

THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

LOOKING AT IRISH LANDSCAPE PAINTING THROUGH

T. P. FLANAGAN AND COLIN MIDDLETON

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AN INTRODUCTION TO IRISH LANDSCAPE PAINTING

What distinguishes Irish Art from the international mainstream is the rural landscape. Irish artists show a definite preference for organic irregular shapes instead of the regular geometry of skyscrapers and machine parts. Patrick Collins says "I've noticed this, the hedges are all woolly...You know ash trees grow up in hedges and so on. They're never culled like the French do."

Even today when so much of the subject matter which has attracted artists has derided, when fashions and styles frequently change the Irish artist continues to have a landscape reference. Sometimes it is the exclusive avenue of enquiry for a painter, sometimes it forms a symbolic sign system; sometimes it is an old friend or enemy to come back for fresh stimulus and sometimes it lurks there unbidden, refusing to be thrown out of the subject of a painting. There are specific tendencies:

1. Romantic Landscape in which an intuitive feel for the medium of paint is made to serve an intuitive feel for the elemental mysteries of the land and light.
2. Analytical Landscape where structures are demythologised, where patterns in nature are subjected to a geometrical, reductive evaluation and where the numbered parts are reassembled and expanded into newly articulated spatial and colour dimensions.

The end result can be atmospheric and as aware of the sublime as the mimetic Romantic landscape. Thus it is futile to over classify and say that Basil Blackshaw is 'only' a romantic landscapist and Derrick Hawker 'only' an analytical landscapist.



George Campbell
Dun Aengus, Inishmore 1969
Oil on canvas
760 x 1,020 mm
Signed: Campbell
Exhibited at the David Hendriks Gallery, Dublin, October 1969

In recent times a new awareness of the land and its ecology has led to a use of the land as an object and medium, not simply as a subject. Republic of Ireland artists show many of their basic approaches to be the same. Southerners like Reid, Collins, Souter, Cooke and to date Cecily Brennan are more organic, more abstract and atmospheric and have a freer and more loose style than their Northern counterparts. The latter tend to have a more controlled style, attitude and approach. They also tend to delineate and articulate their shapes and rely more on line than on colour. Examples of this 'coolness' can be seen in the works of artists like Terence Patrick Flanagan, Nora McGunniess and Colin Middleton. The northern temperament with its strong element of protestant sobriety has an inevitable influence on the stylistic approach. This element can be seen in the works of Armstrong, Cambell and Middleton.

Colin Middleton and T. P. Flanagan has a quality of stimulating the imagination and evoking images above and beyond their immediate terms of reference. Of course this is true of many Irish artists. Patrick Collins for example approaches in a free and loose way, unlike the more controlled approach preferred by Flanagan and Middleton. Both Collins and Flanagan loved the diffused sunlight of an overcast Irish day, soft subdued colours and the edges of shapes softened as if enveloped in a mist and, an atmosphere laden with moisture. 'Bog County' 1970 by Collins depicts a direct focus on a bog with no sky, trees or people - nothing to distract us from looking at the bog and "to contemplate the ultimate return of all living matter to earth". Collins sees the bog as a physical link with the past. Though the underlying idea is the same in many of Flanagan's paintings, the treatment is different. Flanagan has a more controlled, more representational style and a luminosity that is not present in a Collins.

Today the motorist can drive around Northern Ireland in a day and encounter limestone cliffs, basalt outcrops, bogland, glacial valleys, glens, loughs, dramatic mountain ranges, undulating drumlins and a lighting that is distinctively Irish.



Camille Souther
 The West 1964
 Oil on board
 570 x 800 mm
 Signed bottom right: Camille Souther 1964

These circumstances create a strong awareness of regional identity without a corresponding sense of isolation. This regional identity delves much deeper in the minds of the two artists, Colin Middleton and T.P. Flanagan, which I am going to discuss in the following chapters. The way in which both treat their subject matter is very different but what is important is that many of their basic ideas are the same. What is very basic to the theme of both their work is:

1. A Sense of place.
2. A Sense of the past.
3. The effect weather had on the land.
4. A sense of order and control.

1. A Sense of Place

Flanagan and Middleton worked for a large part of their lives on one locale. They got to know the land - its rocks and stones, physical qualities of the land, lighting conditions, weather conditions on a very personal basis. Both looked at the landscape and painted it as they saw it. This was unlike Camille Souter who took things out of their normal existence and painted them. Middleton looked for things, saw the extraordinary and painted it. Flanagan patiently waited until atmospheric conditions were right and then captured the scene. In an interview with Michael Longley, Colin Middleton shows this intensity of feeling "...Place is terribly important...You've got to go to a place until it does something to you. Or rather you gravitate - when you get there you know you belong - it gets to you, it eats you. Its as though you've been there and always have been...". In Flanagan's work his personal emotion hovers around a location making his art a prism through which we can now imagine the beauty of these places as he has imagined the romantic imagery of place. Both artists need to be pushed by emotion - as, needless to say all artists do.

The emotion they were concerned with was that of deep, deep feeling for a place, excitement and strenght and yet controlled (as we will see in 4). Often both made working drawings on location and then went on to make further drawings from these. The combination of both represented the true creative excitement, that recollection of spontaneous response in the tranquillity of the studio.

2. A Sense of the Past

Flanagan and Middleton saw a great significance in using the land for their imagery because it contained a sense of their past heritage. The land was as Patrick Collins said "a direct link with the past". Middleton referred to the land with reverence "...Ther'es got to be some sort of place, particular places, holy places. Once you get there you know you're kith with kin. The stones start to talk". From Bogland by Seamus Heany written for Flanagan he says of him:

"The've taken the skeleton
Out of the Great Irish Elk
Out of the peat, set it up
An astounding erate full of air.

Butter sunk under
More than a hundred years
Was recovered salty and white
The ground itself is kind, black butter."

The places where they painted to them were holy and sacred, precious. Not precious in the sense that you stand in awe and do not touch. Precious because you 'must', 'have to' get to know these places analyse them, potray them. By doing this you get closer to the land and it becomes a part of you.

3. The Effect Weather had on the Land

This is vitally important to both. The way the elements have left their mark on the land. Look at how sensitively Middleton examines the weathering down of a pebble in "Anvil Rock I" and the wearing of time and nature on a mound as in Flanagans "Summer Diary" drawings. Middletons moods change, by and large, in tune with the changes of the season. When Autumn comes he turns inward, when Spring comes he tends to look for outward stimulus again. And while talking about seasons and weather it is obvious from Flanagans paintings that he prefers a soft Irish misty day with a sky laden with moisture.

4. A Sense of Order and Control

Flanagan and Middleton are both northerners. The northern temperament with its strong element of protestant sobriety has an inevitable influence on their stylistic approach. They tend to have a more controlled style than their southern counterparts. We can see from looking at any of Middletons paintings that there is a defininte sense of order and control in them. Middleton has this right from the beginning. I believe it is partly inbred but also partly as a result of the years he spent as a damask designer. During these years he disciplined himself to doing very technical and precise designs and he still has a sense of order and discipline about his work, he has an excellent sense of draughtsmanship. Middleton once said in an interview with Michael Longly that he always uses good materials, not for the purpose of his paintings lasting for years and years but because they are better to work with quality.

When looking at Flanagan's watercolours I think that man has excellent control over his paints water and brushes. Unusual for a watercolourist, Flanagan works quite large. Yet he never loses control over the medium. His paintings are well designed and then he quickly applies thin opaque washes in a free yet controlled style. One feels he never makes a mistake - applying too much water etc. and seemingly he never does.

Now that I have clarified what I believe to be the very basis the theme of their work. I would like to discuss each of their works individually using the above criteria for discussion and assessment of both.

COLIN MIDDLETON (1910 -)

HIS EARLY LIFE

Colin Middleton was born in Belfast in 1910. His father was a damask designer, a man who moved easily in artistic and literary circles and Colin grew up with pictures, paints and painters at his elbow. In the 1920's the seeds of Impressionism had at last blown to Belfast and his fathers enthusiasm and Middletons first affection was for the work of Monet and Pissarro. He too became a damask designer and could only afford to attend evening classes at Belfast College of Art and paint in his spare time. As required by the needs of his vocation he studied design principally under the tutelage of Newton Penprase a master of many skills. He gave Middleton an excellent grounding in discipline manipulation of the pencil and perspective which was later to stand to him in good stead, especially in his surrealist paintings.

In 1928 Middleton visited London where he first saw the work of Van Gogh and the flemish masters whose work he enjoyed. Although the years spent at damask designing brought him little joy, the disciplines proved invaluable. The squared paper upon which the designs were drawn may have been a determining factor in his choosing in recent years, to paint on square panels and many of his subsequent compositions carry hints and intimations of his long familiarity with the shuttle, loom, harness and rhythms of weaving. His work entailed frequent visits to the town where he often made tiny pencil sketches. These were later to become the ground and basis for his series of paintings of Belfast street scenes in the early nineteen-forties.

In 1938 he became interested in Surrealism. The surrealists took the dream world of the subconscious as their subject matter as did Middleton. He showed an affinity with English surreal painters - Hillier, Wadsworth and Nash. As Middleton has so many styles he has an 'affinity' with many artists which I shall discuss in later chapters. However I would like to make a point of saying that originality for Middleton lies in how he handles his personal experience and the impact of other mens pictures is obviously part of that experience. Thus, although Middleton may clearly know about Hillier, Wadsworth and Nash, he is a disciple of none of them.

BEGINNINGS OF SURREALISM 1938 - 1941

Just to put Irish painting of this period into place Middleton once said "You could say that in the 1930's I was the only Surrealist painter working in Ireland." The early Surrealism gave way to a more psychologically charged surrealism one associates with the work of Salvador Dali. Middletons paintings of this period explore all the irrational encounters and confrontations of his highly imaginative mind. The surrealist method that the fantastic may appear real imposes an exacting technical discipline which Middleton because of his early training was able to cope with very well. 'The Toy Box' of 1948 shows a fascination with stage lines. Middleton became fascinated with the precision of the Flemish painters. Middletons personal surrealism is based on a programme of objects and vistas which have passed through the artists own filtration system.

LOVE OF LANDSCAPE 1941 - 1955

In May of 1941 Middletons preoccupation with Surrealism was shattered by the terrible Easter blitz on Belfast. He could not paint. When he did it was a series of Belfast street paintings in neo-impressionist technique which he had been experimenting with for some time previously. As if to dispel some dark memories these paintings showed the normality of life - kids playing in a city street. His break with damask designing came in 1947 when for one year he joined the Middleton Murry community in East Anglia. It was there that his early love of landscape was reawakened. He returned to Northern Ireland - County Down and from 1949 to 1953 he painted what is called the 'Ardglass Period' which was a series of intense landscapes naming two 'Hunters Moon' and 'Give me to drink'. In these we can see the lush vegetation of that county.

LANDSCAPE CONTINUED 1955

In 1955 Middleton moved to Colerain to teach, the lush vegetation of the Co Down soon disappeared from his paintings and he rediscovered the boglands, the vast open spaces, strange light and limestone and basalt of Co Antrim. His canvases during this period sought to reflect the more geometric shapes and light effects of the northerly region. Some of these settled for a format consisting of a horizon some two thirds up the paper or canvas; above this might be a projecting rock promontary or solid train of cloud. Beneath the line of this horizon would be horizontal bands delineating the furrowing or folding of the land.

These would be bisected by vertical or diagonal vertical lines to produce a slightly chequered effect which might be filled in with broad strokes of colour, as in 'Sundown Canalridge III' 1960. Or then again the blocks might be handled monochromatically so as to expose the sparse light around piled turf stacks in the sombre bogland. The precedent for the precise division of picture space exists in some of his landscape sketches of the late 1960's and also in Middleton's usage of the standard language of international surrealism - which I have already discussed. In 'Cloud Across the Moon' October 1960, Middleton creates a surreal type picture using very different means. Variegated colours superimposed on a grey background are used economically and the paint is handled with delicacy, he creates a fantasy image 'Bog after Rain Ballybogy' and 'Rain, rain Valley' are two very fine bog paintings their subtlety and the seemingly monochrome of the boglands contrast with the vital, vigorous and startling colour in 'June Evening', 'Colerain' and contrast again with a quiet lyricism of 'Evening Bangor'.

FEMALE FORM

The Middleton who recalls the old Middleton in 'Genesis' and 'Woman Carnmoon' and assesses the new Middleton with 'the Gipsy' a Middleton whose whimsy and imagination express themselves in 'Outward Band' and 'Girl at a Window'. When looking at these images we notice that there are a lot of female forms in them. Well Middleton once said "What gives my work continuity is the constancy of the female archetype no matter how many the disguises, the mother figure, the mother and child, the reclining figure, the single tree against the hill". Middleton explores the relationship between the contours of the countryside and the female form. The disguises are many, they



may be expressionist and voluptuous as in 'Hunters Moon' of 1951 and 'Fortune Teller' of 1941 or stately and sculptural in the sedate tones of 'Ash' of 1967. Middleton admires the flemish primitives, his female figures tend to have high breasts, associated with the work of Northern European painters or Misoan civilisation. Sometimes the archtype may be cruelly mocking like the senorita with the gun in 'Good Morning, Mr Goya' of 1957.

TWEEDY TEXTURES 1957 - 1961

Middleton had a small output of work from 1957 - 1961 this period John Hewitt called 'tweedy textures' because I presume ^{of} the succession of rough raw palette knife portraits. This technique 'could' have owed something to Jack Yeates. Yet without all his experimenting Middleton felt the medium was in some way dictating his style. The answer, from looking at his later paintings is in colour.

COUNTY DOWN

In 1961, Middleton returns to County Down and his paintings of the late 60's were inspired by rugged configuration of the Mourne, crooked craigs, arrangements of dry stone walls and young plantations patterning the foothills. These works had large simple areas in which cubism and constructivism meet in landscape and figures had polished and eroded surfaces which resemble close-ups of sculpture by Henry Moore (one of Middletons favourite sculptors). These works,

2d passing sometimes into 3d have a pared down dramatic quality as in 'Anvil Rock I' 1965 or 'Granite Mountain Spelga' 1968. These works are done in mainly browns, greys and blacks. The paint surface is dry and almost lusterless. Simplicity has stylised and simplified his landscapes until they form patterns of almost childish simplicity - in fact a hard edged treatment in contrast to the romantic softness of the Dublin School. In a way this simplicity and over rigid symmetry is a hinderance and his restraint, a puritan affair often ends by having very little left to restrain.

UNIFICATION

Looking back on Middletons work up to 1966 we can see that he still has sharply contrasting styles but the appearance of fragmentation has vanished. Middletons work has often been criticised for its changeability, the answer he gave to this was "I can understand that but we must ask ourselves why so many recognised painters go on in the same narrow channel doing variations on the one theme all their lives. The dealer is depending on you to supply him with the commodities that he can establish so and so's. People get to know what a so and so looks like. If you depart from that you cut your own throat and most artists keep to the straight and narrow. Picasso managed to change his style whenever he wanted. Paul Klee has been just as varied and you always know a Picasso and Klee when you see one. A man who really changed radically in the way that you cut off my Ardglass paintings from the work I'm doing now in Pasmore...why shouldn't one produce something absolutely different every time one paints (I don't mean that as an aim)." To be alternately a surrealist, a cubist, an expressionist some say may point to an over sensitivity to other mens work and a lack of sureness in his development. But I say

This is a dark, abstract image. It features a large, textured, yellowish-brown area in the upper left quadrant, which appears to be a piece of aged paper or a light-colored surface. The rest of the image is predominantly black, with some subtle textures and a smaller, similar yellowish-brown area in the lower left quadrant. The overall composition is minimalist and high-contrast.

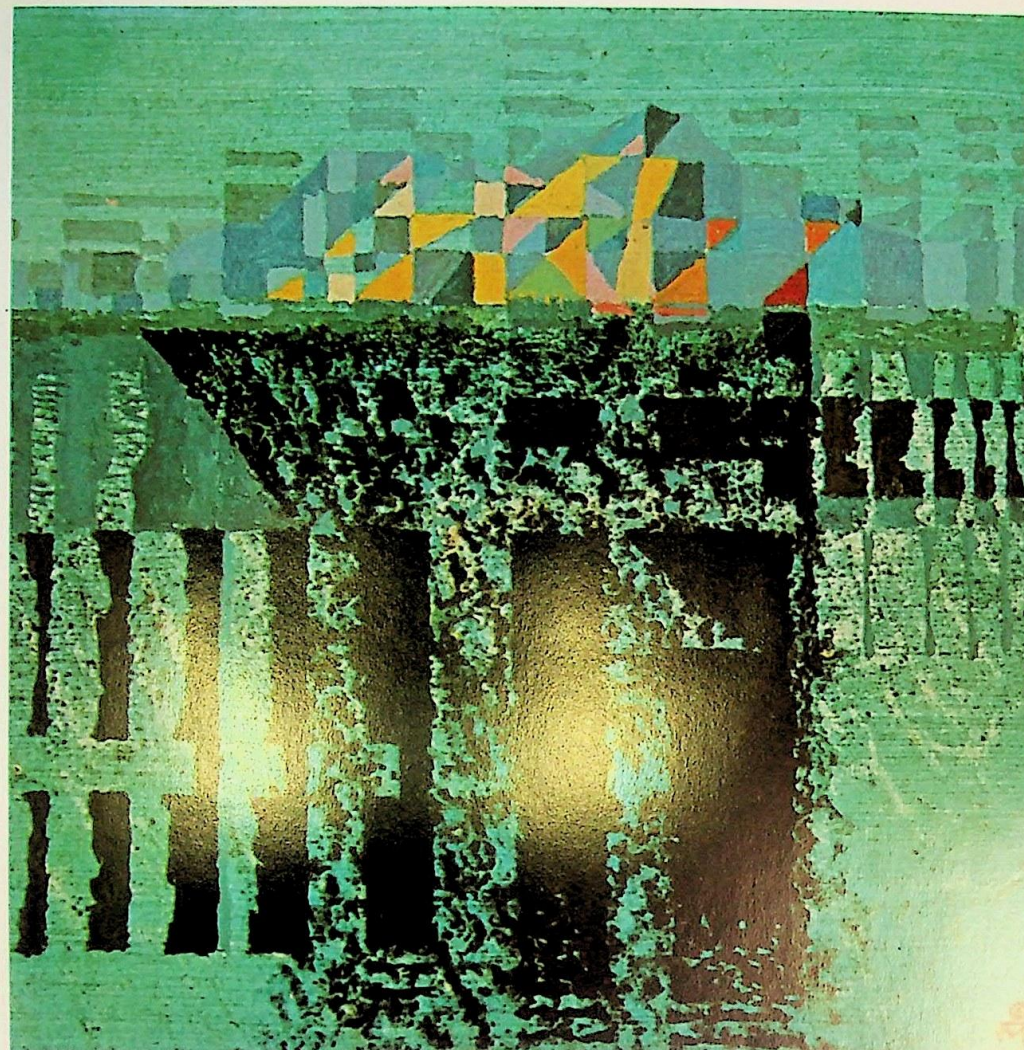
and 'Brockage' of 1969 in which textures of the flat surfaces are simultaneously constricted and exploited and its imagery suggests the poet as much as the craftsman. It could well be that in most of his work, the accomplishment of his craft and the varieties of technique are so evident that he has never felt that he has needed to use words to indicate the hand skills.

REBIRTH OF COLOUR EARLY 70's

In 1970 Middleton received a large Arts Council grant and did not have to teach any more. It was also in the early 70's that Middleton started introducing colour again and very successfully. At first we have little spots of red and bright colours subtly dotted at crucial points on the canvas, this colour could have been influenced by his visit to Australia. In 'The Wilderness' early 70's the pigment is not applied as in the earlier pieces but it gives a more vibrant surface. In the delightfully inventive surreal works such as 'Terra del Fuego' and 'Metro: St Georges Day Barcelona' the verticals on the landscapes however chequered assume a dramatic monumentality that echoes the strength of the fantastic rock formations of the Giants Causeway. Middleton has the ability to construct a form not only satisfying and self sufficient in itself but which also expresses and contains the feeling for the motif. This is very noticable in the landscapes of this period in which the forms evolved can express the mood and structure of the scene with sensitivity and power. A very good example of this is the large 'Evening Star Achnelly' with its romantic twilight and twinkling lights perfectly expressed in solid form. The excitement and strength of this preliminary feeling emotion idea appears to be necessary to him to imitate the creative process. When it is absent he appears just to make a picture, example 'Table Top Brown and Grey'.



Colin Middleton
 Woven Landscape Lechenagh 1971
 Oil on board
 610 x 610 mm
 Signed bottom right with a monogram Colin M
 Exhibited at the David Hendriks Gallery, Dublin, November 1971



Colin Middleton
Leitrim Hills 1971
Oil on board
100 x 100 mm
Signed bottom right with a monogram 'CM'
Exhibited at the Irish Exhibition of Living Art, Dublin 1971

TOYLAND 1976

Middletons paintings of 1976 resemble toyland or a puppet theatre with the usual surrealist backgrounds of enigmatic space. The atmosphere is spikey and rather sinister with doll-like female figures, oracular looking birds, pillar like shapes that could be human, vegetable or mineral. These are often painted with bright flat colours like wooden toys. Offset at times by neutral greyish backgrounds. The effect is sometimes strained. They are not 'literary' paintings they are altogether pictorial and self-contained.

Middletons paintings vary in what a great deal and how of his smallest ones are often very intense.

In 1973 we see small solidly painted landscapes often tonally sombre, one could call him sometimes a 'brown' painter with a, winter bleakness. 'June Ballinderry I' 1973 an oil on canvas is a geometric landscape. It provides us with an image that combines breathtaking beauty with psychological intensity. Middleton responds emotionally to a certain place, then beyond a certain point the painting takes over, imposing its own patterns. There is a pronounced geometric grid in this painting which knits the surface together. The horizon line is emphasised to show the flatness of the surface pattern. The ploughed furrows, the irregular cluster of trees and bushes, and a burst of new growth form a vigorous staccato pattern. There are brilliant reds and blues resembling the month it was painted in. The composition is made up of two dramatic movements: the sky pushes forcefully to the left while the striped patterns in the field sweeps to the right. The tension of these opposing forces is heightened by the intense colour. It is an image of jubilant excitement. Middleton banished much angularity and texture for more open simple composition and fluid draughtsman. In 'September Lough Erne', 'Leitrim Border' 'April West Tyrone' he explores the careful conjunction of season and place and without the layering effect. In 'Rain in Leitrim' there again appears the geometric grid. It gives a regular rhythm to the piece, as it does in 'June Ballinderry I'. In 'Burtonport Revisited' also painted during this period his colours seem restrained and instead he emphasised the texture. In all of these wilderness paintings Middleton seems to go beyond the surface of the landscape and into the mysterious. Kenneth Jamison said of Middleton "In all Middletons work there is an inexpressible sense of magic of something metaphysical beyond the visual reality."

Middletons paintings vary in size a great deal and some of his smallest ones are often very intense.



Summary

Middleton deserves credit for his professionalism and craftsmanship (and his refusal to type himself). He allows the art of others to fertilize his imagination but his understanding of their methods is so profound that he rethinks their problems and his conclusions however similar are never quite the same. In the late 60's we see a more consistent and unified Middleton. He has artfully used a low colour range in a way that produces great subtlety and depth. They are generally hard landscapes something very rare in Irish painting which has tended to stress atmosphere instead of structure and to go overboard always for surface beauty - and the obvious picturesque - in fact he painted scenery. Something Middleton once said made this very clear to me, it was about a pebble. "These pebbles are so important to me - it's what the elements have done to a pebble. It's not just the beautiful shape. Somehow you get it revealed there. If it's left to the tide, the winds and the salt it will reveal qualities...". This subtle austerity pays rich dividends in paintings like 'Mourne Elegy' 'Grey Elegy' or 'Evening Dundrum' with its greyness reduced by the tiny red sun glowing like a cigarette end at dusk. These paintings are the production of the interaction of two basic concerns of the painter: with the moods and qualities evoked in him by certain places and with the essential nature of the materials he uses. Middleton never uses inferior materials. The answer he made to this: "The first symptom of maturity is to know the nature of the materials you're working with and to know its nature means you never abuse it. If you want to get top quality of anything you respect it - but it's not for the sake of making it last. You can get the quality out of a material by patient study. It's a voyage of discovery all the time... You can go on and on and never exhaust it. The formula becomes more and more simple and at the same time has resonance. A painting for me before it has anything must have resonance." The dominant archetypes are coaxed from the amorphous materials and moved towards realisation in much the same way as the elements work upon wood and stone: a process of erosion: the polish of wind and rain, the action of sand or the trace of a thorn. This can be specifically applied to 'Sycamore' 1967

Throughout his life Middleton has gone through many different styles of painting: surrealism, cubism, expressionist, never changing himself in any one type of painting. The mystery of the past as viewed from the present is a theme which links his work together. Behind most of his images is a sense of mystery. Middleton is very professional in the way he composes his images and has an excellent sense of draughtsmanship, and composition. He often uses landscape as a basis for his images. A sense of place is very important to him. He simplifies and abstracts from nature creating images of great intensity.

From 1953 onwards Middleton exhibited on a regular basis in Belfast, Dublin and London. He has been represented in an enormous amount of important Irish and International group exhibitions, including the Irish Imagination (ROSC 1971), The Delighted Eye (London and Irish tour 80-81), Irish Art 1900 - 1950 (Cork ROSC '75). Since 1943 he had one man shows in a number of galleries in Belfast, Dublin and London. A major retrospective exhibition consisting of nearly 300 of Middletons works was held in 1976, at the Hugh Lane and Ulster Museum.

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T P FLANAGAN (1929 -)

HIS EARLY LIFE

Terence Patrick Flanagan was born in Enniskillen Co Fermanagh. He was brought up by two of his aunts, in a house near Lissadell, Co Sligo. This was the home of the Gore-Booths. The great georgian house of Lissadell had links with Irish nationalism and literature through Constance Markievicz and poet W.B. Yeats. Yeats wrote evocatively of the house and the surrounding grounds and woodland. This literary connection is not lost in Flanagan who in addition to his skills as a painter is an articulate and sensitive writer. His childhood spent in the elegiac woods and now overgrown parkland meant a great deal to him. His early awareness of the peculiar gravity of light in both places became a conscious concern and true theme in his work. The closeness of the sea helped this, not because of the sound but because of ever present luminosity - elemental mirrors of sea and sky.

Flanagans mentor was Kathleen Bridle, a Fermanagh art teacher with a love of modern art and a sensitivity for watercolour. A hard worker Flanagan went to school by day and at night attended classes at Enniskillen Tech. After his time as an art student he went into teaching from 1949-1953 he taught in a convent school in Lisburn and in Ballynahinch. It was here that he began to learn the essence of the watercolour technique. In 1954 he became a lecturer in art at St Marys College of Education, Belfast and by 1963 he had become a part time teacher in life drawing at the Belfast College of Art. It was around this time that Flanagan decided to concentrate on painting rather than teaching - though he needed the income from teaching. As we will see a few years later again he was fortunate enough to be able to give all his time to painting. We shall start out by looking at one of his earlier themes - The Lough Erne and Lissadell themes of 1960-1966.

THE LOUGH ERNE AND LISSADELL THEMES 1960-66

Flanagan has a childhood awareness of the peculiar gravity of the light in both places and they became a conscious concern and true theme in his work. In these early works there is a restricted colour and tonal simplification. This sometimes verged on abstract. Always in the pictures the linement of the landscape is revealed through the subtle control of light filtering sometimes with restrained drama through a broken sky.

About 1949 we see evidence of his strong compositional skill and his ability to work with a restricted palette in his series of paintings of Dominican Nuns where he was teaching. As we will see, Flanagan is particularly keen on serial production as offering alternative experimental solutions to a specific thematic problem. One of these early works 'On the terrace' shows itself to be more than an exercise in simplification of colour and form, it is an evocation of stillness and silence. The texts are integral to the image and speak via their rustic descriptions of a world and a life beyond the page.

In 'The Vow of Colmcille' of 1962 it shows St Columba sadly turning his back on Ireland before going into exile. Flanagan uses the low islands of lough Erne to symbolise Ireland and in his own words he says "I lost interest in the figure and the islands over his shoulder began to interest me more" so that as is appropriate the homeland comes to dominate the exile. He now concentrates on the islands of Co Sligo with their misty moody pools and what Sheamus Heany called "...their mutual flirtation, their eternal triangle with a moody light". This sparseness which marks his point of reference for the paints of lough Erne and Lissadell can be seen in 'Autumn Lough' of 1961. It is restrained in mood yet assured in technique, the elemental subject and the pigment are linked together into a personal calligraphy. The essential 'earthy' tones of horizontal land masses blend into pale colours of the water and sky.

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Flanagan has a childhood awareness of the peculiar gravity of the light in both places and they became a conscious concern and true theme in his work. In these early works there is a restricted colour and tonal simplification. This sometimes verged on abstract. Always in the pictures the linement of the landscape is revealed through the subtle control of light filtering sometimes with restrained drama through a broken sky.

About 1949 we see evidence of his strong compositional skill and his ability to work with a restricted palette in his series of paintings of Dominican Nuns where he was teaching. As we will see, Flanagan is particularly keen on serial production as offering alternative experimental solutions to a specific thematic problem. One of these early works 'On the terrace' shows itself to be more than an exercise in simplification of colour and form, it is an evocation of stillness and silence. The texts are integral to the image and speak via their rustic descriptions of a world and a life beyond the page.

In 'The Vow of Colmcille' of 1962 it shows St Columba sadly turning his back on Ireland before going into exile. Flanagan uses the low islands of lough Erne to symbolise Ireland and in his own words he says "I lost interest in the figure and the islands over his shoulder began to interest me more" so that as is appropriate the homeland comes to dominate the exile. He now concentrates on the islands of Co Sligo with their misty moody pools and what Sheamus Heany called "...their mutual flirtation, their eternal triangle with a moody light". This sparseness which marks his point of reference for the paints of lough Erne and Lissadell can be seen in 'Autumn Lough' of 1961. It is restrained in mood yet assured in technique, the elemental subject and the pigment are linked together into a personal calligraphy. The essential 'earthy' tones of horizontal land masses blend into pale colours of the water and sky.

Also in 1962 he exhibited in the Irish Exhibition of living Art, with a work entitled 'Flooded Field'. This piece took the interplay of reflected misty sky and water to greater lengths. The horizontality and flat planes are now established, as is the concern with light as the definer of our visual sense. The brooding quietude remains intact and is made more obsessive by the covering of water.

OILS OF 1964

In 1964 Flanagan had his first Dublin exhibition the majority of these paintings were executed in oils. There is something very quiet and deadly still about these paintings 'November Dawn' being one. It has a painterliness and a sense of delicacy about it. There are no surface gestures, he plays it cool with a low toned palette. Grey and white predominate with a few splashes of colour in his poppy pictures 'Thistles and White Tulips'. This use of colour reminds me of Middletons use of it in 1969. 'Lissadell' and 'Lough Erne' are made up of geometric lines. Thinly spread paint in slabs side by side is a very effective device he uses here to describe a rainwashed atmosphere - as these places so often are 'Benbulbin from the Cartrass' show a sense of solidity lacking in the atmospheric works. One critic described these paintings as Reminding him of chamber music. Flanagan says "I paint me a memory of a place rather than what I saw" epitomising the romantic but not the sentimental.

A SENSE OF PLACE AND THE 'SAND SERIES' 1965-68inc.

In 1965 we see many paintings of Fermanagh. From looking at his paintings already we can see that they seldom make an immediate impact. Instead they wear very well. These paintings break fault. Delicacy and refinement like him easily become grey and thin and dangerously insubstantial there he is breaking into brighter colours - rich greens, blues and reddish browns to relieve the twilight subtleties of his palette. Flanagan's themes are the same, many misty skies and seas, most in the thinnest paint. At times he is like an ariel impressionist who occasionally nears the border of abstraction but never crosses it. He feels the atmosphere of the sky too precisely to turn it into generalised tonal symphony. He is close to Camille Souter in that both have intelligent subtlety but there's where it ends. In Miss Souter's images there is an attack and stir in the paint - action painting. Flanagan's painting is passive and contemplative, he almost never paints motion and when he does it's not his best. A pool without a ripple. Here we see lonely seashores dissolved in light, he uses a palette knife to build up patterns of oblongs and squares, or sea or clouds and the horizon separates them through. The consistency in the way he works to establish a solid framework could in time reduce many of his works to a formula. On account of this the composition sometimes straggles.

When asked why he wanted to paint the landscape he said "The landscape is the theme which channels into some definite coherent and visible form things that I want to express although the act of balancing physical elements in a painting can be related to what one studies in the landscape. If I stand beside a lake and I am aware of a tree beside a lake, there is a certain relationship between the tree and the air around it...these different relationships create what I think is the excitement of that particular landscape". What struck Flanagan about his Lissadell paintings was the sense of order that was there but had now decayed. The place had been

USE OF BLACK

In 1966 Flanagan like Renoir rediscovered the virtues of black. "Black is the queen of colours". Flanagan said that in '66 "Another discovery for me was that if you look into the sun the intense brightness is black so that the sky at its brightest is interpreted in black "Flanagan uses black as an -

- 1) accent
- 2) linear trace
- 3) assertive gesture

It dominates his work between '66-68 and until 1970 it continued to provide a strong element in a series of near abstract works based on the trace of water flowing through sand. It is a linear logic obeying aesthetic laws and is as difficult to legislate as the erratic courses of the streams themselves.

THE NEW YORK EXHIBITION AND THE CONEEN SERIES

In 1969 Flanagan exhibits along with other Irish artists in New York. His summer house in Donegal between Killybegs and Ardara encouraged a sequence of bogland paintings. In these black is modulated to a deep brown and the earlier concern with the great elemental mirrors of water and sky assert itself again. Bog pools reflect brooding skies. Dark brown turf stacks wedge between water and waste of bog stripped bare, itself a dark glass, another moody mirror. A 'Road through Landscape' is both simple and subtle and captures the maximum amount of atmosphere. Flanagan has put his semi-cubist style behind him for larger vaguer images. 'River Struggle' is dark and melancholy while 'Coneen' is light and pastel, with sky the colour of milk. He seems a quality painter rather than an important one because his scope is limited and it lacks robustness. His larger works are now somewhat distilled impressionistic. His smaller works are densely worked nature studys in brownish tones which suggest Flanagan has been

looking at Middleton. There is a sombre atmosphere in his 'Bogland Drawings' '1' and '2' here he has a fine draughtsmanship and a strong sense of ariel perspective. To me there seems to be a lot more energy and thought behind his drawings and they are stronger images than his paintings.

'THE FROZEN LAKE' SERIES OF 1971 - 1975

The theme of this series was a frozen lake. The painting named after the series is a very large strong work. There is greater intensification in it and one can see that he now concentrates on an area he knows very well. He is moving towards abstraction very tentatively and carefully as is his nature. Note the use of verticals in 'Frozen Lake' he avoids verticals in earlier works. They are not only used as units of measurement by which to comprehend the open space of the rest of the picture. This confident gesture making is a conversion of style and method which was absorbed from Japanese and Chinese art and is found locally in the art of Tom Carr. The 'Coneen Series' reopened the question of colour. In this series there is an intensity and complexity of colour for example in 'Rosslea Autumn 2' the briars here appear as barriers to light and as jagged forms for the soft sky to bounce off, there is a glowing colouration. In 'The Small Rock' the enigmatic force of line and shape that creates a tension within the harmony of the whole. He is seeking to preserve an element of inexpressible restraint over emotion and over lyrical. The previously bleached landscapes are now blushing with colour. Always the problem for this artist is one of metaphor or retaining the reference, but achieving it in painterly gestures so that there is no deceit. "Like Corbusier he refused to imitate. Shuddered concrete should look like concrete; paint like paint".



T. P. Flanagan
 Frozen Lakes 1971
 Oil on canvas
 1,260 x 2,040 mm
 Signed: T. P. Flanagan 71
 Exhibited at the David Hendriks Gallery, Dublin, 1971



T. P. Flanagan
A Rough Morning 1971
Oil on canvas
620 x 760 mm
Signed: T. P. Flanagan
Exhibited at the David Hendriks Gallery, Dublin, 1971

THE MYSTERY OF THE PAST AS VIEWED FROM THE PRESENT

This series of 1975 continues his use of jewel like colours, reminiscent of Celtic illumination. There is a hint of the oriental with Japanese like graphics. 'A Study of Stillness' 1975 has words painted on it, words that are integral to the mood of this work and to the experience of his whole output. The words are 'A Tree, A Bowl, A Shared Stillness' these evoke some sort of romanticism. Motivation for Flanagan often appears to be his romantic involvement with the mood of his subjects. The images appear to be arrived at by a method that is both an analysis and a synthesis. Flanagan has affinities with the cool spectral world of David Friedrich.

DRAWINGS

In 1975 he moves away from painting and towards drawing. His drawings are not as well known or appreciated but stronger than his colour works. 'Pages from a Summer Diary' of 1975 is a beautifully simple and subtle charcoal drawing, yet it has great strength and daring. 'A Hollow in the Grass' 1979 has the same strength and subtlety as above. There is no vast panoramas here, but zooming in on flat surface pattern. There is changes in density which suggest mounds - perhaps old Celtic graves, creamics, the past from the present.

'WHAT YOU MIGHT SEE FROM A TRAIN WINDOW'

This is how Flanagan describes his paintings of 1979. The subject matter is taken from the landscape of Fermanagh and Leitrim where it borders the (now extinct) track over which the Sligo, Leitrim and Northern Counties Railways ran. He manages to do justice to his large watercolours and they do not fall into the trap of looking like 'blown up' images for example 'Fermanagh Rain' 30" x 22" and 'A Lake' 15" x 20". A watercolour 'Old pier, Wiers Bridge' rears up with an impressive vertical thrust. His drawings show real power especially in the stark contrast of black and white which produce a great contrast. An oil painting 'In Fermanagh 1' reminds one of Camille Souters style of work.

There is a tendency to look down on landscape painting - as I said in my introduction - with the Bord Failte School of Painting and the Idillic Constables. The answer Flanagan gave to this was "Some people tell me I'm carrying on an activity of the past ...I think its more important than ever, important that one records the landscape through the filter of ones own emotions and experiences and in doing so preserves it against the time when it won't be there". Flanagan does not represent nature in literal terms the place captures the essence of a place rather than the place itself. Its the ability to impart a memory of where he has been that puts him in the front rank of Irish painters. Another insight, Flanagan says "My painting is essentially retrospective I can't react to immediately".

As you will have noticed earlier this abstraction by the use of line, vertical, horizontal and cross hatched softened by light forcing the way through trees or water reeds, producing a structural composition. "When people confront with an artist they tend to pay attention to the subject whereas the theme is the important thing." He goes on to say that all serious painting is abstract in the formal sense be it figurative or nonfigurative. This I think explains Flanagans abstraction.

'SHOOT' AND 'FINDS' OF 1980

Flanagan is now concentrating much more on drawing than on painting, perhaps this is because of the success of his drawings and because he realises they have much more potential than his paintings. "They are drawings of things like lumps of coral and so on which I just happen to find outside the studio. Its better than a written diary". There is a series called 'Finds' one of which depicts three feathers. I also found out that at the opening of this exhibition there was a dead hare pinned on the wall, and the bloodied corpse of a bird tacked to another. Certainly not a static artist, his work is not generalised, his analysis is genuinely authentic. His drawings are strong and seductive. The fact that he often leaves a large expanse of white adds to this and to his mastery of technique. The series 'Shoot' show dead pheasants, hares and woodcocks drawn with no attempt at glorification of the hunt, nor is there any feeling of wasted life. Flanagan shows a great respect for nature here, revealing a lyrical romantic imagery rather than the sublime variety. In some of these drawings he stands back and describes naturalistic phenomena from such a close range that the images advance and recede, producing a hypnotic effect of weighing on the abstract patterns in nature. 'Shoot: Pheasants and Woodcock' depicts an abstract pattern of birds.

'WELLS' OF 1981

This is a series done in the now familiar manner. The 'Wells' series is landscape based but is 'reasonably figurative' meaning that he is not merely content to copy nature. There is a spontaneous handling in this series which makes it refreshing. In them there is also a sense of being alone. "We've lost an enviable thing, we've lost the ability to use solitude. When I was a child I had nothing to entertain me so I filled in the time drawing and writing."

Summary

Flanagans desire was not merely to reproduce actual images but to capture the feeling and emotion of particular places. The mystery of the past as viewed from the present has been a constant theme of his paintings as was his concern for moisture laden atmosphere, refractions of light and water. He loves to use broad expanses of space in his paintings and likes to work with a muted organic palette. A very literary minded person this comes through in his work. Flanagan simplifies and abstracts from nature to create landscape of great stillness and intensity.

T. P. Flanagan has been awarded numerous commissions, prizes and awards. His work has been included in a number of important group exhibitions, for example - Arts Spectrum Ulster (1979), the Irish Imagination (ROSC '71), the Delighted Eye (London and Irish tour '80-81). He had his first one man show in 1958. Flanagan has exhibited in the Royal Ulster Academy and the Royal Hibernian. He exhibited regularly in Belfast and Dublin, and he had a mid-career retrospective exhibition in 1977.

CONCLUSION

1. A Sense of Place

It is obvious that Flanagan and Middleton have a great love of landscape. Landscape is the PLACE from where both take their departure for their images. They do not rush from one place to another - rather they explore one place thoroughly. Middleton spent four years working around one locale in Co Down exploring its dry stone walls, young plantations and lush vegetation. He returns there again and again to paint. In Co Antrim he discovered vast open spaces, basalt and limestone outcrops. He was always aware of different qualities in different places - whatever it was that fascinated him about a place he recorded it. Lissadell was a special place for Flanagan. It was also a starting point for him. Both Middleton and Flanagan responded emotionally to a place, then beyond a certain point the painting took over, creating its own patterns. Middletons 'June Ballinderry' is a beautiful example of this. It is not important that you don't recognise the places that each paints, what is important is that the images are something that take their departure from a certain place. To highlight how important place is to Flanagan, we can see that he usually does a sequence of paintings around one place going back every day, watching weather and lighting effects, watching time.

2. A Sense of the Past

For Flanagan and Middleton the landscape contained a sense of their past heritage. Because of rapid changes in agriculture due to modern technology the surface of our land is changing. Flanagan saw that now more than ever it is important to record the present so that future generations can view it. Capturing it in feeling as well as literally. For me 'A Hollow in the Grass' records a sense of the past as well as the present. Though it was drawn from the

present it evokes images of days gone by - the land as it was hundreds and hundreds of years ago, perhaps it was a burial place, a hiding place, or marks people now long gone left on the land. A lot of Middletons images creat mysteries. In his 'Wilderness' series he goes beyond the surface of the landscape and into the mysteries of the past. So even though Middleton and Flanagans images are different they were thinking along the same lines when it came to the past.

3. The Effect Weather had on the Land

Both as we have seen have been concerned with the effects of weathering. The long time effects weather has on the land - wearing it down characterising it, giving the landscape a story to tell sometimes old sometimes fresh and new. Middleton conveys this especially well in his paintings of Co Down. He uses textured surfaces to show the effect of weathering and time - eroded rugged surfaces, smooth flat polished surfaces. The land and the weather are very congenial to using burnt ambers, yellow orches, natural greens, muted pinks, soft greys and black. If you go and look for cicadellic pink, vibrant orange or pacific blue you won't find them in bogs or countryside of Co Down or indeed Ireland. Earthy colours reflect the Irish climate, they are there and you can relate to them, enter a screaming green and you change everything. Middleton and Flanagan use a very organic naturalistic colour range - they often work in monochrome and tones - this is true of most Irish Artists.

Even the titles of both of their paintings gives us a clue that they were also concerned with weather conditions. For example Middletons 'Bog after Rain Ballybogy' 'Rain, Rain Valley', 'Cloud across the Moon' and Flanagans 'Autumn Lough'. I have already

discussed Flanagan's concern for weather conditions and his continuous involvement with the moisture laden atmospheres.

4. A Sense of Order and Control

We have seen by now that both are excellent draughtsmen and have excellent control over their medium be it watercolour, oils or another medium. Both tend to have a controlled style and yet it is quite free. Flanagan, a master in applying watercolours - he spreads the paint thinly in slabs side by side a very effective device he uses to describe a rain washed atmosphere. Both have the ability to work with a restricted palette. If one looks at their paintings we can see that they are very carefully constructed to create a good composition. Lines were important in the composition whether diagonal, vertical, whether to create pattern or depth. Middleton and Flanagan constructed their lines very carefully. If you have a formula for doing something and it works well it can be very easy to fall into a trap. In a way I feel Flanagan has perfected his watercolour so much that it becomes monotonous at times. Middletons paintings of 1968 show a great deal of discipline. He simplified his images so much that there was nothing left to simplify and it became stylised. However, this is unlike Middleton who was usually continuously changing.

Finally although both Flanagan and Middletons paintings look different, what is very important and very basic to both is that a lot of their ideas and themes for their work are the same, and this is what brings them close together the whys hows and wheres for the themes and ideas of ones work are surely the most important thing underlying the images.

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