

BRIAN BOURKE

FIONA MARRON

4th YEAR EDUCATION

THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF HISTORY
OF ART, NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

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Born in Dublin, 1936

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Awarded second prize in the Irish Exhibition of Living Art Competition for artists under 40 years.
1964.

Chosen to represent Ireland at the Paris Biennale 1965.

Chosen to represent Ireland at the Lugano Exhibition of Graphics 1966.

Recent One-Man Show:

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1979 Stone Gallery, Galway - Theatre drawings

1981 Taylor Gallery, Dublin - "Self and Don Quixote"
painting, prints and sculpture

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"He does not paint for pleasure but out of necessity and he destroys all those pictures he has produced which have failed to contain that element of discovery and achievement which distinguishes the casual encounter from the act of love".

James White, Brian Bourke
A Catalogue

INTRODUCTION

Since his first one man show in 1965 in the Dawson Gallery, Dublin, Brian Bourke still remains undoubtedly one of the more interesting artists in Ireland today, one whom it is impossible to ignore. In the course of this thesis I wish to discuss this commanding quality that Bourke maintains in his work, compelling one to take note of his every adventure. His early figurative work of women; his response to them, the statements he announced about their predicaments, their vulnerability, to his self-portraits which developed from the strong influence of Francis Bacon, who's sense of space and "confined" figures intrigued Bourke. These self-portraits go through various stages. We see the figure growing larger, paint applied more confidently, finding a new sense of space, composition and a growing awareness of colour. All these elements develop to make Bourke's paintings the embodiment of individuality. The sense of self-mockery which started with the helmuted series, "Self-portrait with crown", "Self-portrait with top hat", turns up in later years with complete professionalism and exuberant dramatic content in the "Don Quixote and self" series. Here we shall see how Bourke learns to employ self-mockery, stoicism, sarcasm and wit in his work, with total control, and portrays these dramatic activities with a wonderful sensitivity to line.

With his landscape paintings Brian Bourke created a new "way of looking" which took contemporary Irish painting by storm, and its effect was also felt on the international scene. He set a new standard of accomplishment, a standard which still grows with every year. His inventive use of colour shows a strength and individuality that is outstanding in the field of landscape painting. One can recognise a "Bourke" instantly from the vigorous marks of acid greens, yellows, blue and orange which gush like waves over soft curving hills. And from the dramatic skies filled with immense, moving clouds of wild pinks, greys and exotic blue. This remarkably individual sense of colour was sparked off with the Kilkenny and Burren paintings, developing more in the Bavarian landscapes, where the light played different effects on the countryside, and reaching a positive strength and intensity in the Knockalough series. These paintings are not a mere representation of nature, they are a very individual re-creation of the sight and soul of it.

Brian Bourke describes his eagerness to paint as a "hunger". There are few artists anywhere who can be more hardworking than he. He involves himself completely and works at an intensely rapid pace. This energy, this exuberance bursts forth in his paintings, and one cannot help but be affected by them. You can feel the breeze blowing over a summer field or be intimidated by the angry architecture of a winter sky, or again feel the quiet of a meadow in spring. For re-act you must, Brian Fallon says of Bourke's work (F.1). "Where his early pictures had given the feeling of a shuttered and airless room, these give the feeling of a window thrown open".

Footnote No. 1. Brian Fallon - Art Critic, Irish Times.
Review of exhibition at Dawson Gallery 10/9/76.

CHAPTER 1. BOURKE'S ART EDUCATION - EARLY PAINTINGS

Brian Bourke was born in Dublin in 1936. He can remember clearly that he never wanted to be anything other than an artist. As a child he was drawing constantly. At the age of seventeen he had a brief encounter with the National College of Art in Dublin. He describes his time there as "a stupid waste of time"..... "colleges put shackles on people, if you get caught up it takes a long time to get free".

He went to London and enrolled in St. Martin's School of Art, leaving behind him in Dublin a reputation as a revolutionary, as he disagreed entirely with the conservative rules of college. But St. Martin's was not much better. However, he managed to get most of his education in art from reading books in the library of the British Museum, and going around galleries in London. Bourke says that this was his best option for learning. He encountered artists such as Francis Bacon and Frank Averbach and was very impressed with the work. He also managed to sneak into the life drawing classes held at the Goldsmiths School of Art and this provided him with a basic training. He still believes that art institutions are a bad thing: "I'm very suspicious of schools of art, they're far too big. They're getting bigger and more powerful all the time. It's like a machine for maintaining teachers. I'd like to see more of them and smaller ones. With a big school there is too much involvement with a political thing, the whole situation is an evasion of work".

PAINTINGS (EARLY YEARS)

Brian Bourke's early paintings are involved with the figure and self-portraits and they tend to have a greater feeling of premeditation about them, compared to his spontaneous landscape work, particularly when the figure is placed in an interior space. "Portrait of a woman, Nude" was painted around 1961. It is a stark almost crude painting of a reclining woman with painful eyes. The background colour is cold blue and grey, painted flatly. The composition is well defined, divided into angular spaces, giving a feeling of clinical coldness. Yet this sharpness doesn't intrude on the sensitive, vulnerable mood Bourke creates around the woman, showing his awareness of female predicaments. In his "Portrait of Ann" the figure sits tensely and isolated. The interior space of this painting is also well defined. The background is built up with densely hatched textures, like a net from which the figure cannot escape, adding a feeling of restraint to the painting. I find that the horizontal line painted across the centre of the canvas adds to the meditative tension of the mood; horizontal lines being instruments of inactivity. In a lot of cases the artist re-frames the figures by painting an oval or circle, confining the figure even further. Dorothy Walker refers to Bourke's female portraits as "the drama of the dire situation in which these women endure their lives". She makes a comparison between Bourke and Louis le Brocquy:-

(F.2) "He has as much an obsession with the human head as Louis le Brocquy, but whereas le Brocquy's obsession is with the poetry of presence and expression which the personality embodies in the head, generally male, Brian Bourke seems more concerned with the boniness and spareness of the

Footnote No. 2. Dorothy Walker, Art Critic - Review in the Hibernia 19/2/71.

female head, stripped of feminine extravagances like hair yet unmistakably female. They are women who are grim and trapped".

I agree with this statement. I feel Bourke is portraying the "poetry" of reality; situations as they are, good or bad. Le Brocquy's work streams from his imagination, involving the ideal and dreams.

Bourke's self-portraits are painted rather differently. They show a sense of self-mockery and stoicism. "Self-portrait in top hat" and "Self-portrait with crown" are examples of this. I find the latter painting quite humourous, yet intense. The artist stands erect and proud, naked but for the crown. The crown is perched on top of the head, and Bourke grins mockingly, yet his eyes have a penetrating stare that adds an uneasiness. The background is divided into two rectangular spaces, painted flatly in blue and green. The figure occupies most of this space yet the impact from this is not as strong as one would expect. Bourke is hemmed in, and confined in his own space. This gives the painting its disturbing quality, a tip from Bacon perhaps.

In Francis Bacon's "Portrait of Lucian Freud" painted in 1968, we see the figure confined in the same compositional space. Bacon breaks up the composition with flat horizontal rectangles of red, brown and lilac colours. These in turn seem to hold the figure rigidly in his position - very much in the same way Bourke uses a vertical rectangle in "Self-portrait with crown". Both subjects stare from the canvas, setting this disturbing and intense mood.

I think Bourke's self-portrait paintings also have a touch of primitivism about them in that they possess a rawness that is almost savage.

This also adds to the intensity I mentioned. I find this "primitivism" highly evocative. It summons one forth to study the paintings. Harriet Cooke writes: (F.3) "He is also exhibitioning himself. Bourke, more than most painters is unremittingly savage in a deeply and penetrating way". I agree with this. Bourke makes no excuses when painting himself naked and helmuted. He confronts the naked body with a directness which I think is not often found in Irish art. "Self-portrait with Umbrella" is an example of one such painting. The artist stands straight and proudly, there is no evidence of shyness as he exhibits his body to us. Bourke states himself that: (F.4) "In this barbaric age the artist must turn to essentials. In a barbaric age the nearest thing to culture is primitiveness, the only recourse for the artist is primitiveness".

Brian O'Doherty talks about Irish artists "strategy of avoidance" when dealing with the naked figure: (F.5) "Since the nude is a fully codified theme and subject in European Art, the way in which it is approached by Irish artists might reveal aspects of that fierce continence, repression and avoidance through idealization or fantasy so familiar in Irish literature".

For me, Bourke engages himself in projecting his feelings about sensual man, and he does so with a strong sense of maturity. Talking to him about the recent "making sense" exhibition which is touring Ireland for some of 1983, we discussed this aspect of the painted naked man and

Footnote No. 3. Harriet Cooke, Art Critic. Review Irish Times 5/5/69

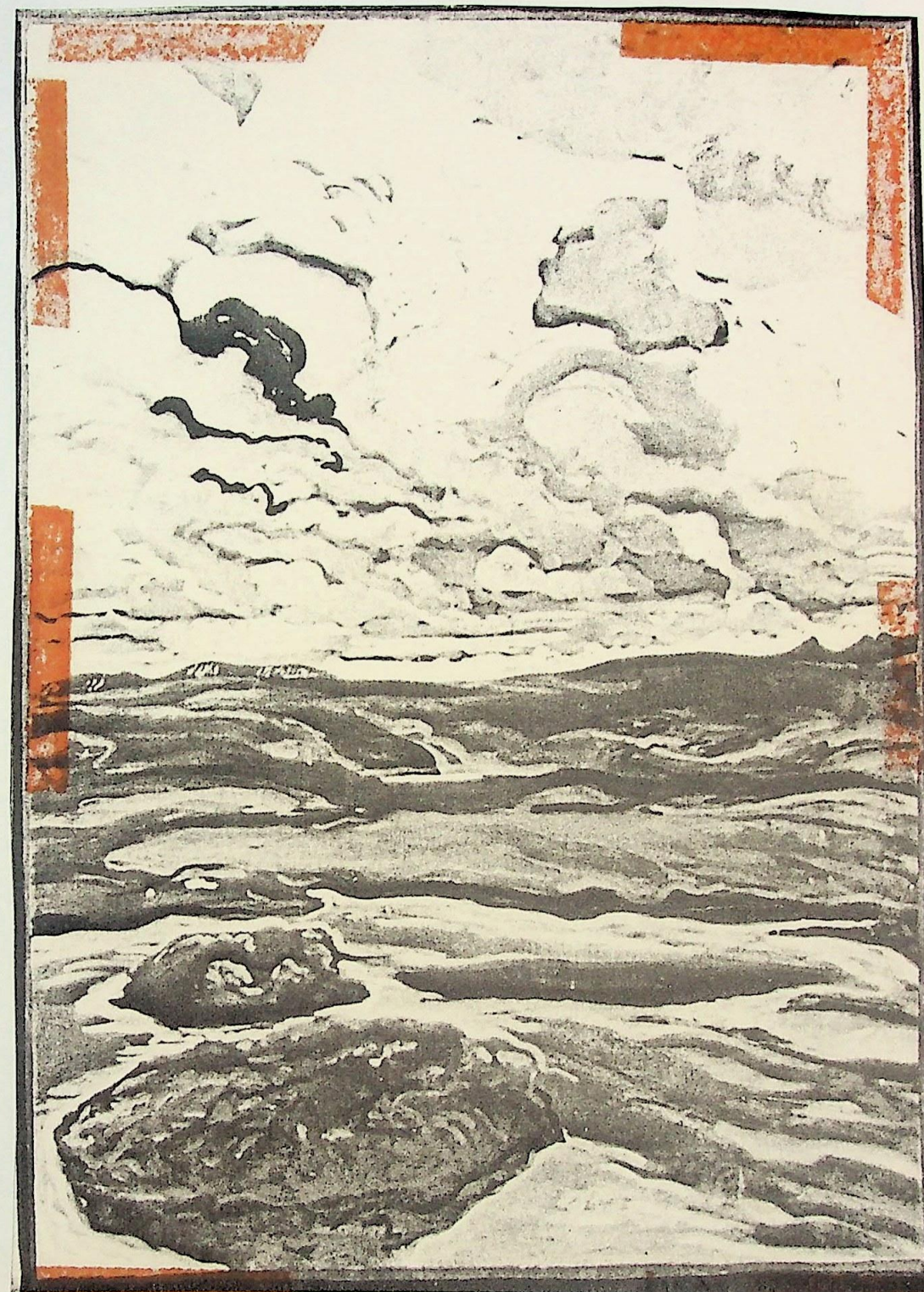
Footnote No. 4. From handout with catalogue, Exhibition held in Arts Council Gallery, Bedford House. May 1969

Footnote No. 5. Brian O'Doherty, Art Historian. Essay - "The Puritan Nude" from "The Irish Imagination 1959-71".

Bourke admits disappointment with this show, saying: "It's greatly lacking in maturity. Some of the artists look like they have only just discovered their genitals. I was painting mine in the '60's".

Bruce Arnold talking about an early self-portrait by Bourke (1961) describes the artist's technique as: (F.6) "Bold and rather crude". This painting shows the artist full-face, head and shoulders, and he is wearing the infamous top hat. The paint is laid on thickly and the colours have a vibrant, almost luminous quality, which was gained by mixing egg with the paint. The patches of brown, red and yellow, of light and shadow on the face stand out strongly but not crudely. I think this painting was probably one of the first showing Bourke's evocative primitivism. The paintings coming after this early portrait, some of which I've mentioned, "Self-portrait with crown", "Self-portrait with top hat" and "Self-portrait with umbrella" are the result of obsessive learning and development. The overall effect of these paintings is one of strength and unity, demanding our attention, compelling us to look, a quality which Bourke goes on to develop more and more in both his landscapes and figurative work - till the effect becomes almost overwhelming.

Footnote No. 6. Bruce Arnold, Art Critic. Foreword to Catalogue for "New Paintings" Exhibition at Dawson Gallery in 1968.



Knockalough (diptych) oil on paper 70x50 cm. each



landscape, Kilkenny (1976) oil on board 76x56 cm.

CHAPTER 2. THE "KNOCK-A-LOUGH" PAINTINGS

My interest and involvement in Brian Bourke's work stems primarily from the impact his landscape paintings throw forth. Here I feel Bourke shows an energy and strength, growing from total dedications, that is unequalled in Irish art today, apart from the landscape paintings by Cecily Brennan. Bourke's landscapes are creative reconstructions which come into existence through obsessive observations on the Irish countryside. Frances Ruane writes on Bourke seeing the countryside as:

(F.7) "The site of dramatic activity ... the drama of the light and weather and the activity of plant growth and moving skies". Indeed, it is a "site" that Bourke plays out boldly until he has almost exhausted it. He often paints the same scene again and again, but never loses that vibrancy of colour, that intensity of rushing lines and works. He maintains a freshness of vision for all the seasons, days, he depicts, and each scene is alive with the strength that dares us to look.

Bourke is a painter who works at a subject over a period until he can do exactly as he wishes with it. He has been living in Connemara for the last six years. Five of these years were spent at a place called Knockalough, and this countryside provided him with the motif for his "Eight Seasons", an exhibition held in the Taylor Galleries in 1978. There were thirty-five paintings shown, each an interpretation of the same landscape. Knockalough is a place of low hills, jagged turf-cuttings and a windswept thornbush dominated by immense cloud filled skies, which in their turn dominate Bourke's paintings. These paintings are indeed dramatic, evocative and commanding, the individual re-creation of the sight and soul of the landscape.

Footnote No. 7. Frances Ruane, Art Historian and Lecturer. From "The Delighted Eye".

The paintings are set down in rich, thick paint. The great scurrying clouds have a charge about them as they move across the sky in their pinks, greys, brown's and especially the exotic, electric blue, The colour which stands out most in a number of the works. The splendour of high summer is splashed out with almost restless exuberance. The striking yellows and greens have a brashness about them, creating wild acid effects which becomes the key to recognising a "Bourke". Everything in the paintings is alive and oozing with freshness. The winter and early spring paintings are more muted in tones of rich browns and russets, emphasising the structure of the scene. I warmed to their moody and emotional depths of expression, and Bourke's sensitivity to his surrounds. I found the overall effect of this show deeply intoxicating and exhilarating.

"Knock-a-Lough, Galway '77" is the embodiment of strength and control in a turbulent landscape. A rushing wind forces the clouds to fit into a semi-circular shape, and they become like one gust of the elements. They almost crash down on the thorn bush that is falling sideways with the force. The colours are throbbing with that vibrancy which is so much a feature in Bourke's work. Green, yellow, pink, brown and blue flash across into the depths of the landscape in flowing lines of thick paint. The long grasses, which are painted more delicately, are also blown sideways, some fall down in rust-red shades beneath the greens. The low hills are soft, gentle curves moving into the distance, very much in contrast to the rest of the rhythmic gestures portrayed by Bourke. The element of control is gained by the emphasised semi-circular line of red in the foreground, which reaches up to that one of the clouds.

Talking to Bourke about this place, Knockalough, I was made aware of his deep feelings for this countryside. It is as though this place seeped into his bones, as he lived there, worked there - looking constantly at the unfolding drama as it shaped and re-shaped before his eyes. Brian Bourke is a man with strong feelings and Knockalough was the place that provided him with so much stimulus and space to express these feelings. "Connemara is beautiful at any time" he says "even when it rains; you've got the mists - and always there is the unusual quality of light.....". "I need the air too, I couldn't live in a city anymore, they've got too much smog and cars...."

In contrast to "Knock-a-Lough, Galway '77" is "Knock-a-Lough Winter '78". From this painting we can learn of the artists open response to the changing seasons. The winter painting is much more subdued and muted in tone, compared to the high splendour of summer sunshine and gusty breezes. It's a snow scene and the landscape is calm and silent. The tree stands straight and stark, naked without its leaves, strong in its structure. The grasses are spiky, definite lines shooting out of the blue-gray snow in particular places. There is no driving wind pushing against the landscape, but the clouds retain some of their heaviness and movement as they press down on the low hills. This painting has more flatly painted areas too, and the brushstroke is less gestureous. Yet this painting is obviously a Brian Bourke; it has the strength and feeling that the artist expresses constantly in his work. He was obviously affected by the deep and moody calm of the scene before him and the result was an interpretation of such.

He introduces human presences, not as subjects of his landscapes but further, to accentuate the space in the foreground. In "Theresa 1967" the figure with the bright yellow umbrella is a small, almost timid occupant rather than a fully realised character. Bourke became deeply involved with the problem of achieving harmony between the figure and the landscape. I feel he achieves this quite remarkably in his work. There is no intrusion or conflict between figure and landscape. Both fit comfortably and in some cases even complement. Examples of this are "Theresa", "Neighbour" and particularly "The Baker takes a walk, No. 1 Bavaria". In the latter painting, which is one of my favourites from this time, Bourke paints a landscape, a street, a tree and a baker walking beneath an exploding sky of colour. The tree leaves and branches reach up and mingle with the decorative sky of blues, creamy pinks, rust and green. The landscape, or rather park, is hemmed in behind a low wall. The baker is part of everything going on around him and fits in, in that way. Bourke says: "It was the reality of the place, everyday at the same time the baker took a walk in all his whites there was a dog there too, but he went behind the tree".

"Landscape with starfighter" shows the same sense of reality. Bourke painted this series during the 1968 Czechoslovakian crisis, and for him the starfighter became part of the landscape during this time. The aeroplane in the drawn oval to the left takes on something of the same substance as the clouds. There is a wonderful feeling of space and lightness even though the clouds are painted in heavy brush strokes. The aeroplane occupies a small area of the wide open sky, but it is a positive mark in the painting. Bourke himself says that: (F.9) "The starfighter is a reality. It is also an allegorical truth which should

Footnote No. 9. Brian Bourke: Written handout for Exhibition of paintings and drawings. Arts Council Gallery. April 4, 1969.

be much more potent. I use the starfighter, the landscape, as a symbol, a starting point, a guide line for myself. How you regard them is your affair".

To me Bourke is the kind of artist who either engages people in the adventure of what his work is about, or puts them off.

In Switzerland he painted "Frau Shutz's Cherry Tree" (1974). Here he excluded the human being, yet tells us something of her personality. Frau Shutz was a Hungarian widow and quite an eccentric lady, who decorated her cherry trees with streamers and masks on the ends of long poles. She screamed at her canary in broken German and loved telling stories. "Frau Shutz's Cherry Tree" is a triptych that Bourke has dedicated to this amazing person. The subject is a tall tree against which a ladder is placed. The same scene is presented from three different angles and with very different cloud effects in each. Variations between the oval and the rectangle which the artist loves to include in his painting are still employed here. He also manages to relate the calm and settled ladder, masks and tree, placed in the centre of each picture, happily to the moody rhythm of the landscape.

The drawings and sketches Bourke has done in preparation for this triptych show his remarkable ability to focus in on the landscape and choose the elements he wishes to include. Using pencil and crayon the structure lines are put down quickly and spontaneously, yet they are strong and positive lines. The lines and marks the artist builds up after these are equally free in gesture, but softer and more subtle. The overall effect from these drawings is one of freshness, showing the artist's sensitivity to line and strong ability as a draughtsman.

OTHER DRAWINGS

His series of drawings "Heads in Landscape" have the same density and rapid speed lines. Some of them remind me of Giacometti drawings; the heads in the centre of the drawings and the active lines evolving around it, till there is a merger, creating a unity between the head and the landscape. Giacometti's heads evolve from soft, subtle lines defining the face, moving then into more activity and wider gestures with heavier lines, till that same unity is captured between the figure or head and the environment. Bourke's control of pencil or crayon is apparent even in the "scribbling" lines he uses. His portrait drawings of Jay, his companion, show a further and more developed draughtsmanship. The small portraits done during 1980 show Jay sitting in a chair - profile of Jay staring out at us. Bourke emphasises her features and often exaggerates them; her high cheekbones are made more prominent with shading and sharper lines for her deep-set eyes and pointed nose. He elongates her neck with soft, sweeping lines. He shows us the relevant lines only, drawing what is necessary and no more. Everything is refined and more controlled in these drawings, with the least amount of shading. These beautiful drawings become the basis, or rather starting point for Bourke's later work in sculpture.

CHAPTER 4. THE PRINT MAKER. DON QUIXOTE AND SELF

Brian Bourke has for many years also been a print-maker. His line and style of drawing are completely sympathetic to lithography and etching. He has also made a series of drawings to illustrate literary works. In 1973, his drawings accompanied an edition of the poems of Desmond Egan - "Midlands", which was published by the Goldsmith Press. The same publishers produced a book of Bourke's drawings made in 1975 in the wings of the Abbey Theatre which illustrate the extraordinary miming capacity of the French artist, Marcel Marceau. I agree with James White when he writes about Bourke showing (F.10) "a notable capacity to render the graphic gesture of the individual and this is always reflected in the mixture of cynicism and incisive character drawings which indicates that Bourke is never far from recognising how close he is himself to those he portrays. He inherits from a tradition of great satirists like Goya, Daumier and Picasso...."

From here the obvious step in this thesis is to discuss Bourke's paintings and drawings on Don Quixote and Self. Clearly he found the great novel by Cervantes highly entertaining. Talking to Bourke himself he said the story had been hovering around in his head for the last ten years, so it was about time that he did something with it "I keep reading it in bits and pieces. It's great fun. I thought I'd pursue the thing and get it out of my system. I've always worked from objects and it's a new departure for me to work from what's in my head. You're not stuck with transforming the three-dimensional to the two-dimensional. The two-dimensional is already in your head".

Footnote No. 10. James White. Brian Bourke - A Catalogue, Page 18.

The result of this absorption with Don Quixote was many works produced during a surprisingly short space of time and in a wide variety of media: - drawing, watercolour, etching, lithography and wood carving. These illustrations are marvellously vital and possess, for me, something of the spirit of his landscapes. There is also still something of the stoicism of the early helmuted self-portraits, but the approach is much more in tune and exact. Bourke has reached a level with these works that shows confidence and awareness. They do have "an air of spontaneous inspiration" as James White describes them in the "Making Sense" Catalogue. We see the artist leering, grinning, gesticulating and frowning at us from all angles while the drama of Don Quixote rushes in flowing lines of a more subtle quality behind Bourke's front position. The exploits of the knight of sad countenance and his squire have inspired painters and writers since its publication in 1605.

It was in his study that it all began. Don Quixote "so buried himself in his books that he spent the nights reading and so from little sleep and much reading his brain dried up and he lost his wits".

Bourke's use of line, colour and composition are all adapted to intensify the sentiments involved; the humour, the absurdity, the eccentricity - "And hurriedly stripping of his breeches he stood in his skin and shirt". The self-portrait and Don Quixote drawings are less humorous: with the inclusion of the artist himself the atmosphere becomes more charged, the tension mounts and a manic quality is introduced (f.10) "The line becomes quirkier".

In the series of etchings we see Bourke's bold drama in action again. The solid areas of textures and heavy lines are the perfect environment for Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. In the etching entitled

"Don Quixote and Sancho Panza" the artist embodies the scene with the use of the oval again. Don Quixote and his companion sit in dramatic positions in a field of various textures, made up with lines scraped over the etching plate in a circular motion. The characters themselves are drawn with lighter lines and delicate criss-cross effects. The artist includes himself in the bottom left hand corner. This image is less clear, and I find it an intrusion on the rest of the scene. However, the full, bold impact of the etching still comes through, and once again Bourke compels us to look upon the drama and take in the adventure.

QUOTATIONS FROM DON QUIXOTE by Cervantes

PART I, CHAPTER I

"He so buried himself in his books that he spent the nights reading from twilight till daybreak and the days from dawn till dark; and so from little sleep and much reading, his brain dried up and he lost his wits. He filled his mind with all that he read in them, with enchantments, quarrels, battles, challenges, wounds, wooings, loves, torments and other impossible nonsense; and so deeply did he steep his imagination in the belief that all the fanciful stuff he read was true, that to his mind no history in the world was more authentic."

PART I, CHAPTER II

"Now there chanced to be standing at the inn door two young women of 'easy virtue' he went up to the inn door and, seeing the two young women standing there, took them for two beauteous maidens or graceful ladies taking the air at the castle gate."

PART I CHAPTER XVI

"Maritornes was bathed in a sweat of anguish at finding herself grasped by Don Quixote and, without understanding or paying the least attention to his protestations, tried silently to break loose."

PART I, CHAPTER XVII

"He saw him fall and rise in the air so gracefully and so nimbly that, had it not been for his rage, he would certainly have burst out laughing."

PART I, CHAPTER XXV

"And hurriedly stripping off his breeches, he stood in his skin and his shirt. And then, without more ado, he took two leaps into the air, and twice turned head over heels, revealing such parts of his person as caused Sancho to turn Rocinante's head for fear he might see them a second time."

PART I, CHAPTER XXVI

"At this there came into his head a way of making one (a rosary). He tore a great strip from the tail of his shirt, which was hanging down, and made eleven knots in it, one fatter than the rest; and this served him for a rosary all the time he was there."

PART II, CHAPTER X

"Stepping back a little, she took a short run, and resting both her hands on the ass's rump, swung her body into the saddle, lighter than a hawk, and sat astride like a man."

PART II, CHAPTER XI

"When this clown came up to Don Quixote, he began to fence with his stick, to beat the ground with his bladders, and leap into the air to the sound of his bells; and this evil apparition so scared Rocinante that he took the bit between his teeth, and started to gallop across the field with more speed than the bones of his anatomy promised."

PART II, CHAPTER XLI

"With some pieces of tow hanging from a stick and easily lit and quenched, they warmed the riders' faces."

PART II, CHAPTER XLVIII

"Enveloped from head to foot in a yellow satin quilt, a nightcap on his head, and his face and moustache in bandages – his face because of his scratches, and his moustaches to keep them from drooping and falling; and in this costume he appeared the strangest phantom imaginable."

CHAPTER 5. WOODCARVINGS, JAY, NEW EXHIBITION

Brian Bourke is a man who generates new ideas all the time. A continuation of his crisp character drawings and capacity for hard work is found in his sculpture. For many years the artist has been experimenting in the modelling of heads in plaster and having them cast in bronze, fiberglass and other materials. These heads retain the taut structure of his drawings with no resort to decorative or ornamental additions - not even hair. He has used these sculptures frequently as models for paintings and drawings and has entitled them simply "Heads". His bronze heads, especially those modelled on Jay's head, show Bourke's ability at rendering form. The features of the head are strong, sharp and well in proportion to each other, moving down to a long, straight neck. This sculpture of jay has a stirring quality about it, like his drawings and portraits of earlier years. I think this comes from the deepness of the eyes, like caverns, and the tautness of the structure. The expression is not obvious; it could be described as calm and serene yet there is something deeper in it, something brooding and meditative showing an inner pain. The muscles are tight and rigid, clamped in the bronze cast moulded by the artist's hands with control and care. Most of Bourke's "heads" contain this austere quality; the vacant eyes add a fearful touch, leaving one unsure about what to think but absorbed with the multitude of feelings. Some of them possess aloofness, especially when the head is tilted slightly upwards. I look forward to seeing Bourke's new plans for sculpture using wood.

At present he is engrossed with carving wood, which is supplied from the locale. Bourke says that the wood is simply the material he is using.

He has no desire to show off the various textures of different wood
 "I want to use paint over the wood, and when I'm finished with a piece
 it may not look like wood at all...."

In his studio he was working on two large pieces, based on Jay's
 head. One was almost completed and indeed it wasn't the texture and
 the lines of the wood which made the piece so commanding but the shapes -
 full and round, chiselled down to almost a perfect smoothness.

Bourke seems to know exactly what he is going to carve out, the
 result of much experience from working with various types of wood.
 For years he and Jay, and a friend Padraig O'Carra, were producing a
 puppet theatre. They made the sets, puppets, they wrote the stories
 and arranged the music themselves. This adventure is finished for the
 time being "We may get it going again, we may not ..." "It always
 worked though, we had a faithful audience. We've travelled all over the
 place, from Kilkenny to Armagh to Clare to the Aran Islands". The
 puppets I've seen were quite exciting to look at. They had beautifully
 carved heads, hands and feet, their faces painted on the wood had
 expressions ranging from extremely funny to sad and lonely. They were
 dressed in shiny materials and sequins. Asking Bourke about the stories
 he replied: "They were simple stories, simple adventures, nothing spaced
 out, it was great fun".

JAY

We have seen drawings of Jay, portraits too, Jay's head carved
 in wood and cast in bronze, so it is not a surprise that Bourke does a

special series of paintings of this woman. These paintings are on exhibition at the Taylor Galleries for March 1983.

The first thing that I was aware of was colour, colour, colour: fresh, vibrant, brilliant colours. Bourke includes almost every colour that an artist could mix on a palette. Jay stands and sits, ready to turn around to the viewer, or she stares out directly at us. She wears a striking, unusual shaped black hat with wide sweeping curves that has a long linear piece on top. A Basque hat. Bourke paints this hat in thick black paint for every painting. Her low cut dress is exotic, clinging to her body in amazing colours; stripes of red and green, spots of blue, yellow and black. She possesses a haughty serenity. In some paintings Jay is entombed by the oval, in others she is reframed by a rectangle. The marks outside the oval are free and spontaneous, put down with thick brush strokes at rapid speed. Within the oval, surrounding Jay, the lines are more subtle but I also feel a mounting tension from the contrasting marks and colours.

"J with Basque hat and red and green striped dress". In this painting Jay's shape is elongated from the neck down. Her arms are long and thin. This linear effect gives the figure a distorted appearance which adds a disturbing element to the painting. The strong outlined oval enclosing the figure works with this disturbing element. Also adding to this uneasy quality is the vacant eyes. Bourke has left Jay's eyes blank, void of colour and expression. The figure also lacks a three-dimensional feeling from the neck down. Her dress painted flatly in stripes of green and red, gives this cardboard cut-out effect, for there are no shadows or tones where the fabric would fold and crease from her form. This is very much in contrast to the tones and highlights

of the face which are produced with more painterly strokes, and blended colours of red, cream and brown. Also contributing to the two-dimensional effect of the figure is the heavy blue line which Bourke uses to outline the oval. He outlines the figure up to the elbow with this line, confining her, holding her in place, she appears almost like a prop.

In contrast to this painting is "Portrait of j in Basque hat and black and yellow dress". The figure is larger and more realistic in this painting. There is no oval or semi-circle to confine the figure either. The background marks are more vigourous, splashed out in blues, creams and greys, showing tremendous energy. Jay with her head turned in the opposite direction to the way she is sitting is a more dominant character. There are no dwarf-like distortions, the shapes of the body are painted more fluidly and the colours are striking and bold. The black and yellow of her dress vibrates against the blue and grey marks of the background, the dominant black hat holds the rushing colours together. Bourke uses its flat shape to emphasise the structure of the composition. All colours move in a flowing whirl of activity while the hat stays still and solid, holding the balance.

RECENT LANDSCAPE PAINTINGS

Accompanying these wonderful portraits of Jay are three large landscape paintings but Bourke entitles them "Self-portrait with blank canvas" for the artist himself occupies an important space in each of the paintings.

However, the dominant feature of these landscapes, as with all the landscape paintings I have mentioned, is Bourke's striking individual use of colour to portray the soul of the land and his ever active mountainous skies. But where the previous Knockalough and Bavarian landscapes were treated with amazing greens and yellows giving that distinctive "acid" effect, these paintings absorb one's attention and capture one's eyes with hot, energetic orange and red. The soft curving hills are flooded with streams of orange and red marks with splashes of purple and green. Bourke makes the colours swirl with strong, almost restless brushstrokes. Their movement breaks into many rushing rhythms and the flow is continuous until it reaches a bog-cut. These sharp ridges cut into the landscape making huge, gaping scars. Their heavy brown texture are very much in contrast to the flashes of colour that flows over the fields. The definite lines of these trenches hold the fusion of bright, splashing marks together and give the composition a definite structure.

Bourke creates more wonderful moving skies for us in each of these landscapes. In fact, I find them more adventurous, more daring, more thunderous than ever before. Clouds like heavy rocks seem to be suspended miraculously over the landscape. They look ready to crash down on the scene. Some are thunderous in their dark grey and brown colours, others are fringed with pink and cream and in some cases Bourke has large, roaring clouds of white crashing like waves above the soft curve of the hill.

In "Self-portrait and Blank Canvas No. 3" the mounting storm which one feels trembling in the two other paintings, actually breaks loose and sheets of black, purple and grey rain drenches the land. Bourke's line

moves furiously downwards generating terrific energy.

In the midst of all this intense drama, one's eyes are led to the white blank canvas that is suspended over the landscape. The artist's silhouette stands within it. His hat and clothes take on the swirls of colour that mark the land and I feel the figure of the artist becomes part of the dramatic activity as a result. However, the flat, white rectangular shape that represents a canvas does not fit comfortably with the activity. It is the disturbing element in the painting. For it is so blank, flat and hard-edged compared to all the other moving, curving shapes. One's eyes are constantly drawn back to it when looking at the paintings, feeling uncertainty and unease. I feel it was deliberately employed by the artist to trigger off that disturbing quality which I've found so many times in his previous self-portraits. The flat, hard edge shape causes a spatial conflict within the composition.

CONCLUSION

I have looked at Brian Bourke's development in his art from his first one man show in 1965. He has gone through many adventures - from his early figurative work and self-portraits to his ever open response to landscape. We have seen his use of colour and unique marks with both paint and pencil change and develop until he captured his own individual marks and sense of colour with the Bavarian landscapes. This became stronger and more striking, reaching a peak with the Knockalough series of landscapes. From here there was a point of no return. Unique and original colour mixtures produced intoxicating effects, compelling one to take note of the artist's adventures. This commanding quality has been maintained in all his work. I have discussed this in relation to particular self-portrait paintings and especially the landscapes produced from the Knockalough motif. I have also looked at the commanding quality mixed with humour, wit and sarcasm in the "Don Quixote and Self" series of paintings and drawings, lithographs and etchings.

Brian Bourke's strength and individuality as an artist has never flagged, I feel - it has only gained more power, more dynamicism and the proof of this is evident in his latest exhibitions in the Taylor Galleries with "Portraits of jay in Basque Hat" adorned with a multitude of colours that leap and bound and rush furiously around the canvases, curving gesturous lines and stacatto marks put down with restless energy, all compile to take one's breath away, or to use the artist's own words.... "to knock the sight out of your eyes".

Brian Bourke has proved himself a hard-working artist with unequalled energy and passion for his work. He has never tired from

producing art of that "breath taking" commanding quality. For this alone he remains undoubtedly one of the most fascinating artists in Ireland today, one who will never be forgotten or laid aside. The element of discovery and achievement shall hold our attention for all time.

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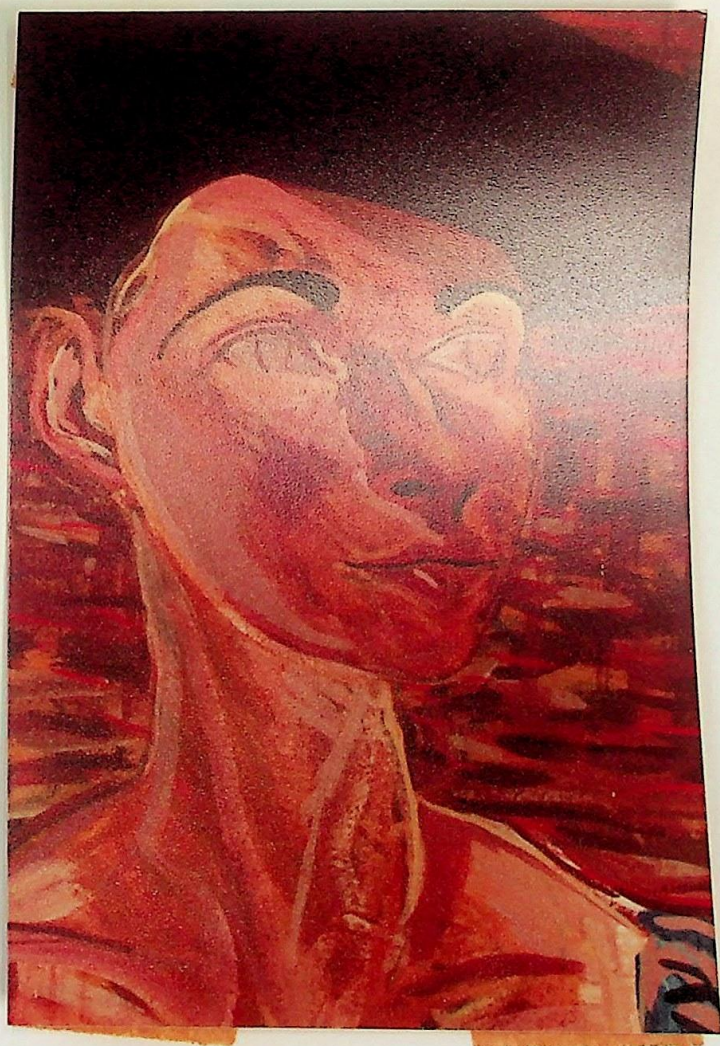
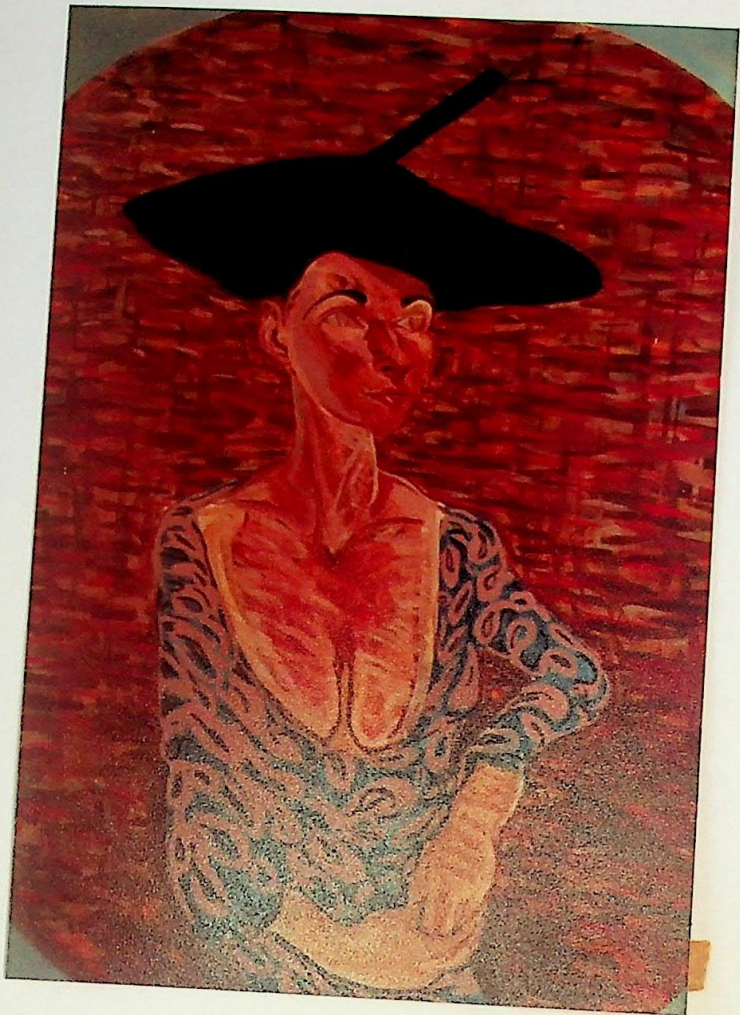
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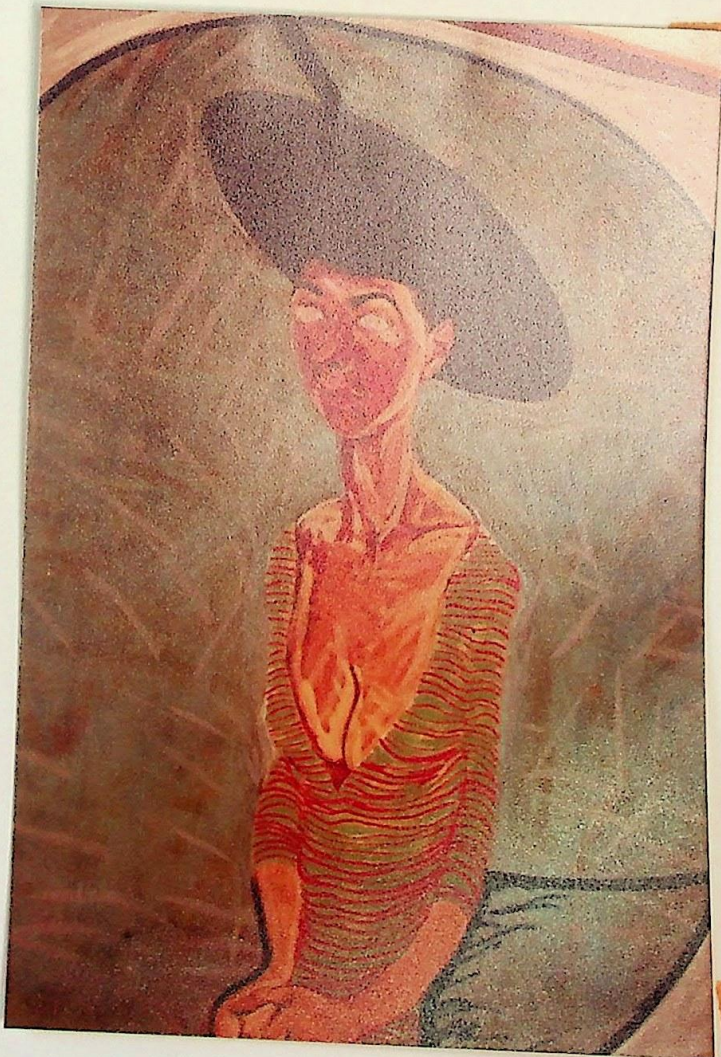
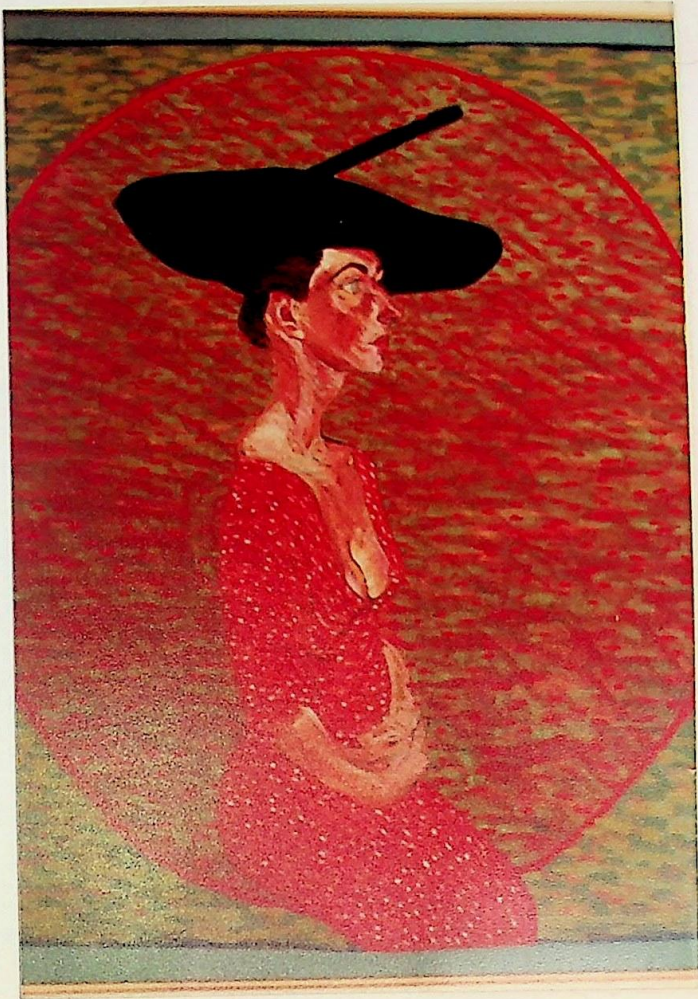
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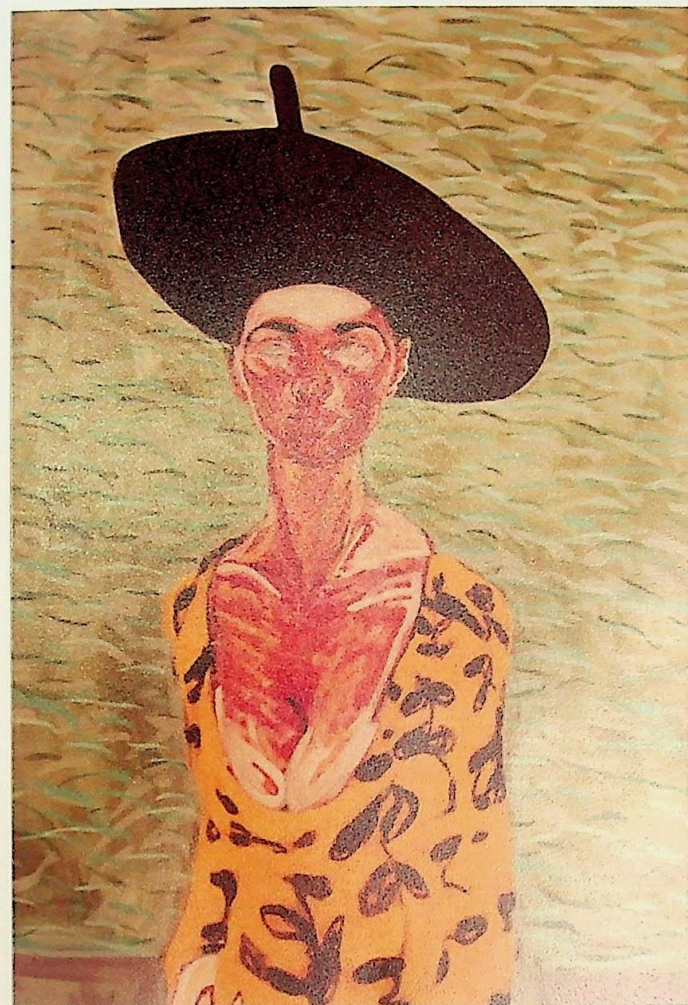
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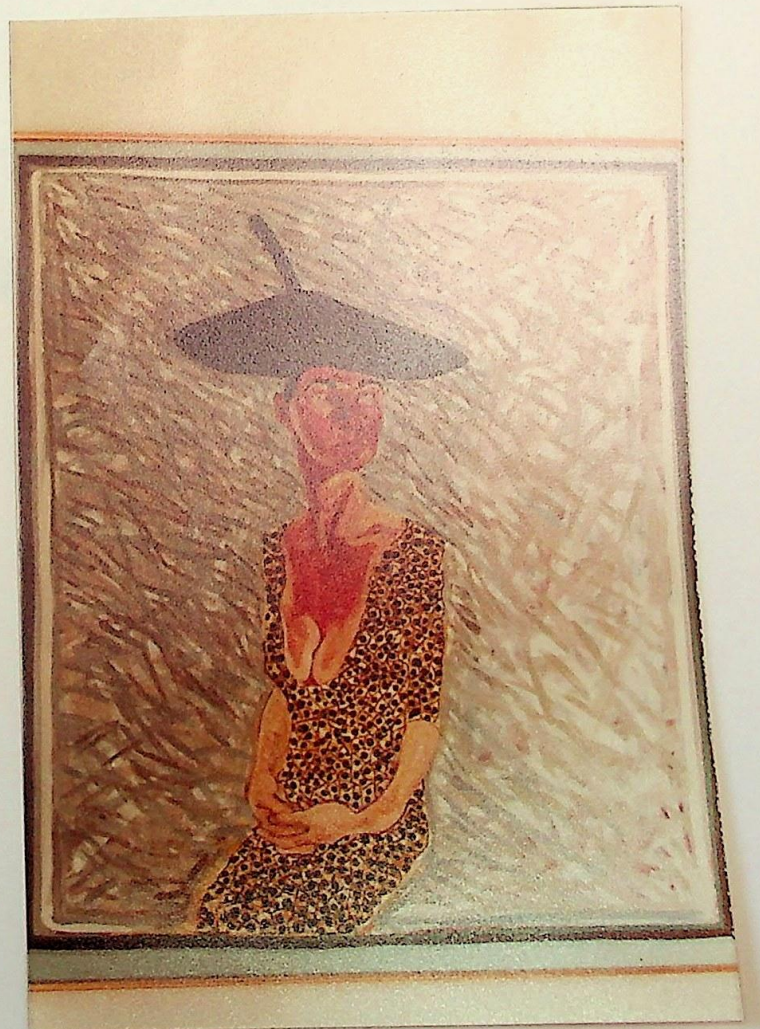
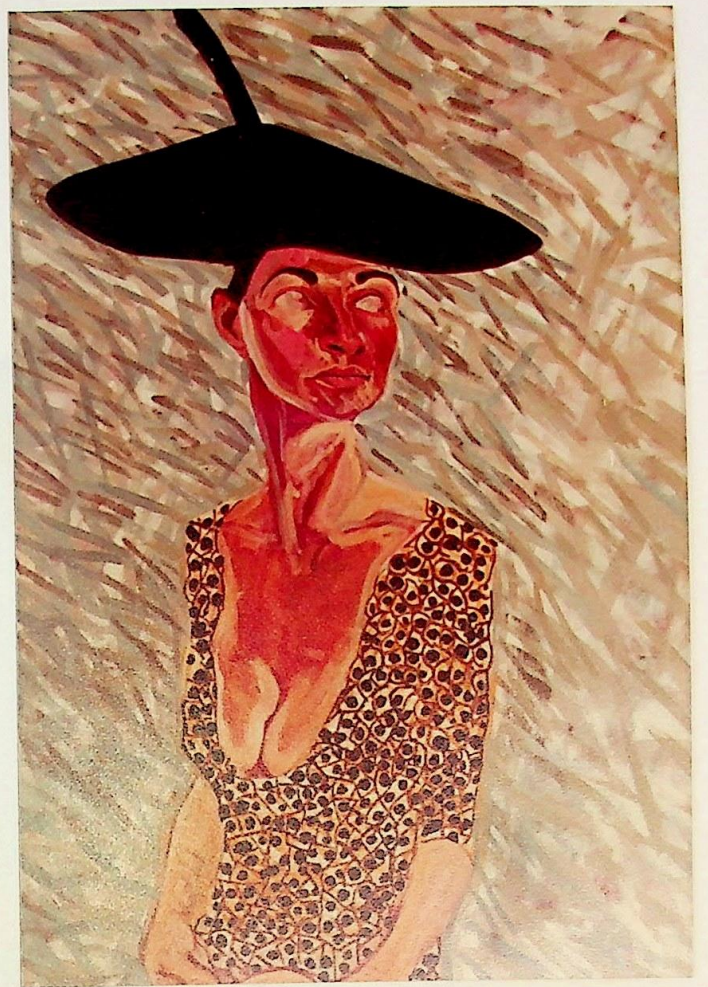
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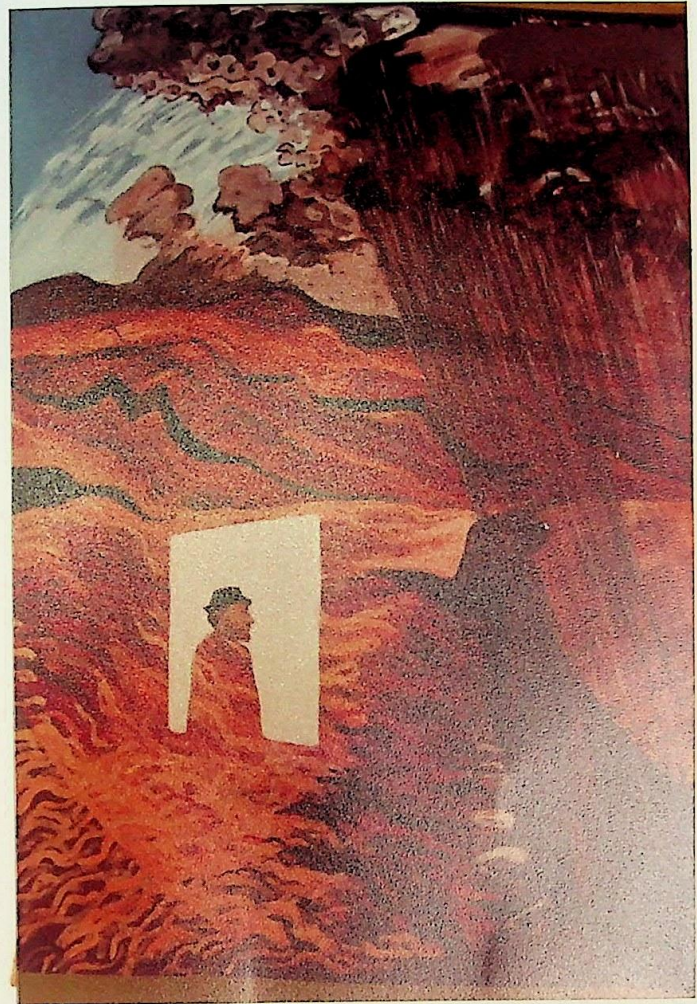




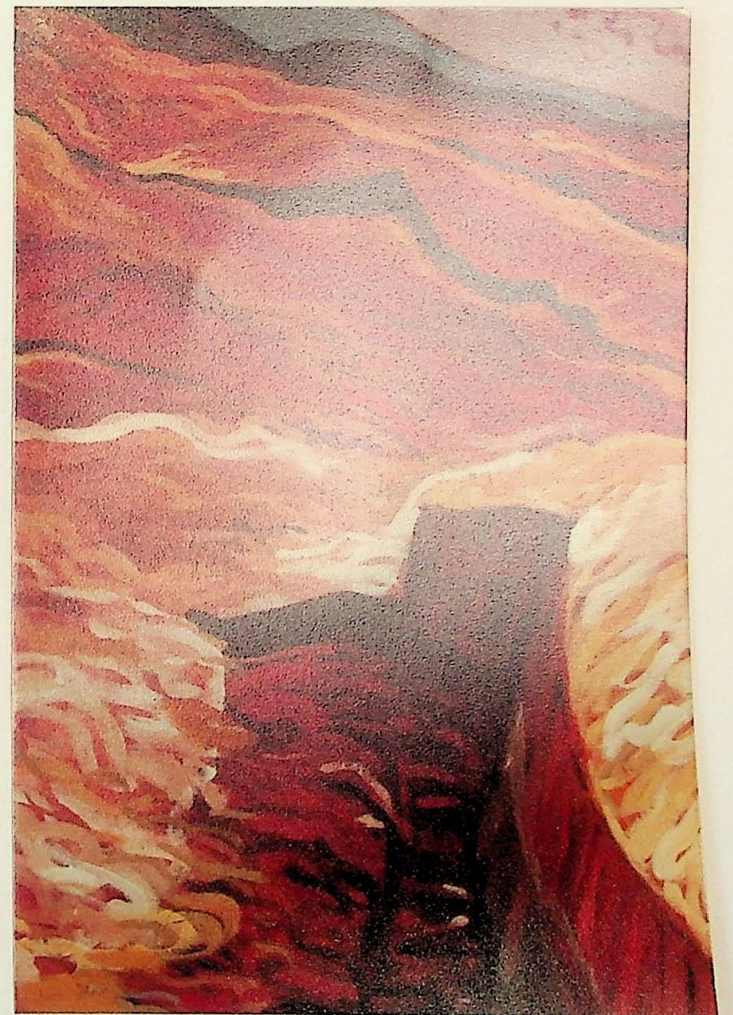
Portrait of J. with Basque Hat.



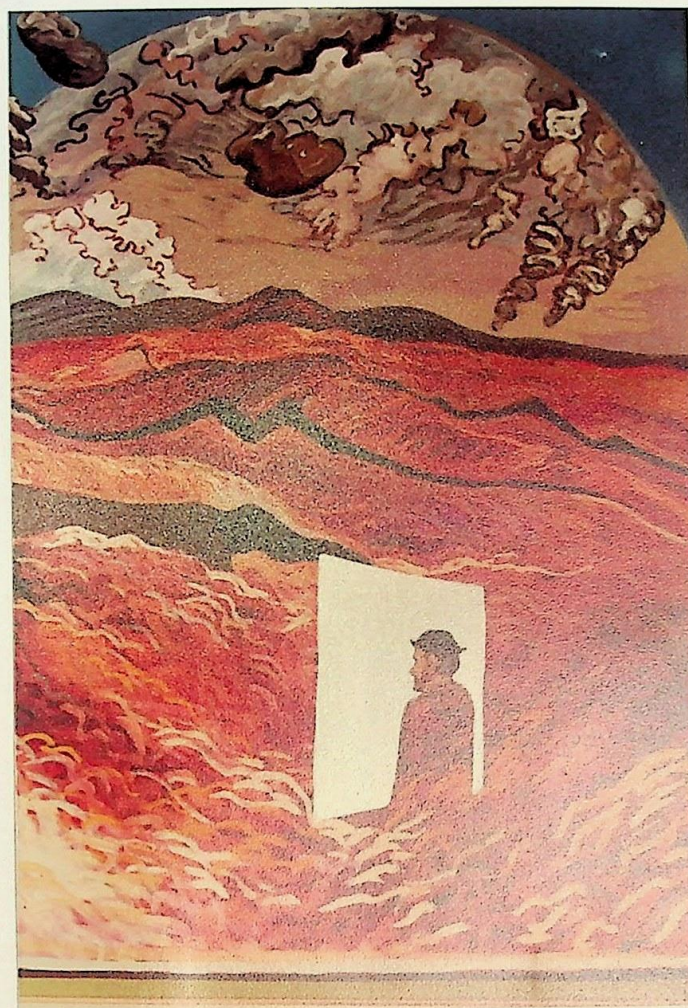
PORTRAIT OF J WITH BASQUE HAT, YELLOW & BLACK DRESS



SELF PORTRAIT WITH BLANK CANVAS.



DETAILS OF SELF PORTRAIT WITH BLANK CANVAS.



SELF PORTRAIT WITH BLANK CANVAS.