

NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

A BRIEF ANALYSES OF THE WORK OF TWO IRISH ARTISTS  
OF THE SEVENTIES

PETER O'NEILL

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## CONTENTS

	Page No.
INTRODUCTION .....	1
I NIGEL ROLFE .....	3
II ROBERT BALLAGH, WORK .....	10
III ROBERT BALLAGH, POLITICS .....	22
IV FURTHER ANALYSIS .....	24
V INTERNATIONAL CONNECTION .....	30
CONCLUSION .....	33

## ILLUSTRATIONS

- |            |                                   |
|------------|-----------------------------------|
| Illus. 1.  | Red Wedge                         |
| Illus. 2.  | I Love Art                        |
| Illus. 3.  | -                                 |
| Illus. 4.  | -                                 |
| Illus. 5.  | Marching                          |
| Illus. 6.  | Bloody Sunday piece               |
| Illus. 7.  | Diamond Series                    |
| Illus. 8.  | Liberty on the Barricades         |
| Illus. 9.  | 3rd May, Goya                     |
| Illus. 10. | Figures (all together)            |
| Illus. 11. | Two people with a Robert Ballagh. |
| Illus. 12. | Woman with a Barnett Newman       |
| Illus. 13. | The Conservation                  |
| Illus. 14. | Inside No. 3                      |
| Illus. 15. | La Ronda                          |

## INTRODUCTION

In this Thesis I aim to delve in relative depth into the work of two Irish artists whose respective disciplines are, within an art context, miles apart.

The background of each artist is very different. One is English by birth, a teacher and a performance artist. The other is Irish, a realist painter and a commercial artist. Both artists are young and are prominent members of the Dublin art community.

I take it for granted that the reader believes that the spark which causes art to be produced is an unselfconscious thing and that it speaks honestly about the creators response to a particular political, social and historical situation.

I have tried to allow for temporal limitations imposed on the artists by reading through them into more timeless or permanent aspects of each artists work. In this way I hope to come close to the message in the work of the above artists and to have clarified for the reader to some extent at least the content from and message of this work.

I make no judgements about what constitutes good or bad art or artists in general, I judge the work of these artists as autonomous bodies of work, and by choosing the above two artists I have made no comments on their respective positions in the hierarchy of the Irish art world.

The artists, as I have said, are active members of the Irish art community of 1980 and their work has something to say outside of this fact.

This thesis attempts to enquire into and to clarify the message or messages which are contained in the work of the above two artists.

In relation to the text, statements by the artists about their work were recorded in interview with this writer. Statements by the artists which are not footnoted are taken from these interviews.

The artists are Nigel Rolfe and Robert Ballagh.

By analysis I try to find the core of the work of each artist. In order to do this I look at each artist separately. Robert Ballagh's work forms the greater part of this thesis, the reason being that firstly it is more difficult to find the core of his work because he has produced so much diverse work and secondly he has been established for a longer period of time than Nigel Rolfe.

## NIGEL ROLFE

Nigel Rolfe was born in the Isle of Wight, England in 1950. He studied at the Farnham School of Art from 1969 to 1971 and at Bath Academy of Art from 1971 to 1974. He lectured at the Devizes College of Further Education for one year, 1973 to 1974, and at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin, from 1974 to 1981.

Since he came to Ireland in 1974 he has been very much involved with the Irish art scene, and in particular with performance art which he, to a great extent, helped to establish in this country.

His career as an Irish artist started in 1974 when he took a position as lecturer in sculpture in the NCAD. In 1976 he became Visual Arts Director at the Project Arts Centre in Essex Street, Dublin. Both these positions brought him in contact with the Irish art scene. The position in Project gave him a platform, or perhaps more accurately, the freedom and opportunity to develop his style of working.

The direction of his work, indicated by the various stages which it has gone through, from when he entered Project till now, 1980, helps the viewer to see clearly what it is about in terms of content.

The materials with which he worked before 1976 were the usual materials used in any art school, various and diverse. He made objects, he created environments indoors and out and he made performances.

Since 1976 there has been less diversity and more direction in the sense that the ritual of destruction and production has come to the fore.

The most interesting thing which can be noted by looking back from the vantage point of 1980 at the work of Nigel Rolfe is its development from art objects being made, in the traditional sense, the art being in the object, to a stage where equal importance is given to the object and the act which created it, to the present position where the act of production and the object produced begin to separate again. One thing which can be said is that it comprises objects for the audience to see and in this sense



he is a sculptor rather than a performer.

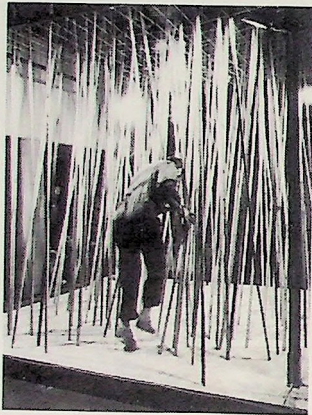
His earliest work in Ireland dealt with balance and comprised individual pieces of sculpture. These pieces developed ultimately to the Red Towers series and the introduction to destruction as a means of creation.

This stage of the artist's work involved him building or constructing a precariously balanced structure with floor tiles and light pieces of timber. He then, with the use of a helmet, demolished the tower of tiles which he had built. The art comprised of the building, the destruction and the remains of the performance. There are numerous precedents for destruction as a means of creation. Jean Tinguely is the most notable in recent years.<sup>1</sup>

The work of the artist which I have discussed above can be seen to have progressed from being autonomous pieces of sculpture whose beauty lay in the use of balance in their construction (illus. 1) Red Wedge, to pieces, Red Towers, which took the use of balance to an extreme, these pieces were very precariously balanced, and were demolished by the artist, the significance being in the action of the artist on the pieces. "I love Art", a performance held in the Orchard Gallery in Derry (illus. 2) is another example.

Another important element in the work of Nigel Rolfe is illustrated by the piece he produced for Oasis Two in St. Annes Park, Raheny, in 1977.

This piece had intentional aesthetic qualities. It consisted of a large timber construction not unlike a section of a saw with a dozen teeth. This lay, teeth downwards, on a circular bank of sand. It was anchored in the centre by an axle and was free to rotate. By moving or rotating it half way around the circle of sand ridges or plough marks were created. The piece was left in the open air in the park for the duration of the show. The "art" in this piece was created through construction rather than



destruction. The ploughmarks or ridges and their creation through the action of the artist with materials, represent the reassertion of beauty in the artists work. The use of this device and idea continues in the work of the artist through a piece called "Zebra" produced in Project in 1978, in this case in the form of black and white strips in flour to ROSC 80 where the plough marks or ridges reappear, again in flower.

The main difference between this piece and the previous example is that in this first piece, Red Towers, the artist performed to produce an object of beauty which he destroyed. In the second piece the action of the artist with materials produced an object of beauty. The important thing to note is that in the first piece the objective was to destroy and in the second piece to create.

I have shown the development of Red Towers. I will not look at the development of the assertion of beauty pieces, i.e. the stripes, ridges and zebra pieces.

From Zebra, 1978, onwards the artist became concerned with the creation of beauty through the action of his body on materials.

At this point I will quickly go back in time and inform the reader again that the earliest work produced by Nigel Rolfe in Ireland comprised beautiful objects, i.e. sculptures, in the sense that the artist manipulated materials, mostly wood, and produced art objects of aesthetic merit in which beauty resided in the form of the natural beauty of the materials. plus the idea of balance which added to the inherent beauty of the materials. In the Red Towers pieces the idea of balance is negated and literally attacked and the ritual or performance surrounding the creating and destruction begins to take on more significance.

In the Red Towers pieces beauty or where it lies is being attacked and in retrospect I believe questioned. Also, and of equal importance,

the action which surrounds the production of the object of art becomes raised to the level of ritual.

Between 1978 and 1980 the work of the artist involved creating an elaborate set, acting in this set in order to change it and leaving the evidence to be seen. The audience can see the performance and/or the changed set. The art object is produced by the artist's action on materials. From Zebra onwards, where the artist crawls or rolls around in flour, it could be said in a very painterly and expressionistic way (illus. 3).

It is interesting to note at this stage the influence of Stuart Brisley, the English performance artist, on Nigel Rolfe's work. Brisley uses performance as an artistic medium and he uses it to stimulate his audience into reaction, if only in terms of thinking. Brisley performed in Project in 1979. His performance lasted for three days and involved the action of his body with that of a sack of cement tied up with ropes which was suspended from the ceiling of the gallery.<sup>2</sup>

Nigel Rolfe was very impressed with Brisley's performance. He has said that before he met Brisley he would prepare all his props in isolation from his audience and after he met Brisley he allowed the preparation of props to become part of his performance.

Brisley affected the work of Nigel Rolfe then in two ways. Firstly he stimulated him to spend more time on his performances and secondly he encouraged him to allow the action of his body on the props to become more important.

The core of Nigel Rolfe's work after he met Brisley became the action of his body on materials.

In order to clarify the relationships between Nigel Rolfe's work and that of Brisley, I will quote from Brisley about his work:

"Performance has a more appropriate definition in relation to visual art, - to carry out duly: to act in fulfillment of: to carry into effect.



It is this aspect which brings the term into focus in relation to art and more precisely into focus with the notion of the public revelation of process stemming from and being part of the initial concept. The essential basis for the public exposure of process must have a political aspect in the sense that it must be consciously directed towards other people at specific times and in specific places. It must involve a concept to do with others. The initial concept cannot be realised until it itself has been overcome, transformed by others with a collective concern, through the public process. It is not an easily defined activity and therefore resists categorisation. It is not concerned with a mixing of categories for arts sake. Rather more it appears to be a non-alienated organic state, a total condition leading from the initial concept through process on context, determining a necessary interfunctioning of conditions - art process, social context, political consciousness, collective action.

It is true that this creative collective state is rarely achieved. But without such an intention the activity decays to become one of the more obvious aspects of decadent individualism, no more or less significant than other activities which have not transcended individualism to become common".<sup>3</sup>

The main difference between the work of Nigel Rolfe and Stuart Brisley is that Brisley attempts to 'expose process' through involving others. This he does by constant action with materials. Action towards no end, the audience is aware of action, of struggle. Nothing outside the action is employed, there are no barriers between the audience and Brisley. It is interesting to note in the light of the above, in the recent work of Nigel Rolfe a moving away from involvement with the audience.

The piece he produced for ROSC 80, for example, occupied a whole room in the basement of the building in which the exhibition was held.<sup>4</sup> In the centre of the room illuminated by spotlights lay a trough-like construction made up of rough wood. In this trough lay flour. The state

of this flour varied with time. Sometimes it would be in disarray, sometimes it would be in a very neat state with ridges or plough marks and at other times it would have the imprint of a human figure on it. There was also a tape machine on the wall which played monotonous music. The room had an air of sanctity about it. When one entered through the small door it felt as if one had entered a chapel. This room existed for the full duration of the exhibition. The actual performances took up a very small percentage of the time which the exhibition was open for.

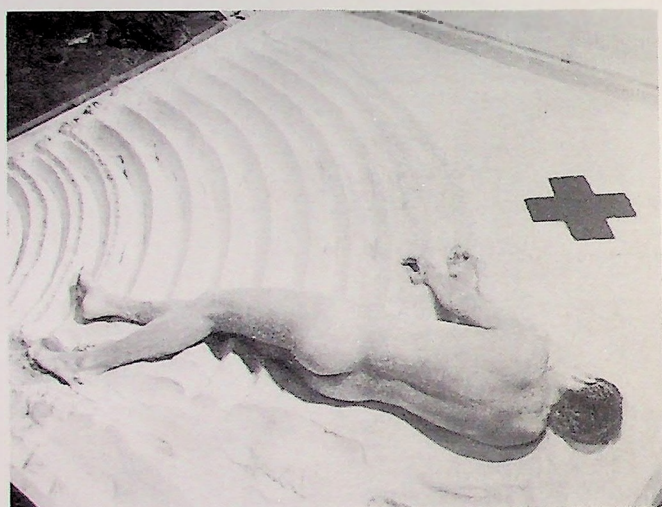
This room was an object of beauty. It was made up of audio, visual and tactile stimulation. It was more than this however. It was the scene of an act of significance. Something important had happened in the troughs. This piece was alive, it was constantly changing. The feeling one had in being in the room was that of being in a place where a ritual had been performed. The symbols in this room were there to support this feeling, they in fact created this feeling. They stood for nothing outside of this room. Their function was to create an atmosphere of ritual, this being the interaction of the artist's body with the materials in the trough. There was no feeling that the artist was trying to reach or communicate with the audience or even to antagonize it. The object appeared to be to raise the level of this action within the trough to that of ritual. In other works, this room and its contents were focussed on the artist himself.

The separation between the artist and audience suggested in the above piece can be seen again in the piece he produced for the Paris Biennial - also 1980. In this piece the artist performed on a perspex platform high above the heads of the viewers. Again he worked with pliable materials, in this case pigment. He has said that during this performance he felt like hiding himself from the audience - he felt that what he was doing was becoming very private.

The ultimate development of Nigel Rolfe's work then is to a stage where it centres on the action of his body with materials (illus. 4) and the private and special nature of this act. Indeed the artist has said to this writer that he could see himself in the future producing objects in private in his own studio which could be exhibited as works of art. The piece which he exhibited in the Living Art Exhibition in 1980 was a piece of sculpture which hung on the wall in the same way that a painting does. The performance which surrounded this piece happened not in the gallery but elsewhere. The artist then is becoming disenchanted with the act of performing in public. He is becoming more and more aware of the performance as a private act. All along in the work there has been this element of ritual. The struggle has been between the object and what happens it in public. Nigel Rolfe believes in the artist as a special being and art making as a special activity. He would probably agree with Laurie Anderson the American performance artist when she says that her audience is mostly an art audience or an informed audience.<sup>5</sup> He believes that it is necessary for the artist to produce objects for an audience and that it is conceivable that there might be a need to produce these objects in private. These objects would be the result of the action of the artist's body on them.

This type of work would seem to be quite close to the "decadent individualism" spoken of by Brisley in the above statement.

Before I finish this section I will inform the reader of an article in the German magazine Kuntswerk in 1978 in which the critic J. Diedericks said that performance art in the 1960s dealt with extroverted play and in the seventies with a more introverted biographical element.<sup>6</sup> The work of Nigel Rolfe would seem to fit easily into this latter category.



## NOTES

1. See, John Fisher, "Destruction as a Mode of Creation". Journal of Aesthetic Education (U.S.A.) 1974. Vol. 8, part 2. p.57-64½
2. Arts Council of Great Britain, "English Art Today" 1960-76, Electa Editrice, M Milan, 1976. p.415
3. ibid
4. Catalogue ROSC '80. Dublin 1980. p.94-95.
5. P. Stewart, "Laurie Anderson: With a song in my art". Art in America (U.S.A.). Vol. 67, part 2. Mar/Apr. 79. p.110-113.
6. J. Diedericks, "Notes on the Performances", Kuntswerk (GFR). Vol. 30, part 3. June 1977. p.44

## II

## ROBERT BALLAGH

In looking at the work of Robert Ballagh I will begin by describing his paintings in relative detail. I will not look at each and every piece produced, I will use what I consider to be the most important pieces, firstly to build an understanding of his work in the reader and secondly to illustrate the development of his work. I will also look at the context in which the work was and is produced. This will include the artists opinions, beliefs, values, politics, and also the context in which this work is seen.

Before I begin I will inform the reader that the artist was trained in architecture and self taught in music.

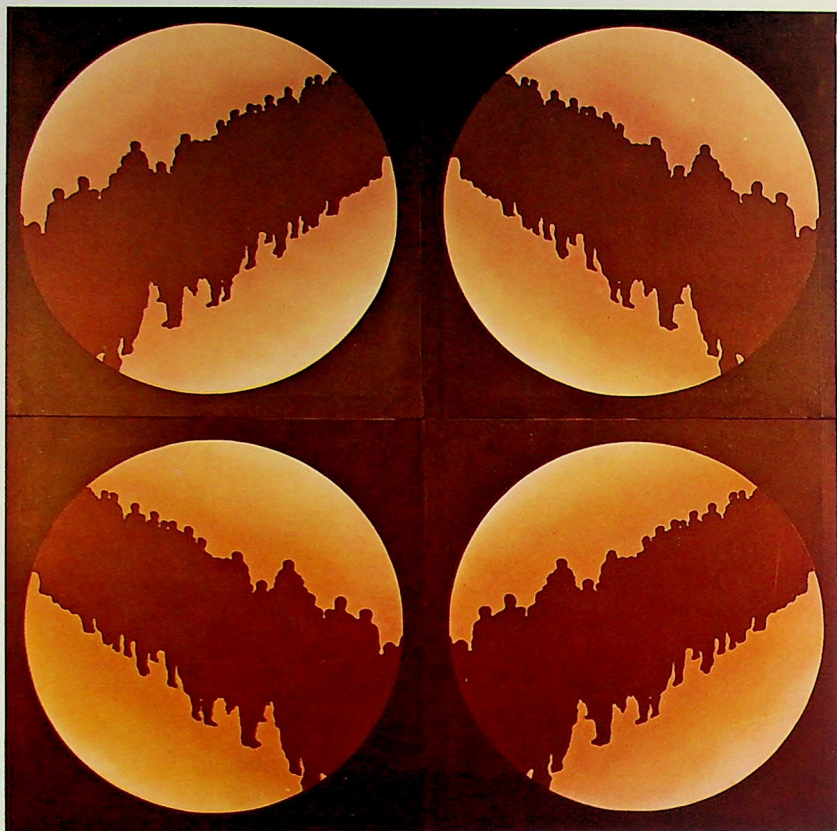
The result of learning the disciplines of architecture can clearly be seen in his work.

From 1967 to 1980 the ability of the artist to produce a visual image, technically, improves clearly and visibly from piece to piece. I believe the betterment of technique to be one of the most salient aspects of the work of Robert Ballagh. Indeed, the artist has said in interview with this writer that when he started painting one of his foremost aims was to master technique in order to get his ideas across.

The first of the artist's work which I shall deal with is the series entitled "Marchers". This was painted in 1968 and contained a number of paintings which comprised images of marchers stencilled or painted onto surfaces in repetative patterns (illus. 5).

Politically in 1968 this imagery had instant currency. In Ireland as anywhere there was an abundance of dole queues, bus queues and political marches.

The artist has said in relation to this period of his life that it is the role of youth to be strident. This statement helps to place this series in the development of the artists work. It came at a time when he was becoming aware of himself politically.



In terms of technique this series is unambiguous and unambitious. It relates directly to the techniques of Pop art, it uses simple basic design, simple colours and simple images (illus. 5).

Robert Gallagher's first one man show was held in 1969 in the Brown Thomas Gallery, Dublin. It was opened by the politician Conor Cruise O'Brien. All the work in this exhibition was explicitly political and related to the political situation in Northern Ireland at that time.

In 1969 also, Hayden Murphy (an Irish Poet) and Robert Ballagh organized a "Peoples Festival" in the Project Arts Centre in Abbey Street. This festival was organized in reaction to the introduction of internment in Northern Ireland. It involved political speeches, poetry readings and exhibitions of political art by Irish artists from both North and South. It is interesting to note, in relation to the ultimate abandonment of explicit political imagery in Robert Ballagh's work and indeed in the absence of any strong explicitly political artists in Ireland at the present, that there was no publicity given to the above festival in the Irish news media.

After the festival in Project, Robert Ballagh with the Northern Irish artist Vallely, helped organize two "Peoples Festivals" in Armagh. The artist also spoke out against the gallery system at this time and wrote a long article condemning it for the now defunct Hibernia newspaper.

Robert Ballagh was perhaps the foremost political artist in Ireland in 1969. Certainly his earliest work is explicitly political.

For a period of time immediately after the "Troubles" of 1968 in Northern Ireland, the work of a number of artists in the Dublin art community was dominated by politics. The Irish Exhibition of Living Art from which Robert Ballagh, Michael Farrell, Evin Nolan, Gerard Dillon, John Kelly and others withdrew their work, has gone down in the history of Irish art, as has Brian O'Doherty's act of changing his name to Patrick Ireland!

Since 1968 various Irish artists have allowed politics to enter their art. In Robert Ballagh's work it has been a recurring theme, the Miami Showband



piece for example, a screen print of a framed photograph of the showband, on which the glass has been shattered by bullets over the three victims, the Bloody Sunday piece (illus. 6). Brian King's work has at times allowed politics to enter it as in the piece he produced for the "Without the Walls" Exhibition at the I.C.A. London.<sup>2</sup> For artists such as Mick O'Sullivan and Michael Farrell, politics has been and is an important ingredient.

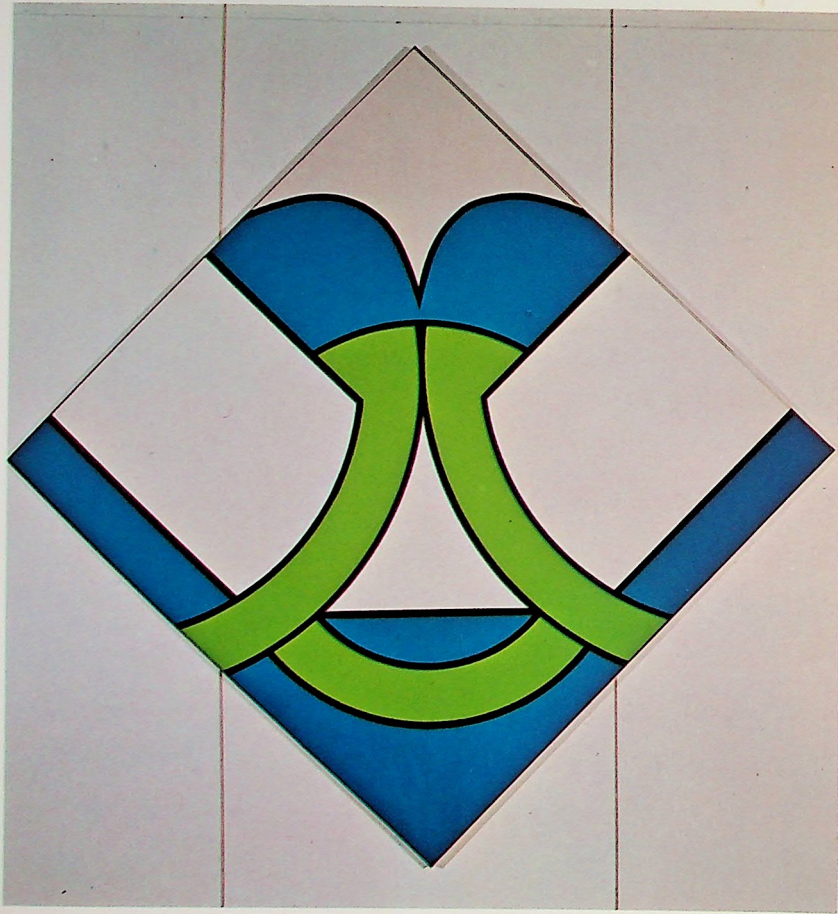
To sum up on politics in Irish art at this time it is true to say that since the resumption of trouble in the Six Counties in 1968 it has periodically entered into the mainstream.

Between 1968 and 1971 then, Robert Ballagh established a reputation as one of Ireland's leading young painters. This was based on his political art and activity at this time.

His work after this period, for a short time, developed into formalist concerns. This would have been more or less in line with international art at that time (refer to note 3). This work is represented by the "Diamond Series" (illus. 7), "Map Series" and the Murals for U.C.D. and Fitzwilton House. Although on the surface these paintings appear to be formalist they, seen in the light of his later work, prove to be more experimental or searching. They represent no particular belief or idea either in its developing stage or in its finished stage. He was, it appears, once he had become established through his political work, experimenting with international trends and possibly commenting on them.

One thing which can be said is that the artist worked with Michael Farrell in 1967 in the murals for the Bank of Ireland in College Green. Farrell is known for introducing large scale abstract painting in acrylics into Ireland.<sup>3</sup> This fact, plus a possible questioning of the political motivation of his work, may have influenced the above paintings.

The next series which the artist produced was called "Series Six" and was exhibited in the David Hendrix Gallery in Dublin in 1971. This series comprised



for the most part of paintings of sugary sweets and cakes which were popular in Dublin in the 1950s and 1960s. The titles included "Liquorice Allsorts", and "Dolly Mixtures". Technically this series was totally unambiguous. The surfaces were sweet, sugary, and even sensuous. Texture played an important part and in some of the paintings the artist incorporated textured plastic onto the surface in order to enhance the composition, as Max Ernst did in the painting "L'Impeccable" which was exhibited in ROSC '71.<sup>4</sup>

This series then is Pop art or uses Pop art, in the sense that it uses images from popular culture as its form and content. However, since Pop art began in the late 1950s and was history by 1971 this series can be seen in a different light. It is either a direct copy of pop art in a provincial setting or a pun on pop art using images relevant to an Irish audience or an assertion by the artist of his basic beliefs using the style of pop art.

I think possibly it is a combination of all the above with most emphasis on the latter. The artist is, I believe, more than anything else in this series showing the viewer his roots.

This series, seen in the light of the earlier political work, shows hesitancy or uncertainty or more accurately perhaps a change in relation to the message which his work carried on the part of the artist.

The artist has said that the message in his work is the most important ingredient. This series is the first indication of the artist returning to his own background or roots, an urban, twentieth century, Dublin background.

We see, in this series and the earlier work, art serving particular salient aspects of the artists life. The means to this end are not so important. The artist adopts other art styles to carry his message. The next series can be seen to work also in this way.

The "Old Master" series was painted in 1971 and in it the artist took images from "Old Master" paintings and reproduced them in a linear and tonal manner very much in the style of the American Al Held, who exhibited in ROSC '71, and Patrick Caulfield, the English artist,<sup>5</sup> who exhibited in ROSC '77.



The paintings chosen included "Liberty on the Barricades" (illus 8) by Delacroix. The "Third of May" (illus. 9) by Goya, "The Turkish Baths" by Ingres and "The Rope of the Sabines" and "The Death of Marat" by David. The artist reproduced each painting in its entirety and as I have already pointed out, in a simple and reduced linear and total manner.

This series represents a re-entry into politics and is, according to the artist, a comment on the political situation in Northern Ireland at the time it was produced.

In relation, in terms of technique, to the previous work of the artist this series is a major step. It is the next step of real importance after the "Marchers" series. In that series the artist used silhouettes of figures or screen printed figures to represent marchers. The series produced immediately after marchers were all abstract and flat and involved no real compositional or drafting problems. The "Old Master" series represents the next step in a visible progression in this area. His figures are no longer screen printed or figures in silhouette. They are closer to being figures in the round. There is more boldness in what was attempted then technically. However, the paintings are still treated in a very simple manner, i.e. flat shape with linear outlines, and secondly they are direct copies which eliminates problems of composition.

This series then while being a political comment and possibly a comment on art is also a comment on the progression of the technique of the artist.

In relation to his previous work the paintings in this series are more meaty and bold, stronger in terms of composition, tone and drawing and more stimulating to the viewer. The "Third of May after Goya" (illus. 9), for example. There is a heavyness and intensity in general in this painting which is helped by strong movement caused by the opposition between the cathartic movement in the figure in white and yellow on the left, about to be executed, and the rigid dark figures of the executioners on the right.

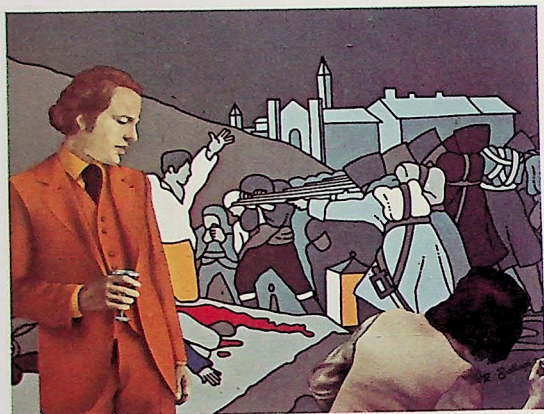


All the paintings in this series work in a similar way. The use of line and tone helps to bring out or exaggerate certain aspects of the original. Or perhaps more accurately, to reduce the complexity of the original to a basic overall design in order to make a simple statement. This series then in comparison with the earlier work is stronger aesthetically and it holds the viewers eye with ease and stimulation.

The next series of importance is the series "Figures Looking at an Exhibition"<sup>7</sup> (for convenience sake I shall call this series simply "Figures") (illus. 10). This was started in 1972 and the artist worked on it for about two years. Calling it a series might imply the wrong thing. Essentially what this work comprised of was one basic idea worked on over a period of two years in which a large number of paintings were produced. The series finished not so much when the artist believed he had made his point as when he believed he had got enough currency from the idea and to produce any more paintings would be repetitive.

Initially these paintings are made up of 600mm square sections. Each painting contained no less than eight of these sections. The individual paintings could exist or be exhibited singly or joined together in groups of more than one to resemble a painting of an exhibition. (illus. 10). Towards the end of this series the 600mm square format was abandoned and the artist painted on single large canvasses (illus. 11).

The form of the paintings in this series was initially figures, back view, standing in front of and looking at paintings, modern abstract, in various static poses. The paintings took up the central portion of the canvas, often as much as a full one-third. The painters used include Barnett Newman, Pierre Soulage and Cecil King. As the series developed the 600mm square format was abandoned as was the rear view of the viewers. The later paintings were not made up of sections. Also the background paintings rather than occupying a portion of the Robert Ballagh painting occupied the whole surface. The figures looking at the paintings also changed and the poses became more active.



This change in the form of the paintings coincided with a shift in the idea behind the paintings. This I will elaborate on in section III.

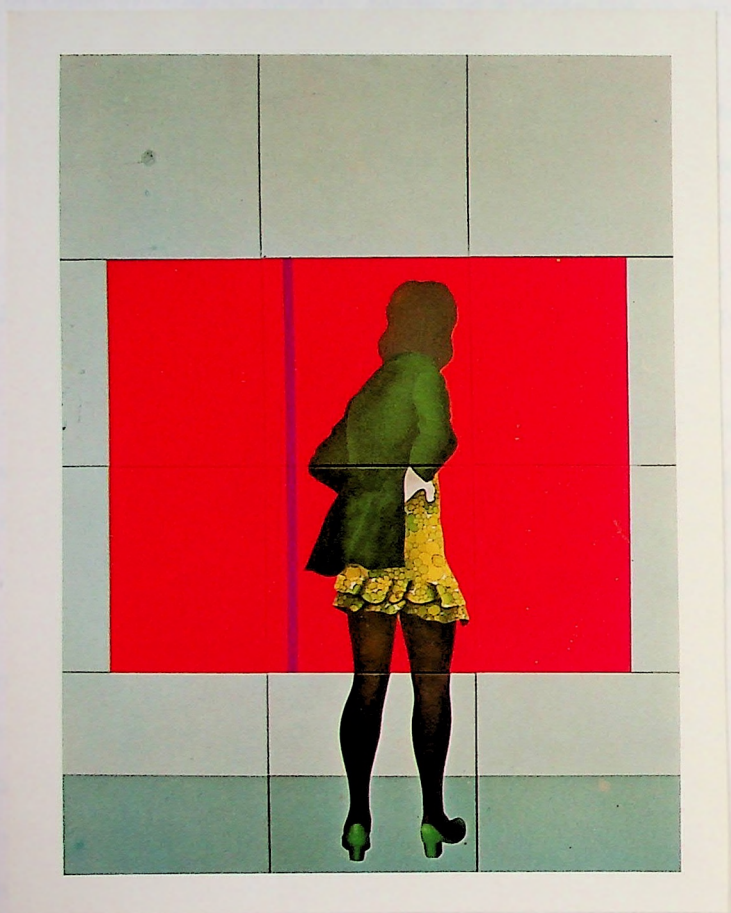
There are obvious precedents for the above initial idea. Norman Rockwell, the American illustrator, in an illustration painted in 1947 of a man rear view, standing in front of a Jackson Pollock painting, is closest in terms of graphic idea.<sup>8</sup>

The intellectual idea of art looking at itself or looking at its own artifice has many precedents in all art forms. This is very important in an Irish context in relation to the writers Laurence Sterne, Jonathen Swift and James Joyce. In an international context it is important in that it has played a major role in Twentieth Century Art and aesthetics and in particular the art of the '60s and '70s. Michaelangelo Pistoletto is an example of an Italian artist who works exclusively in this area. His work was exhibited in ROSC '71. He puts the viewer on the spot by painting images onto polished steel and forcing the viewer, in order to see the image, to also see him/herself viewing the image.<sup>9</sup>

Technically, this series follows the "Old Master" series. The "Old Master" series, as I have said, used flat monotone images edged with a heavy black line. The "Figures" series gets rid of the black edge but holds on to the monotone flat design. However, in the slight modelling of the figures there is an important breakthrough from the "Old Master" series. Also, as this series progresses, the tightness or rigidity of the form loosens up and the figures turn as I have said to face the viewer and also become more active.

In general terms seen in relation to the artist's earlier work this series is less ambiguous, more openly witty, more assertive and fresh. The colours are bolder and the design is simpler and clearer.

If we look at "Woman with a Barnett Newman" (illus. 12) we see a Barnett Newman painting, red with a vertical purple strip which occupies about one third of the Robert Ballagh painting. Standing directly in front of this



painting and in the centre of the composition is a woman in a twisted pose dressed in yellow and heavy green. The opposition between the active pose and the passive painting and the green and red produce a movement or action which was not in the artist's earlier work. There is still clearly a certain hesitency in terms of drawing in this series as a whole but in general there is more boldness.

Immediately after the "Figures" series the artist produced two paintings. One of these was of the interior of the artist's studio. It contained the painting "Liberty on the Barricades after Delacroix", the view from the window of the artist's studio and some of the tools of the artists trade, masking tape, stanley knife, etc. The second painting is also of the artists studio this time, however, it is just an easel, canvas and some brushes. This interior, the artist's studio, is reproduced exactly on the canvas within the painting. On the canvas within this painting the same scene is reproduced again.

The first painting can be seen in relation to the "Figures" series in that it is a continuation of the general theme of the artist looking at or commenting on art. The second painting is the same.

The artist has said himself of this series that it represents for him the time at which his art became concerned with himself as subject matter.

In looking at the first of these paintings this can be seen to be the case. Seen as I have said in relation to the "Figures" series this painting speaks more about the artist himself than about art in general. The second painting speaks also about the means the artist uses to speak about himself i.e. his use of parody or pun. This second painting places him firmly within the context of Irish art in that it relates to the writers earlier mentioned i.e. Sterne, Swift and Joyce and in the case of the above painting in particular it relates to "The Third Policeman" by Flann O'Brien in which one character, MacCruiskeen, shows the writer a box within which is a box within which is a box and so on.<sup>10</sup> This second painting then represents the

artist using an idea with precedents and relevance in an Irish context in order to speak about himself or his art.

The obvious formalist implications in the above paintings I will deal with later. Suffice it to say now that the artist uses formalist devices to speak about himself or his art and not to draw attention to artifice as might be expected.

The final series which I shall deal with is a series painted for a shopping centre in Clonmel, Co. Tipperary. This series was commissioned. The artist was asked to paint three paintings on a local theme. While researching, the artist discovered that the eighteenth century novelist, Laurence Sterne, was born in Cloneml. He chose then, to illustrate in this series the book "The Life and Adventures of Tristram Shandy Gentleman". This he did with six paintings which illustrated events from the book. The manner of painting which he adopted for this was surrealist and the images he used referred directly to incidents from the novel. In short, this series was a series of illustrations for the novel. For example, Sterne has a black page inserted into the novel at a point where one Pastor Yorick dies.<sup>12</sup> Robert Ballagh has inserted into this series of paintings one black painting for the same reason. These paintings are literal translations of events in the novel and do not stand in their own right as paintings.

The importance of this series lies in the importance of Sterne in structuralist criticism.<sup>13</sup> Sterne's novel was one of the first pieces of art which exposed its own making, i.e. the materiality of the sign. This novel dealt with the breaking up of a single viewpoint, i.e. of the self contained cartesian subject. Structuralist criticism which developed in the twentieth century and is one of the strongest schools of criticism today, deals with this breaking up of a single controlling vision.<sup>14</sup> Formalist art since 1950 has developed from the American School of Structuralism. Robert Ballagh has said that Formalism or Formalist art is fighting an

intellectual battle on the periphery of society and is not involved with and therefore not relevant to most people including himself. The paintings of Robert Ballagh use the techniques adopted by other Irish artists to break up this unifying vision, i.e. wit, parody, pun and art looking at and exposing its own artifice.<sup>15</sup> These artists being Joyce, Sterne, Swift, Flan O'Brien.

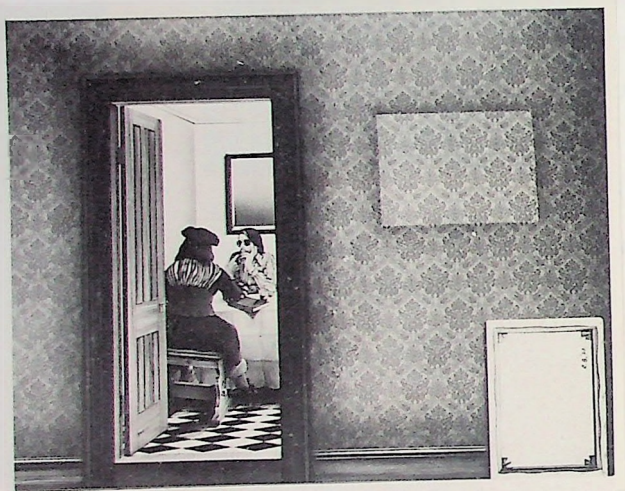
This series represents a meeting between Robert Ballagh and a definitive structuralist novel. How he deals with this shows us his approach to structuralist or Formulist art. His above statement is reflected in this. There is a difference then between the traditional use of parody, pun and self reflexivity in Irish art and Robert Ballaghs use of same. This I will elaborate on in Section III.

To concluded on the above series it is made up exclusively of illustrations of events in the novel. It does not inquire into or develop the essential concerns of Sterne. It illustrates.

The final paintings of the artist which I shall deal with are the three paintings which hung in ROSC '80. These paintings are not a series, they exist as separate independent works. However, in terms of theme they are very closely related and in terms of technique they form a progression.

These paintings are "The conversation" (illus. 13) painted in 1977, "Inside No. 3" (illus 14) painted in 1979 and "La Ronda" (illus. 15) also painted in 1979.<sup>16</sup>

"The Conversation" (illus. 13) in terms of technique and idea is close to the later paintings in the "Figures" series. This painting is of a wall in a gallery from which the only painting hanging has been taken down and is leaning against the wall face inwards. In this wall there is a door accurately rendered architecturally, through which can be seen a room. In this room can be seen Vermeer with his back to the viewer and Robert Ballagh facing the viewer. Both artists are deep in conversation. Between the artists is a table on which is placed a book on modern art, Vermeer's finger



is raised in making a point.

This painting is very simple in design and composition, and the surface is broken up nicely between pattern painting, portrait painting, symbols and images.

The message in this painting is unambiguous and clear. It speaks of a questioning of art in the artist, modern art in particular and it speaks of the answer.

The painting leaning face inwards against the wall symbolises the topic of conversation, that which is being questioned, the artist's work. The book symbolises an important part of this questioning, modern art. It is significant that the book is closed. And finally Vermeer with his finger raised symbolises the answer.

This painting symbolises a period of questioning in the artist's life and is a comment on this questioning. It is the final outcome of the later paintings in the "Figures" series in that it shows the artist unashamedly using himself or commenting on himself in his work.

"Inside No. 3" (illus. 14) was painted in 1979 and represents the result of the questioning which was taking place in "The Conversation".

This painting is based on a photomontage built up by the artist from photos taken inside No. 3. In terms of technique this painting is constructed by the use of perspective. Numerous vanishing points are used in order to build the composition and liberties are taken as with the ceiling which in the painting is curved but in the photographs and reality is not.

The content of the painting refers to the artist's life and work. There are references to the artist's life, his wife, his Fendur bag, in which he carries the camera which took the photographs from which this painting was constructed. His art, the painting "Liberty on the Barricodes" after Delacroix" which is a comment by the artist on his advance in technical ability since he painted Liberty.



In short this painting is a self-portrait built up by direct references to the artists life and work.

The painting "La Ronda" (illus. 15) is very similar. This painting is based on a winter spent by the artist and his family in La Ronda in Spain. It is also built from photographs.

Unlike "Inside No. 3" this painting contains a direct reference to its own making, i.e. the reflection of the artist taking the photograph from which the painting was made. This particular idea is taken from "Las Meninas" by Velasquez which is in the Prado in Madrid and which the artist saw while in Spain. Velasquez uses a similar device in Las Meninas and paints his own reflection in a mirror.

Like "Inside No. 3" (illus. 14) this painting contains references to the artist's life, in this case references to the winter spent in La Ronda, the house he lived in, the above mentioned reference to Velasquez whose work he saw and also a reference to the work of James Joyce which he read while there, in this is also a reference to the fact that Joyce reflected the general in the particular by looking at his own Dublin and the direct analogy with Joyce looking at himself in his art is easy to make.

Technically this painting is less ambiguous or disjointed than "Inside No. 3". This is helped by the fact that the figures are all seen against a flat white wall which is broken in only one place and the mirror in which the artist is reflected. There is strong sunlight in this painting and the colours are more gentle than those in "Inside No. 3".

To sum up on the last three paintings. Technically they have advanced from the earlier paintings and are much more accomplished. The artist has in these paintings the means to put across his message. In terms of content these paintings refer directly to the artist, his work, his life.



### III POLITICS

As I have shown, at the beginning of his career Robert Ballagh was an active political artist. Hayden Murphy, the poet has said of him that he is a confirmed marxist, and an articulate social reformer.<sup>17</sup> To quote from Hayden Murphy "His paintings belong with the working class with he identifies and with which he inevitably belongs".

Robert Ballagh sees his work in this way and fitting clearly into the context of Irish politics, i.e. he sees his work existing within a particular political and social system.

In relation to Irish art in general Robert Ballagh believes that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the dominant art or culture in Ireland was based in Dublin and reflected the values of British middle class administrators. This changed with the separation of Ireland from England in 1922 when the British middle class civil servants were replaced by a rural Irish civil service which had its own values and beliefs. These values were isolationist and rural and were encouraged by Eamon de Valera, who was the most important and influential politician in terms of creating the new Ireland after 1922. De Valera's beliefs are best summed up in a quotation taken from Robert Ballagh's lecture which he gave in the U.S. in 1979.<sup>18</sup> ".....in a radio interview in 1942 he (de Valera) saw the Ireland of the future as a place bright with cosy homesteads where fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths and the laughter of comely maidens". The artist believes that between 1922 and 1958 Irish art reflected the above values.

In 1959 all this changed when Sean Le Meas took over as Taoiseach from de Valera. Ireland now became less isolationist and more interested in material success. After 1959 there developed in Ireland a new wealthy middle class. This middle class which looked to the future encouraged a new type of art. The artist believes that the relationship between the artist and

society in Ireland now is similar to that of seventeenth century Holland where the artist supported and was supported by society.

In relation to the Celtic Revival which began at the end of the nineteenth century, the artist believes that it was an urban Anglo-Irish phenomenon. It developed from a false idea of a romantic Ireland somewhere West of the Shannon. It grew from foolishness and an inability to see the real Ireland. He sees it as a reaction against facing reality by retreating to a false reality in the way that Pre-Raphaelitism in mid-nineteenth century Britain was, to a great extent, a reaction against industrialism. This romantic idea of Ireland was encouraged or more accurately put into practice after 1922 by de Valera who believed that the Irish people were more interested in things of the spirit than the flesh.

The artist has said that 60% of the Irish population is, in 1980, urban. He believes the values of this urban population come not from rural Ireland, but from the Twentieth Century, from Europe and from America. He himself is from this background and knows nothing of Romantic Ireland. His work reflects this. The artist has said that in 1980, in Ireland, there is the embryo of a successful middle class who is willing to support art. He is with his art anticipating and welcoming this new future and changed Ireland. In this sense the role of the artist himself, Robert Ballagh, in Irish society today would seem to be similar to that of Sean Keating to de Valera's Ireland. To illustrate Sean Keating's relationships to de Valera's Ireland I quote from James White's description of Keating's work.<sup>19</sup> ".....for the first time Ireland is presented not as a romantic landscape but as a vision of men united, with a country worth fighting for. Keating has given them a rebels flag, not a dark maiden weeping. With this painting (The Men of the West) and succeeding pictures he was creating a new type of Irishman".

Sean Keating showed optimism for de Valera's New Ireland. He welcomed with open arms and supported it. Robert Ballagh shows optimism for the new bourgeois Ireland, Sean Le Meas's past 1959 Ireland.

## IV

## FURTHER ANALYSIS

As I have already said the influence and explicit use of politics was strong in Robert Ballagh's early work. As this progressed it opened out to include comment on art as well. This can first be seen happening in the series immediately following "Marchers", i.e. "Diamond Series", "Map Series" and "Series Si x". The imagery in these paintings refer to contemporary art styles and as I have pointed out show the artist questioning the political role of his art.

The work immediately following the above series shows the artist becoming more aware of art and its limitations in relation to politics, himself and to society.

If we look at both "The Old Master Series" and the "Figures"Looking at an Exhibition" series we see an example of, in the first case, a statement, initially political changing to include a statement on art and in the second case a statement on art developing into a statement on politics. Both these series were produced at an early stage in the artists career when he was still searching. Here again, I refer to his basic aim, that is, to speak his mind, to speak out and to learn the technique to do so.

Both these series, I believe, manifest perhaps more his struggle to master technique than his particular message. The original message in the old master series for example, was perhaps stronger at the time it was produced than now given the greater saliency of Northern Ireland "Trouble" then than now, and the consequent immediacy and ease with which an analogy could be drawn between the artist's work and the North of Ireland.

Out of the context of these troubles and of the other paintings in this series the meaning of any one painting becomes ambiguous. "The Turkish Baths" after Ingres in the Cork ROSC 1980, for example, made no sense politically. What one saw was a painting very much in the style of Patrick Caulfield of the painting by Ingres called the "Turkish Baths", a painting of buxome, naked females lounging around a bathhouse in Constantinople. This painting could

have been a comment on Ingres, on Caulfield, on women or on art.

Given the presence of the above painting in this series the political message becomes ambiguous. This ambiguity is increased by the great similarity between "Liberty on the Barricades After Delacroix" by Robert Ballagh (illus. 8) painted in 1971, and "Greece Expiring on the Ruins of Missoulonghi after Delacroix" by Patrick Caulfield, 1963.

Caulfield's painting deals with the familiar problem in Twentieth Century aesthetics of the flatness of the canvas.<sup>20</sup> He, in this painting, deliberately avoids or confuses the problem of illusion and works against spontaneity and observed colour. He decorates the surface of the canvas. Caulfield uses art to disown art and his work is formalist in that sense. In this painting he calls attention to the surface and decorates it with an image from the History of Art. He, in short, disarms the image. The incredible similarity between the above two paintings makes the message in the Robert Ballagh painting totally ambiguous.

The recurrence here of formalism again raises the issue of formalism and again this is important in relation to the Clonmel paintings and the last three paintings dealt with in Section II in particular. The artist has said that in this series his aim was to comment on the political situation in Northern Ireland at that time. He has also said that he is not interested in formalist art. His use of formalism in this series then is of minor or no importance. It appears to be used as a means towards the end of comment on the political situation in Northern Ireland.

The series "Figures" began as a pun on the act which the artist was performing. The paintings drew attention to themselves and did not have any ulterior meanings. If one looks closely at this series, the original idea can be seen to break up and open out as it progresses to become a particular statement or comment by the artist depending on the painting being used as background and the action and pose of those in front.

In short, the earliest paintings in this series were meant as a general comment on art. Just as the "Old Master" series was meant as a general comment on the situation in Northern Ireland.

As this series progressed the comment began to vary from piece to piece and became a particular political/social message or idea depending on the particular piece. This can be seen to have happened in the "Old Master" series. Compare, for example, the role of the "Marat" painting in that series to the role of the "Leger" painting in this series. The paintings in the "Old Master" series were as I have said directly analogous with violence in the North of Ireland. The "Death of Marat" in this series is not just a comment on political murder, it is also a comment on the role of the artist in society. By using the painting of Marat the artist hoped that the audience would relate the role of David to post-revolutionary France with the role of today's artist. In the painting in the "Figures" series in which Leger's painting is used, the message lies in the political beliefs of Leger implied by his painting juxtaposed with the two "dinner party" types standing in front of it.

To summarise then on the "Figures" series, it started out by being a pun on the act which the artist was performing. The technique adopted was basic and simple and the particular graphic idea used to get this message across had precedents. The paintings represented were abstract designs with the viewers represented by simple shapes standing back to the viewer in mildly animated poses. As the series progressed the design became more complex. The painting in the background came forward and took on more significance, to the artist's mind, and the viewers turned to face the audience and became more active and also more important.

In both series then, the artist had started with one idea, this changed as they progressed and by the time the artist had finished with each series the whole message had begun to change. From beginning to end these series

progressed from being either a simple analogy to a particular political situation or a pun on painting as an activity to being specific comments, or messages by the artist, depending on the knowledge of the viewer and the symbols and signs contained within the painting.

To summarise the achievements of the last two series and their relevance to the work of Robert Ballagh. They started out being carriers of a single message. By the time the artist had finished with each series the individual paintings had become multiple message carriers. In short the artist discovered how, through the use of one particular graphic idea, to illustrate more than one idea or belief. The importance of the message lies in the fact that, as I have already pointed out, it changes from being general and relating to art and/or politics to being specific and relating to the artist's own beliefs and values.

The tendency towards speaking about his own particular ideas rather than commenting on something outside of himself or conversely to illustrate feelings from within, shown developing in the two series just mentioned, finally broke through, in the artist's opinion, in the two paintings mentioned earlier of the artist's studio. In these paintings the content is the artist's studio. The message appears to go beyond this to take in what I have already labelled as formalism in that the images used refer directly to the paintings which the viewer is looking at. In one of the paintings a device used by Flan O'Brien is used, i.e. boxes within boxes, in this painting. However, it is paintings within paintings.

In these paintings, I believe the artist shows that he has not yet developed to the ultimate position where he is unashamedly willing to speak about himself in his art. In these two paintings, it is true, the content is his studio, however, by bringing in and using extraneous material, i.e. comment on art, selfconscious formalist tendencies, he shows hesitancy in producing paintings which refer exclusively and unashamedly to himself.

"The Conversation" is the first painting in which the artist is the centre of the composition. This painting speaks clearly and unambiguously about the artist himself, questioning his own art and art in general. From this painting onwards the artist has presented, in his free work, i.e. work which is not commissioned, paintings which present realistic images which depict his world, his work, his life, his values, beliefs, etc.

The artist's work then has evolved, parallel that is to the evolution of the betterment of technique, from being more objective to being purely subjective. At this point I will introduce again and finally resolve the issue of formulism by saying that one of the basic tenets of which I call formulism is that "a wholly objective perception of individual entities is not possible."<sup>21</sup> The painting "Inside No. 3" is wholly subjective, i.e. it deals with the artist himself. It is significant to note that it does not deal with or draw attention to itself. The art which Joyce and Sterne made, and with which the work of Robert Ballagh has been equated have attempted, by producing art which refers to itself and themselves to break up the cartesian controlling vision, the idea of an orderer. Joyce's work in particular epitomises this type of art. These artists critically analyse both themselves and their art forms. Colin McCabe, a lecturer in English and Literature at Cambridge has said "Reading for us is passive consumption; with Joyce it becomes an active metamorphosis, a constant displacement in language".<sup>22</sup> McCage goes on to point out that one of the most significant aspects of Joyces work is that he removes the controlling vision by changing the relationship between narrative and prose. He removes the author who informs the reader and makes sense of the text or controls the text, also he digs deep into his own mind and in order to do so he removes his own control of himself. Joyce not only challenges our concept of language itself he challenges the form of the novel also. McCage has said of Joyces work that it is psychotic rather than neurotic. If we look very closely at the

painting "Inside No. 3", we can see in comparison an incredibly tight and controlled piece of art. Technically, the various images i.e. stairs, walls, ceiling, etc. are constructed by the use of perspective. The assembly of the images is taken from a photomontage. The whole composition is subject to the artist's eye. The artist himself is the ultimate controlling vision, the orderer. The world he controls is his own, his possessions, his life. This painting is neurotic in this sense and consequently fits into the groove of classic Realism.<sup>23</sup>

In relation to politics then Robert Ballagh's work, firstly in reference to his flirtation with formalism, as in Joyces use of it, is conservative and secondly in reference to explicit message is ambiguous.

Two issues dominate the work of Robert Ballagh, one is the constant and progressing betterment of technique from piece of piece, and the second is the evolution of the content of his work from messages which are various and diverse and relate to politics and art in general to self-centered or self-documenting art.

## IV

## INTERNATIONAL CONNECTION

The essence of the work of Robert Ballagh then, is that, in terms of content it centres on himself. In terms of his use of materials his work is conservative and in this way is non-revolutionary, i.e. it does not challenge in any way established or accepted beliefs about art.

In terms of explicit political message it is ambiguous, given his narrative style there is no consistent theme in the work as a whole or in any particular series.

The core which emerges from looking at the development of the work of Robert Ballagh is one of narcissism. This work in this way relates to the work of Nigel Rolfe.

In order to look further into the work of Robert Ballagh and Nigel Rolfe I will take a brief look at Marxism. It is not my intention here to delve into Marxism and art, an area which suffers from a shortage of writings by Marx himself. Suffice it to say that the work of the Marxist artist must relate in a concrete way to, and be aware of, the social and political context in which it exists. At the very least this relationship should not be supportive. The artist need not challenge explicitly, he must, however, expose or express dissatisfaction with the system within which he exists.

To illustrate a Marxist view of art I will quote from F. Jameson from his introduction to a book called "Marxist Dethetics":<sup>24</sup> "The writer (artist) of genius seems to us to be one who realises a synthesis, whose work is at one and the same time the most immediate and philosophically aware for his sensibility coincides with the ensemble of the process and of the historical evolution; the genius is he who, in order to speak about his own most concrete and immediate problems immediately raises the most general problems of his age and of his culture and for whom, inversely, all the essential problems of his time are not more intellectualisations or abstract convictions but realities which are manifested in living and immediate fashion

in his very feelings and intuitions..... the aesthetic greatness of a work is directly proportionate to its completeness with which it dominates all the contradictions of its age".

In relation to the above on Marxists art and the narcissism of Robert Ballagh's work it may help the reader to refer back to an earlier mention, in Section I, of J. Diedericks on performance art who, as I have already said, pointed out that performance art of the 60s dealt with extroverted play and in the 70s with a more introverted biographical element. I hope the comparison between performance and painting can be forgiven given the obvious parallel between the evolution of performance in the above way and the evolution of Robert Ballagh's work.

In relation to the above, i.e. Diedericks, Goldman and the biographical element in the work of Robert Ballagh and Nigel Rolfe I refer the reader to an article by Peter Frank in Art News (U.S.A.):<sup>25</sup> "The 1970s are acquiring a social topography of their own. The extroverted optimism and aggressively non-conformist character of the previous decade has given way to interspection, doubt and a sometimes desperate seeking for spiritual tranquility. This worried, self-reflexive attitude finds emphatic and sensitive expression in the work of today's artists. Current art activity is dominated, not by the affirmation of well-developed ideas codified into movements, but by the exploration of properties and possibilities, the properties and possibilities of materials, of physical activity, of entertainment, of imagery and significantly of the factors determining ones own individual existance. Who one is, how one got to be that way, what one is capable of, what one needs and desires, how one responds to experience - all become the subject matter for art. A new art has emerged, one consonant with the self involved confessional, even narcissistic - but rarely contented spirit of the age".

I leave the reader with the names of artists whose work deals with themselves, their lives, their bodies, their worlds. Judy Chicago, Carolee Schleeen and Laurie Anderson are American women artists who work in this way. Denis Oppenheim, Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman, also American. Gilbert and George in England, Rudolf Schwarzen Agger in Austria and Rebecca Horn in Germany.

## NOTES

1. See Cyril Barrett, Irish Art 1943-73. Catalogue of Exhibition Cork ROSC '80. Crawford Municipality Art Gallery. 1980.
2. See Dorothy Walker "Without the Walls" Exhibition Catalogue. Sense of Ireland. ICA London. 1980.
3. See Cyril Barrett "Michael Farrell" Exhibition Catalogue, Douglas Hyde Gallery, Trinity College Dublin. 1979.
4. See Max Ernst Catalogue ROSC '71, p.44-45
5. See Catalogues ROSC '71 and '77, Dublin. P. Caulfield. p.34-35. A. Hold. p. 58-59.
6. See Hayden Murphy "The Irish Imagination" 1959-71. ROSC '71. p.36
7. See Catalogue of Works of Art, Bank of Ireland.
8. S.E. Meyer. Americas Great Illustrators. H.N. Abrams inc. New York '78 p.160.
9. Art in America. Feb. '81. p.110
10. Third Policeman, F. O'Brien. Pan Books 1967. p.61
11. The Life and Adventures of Tristram Shandy Gentleman. Lawrence Sterne. Penguin English Library G13. 1967.
12. ibid. p.62
13. George Gibian, H.W. Tjalsma, Russian Modernism, Culture and the Avant Garde 1900-1930. Cornell University Press, Ithica and London, 1976. p.31-48.
14. Viktor Sklovsky, Mayakovsky and his circle, Pluto Press, London. 1976. p.XIX.
15. Vivian Mercer "The Irish Comic Tradition". Oxford.
16. See Catalogue ROSC '80
17. ibid
18. R. Ballagh. "The Irishness of Irish Art - A Personal View". Lecture 1979.
19. James White. Exhibition Catalogue. John Keating, paintings and drawings 1963. Municipality Gallery of Modern Art, Parnell Sq., Dublin.
20. "English Art Today" 1960-76. Arts Council of Great Britain. Milan. 1976.
21. Terence Hawkes. Structuralism and Semiotics. Methven & Co. Ltd. 1977. London. p.17.
22. Colin McCabe. "James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word" MacMillan Press. 1978. London. p.2

23. ibid. p.27
24. H. Arvon "Marxist Aesthetics". Cornell University Press Ithica and London. 1970.
25. Peter Frank. Auto Art: Self indulgent and How! Art News (U.S.A.) Vol. 75, part 7. Sept. 1976. p.43-48.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, I have shown how the work of two Irish artists has evolved over a short period of time. This evolution has taken place in an unselfconscious way and is still happening. Both artists are established in the Irish art scene which is, needless to say, rather small in an international sense. Neither artist, I believe, has been involved in international trends in the sense that their artistic environment has been the confined Irish art scene. There have been exhibitions and performances abroad, but the motivation behind creating art and the act of exhibiting art are two distinctly different things. I believe, therefore, that it is quite surprising to find, on close analysis of both artists' work given the above isolationism of the Irish art scene and the different disciplines of each artist, a strong introverted biographical tendency which is reflected in international art.

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