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Title **Conastance Short Artist and Political Activist**

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Introduction

Introduction

On my meeting with her, the first thing that struck me about Constance Short was her vibrant personality. She describes herself as a political artist, a pacifist and constitutional socialist. She lives her life not only as an artist but also as a political activist. Her art makes statements about social and political problems.

Despite an active involvement in many organisations and campaigns - Anti-Apartheid, Anti-Internment in Northern Ireland, Free the H-Block Hunger Strikers, co-operation North, Culture of Ireland, Independent Artists, Projects Arts Centre, and most recently, the Anti-Nuclear group STAD - she has found that she can comment on local and global injustices most effectively through her artwork.

Short is an artist who believes in direct experience and involvement. If she thinks that there is an injustice being committed, she gets up and fights for it. This is clearly evident from the many organisations with which she has been involved throughout her life. Her background and past experiences influence her art. Everything is personal. She believes that the artist should be used in the service of life.

As she maintains herself, "All my work is conceptual. I always have to have some type of politics in it."¹ Indeed, she believes that the artist has a responsibility arising from his or her visionary powers, that artists see things earlier than others. She is of the opinion that the artist should not just be an observer, but also a commentator. In order to understand Constance Short as an activist and an artist it is important to understand her background.

Constance Short now lives over looking the sea in Blackrock, Co. Louth. She was born in 1944 in Clones Co. Monaghan. Her father came from Crossmaglen Co. Armagh and her mother from Dundalk. Her father's teaching job took him South to Monaghan. She has lived in the Boarder area for most of her life, having grown up there, and is now living in Dundalk.

Her father, Con Short, was very interested in Gaelic football and the Irish language. He was chairman of the Ulster Council of the Gaelic Athletic Association (G.A.A). He wrote a history of the G.A.A in Ulster for the

1. The first part of the report
describes the general situation
of the country and the
state of the economy.

The second part of the report
describes the results of the
survey and the findings of the
research.

The third part of the report
describes the conclusions of the
research and the recommendations
for further action.

The fourth part of the report
describes the implementation of the
recommendations and the progress
of the work.

The fifth part of the report
describes the final results of the
research and the conclusions of the
study.

The sixth part of the report
describes the final conclusions of the
research and the recommendations
for further action.

centenary of that organisation in Crossmaglen. He introduced the deletion of the ban on foreign games in Belfast in 1972. Short's Uncle Frank was a founder member of the Anti-Partition League in Britain. She herself maintains that "she had a schizophrenic need to be both a painter and politician". She describes her mother as being republican and radical characterised by a strong sense of justice. The combination of these influences meant that Constance Short was brought up in an environment that was very strongly influenced by Irish Culture and Irish politics.

All her life Short has hoped for a United Ireland, a 32 county Socialist Republic. At this stage of the peace process she has accepted that this will not happen and reluctantly and sadly voted to remove articles two and three of the constitution in the referendum and the Peace Process as a whole has influenced some of her recent work.

Short has worked extensively with Northern Ireland communities having worked as a Community Projects officer for the Co-operation North organisation. After one year she was appointed Community project manager for the entire organisation. She joined the organisation in 1988 motivated by a desire to help people, to bring people together. Her effectiveness was rewarded by her presentation to both Queen Elizabeth and President Mary Robinson.

Short initiated an adult exchange programme - before which Co-operation North focused more on children. She considered it as more of a challenge to bring adults together. Although primarily employed to devise and execute cultural programmes she wanted to examine the fundamental impetus behind the Troubles. Her outlook was

" Why can people not celebrate difference, why could people not see difference as something to celebrate rather than kill one another over ? My whole approach is that we should celebrate diversity as something colourful and interesting, not something to fear".²

In an attempt to understand and address such issues she organised several conferences including Culture in Ireland Division or Diversity, and Culture in Ireland Religion, Identity and Power. The proceedings of these conferences were published by the Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University, Belfast. She did a considerable amount of work in places like the Shankill Road and Ballymun. She was determined to work in the most

recalcitrant areas, to see what she could do, and is proud to admit that she convinced some very hard-line people to go to Dublin or cross the boarder. This work was not solely about cultural exchanges, bringing Protestant and catholic groups both North and South together, it was also about encouraging people to clean up their own areas, to set up residents associations and to encourage people living next door to each other to work together.

While working for Co-operation North she also set up a women's exchange programme on the basis that the women were more likely to talk to each other than the men. The involvement in this programme was a major influence on the exhibition titled "On Poems, Plays and Personal Things" in 1994.

At present Short and three other plaintiffs are involved in a legal battle with the British Nuclear fuels limited (BNFL). Their case has involved several stages to date including court action in the circuit court, high court and Irish Supreme court. It has also involved debates in the Dail with the Irish government. Being in close proximity to the Thorp plant at Sellafield they argue that the risk of ill-health has increased within increased pollution from Thorp. They also argue that the Thorp plant does not operate within the planning regulations which Europe lays down for Nuclear reprocessing plants.

Constance Short calls herself a figurative artist "I'm only interested in drawing the figure. Everything I say is in the figure".³ She has hardly ventured from this form of expression in her artistic life.

Chapter 1

Conastance Short and the Figure

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Chapter 1

Constance Short's career as artist began with her first solo show in Dundalk Town Hall in 1967. Since then she has exhibited in America, Germany, the Czech Republic and London. She has very rarely strayed from using the figure all her exhibitions to date have featured some if not all figurative pieces.

Her first show was titled "Oil Paintings Of My Family and Me". It contained mostly portraits and still lifes. Short describes it as a very naive show and claims that she did not produce much work especially for it, but submitted what she already had.

Exhibiting first in 1967, she has intermittently as she modestly states taken "time off to have babies, save Ireland (and the world) and other worthwhile and not so worthwhile, distractions". Working initially in oils, she returned to art as the mother of three young children, executing linocuts at the kitchen table, followed by a course in etching with John Kelly at the Dublin Graphic Studio. She began to exhibit again in the mid seventies.

In 1975 Constance Short took part in a joint exhibition with six women artists. Short and her colleagues from the Dublin Graphic Studio were under pressure to mount exhibitions on and about women because it was the first international women's year. Short, however, was wary of any positive discrimination and maintained a reticence about herself. Indeed, precisely because women were so actively promoted Short and her friends decided to give the men some exposure. This resulted in a male nude exhibition, which took place in the Projects Arts Centre in 1975. Some people were disgusted, not only because it was women's year but because they felt that women should not show men in such a way. The exhibition sold extremely well and received good reviews and much publicity, including in some of the English papers.

Her second solo exhibition, held in the Peacock Theatre, Dublin in 1977, contained etchings and linocuts and was titled "My Kitchen, My Children and Me". This exhibition described Short's experience being confined to the house and having undergone a hysterectomy. It was a very

successful show, she sold out whole editions and many pieces. The self portrait of Short with a nappy on her head hanging from a line sold out completely.

In 1981 Short was approached by Eavan Boland to illustrate her book "In her Own Image". It was about the role of women in society. The illustration to Anorexia, for example, is a stark visual representations of the subject of the poem which opens with the line,

"Flesh is heretic.
My body is a witch
I am burning it".

Short's next solo project was not until 1993. Between this time her marriage had ended and she had moved from Dublin to Dundalk, where she worked in numerous schools under the Arts Council 'Paint on the Wall Scheme' during which she completed some forty murals. She was employed as an Art organiser in Dundalk where she set up an administrated an arts office responsible for carrying out an extensive professional Art Programme bringing major exhibitions, theatre groups, orchestras and poets to Dundalk in some cases for the first time. She also worked with co-operation North and took part in several group shows.

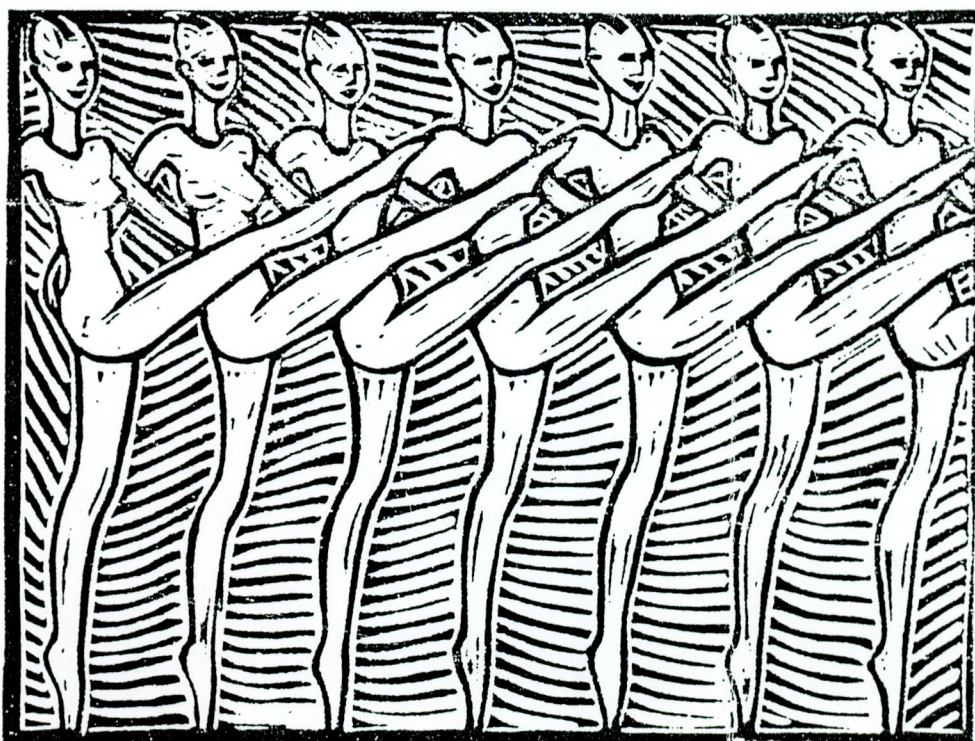
In 1985 she illustrated the cover of the official history of the Gaelic Athletic Association 'The Ulster Story 1884-1994' written by her father Con Short. In 1990 she produced the cover for Nuala Ní Dhomhaill's 'Pharoh's Daughter' illustrating the poem "Fear/Looking at a Man" - the rich and yet economical brushlines are appropriate to the subject. This illustration was related to a series of monotype and linocuts on the theme of the Model as Voyeur (later used for Aquarius Magazine) where the nude model comfortably seated in an academic pose, boldly eyes up the naked males. In 1990 she produced the illustration for the cover of the co-operation North's Poetry Ireland book called "How High the Moon". She produced six monotypes entitled "Dance Sequence" in 1993, she also featured on the cover for the women issue of Krino Literary Magazine and in 1993, she also featured on the cover of Aquarius titled "Model as Voyeur". She has illustrated for various other magazines and newspapers: The Irish Times, The Irish Independent to name but two, mostly on women's issues.

"I am a feminist. I think that men and women should be feminists. I don't believe in separation or ghettos. Women have a right to be there as



Top fig. 1.

Bottom fig. 2.



well as men".⁴

"I don't think that women per-se bring 'peace and love'. But I do think that what they bring is a philosophical view on life, much more than men".⁵

Her next solo exhibition in 1993 "On Poems Plays and Personal Things" was influenced by the women she worked with while involved with Co-operation North. An admirer of the work of Francis Bacon, Short accepts the possibility of his influence in her organisation of some of her pictures. This exhibition travelled extensively throughout Ireland and to London. Speaking of "Let the Dark Shine Through" (fig.1), Short tells how she uses the basic features of her medium to juxtapose the rough outlines of an existing reality and the elegant incised lines which define the dark, enthroned areas of potentiality. "Dance, Dance, Dance" (fig.2) depicts seven shaven - headed leotard - clad females dancing in line arms entwined, absorbed in the activity of the dance - an image at once of independence and solidarity. The lino cuts were produced, telling a story and reflecting the changing mood over the period of production. Overall the series "tries to make a statement about marginalised in society taking the situations of women as the symbol for all".

In September 1994, Short exhibited at United Arts Club in Dublin. The exhibition was titled "Pages From My Sketch Pad" and contained male and female nude drawings. In this exhibition Short has paid more attention to the male form. They show the man as "a free spirit rather, than an object of sexual desire",⁶ according to the artist.

"Because I'm a figurative artist, I use my work to make a particular statement. I've used the female form to tell my story. But I don't want it to be read just as a commentary on the situation of women. It applies equally to men".⁷

"The female figures tend to be more discrete". Short says that is because "with women there is more to draw. I don't consciously concentrate on the genitals but the male body is quite uncomplicated compared to the female".⁸ The works from this exhibition were done in pencil.

Shorts "One + One =" exhibition travelled to London and Fairfield University Connecticut USA. The exhibition was about relationships, it consists of male and female figures together, all female figures together and



fig. 3.



all male figures together. It questions the relationships men have with one another, women have with each other and finally the relationships both men and women have with one another. Short's aim was not to tell the viewer to mediate the meaning. The piece done with Paul Durcan, the poet, was entitled "Noughts and Crosses"(fig.3). Instead of nought and crosses, male and female figures were inserted into the grid. Short left the middle square free so Durcan could determine the outcome. In this square he wrote a poem which re-posed the question about relationships and how they work or do not work. This piece is now on display in the R.T.C. in Athlone.

While in Fairfield University Short took part in a one week workshop in the Studio Art Department in wood and Linocut, Life Drawing, Concepts in Art and The Relationships between Art and Politics, and Art and Conflict. She gave a public lecture entitled "Constance Short, The Artist as Visionary and Activist".

The "Rising of Miss Sweeney" exhibited in 1994 in Wellesley College, Boston USA and in Ireland was a combination of the "One + One =" exhibition and some new work still carrying the same theme of relationships. Short introduced some colour pieces to this exhibition. Short's favourite quotation is,

"If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution". Emma Goldman.⁹

She used "dance" as a metaphor for freedom, choice and celebration and "sleep" as symbolising lack of power and helplessness. This exhibition takes women from their knees to vibrantly leaping across a page. In the first few prints she is rising, rising, becoming aware. Her dream of learning to dance is emerging. The path is not smooth. She realises that she has to shed the cross of guilt at ever wanting to do anything for herself - "The Resurrection". She then dances a chorus line because she is not quite ready to step out alone - "Dance, Dance, Dance" she wonders how long it will take - "How long the sleep I and II", she doesn't find it easy - "Waking Up is Hard to do" and "Climbing the Walls". She lacks the courage to find her own way - "Taking a Peek at The Boys" and "Hey Mr. Businessman". She gets there eventually, leaping, joyously across the page - "Come Dance With Me I and II". She finally arrives and gently dances, no longer a victim of society of her own passions, moving through the crowd but in her own time and with her own dignity - "Come Dance With Me IV".

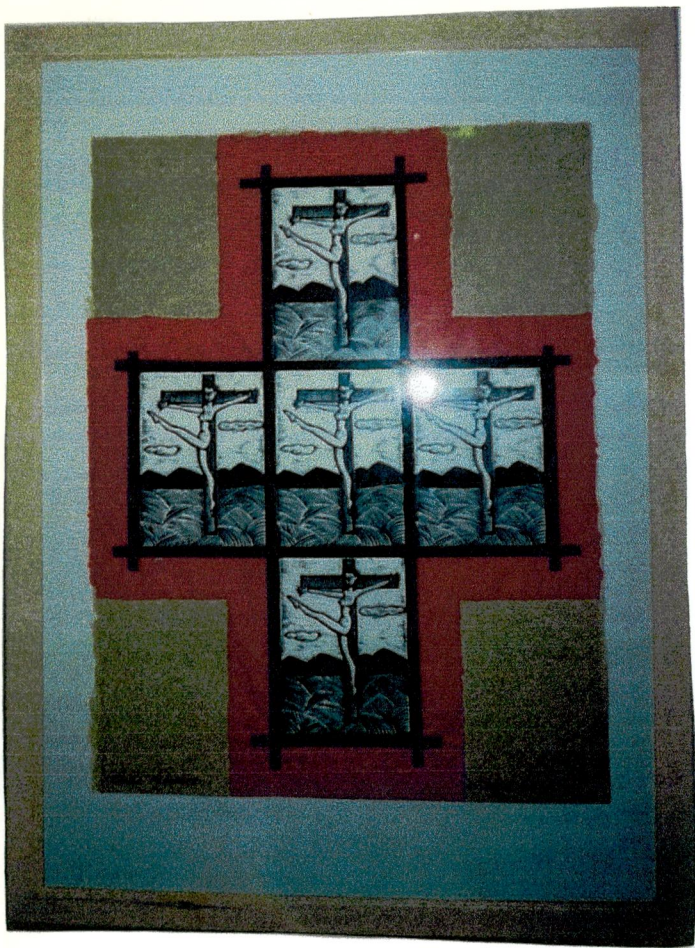


fig. 4.



This exhibition was mounted in Wellesley College Boston in conjunction with the Reaching Common Ground conference (a conference about the women of America and Ireland). While there her time was occupied with lectures and debates with three classes from the Women's Studies Department, Peace Studies Department (interested in the work she did for Co-operation North) and the Irish History Department.

The highlight of the past five years for Short is having had an exhibition in the women's Co-operative gallery Soho 20, Bloome Street New York, in January 1996 and having made the critics recommended listings in the New York Times (Sunday edition) twice during the month's run of the show. They chose 20-40 exhibitions from the "Gallery Guide of New York" which has approximately 600 gallery listings. This exhibition titled "Jumping the Boarder" was curated by Meabh Ruane featuring a series of linocuts on women and their relationships. The pieces were chosen from all of her previous work. A large site - specific piece 7' X 5' X 2', titled "Dancing at the Crossroads" (fig.4), was purchased by the Mayor of Weisbaden, Germany, and installed in their town hall in June 1997. The work, comprising a series of linocuts arranged around the shape of a cross depicting an image of a naked woman jumping down from the cross, has been branded blasphemous by German politicians who have to pass the picture on an almost daily basis in their way to their council chamber. No sooner was the unveiling ceremony over than the members of the council chamber moved to have the work taken down on the grounds that it was deliberately provocative and disrespectful to the church. Members of the Republican Party said they had not been consulted about the painting and described it as a "naked white corpse". They said it was blasphemous and offensive to Christians. There have been a series of meetings about the work, the controversy has attracted considerable press attention and editorials in the local Frankfurt press and pickets and protests have been held by the general public outside the Town Hall.

Constance Short said she couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. "Its simply saying to women and anyone who feels impeded to shed that cross of their backs".

This was not the first time that this picture or a variation of it had caused trouble. A key sponsor of the exhibition in America withdrew



fig. 5.

funding after one of the linocuts which made up the piece appeared on the invitation to the exhibition.

"I have been suprised at the reaction. I've had it hung in New York, Dundalk Town Hall and in Weisbaden and they've complained about it in America and in Germany but nobody said boo about it in Dundalk".¹⁰

As well as exhibiting this show in America, Germany and Dundalk it has travelled to the Czech Republic. It has one of the most successful and publicised exhibition of Short's career.

Other artists who share similar ideas have worked with the figure and whom Short admires are Pauline Cummins, Eithne Jordan and Pauline Berwick.

Pauline Cummins work has consistently incorporated an awareness of the constructed nature of female identity. Throughout her life as an artist the struggle between the creating of art and the creating of children is worked through the canvases often being an obvious site of struggle in themselves. Sometimes they are exultant celebration, like the image of a woman in labour being carried in glory by the women who will attend her birthing. This particular image exists now only in a eight foot canvas, it had also being painted as a large mural called "Celebration" (fig.5) at the National Maternity Hospital in Holles Street in Dublin in 1984. Her exploration from a specifically female viewpoint of the conflicts between creation and procreation, production and reproduction. She began to question whether the medium of painting was the one she was best suited to, and the one best suited to her subject. She began to experiment with line - based media with installation and tape-slide. As her concerns developed and shifted, so too her media shifted.

Cummins looks at everyday commonplace above all usual events and experiences, examines and finds pleasure in their subtleties of change and metaphor.

Cummins like Short has also been influenced by Northern Ireland. Using the preserved bog people as a metaphor for a trapped history of Ireland, Cummins investigated a personal vision of the country's troubles.

"Bodies that have been discovered in our bogs, some 2,000 years old

are startling because they are so life like, they look as if they could almost speak".

"It is this idea of preservation in death or life preserved that gave me an apt arena in which to explore some of the contradictions and complications of the situation in Northern Ireland. My clay figurines speak of the past, and of the present of life remembered - life dismembered. They represent ordinary people caught by chance, and preserved in history as symbols of the on-going agony of Northern Ireland. Living as I do on Ireland, I experience the killings connected as a continuous gnawing at my bones".¹¹

Eithne Jordan's work shows introspective, personal explorations of woman, mother and child, and of woman divided by the multiple tensions of responsibility desire and need. She has been concerned with woman and the demands on her body, her presence, her personal space by those who love her.

Like Short ("My Kitchen, My Children and Me") Jordan has been influenced by the birth of her children she has also done work on relationships and her family. Two closely linked themes re-occupy her, beauty and the beast, and mother and child. Speaking about an exhibition held in the Lincoln Gallery she muses about her paintings.

"That basically they're very personal paintings about being in a strange environment called a family. Because in a way the limits of your world are the people you live with. The paintings all have to do with aspects of myself, with me and my relationship to the people around me".¹²

The birth of her own child heightened her belief about the importance of blood and family. She made it a preoccupation in her work - the relationship of women to children, to men, to each other, the difficult balance between self-protection and protectiveness of others. The survival of love and tenderness in a harsh world. Short dealt with some of these issues in her "One + One =" exhibition.

Her paintings are a direct response to her own experiences "They are an attempt to put into images human predicaments, the experience of being female, and the struggle for survival in a world seemingly bent on self destruction".¹³

Pauline Berwick, like Short, uses images of the female figure to

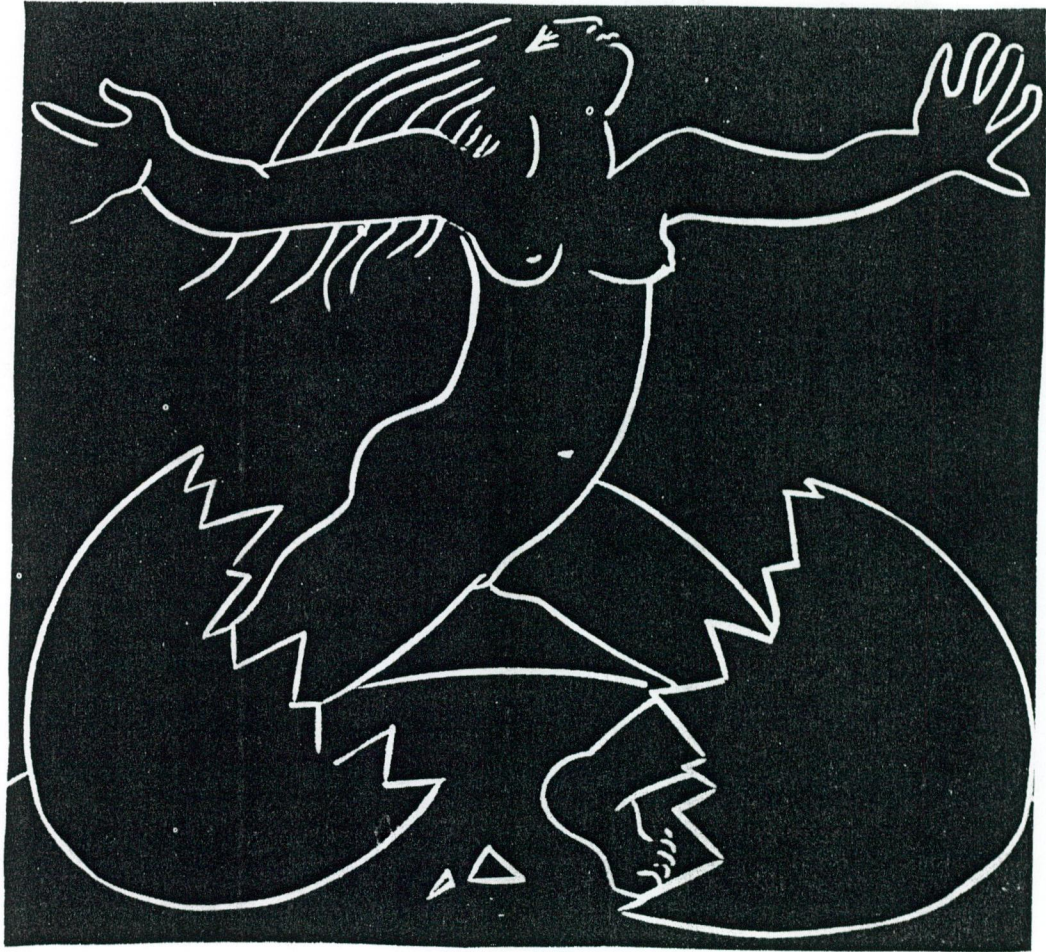


fig. 6.

translate her ideas. The subject of motherhood in "Another Child" reflects on the many mothers everywhere who already had more children than they desired and who reacted with a sense of dismay and disappointment to the discovery that they were pregnant again. This attitude appalled Berwick who brooded about it, and let it surface in a subtle way in her pictures.

In 1970 when Berwick had her second child she produced many pictures which are inspired by the presence of another life within her. Pictures entitles "Three Months Pregnant", "Pregnant Again" and "Pregnant Kerry" were exhibited over the next couple of years in group exhibitions. Her picture "Woman Awake" (fig.6) shows a woman rising from a cracked egg. It resembles Short's images of the woman rising to dance, getting up of her knees to stretch herself out and put herself on show. Short thinks the Berwick is a very beautiful and talented drawer and painter however she does find her work very illustrative.

All these artists like Short have used the figure to translate their ideas. They like Short have all been influenced by childbirth, motherhood the experiences of life as a woman.

Chapter 2

Conastance Short and Northern Ireland

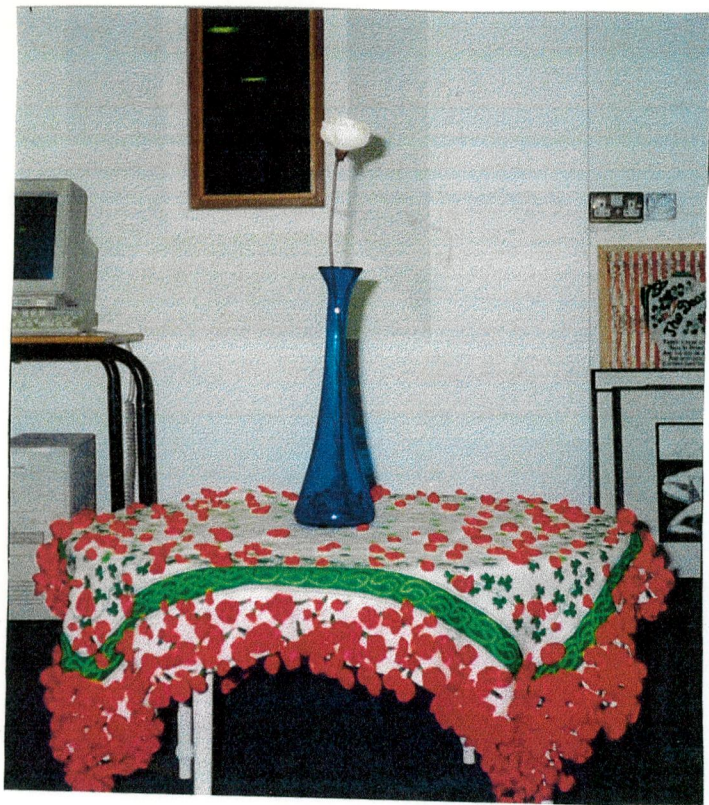


fig. 7.



Chapter 2

One of the things that struck Constance Short while working with the Women's Exchange Programme was the vitality and energy in both Catholic and Protestant areas.

Unfortunately these women saw themselves marginalised as women and as victims of the troubles. The prints "On Poems Play and Personal Things" comments on their situation. In this exhibition, she moves from subservient oppressed woman to woman dancing. She moves from the woman lying down under subjugation to the woman leaping in the air. This exhibition suggests that these disadvantaged women have the potential within themselves to develop into something meaningful. In one image a kneeling woman is shadowed by a tall, upright woman the shadow is a projection of her potential. According to Constance Short.

"Victimised people find it hard to control their situation. In this exhibition I wanted to say something about people who are victimised, marginalised, unemployed".¹⁴

She considers her art as a form of empowerment for those who are on the outside. The referendum and the peace process have influenced her more recent work. For the first time she is moving away from figuration, her most recent work includes three tables, all of which carry different meanings.

The first one consists of cloth with eight-hundred and twenty-nine roses stitched onto it and placed over a table (fig.7). On the table, a vase is placed, displaying one white rose. The inspiration for the piece began on her return from voting in the referendum when she spotted roses in bloom. She immediately thought of the English rose, and how beautiful it appears to be, and how benign it is, until you actually touch it, and it pricks you. She developed this as an analogy for British presence in Ireland. On her return from a trip to Dublin the idea for this piece developed further. Walking down Talbot Street she noticed a linen table cloth in a souvenir shop, three feet square with shamrocks printed all over it, and Celtic designs around the edges. She brought it home and began to produce the eight-hundred and twenty-nine roses. Along with the help of friends she began to stitch these roses onto the table cloth. The roses symbolising the eight-hundred and

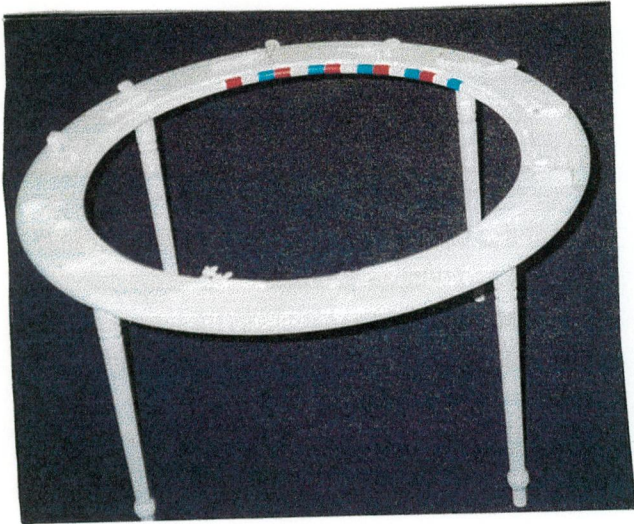
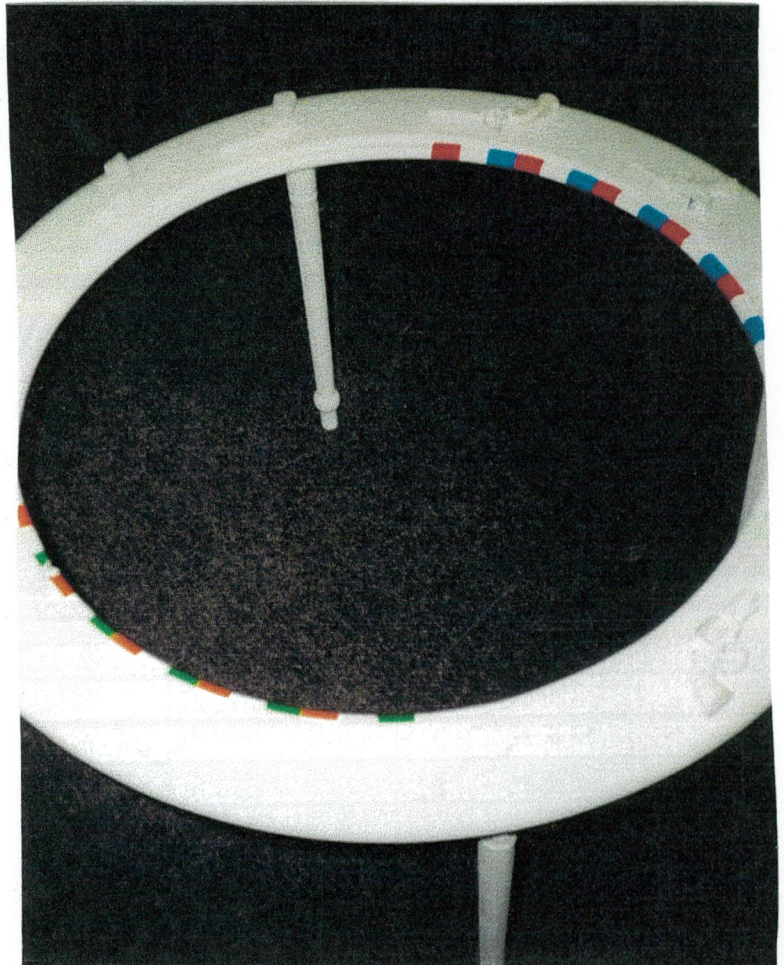


fig. 8.



twenty-nine years of British presence in Ireland, one rose for every year. The English Rose, symbol of British rule, was stitched over the symbol traditionally associated with Ireland, the Shamrock. The white rose represents the hope that the rose will be benign from now on.

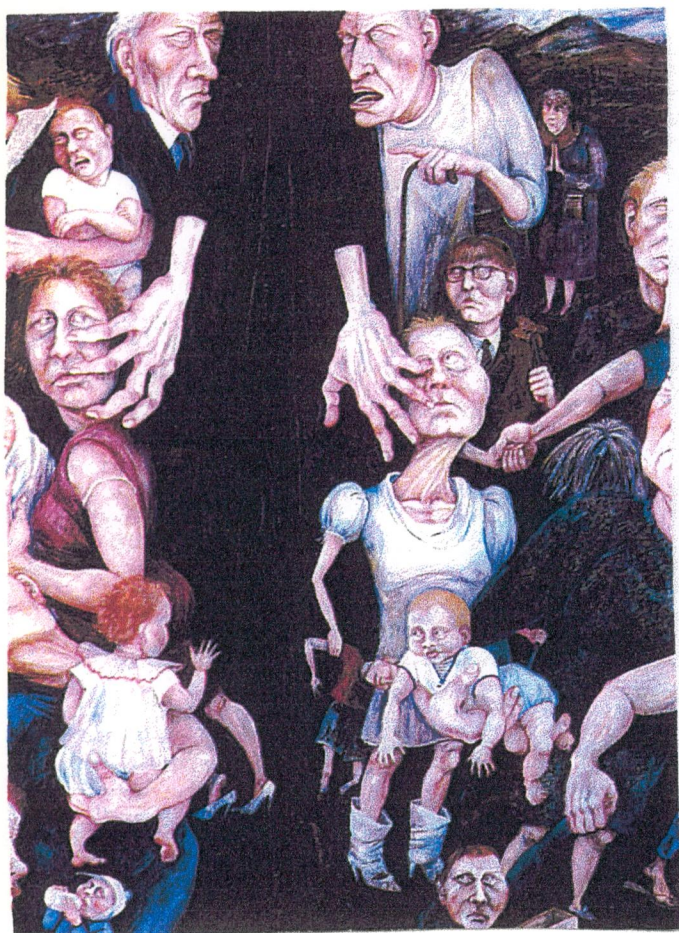
Another table, "Anglo-Irish Talks" (fig.8) is a coffee table with the glass removed, leaving only the rim. Some small cap guns are screwed to this rim. Everything is sprayed white. On the rim there is also a painted arc of green, white and orange and another of red, white and blue. The inclusion of the guns is allusive of decommissioning. The decommissioning controversy- whether peace negotiations should continue further before or after decommissioning was the underlying theme of this work. The guns were sprayed white in order to disguise them, indeed it is only when one is close to this piece that one can identify them. By extension, the guns are both "on the table" and are not. The way in which the guns were placed on the periphery of the table was Short's comment on the empty table scenario.

Finally the third table was influenced by the words of Brendan Behan's song the "Captains and the Kings".

"Of cup of tea and some dry sherry, vintage cars, these simple things. So lets drink up and be merry for the captains and the kings".¹⁵

This table titled "Afternoon Tea" consists of a green table cloth which is laid out for tea. The inherent domestic analogy questions whether we have reached the stage in this peace process where we can put the kettle on and sit down to a cup of tea together. Have we reached the stage that we have learned to accept our differences and live together as one? Can we now sit down, not only as opposites, but most importantly, as friends.

Short is now concerned with the experience of living on the border, between North and South. When she was growing up she recalls being stopped by the B Specials. The volunteer force who manned the border most, if not all of whom were unionists. She remembers how unpleasant this experience could be, from childhood she has never known anything but the expectation that someone, armed with a gun is going to stop you. It would be even more unpleasant however, to be stopped by an IRA member, as these too wear a uniform, as well as sinister balaclavas and display guns. At the moment Short is trying to figure out how she is going to translate these



Top left fig. 9.

Top right fig. 10.

Bottom fig. 11.

experiences into her work. She herself muses,

"Marie Jones with her wonderful plays or contemporary Belfast always leaves me with something to think about, words and images of Sean O'Casey. Thomas Kilroy's "Death and Resurrection of Mr. Roche" and "Talbots Box" are powerful comments of Irish society. Seamus Heaney's "Tomme Road" always comes to mind when I think about the hurt I feel over the past twenty-five years and the effects on the troubles on my own. I have always been attracted to German Expressionism and I like to think that when I am describing an intimate or domestic situation it has a reflection on the broader world".¹⁶

Rita Duffy (fig.9-11), an artist who Short claims she can easily identify with has also worked extensively with Northern Ireland issues. She deals with issues such as segregation siege mentality gender and cultural and religions extremism. She also works with the figure often showing it in a distorted background or landscape.

The German Expressionists have provided relevant visual stimulus for the artist particularly the painter Otto Dix whose portrait of "Silvia Von Harden" was the source for "A Comfortable Woman".

The streets of Duffy's Belfast are not places for religious contemplation. They are perpetually in a state of arousal or group agitation. Rita Duffy is interested in all roles that women have to or are forced to play. She has in all her work treated them with compassion and humour. Belinda Loftus in 1985 affectionately described "Avenue of Liberty" as a work that,

..."shows a red light area at night. Here Duffy's sense of the grotesque and the fascination with decorative detail find a worthy subject in the prostitute who walks down the pavement, ogled by the men she passes".¹⁷

Like Short Rita Duffy has involved herself with political issues bringing Protestant and Catholic together. The divisions that Rita Duffy reflects in her work are physically expressed in the so called Peace Line that separates the Protestant Shankill Road from the Catholic Falls Road. In January 1990, Rita Duffy, inspired by the coming down of the Berlin Wall, organised children from both communities to paint out the wall as an artist in community projects- A Friendship Wall produced in 1990.

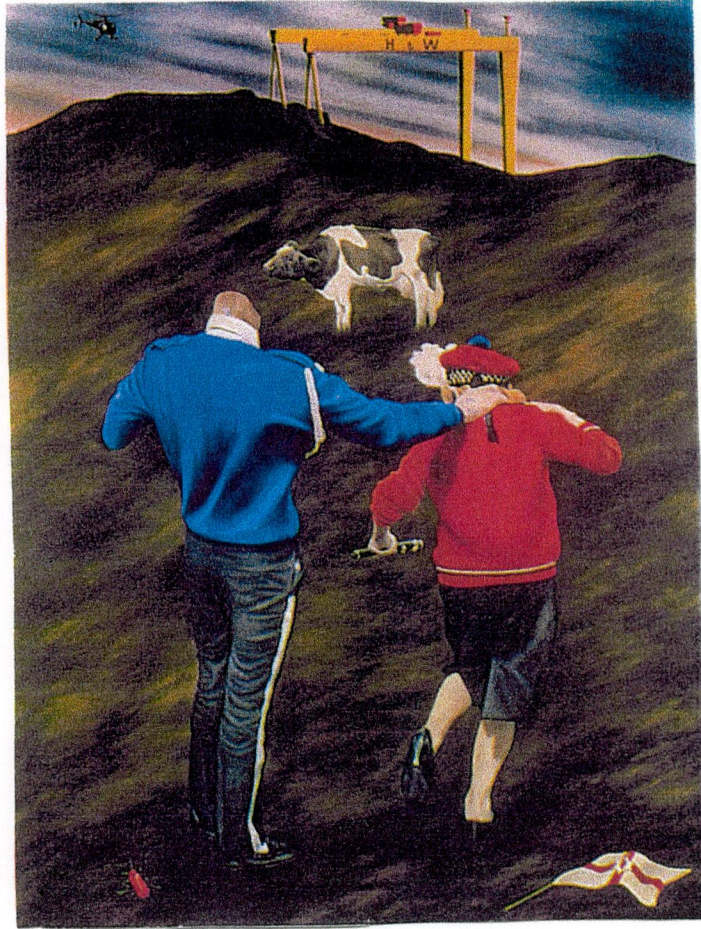


fig. 12.

Another Northern Ireland artist whose work Short admires is Dermot Seymour. Seymour's lurid ominous and displayed drumlin borderlands are also myth-laden, and words are used to explore conundrums, complexities and bizarre juxtapositions. Nothing seems to be what it is. Seymour brands and marks his absurd menagerie of sheep, cattle and pookas so that they only stray into his pictures just as partisans mark and territorialize the Ulster countryside.

His animals are always the ones who look on, silent witnesses to the persistent fact that nothing has changed, or they pick up disease from the land, underlying a preoccupation of the artist the idea of the sickness of the land. An example of the latter is "Botulism over Mullaghcreevy" an intriguingly ambiguous painting in which it is difficult to tell if a re-clinging figure is resting or dead. Seymour has commented,

"there's a question mark over the figure lying there - is he dead, asleep, sick? Those are ambiguous conundrums thrown in to start this whole idea that nothing is ever what it seems, which for me, is one of the ways of trying to come to terms with the complexities of place".¹⁸

Seymour is fond of incorporating military insignia, flags and graffiti as other forms of marking and categorising, but it is the titles of his paintings that set riddles off. His titles however do more than describe, they humorously extend the meanings by interlacing them.

According to Seymour, "being Protestant is not being allowed to think for yourself". He illustrates this in a series of paintings by depicting headless figures as a comment on fundamentalist or entrenched thinking. In "Who Fears to Speak of '98" (fig.12), the dominant symbol of Harland and Wolff is relocated on Napoleon's nose (a local term for part of the Cave Hill, visible from most of Belfast). Here Free Presbyterianism stands over the free thinking of Henry Joy Mc Cracken and his associates. Belfast Cave Hill is historically linked with Henry Joy Mc Cracken, and Seymour ironically sees the same kind of people who today work in the local shipyard, in many ways like those who would have signed the United Irishmen pact. The painting point to frustrated behaviour, and a soldier beetle symbolically drop from nowhere.

In Seymour's paintings the complications of our society come out of

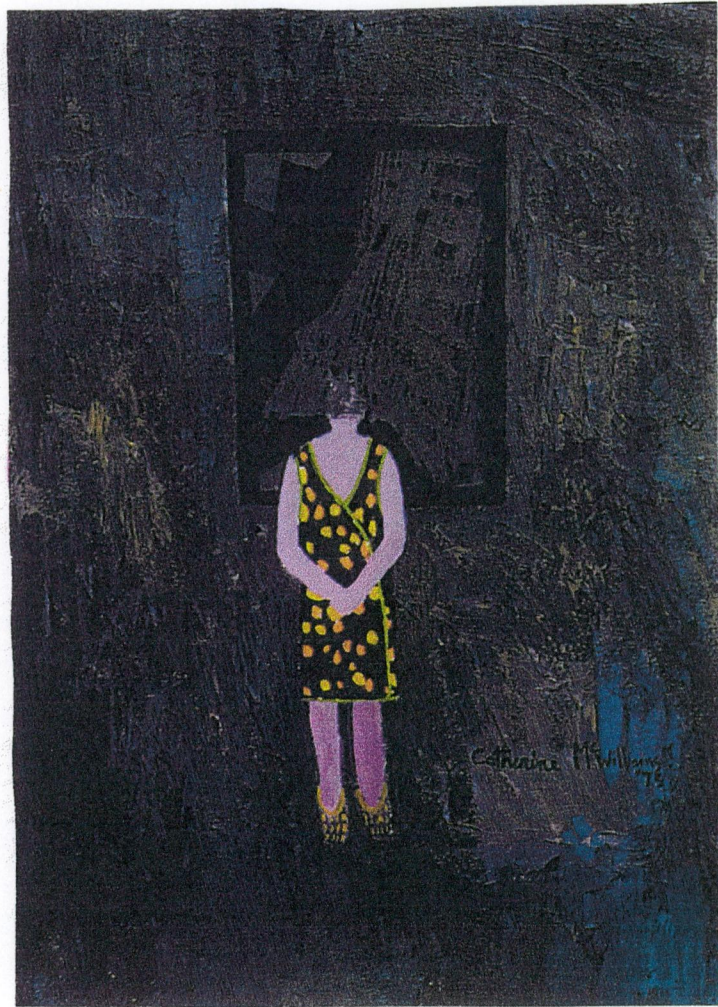


fig. 13.

locations. A cross-roads is not just a junction, it is where someone was shot, a patrol ambushed, or where traffic is monitored or surveilled. Every one of Seymours paintings has a meaning behind it or message to convey. He translates his idea through his use of the figure, animals and the landscape into which they are placed.

Two female artists tackling the effects of the Troubles on Women in Belfast are Catherine Mc William's and Patrica Mc Comish. Patrica Mc Comish depicts the women of Belfast as suffering, brooding figures. These figures are laden with heavy black lines giving them a bleak and dull appearance, full of sorrow and suffering.

Catherine Mc William's, like Constance Short, depicts images of women's suffering (fig.13). Both are influenced by the women of Northern Ireland. In a series of social portraits during the early 1970s, Catherine Mc William's focused on single, isolated female figures. The space that she depicts around these forlorn figures does all the work. They are entrapped by it rather than simply being in it. They have little control or choice over their circumstances. These were painted during a period when the artist was walking in an all girls school in the Catholic Ardoyne/Old Park area of Belfast, an area which has suffered and endured considerable violence and social deprivation. In areas of Belfast like Ardoyne, the social deprivation that arose from unemployment and neglect is exacerbated by the contributing presence of the British Army and the IRA. The necessary space to enjoy childhood innocence is denied. Mc William, like Short, recognises that the construction of female, stereotypical roles for women is compounded further within the Northern Irish context. She has stated,

"A northern Irish woman, like woman everywhere may occasionally feel trapped within stereotypical roles, but she will also be immersed in Northern Ireland's own particular identity problem, whether one's label is to be Irish or British. This concern for labels, flags and emblems does not end in the domestic world, but intrudes into the domestic world".¹⁹

These earlier paintings which depicted actual women, developed into works where imaginary female forms became every woman. The negative perception of woman merging into the background, either as wife or mother, is inverted and re-directed as a pervading strength in a series of works during the 1980s. Like Short, Mc William's has showed both woman as the victim



fig. 14.

and escaping that victimisation and suffering.

The same expressionist handling of Belfast women's lives can be found in Martin Forker's series of drawings made in 1975 while he and his wife were living in Turf Lodge, a Belfast Catholic housing estate. Forker who was unemployed at the time, was witness to many of the intolerable strains imposed on local women, including his own wife. He translated these images and experiences into his art. Forker's drawing of the fate of local women are strongly rooted in such immediate circumstances as oppressive architecture, squalling kids and endless nappies.

Brendan Ellis has drawn heavily on German Expressionism for his depiction of the effect of the troubles on Belfast women (fig.14). He depicts women as lively combatants, suffering but fighting back. The joking factory girls hurrying home from work, the wife or girlfriend leaning forward in her chair to watch the news on the television, the pinched down at-heel housewife scuttling along with her carrier bag, past the corrugated-iron barricades, the girl shocked by some violent incident, crouched in an armchair, wrapped in a dressing gown, the brassy tarts down the pub- these are the women of Belfast's troubled streets, at once vulnerable and intimidating. He was born and grew up in Belfast. He has experienced daily riots and shootings in his life and has reacted accordingly in his pictures. His early work depicts soldiers with sprouted guns, buildings burnt down, somebody being shot. Now his pictures focus more on the social problems. Like Short he shows this through his use of the figure.

The artists mentioned here have used Northern Ireland as inspiration for their work most have been influenced by German Expressionism and all use images of the figure to convey their ideas.

The troubles in the North have always been a major preoccupation with Short both in her art and personal life. She has reacted to the troubles by becoming involved in Co-operation North and bringing Catholics and Protestant together, and responding through her art.

Chapter 3

Conastance Short and THORP

Chapter 3

Constance Short has fought for many worthwhile causes. Her most recent involvement, and probably her most daring to date, is with BNFL (British Nuclear Fuels Limited). Short along with three other Dundalk residents are taking a case against BNFL regarding the operation and the management of their THORP plant (Thermal Oxide Reprocessing Plant) at Sellafield. The other plaintiffs involved in the case are Mark Deary (an organic farmer who has a history of involvement in local environmental issues), Olan Heer (an engineer who is involved in making products for waste fluid control) and Mary Kavanagh (a second level school teacher). These four came together as a result of a public meeting which was called in Dundalk by Mark Deary. The purpose of the meeting was to raise people's awareness about the dangers posed to them as a result of being in such close proximity to the THORP plant. The meeting was very well attended but resulted in only four people willing to take on the court battle. Many of the remaining people who attended the meeting formed a support group for the plaintiffs, STAD (Stop Thorp Alliance Dundalk) which has been involved in fund-raising for the case, publicising the case and conducting necessary research. To date the case has had hearing in the Circuit Court, the High Court and the Irish Supreme Court. It also generated debates in the Dail. There is an on-going argument with the Irish Government regarding the funding of the case.

STAD is not the only group opposed to THORP CND (campaigns against nuclear weapons), Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, Core (Comrade Opposed to a Radioactive Environment) and other Environmental groups share objections.

THORP reprocesses spent (used) fuel from both British and overseas nuclear power stations. The British fuel is brought by rail from nuclear power stations in England, Scotland and Wales. The imported spent fuel comes by sea through the nearby dock at Borrow. It comes from a growing number of countries including Germany, Switzerland and Japan. BNFL is also trying to get reprocessing contracts from more countries all around the world.

THORP began in 1977 when nuclear fuel was coming from nuclear

power stations all over the world to Sellafield for reprocessing at the plant. European nuclear power stations were changing and modernising and the spent fuel they were sending was different from previous generations, so a new reprocessing facility was needed to reprocess fuel from the more modern reactors than from the very old magnox reactors.

Reprocessing separates out the various elements in the spent fuel. This produces not only large quantities of radioactive waste and uranium but also plutonium- the most powerful nuclear explosive ever created. The British government has always claimed that the so called reactor grade plutonium produced by plants such as THORP is not suitable for use in Nuclear weapons. This is not true. The US has now revealed that as far back as 1962, it carried out a nuclear test explosion, deliberately using reactor grade plutonium to prove that it could be done. The plutonium was supplied by Britain.

The idea for THORP made even more sense at the time because uranium from natural sources was very expensive to extract and plutonium, needed for nuclear war heads, was the life blood of the Cold War. In the mid 70's at the height of the Cold War uranium prices were very high and it seemed to make sense to extract these two products from the spent fuel. This was originally the job of Sellafield, but Sellafield could not cater for the demand, nor was it suitable for the reprocessing of the new type of spent fuel, hence the establishment of THORP.

The building of the THORP plant was sanctioned in 1977 following a 100 day hearing The Parker Enquiry, to determine whether or not the THORP plant should be built. The advantages were found to outweigh the disadvantages and the building of THORP was approved. The plaintiffs for the case believe that the profits to be made are more important to BNFL than the risk to life, nature and the environment.

Building started in the 80's but was not completed until the 90's. The £2.8 billion for the building of THORP came mainly from the British Government but it is also speculated that money was donated from other Governments who intended to use the plant. The investments from other countries now mean they have a prior claim and can insist that their waste be processed there. Although very few know the full details, it is the belief of many that the British Government did not build it on their own.

What inspired Short and her colleagues to fight this battle? They are of the opinion that THORP poses a real threat to our health and the environment. Short muses,

"Here we are tolerating the greatest threat that England could ever bring us, it seems crazy to me that people in the North are killing each other over a bit of land, when all that needs to happen is one leak too far and we will all be wiped out Protestant and Catholic alike, the whole island. I feel this is the most serious threat to Ireland".²⁰

The plaintiffs believe that THORP,

- * is not operating within the planning regulations which Europe laid down for nuclear reprocessing plants.
- * It leads to an increase of radioactive isotopes released into the environment.
- * produces radioactive emissions which find their way into the food chain, the sea and the air and ultimately into our bodies.
- * has increased the risk of ill health as a result of the increased pollution from the plant.
- * infringes our rights, and that under European law we deserve protection from further production until such a time that it can be established that the plant is operating without injuring anybody's health.

Clearly it is their belief that the latter will not happen, and that the plant will be shown to have effects on their health, that it should not be operating and should never have been.

A case similar to this case "Constance Short and others versus BNFL" has been fought and lost. Lancashire County Council along with Greenpeace, attempted to prevent THORP from ever opening. Their case held under British law, failed however. The Short case is based on European directives which they argue will give them a better chance. It was the failure of the British case, which Mark Deary had been following, which inspired him to call that public meeting, to encourage others to follow the example set by Lancashire County and Greenpeace.

They have been in court now for four years, establishing their right to

jurisdiction on what was happening on British soil. The first battle took place in the circuit court in order to establish that they had a stateable case. They were successful BNFL retaliated by taking them to the Highcourt, claiming that the Irish courts has no say in this matter, after six days Justice Rory O'Hanlon ruled in favour of the plaintiffs. Determined to quash any kind of opposition to their power BNFL appealed once again. The argument of both sides were listened to in the Irish Supreme court and yet again it was ruled in favour of the plaintiffs. At this stage they are waiting to go to court on the substantive issues to be heard. This real battle has yet to begin. At present they are preparing their case and absorbing themselves in extensive research.

BNFL say they are operating within legal limits, and that their emissions are within recommended limits. It is also argued that if THORP closed down it would have a devastating effect on the employment rate in Cumbria. If however THORP was closed down it would continue to provide employment for generations to come because of the long time it takes to close down a station.

The plaintiffs are also taking a case against the state. This case is based on the states failure to protect the citizenry against BNFL's pollution. The Government didn't take all the steps open to them to get Sellafield shut down. There, wasn't one representative from Ireland at the Parker Enquiry hearing. This aspect of the case is expected to be dropped if the Government rows in and lends it backing to the plaintiffs. At present the Government is only paying their research fees, when they had previously promised to fully fund the case. If the plaintiffs lose their case it may result in them having to surrender their houses in order to pay their legal fees. Until now, all the fees have been covered because they have won every court battle to date.

Short claims that this case has not influenced her work. She feels it absorbs so much of her personal life at present that she does not wish it to absorb her art also. The threat we are under from the THORP plant and nuclear power in general is something Short would definitely like to pursue at some stage in her work. She has not yet decided how and when she will translate it into her art.

The Edge exhibition took place in 1984. The selection committee consisted of Kent Russell (former Gallery manager, Arts Council N.I.),

Aidan Dunne (art critic) and Jenny Haughton (Temple Bar Studios). Aidan Dunne, one of these selectors, saw these artists as being affected in some way or another by the nuclear threat under which we all live. The edge being the nuclear brink. He saw such a threat as a turning point.

"These ten artists in their work variously refer to such decisive, perhaps catastrophic, turning points, to prior innocence, the point of loss or learning, or the aftermath".²¹

Martin Wedge's figure have an animal stare, as if caged for public viewing, and there is no privacy afforded, all bodily parts are on display. In many of the artists drawings figures float or are in some way suspended. In these drawings there is no pictorial context or narrative background. It is the figures who carry all the emotional weight. Wedge's figures are scored into existence by highly aggressive lines and patches of grey-black tones.

Eithne Jordan had two paintings in the exhibition "Group of Women" huddle for spiritual and physical warmth while "Standing Group With Child" approach and confront the viewer. These indeed are forlorn aftermath figures children of the scorched earth.

Aidan Dunne in his catalogue essay claims that,

"A sense of aftermath pervades Cecily Brennan's sleeping world, which has its own pitfalls and is invaded by waking concerns. The calmness of Eithne Jordan's almost submarine space, likewise, seems bruised, as if captured in the aftermath of a storm, as survivors emerge and grope tentatively toward each other. Innocence and its opposite, are strangely mixed in Joe Butler's sculpture, devices that are clearly a commentary on the atomic age and the arms race. They are self defeating machines, ferocious, noisy, locked into cycles of impotent motion. They go nowhere and harm no-one but they mimic the forms and materials of missiles that are designed to do both".²²

Anita Groener another artist who took part in the exhibition comments in the catalogue.

" I have been born in the century in which science has become a delusion. Instead of fostering a prosperous future to mankind, it has brought us the most horrific uncertainty and oppression of human existence".²³

Martin Wedge comments on how his work is about aggression and alienation sexual and otherwise, man/woman under constant threat. Fergus Delargy claims that he is inspired by dilemma. It can be argued that these artists have responded to the nuclear threat through their art something which Short has yet to develop. One thing for certain is that all of the work in this exhibition has been influenced by some sort of catastrophe or dilemma be it nuclear or not.

The nuclear threat is something which Short is clearly aware of as a result of being involved in the case against BNFL. It is a topic which she has already considered including into her art, it has not surfaced into her work yet but she claims that she would like to include it into her future work.

1. The first part of the report deals with the general situation of the country and the progress of the work during the year. It also mentions the results of the various expeditions and the collections made.

2. The second part of the report deals with the results of the various expeditions and the collections made. It also mentions the progress of the work during the year and the general situation of the country.

3. The third part of the report deals with the results of the various expeditions and the collections made. It also mentions the progress of the work during the year and the general situation of the country.

Conclusion

Conclusion

Constance Short now aged fifty four believes she still has a lot more to do both in her artistic life and personal life. She is an enthusiastic woman with a vibrant personality and will always be involved in some organisation fighting for what ever cause she feels is adequate.

At present she has several ideas of what to do next. She may produce more art about Northern Ireland and the peace process or she may produce work about her involvement in the THORP case. The "Short and others verses BNFL" case is still continuing they are still waiting to go to court on the substantive issues.

Her most recent project is with the students of the Regional Technical College Dundalk. Short is going to paint a mural composed totally of hand prints and hopes that lots of the students will participate so she has enough hands to cover the wall. The piece will show a sunburst with fields of green, white and gold and a sky of blue, red and white. This piece is about peace and some Seamus Heaney script will accompany the piece. This is not the first time Short has involved herself with the production of murals. She completed forty murals in numerous schools under the Arts Council "Paint On The Wall Scheme". It is obvious from her involvement in all these murals that Short loves to work with people, to help them show their creative side, to pass on and teach some of her skill and knowledge. Short also give children's art classes every afternoon from Monday to Friday. These classes are something which she finds very enjoyable and rewarding and is amazed by what children can produce.

In the art world Short believes that every artist should have a message in their work. They are interpreters and are responsible to act on the ideas in their head. She states that she prefers art with a message behind it, with something to say to the viewer, rather than a pretty picture that people hang on the wall to match their decor.

Short will always be as she states a political artist, a pacifist and constitutional socialists it is her nature and it is evident from her personality that this attitude will never change. Her art will continue to make a statement about social and political problems.

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