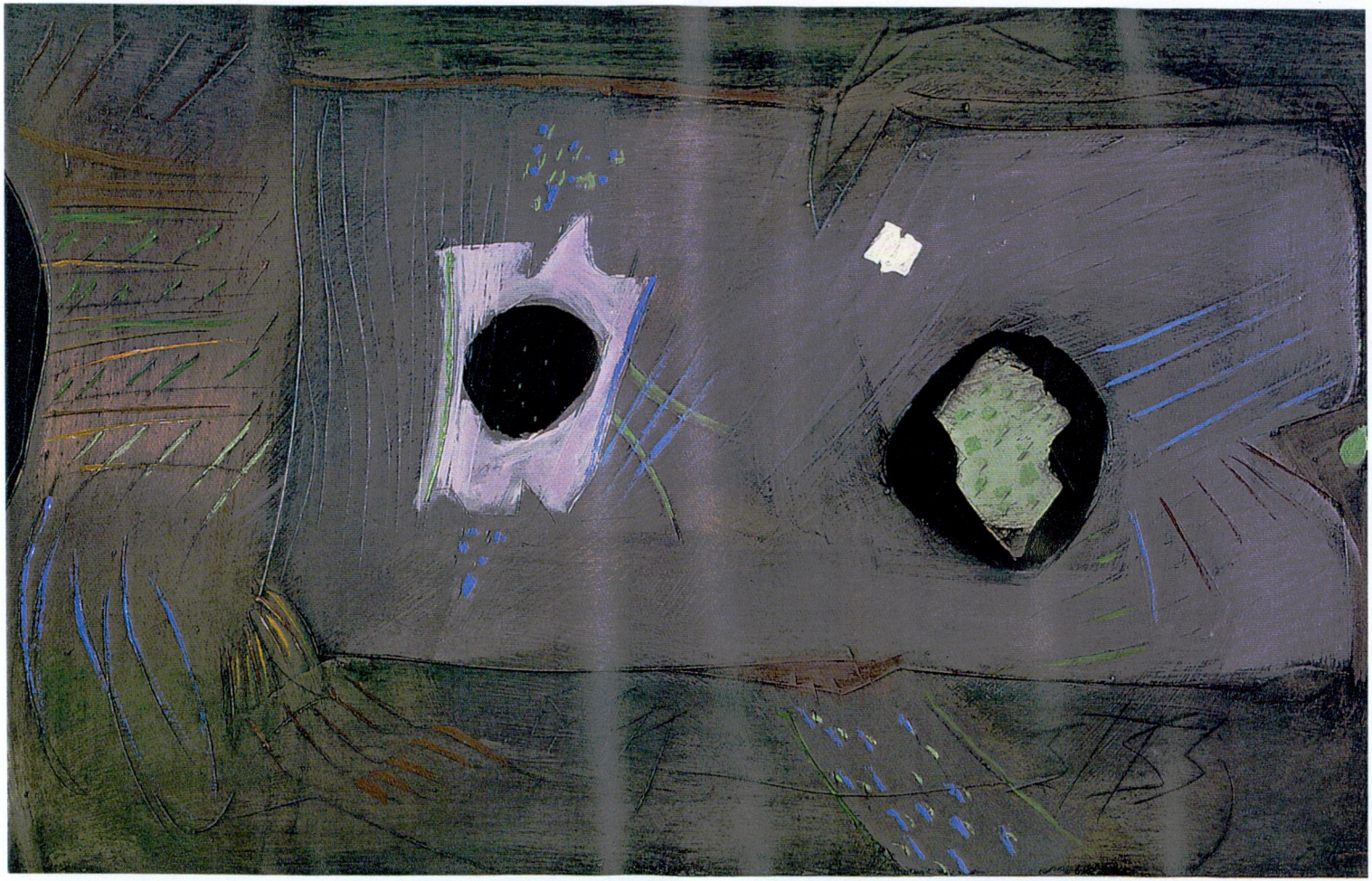

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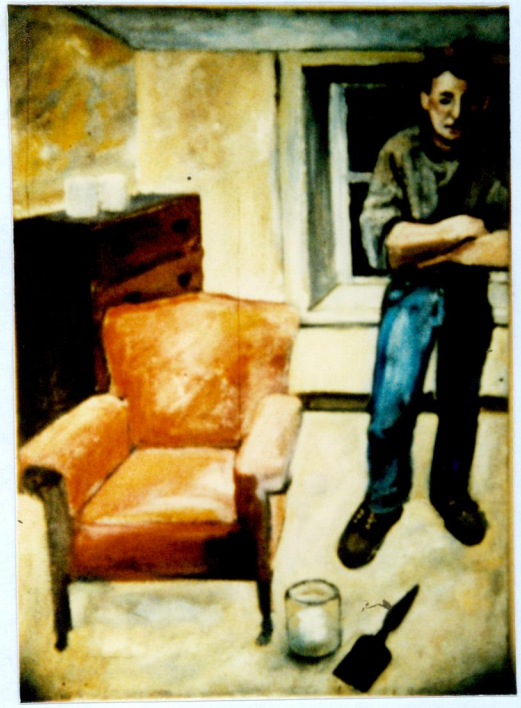
Pl. 20



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Pl. 23

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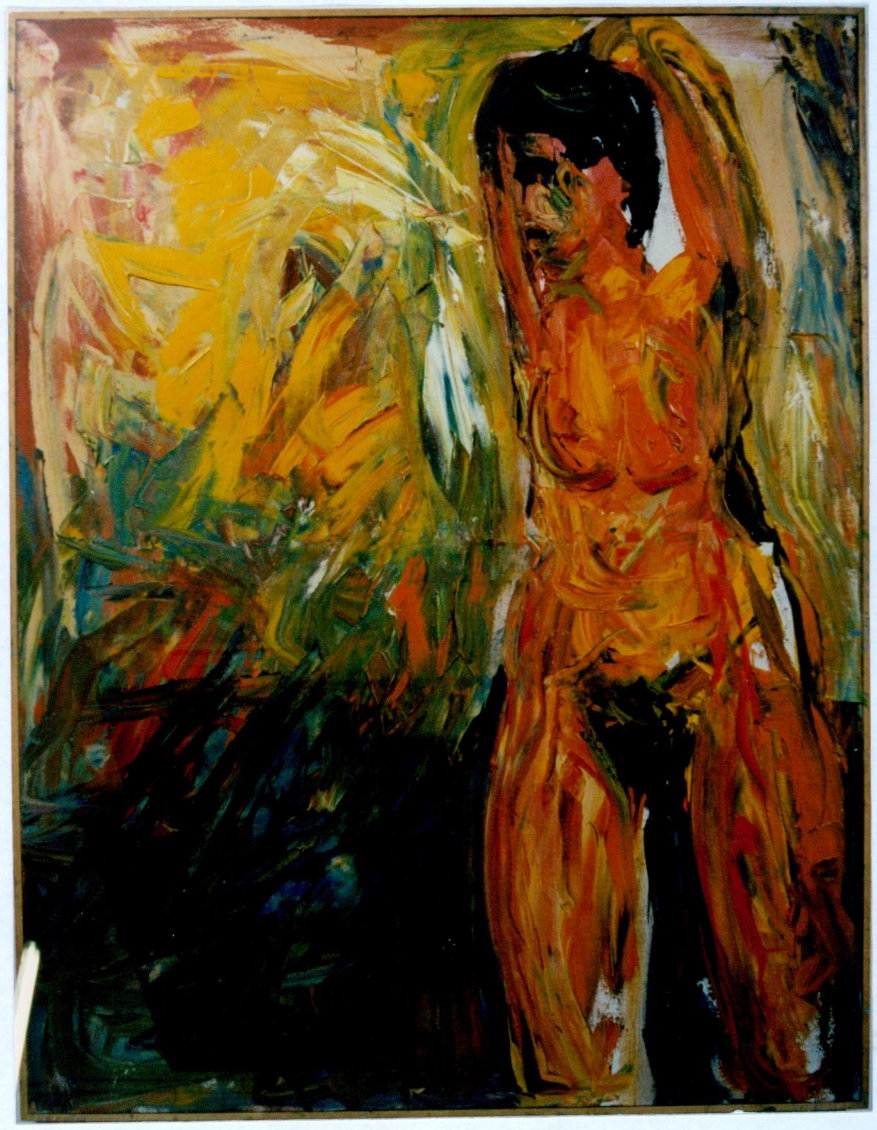

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Pl. 26

Pl. 28

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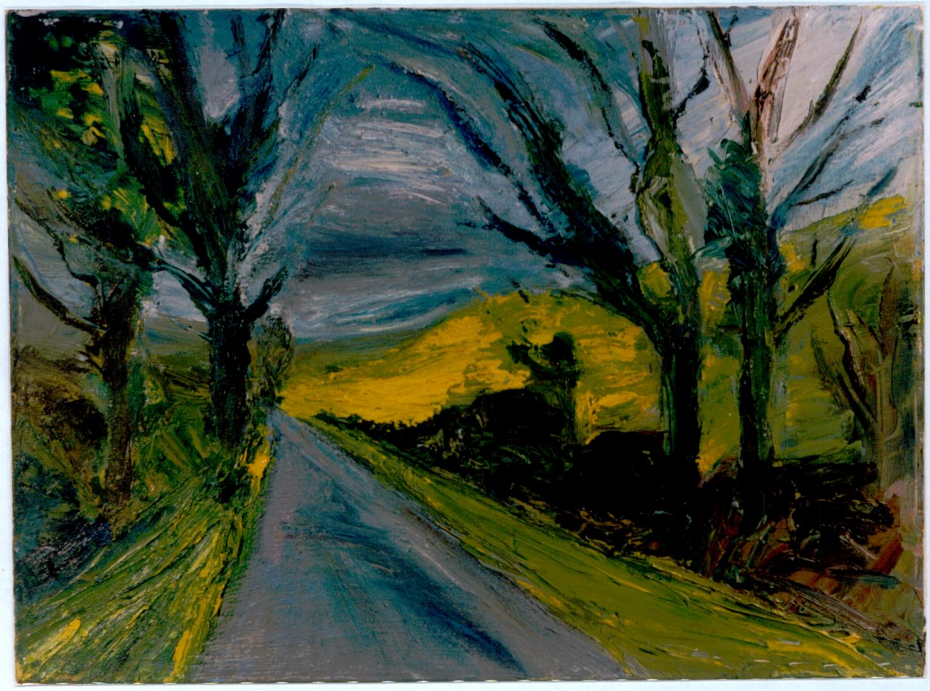
Pl 31

Pl. 32

Pl.33



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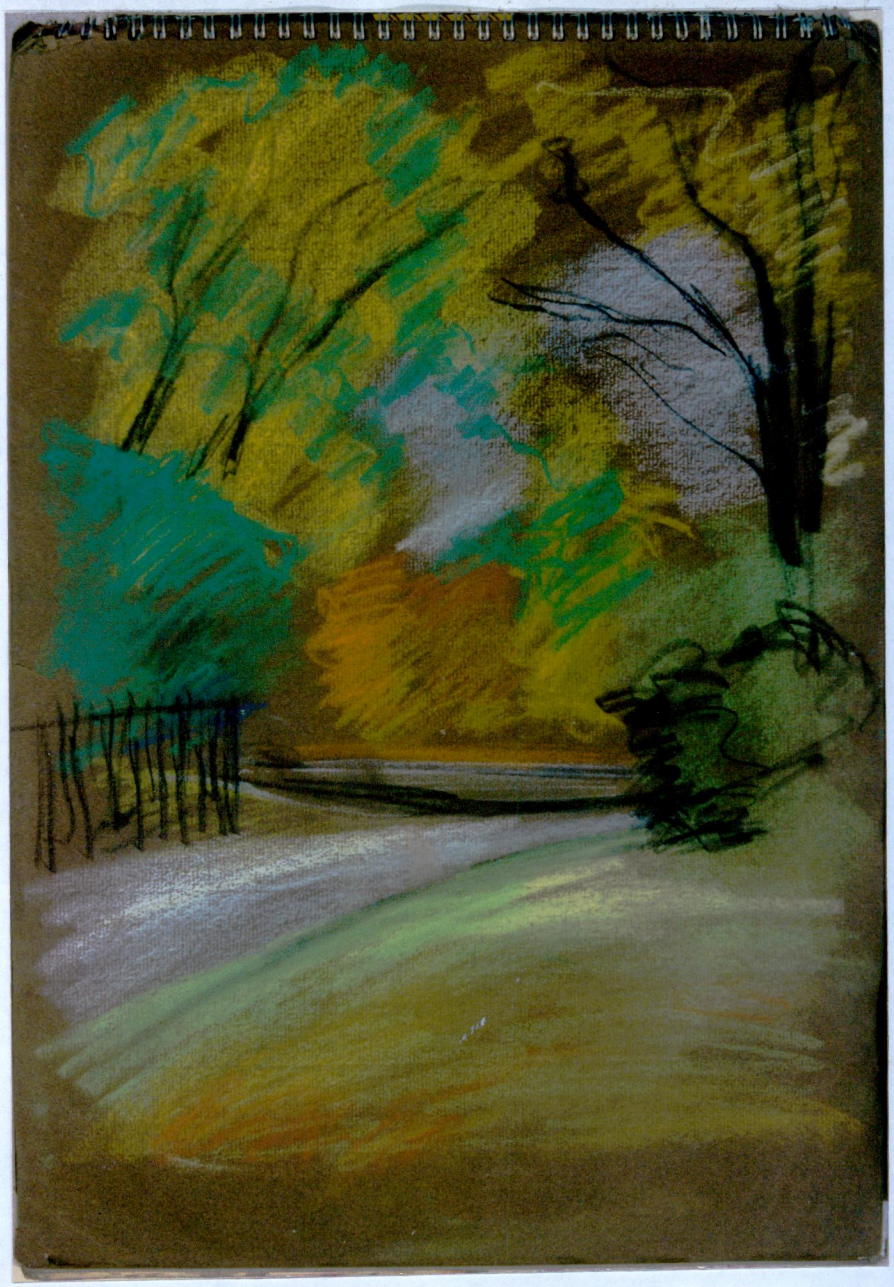

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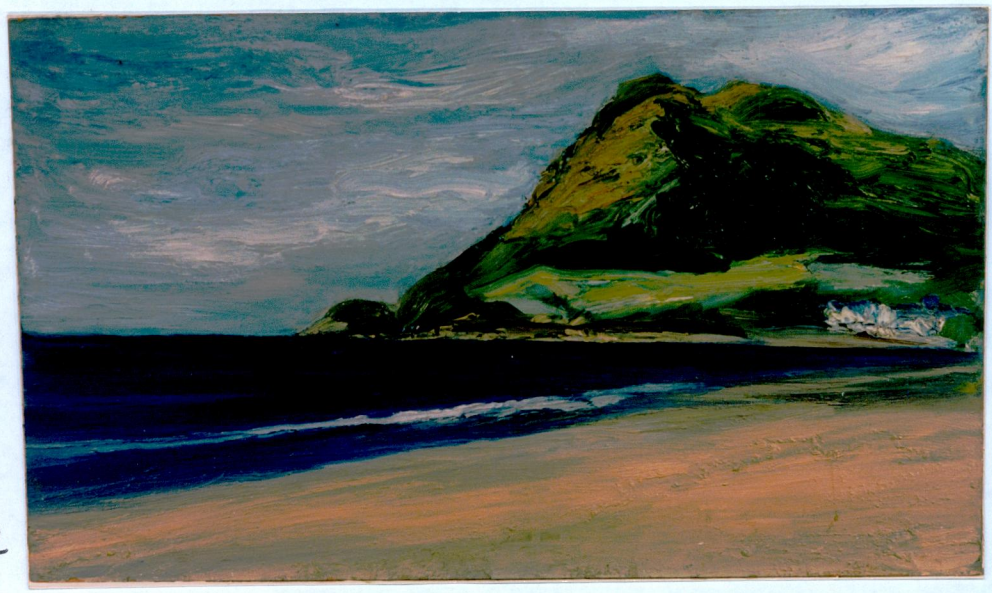
Pl. 36



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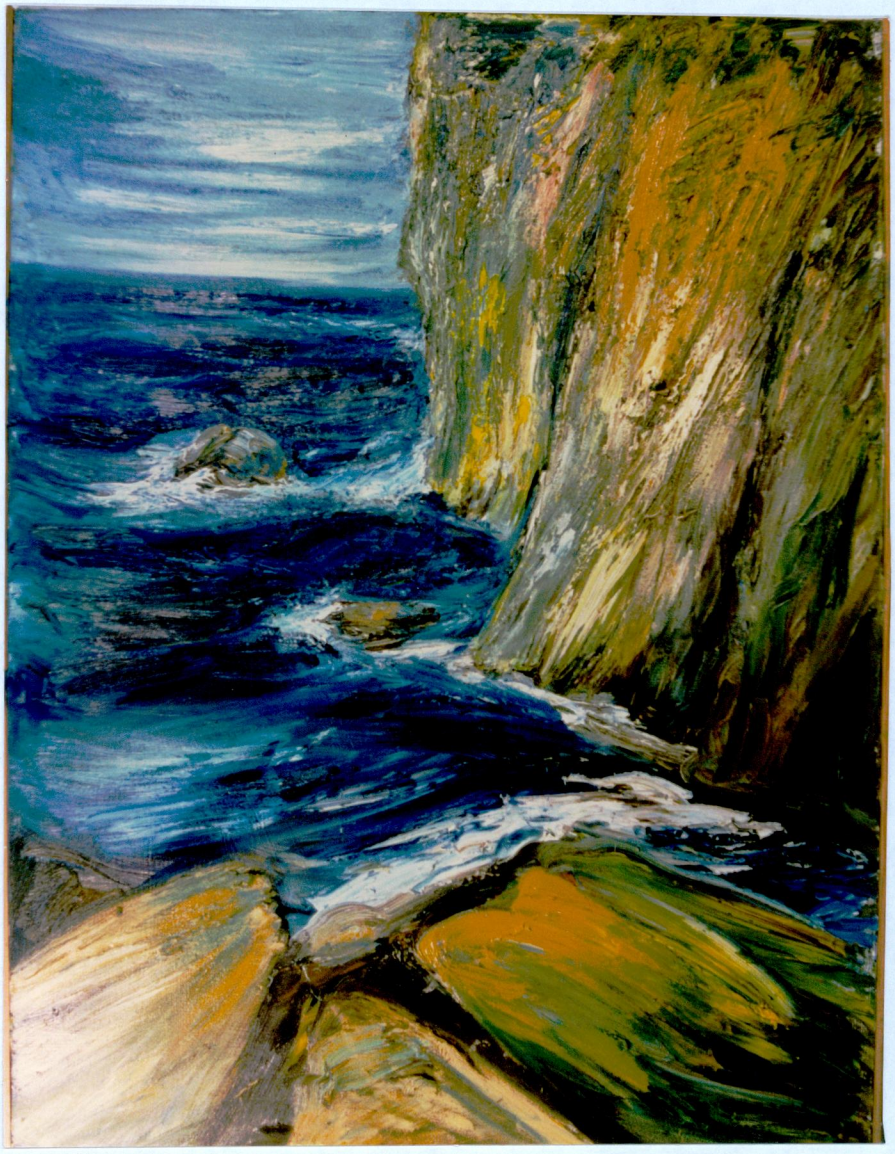
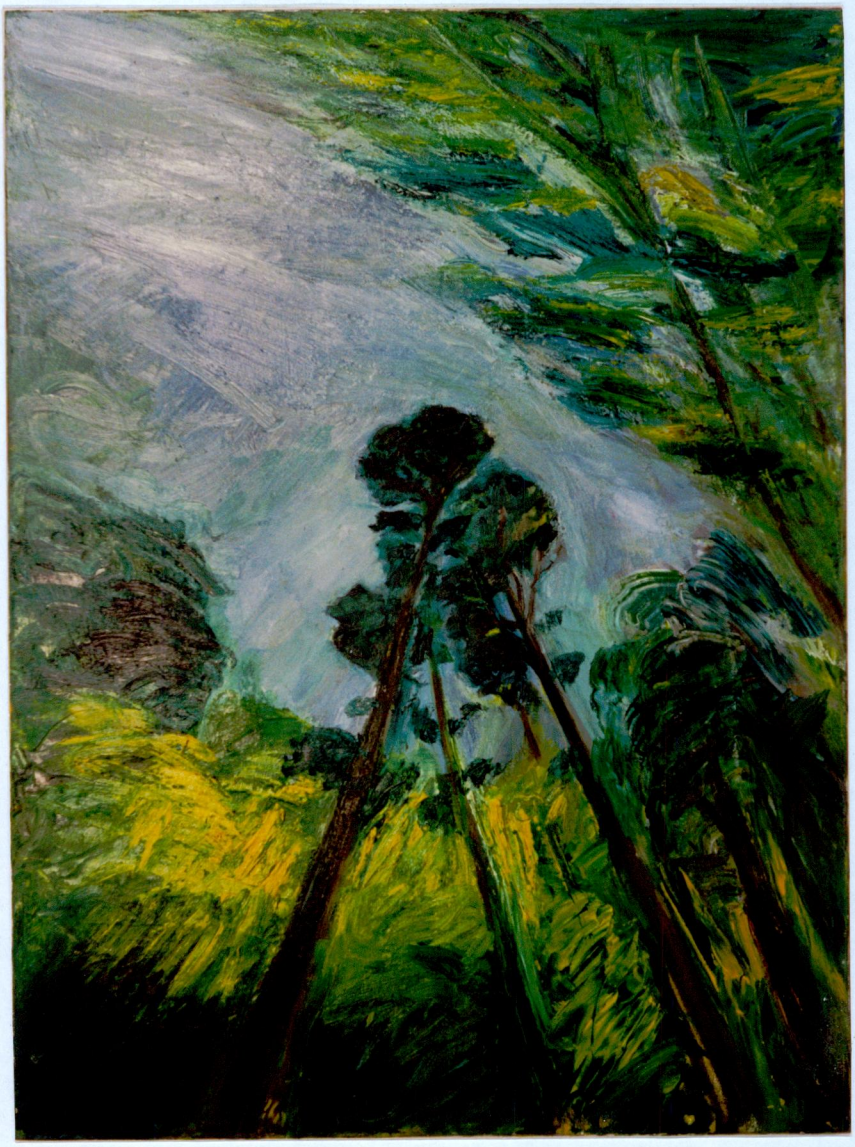
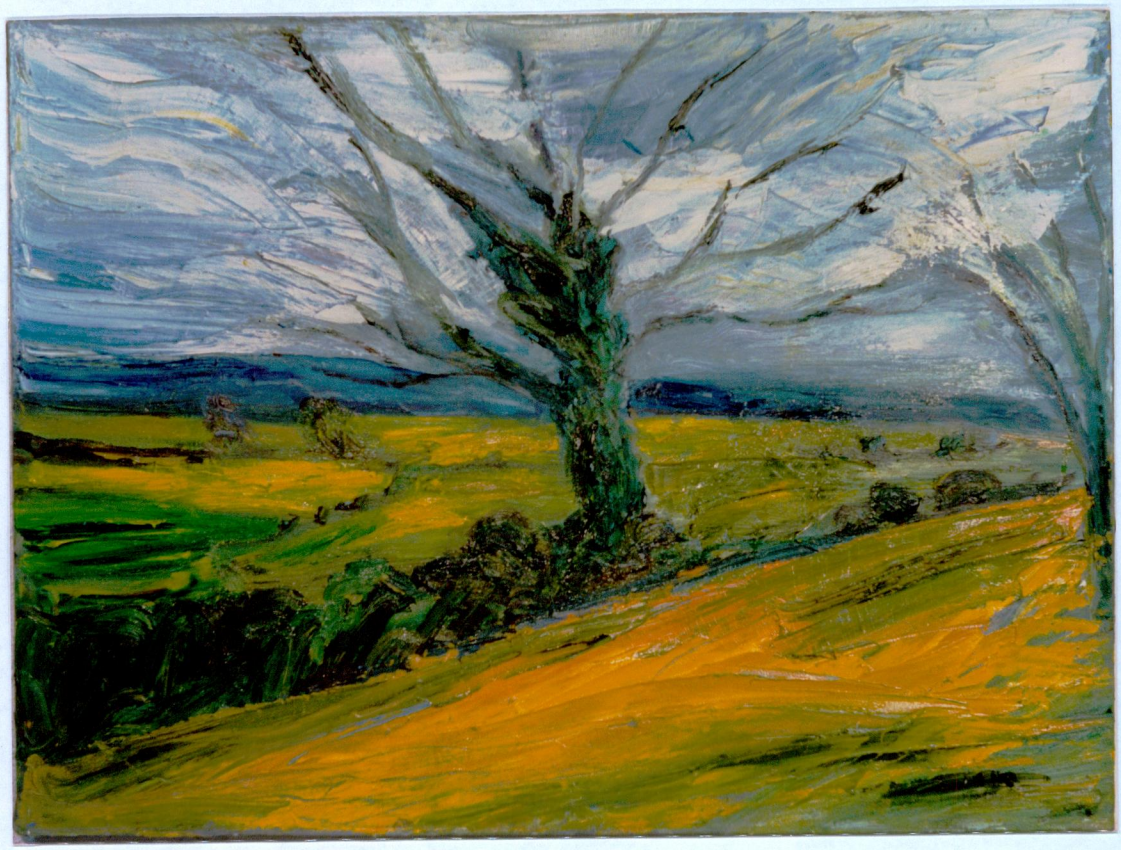


Pl. 38



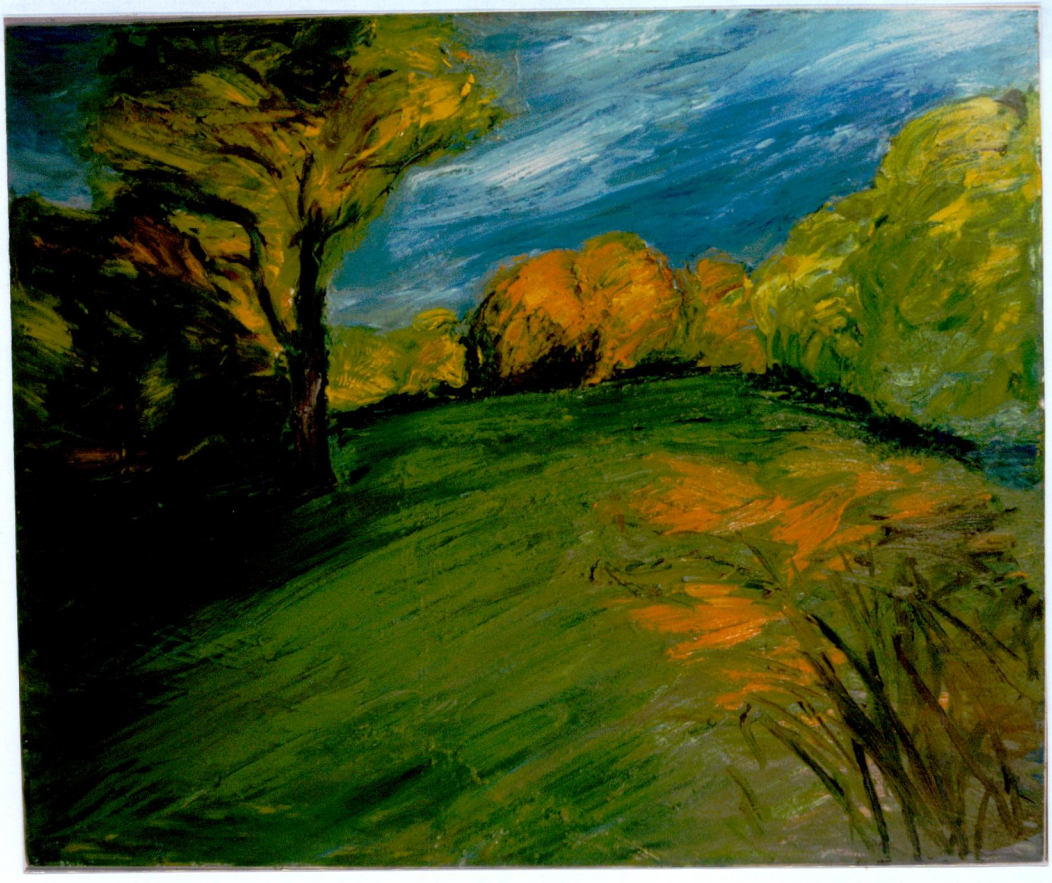
Pl. 39

Pl. 40



Pl. 41

Pl. 42



Pl. 43

Pl. 44

Pl. 45

Pl. 46

Pl. 47

Pl. 48

Pl.49

Pl.50

Pl 51

Pl. 52