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THE PORTRAITURE OF EDOUARD MANET,

GWEN JOHN AND JACK DONOVAN.

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Faculty of Fine Art,  
Department of Painting.

Patricia Murphy,  
National College of  
Art and Design,  
100 Thomas Street,  
Dublin.

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## INTRODUCTION.

This thesis is concerned with the nature of portraiture, the representation of human kind through the eyes of artists. I have decided to study portraiture with special emphasis on three artists - the 19th Century French proto-impressionist Edouard Manet (1832 - 1883), the 20th Century English realistic portrait painter Gwen John (1876 - 1939) and the 20th Century semi-abstract Irish artist Jack Donovan (1935 - ). I have chosen these three artists because I am attracted by and interested in their sense of life, the perception of humanity, and because I find parts of their approach reflected in my own work. I have hopes that an intensive study and analyses of their work will help me gain a knowledge of their influences on me as an artist and a greater understanding of the nature and direction of my own work.

I have always been a painter who usually works directly from life, making in paint a personal translation of what is in front of me.



People did not strongly feature in my work until the summer of 1984 when a friend offered to pose for me. I painted him reading a book in his sitting room. There was an open window behind him and through it all the bright and busy sights, sounds and smells of high summer could be seen and felt. In contrast the room was still, silent and gloomy. In the midst of it I became aware of the man's head, how it was still in itself, and yet how it must house such a buzz of life. As the painting progressed, it became increasingly concerned with the head. I painted it in such a way that it looked as if it had been carved out of stone and introduced colours such as slate blue and greys to emphasize this stone-like quality.

This was the first important attempt I had made to paint a portrait and I quickly realized that for me portraiture was not a means of representing character or personality, but of pursuing more broadly human concerns. This meant that I was not so much interested in portraying individuals as I was in portraying people who could be seen to be symbols of a particular characteristic.



From the beginning I wanted a feeling of stillness in the person as opposed to agitation in the surroundings. The atmosphere I wanted to create was very much like that of some old, white religious statues inserted into alcoves in the grounds of a convent in Limerick. These I had passed every day for many years. I had always been moved by them and knew that I wanted something of them to appear in my work, but had never been sure how to go about it. With the introduction of figures to my painting I felt that I could try to create the atmosphere generated by the religious statues.

This year in the National College of Art and Design, I have pursued the theme of the single figure in my paintings. This concern prompted me to look for artists who concentrate on portraiture and who also use the theme of the single figure in their work. Last year I studied the work of Edouard Manet for a thesis in the Limerick School of Art and Design. I was familiar with and fascinated by the isolation of the bar maid in his Bar at the Folies Bergere painted in 1882.



I see it as being a pinnacle in Manet's career as a painter and have decided to concentrate on it in this thesis

My tutor, Julian Campbell suggested that I look at the work of Gwen John. Her work, I discovered, concentrated almost entirely on portraits of the isolated figure and I was immediately captured by their unassuming, yet quietly strong nature.

I have been familiar with the work of Jack Donovan for many years, and decided to include him because his entire career has been a study of the human face and posture. Jack Donovan and I have often discussed the difficulties and subtleties of picture-making. Because I am acquainted with Jack Donovan himself I have a better understanding of his highly personalized approach to portraiture.

In the first chapter I will deal with portraiture in general and will attempt to describe what I think are its important elements. I will then trace the changes in treatment of portraiture from pre-twentieth Century - the time of Manet - to the present day and describe changes in attitude towards it.



The second chapter will describe what portraiture means to the three artists I have chosen. I will outline what I perceive to be the artists message, his vision of the world, his presentation of human psychology. To do this I think it will be necessary to briefly describe some of the trends and characteristics of contemporary life which each artist drew on and made integral to his or her work. In this way I hope to establish how far and in what way the artist deviates from truth and thereby gain an understanding of the artist's psychological techniques.

In the third chapter, I will try to analyse the paradoxical nature of art, and discuss how an artist must be convincing in an individual way. There is a paradox in the art of Manet, Gwen John and Jack Donovan because although all three artists drew on contemporary life and sometimes painted directly from people that they knew they nonetheless always pursued their own personal, subjective ends.



Thus the art they produced will never become dated even though it is rooted in the individual artist's contemporary life.

In this way I hope to clarify for both myself and the reader the importance of having a true and convincing content in one's art while at the same time fulfilling the need to distance oneself from one's subject and try to make a personalized statement.



## CHAPTER I

The commonly accepted understanding of portraiture is that it is primarily involved with getting a 'likeness', a literal visual representation of a person, and secondarily, with portraying a person's character or personality.

At the opening of Jack Donovan's recent retrospective exhibition in Limerick the poet Desmond O'Grady announced:

"Realistic portraiture - any portraiture - demands using the accidents of each chosen face to reveal the individual life of the sitter, the subject behind that face. The act of portraiture is an exploration of character, personality, persona beyond the exterior presented." (1)

I find that I disagree with this statement because I believe that all portraiture, the realistic kind included, is primarily concerned not with the personality of the sitter but with the personality of the artist.



Portraiture, even at its most objective, is almost always intensely subjective. The portraitist, when in the process of making an image of his subject, does not consider the true nature of the sitter but rather uses the sitter as a vehicle for his own purposes. He sees his subject in the way that he chooses, not as the subject really is.

Most figurative artists, at some stage in their careers, work directly from a living model. We know that for Manet's Bar at the Folies Bergere the model posed for many hours. Gwen John often used her friends and acquaintances as models though later on, she too, hired young women to pose for her. Jack Donovan spent much of the early part of his career painting and drawing models and thus gained knowledge of the structure, colour and texture of the human form which he later used in his more personalized, doll-like version of the nude.

Drawing or painting directly from a living model tended to go out of fashion some years ago in art schools, but in the last five years or so models have made a reappearance. Figurative artists such as Lucian Freud, Uglow or Brian Bourke are widely admired.



Now life drawing is commonly practised and is respectable again. For an art student the act of drawing a human being from life is more challenging than drawing from other subjects such as still-life or landscape. Every mark has to be considered carefully. Any deviation from normal proportion will be very obvious because while the viewer may not know the general proportions of a landscape he does know the general proportions of the human form. If the artist wants to distort he has to do so in a considered way.

But there is another, far more interesting problem that faces an artist when confronted by a model. As I have already stated, an artist uses the model for his or her own ends. Through painting an image of the sitter, the artist imagines the model as a different person in a different situation. If the painting is convincing enough, his imagination will become real. The object therefore is not to slavishly copy nature but to use nature intelligently and discriminatly.



Every artist must discover and establish his or her personal way of using nature. To examine how Manet did this in comparison to the work of one of his contemporaries is illuminating because it puts him in an historical context.

Most people recognise Manet as the forerunner of the the Impressionists. The French novelist Emile Zola, who was a contemporary of Manet's, was one of the first to see this. He describes Manet as an analytic painter and favourably compares this approach to that of other painters working at the same time. Zola writes:

"While others rack their brains to invent a new Death of Caesar or a new Socrates Drinking the Hemlock, he calmly places a few objects and people in a corner of his studio and begins to paint the whole thing carefully, analysing nature all the while ..... his labour is much more interesting than the plagiarisms of his colleagues." (2)

The American art critic John Canaday supports this point of view.



He describes Manet's painting Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe, painted in 1863 as:

"an effort to discover technical means to make the most direct translation of 'pure visual experience' into the language of paint." (3)

While I accept these views, I think that both Zola and Canaday are mistaken in dismissing the question of subject matter in Manet's painting.

Manet addressed himself to profane subjects, challenged bourgeois taste and attempted to deflate traditional myths. Manet thus was a painter who dealt essentially with human concerns. He is at his most interesting when he is portraying and commenting on people.

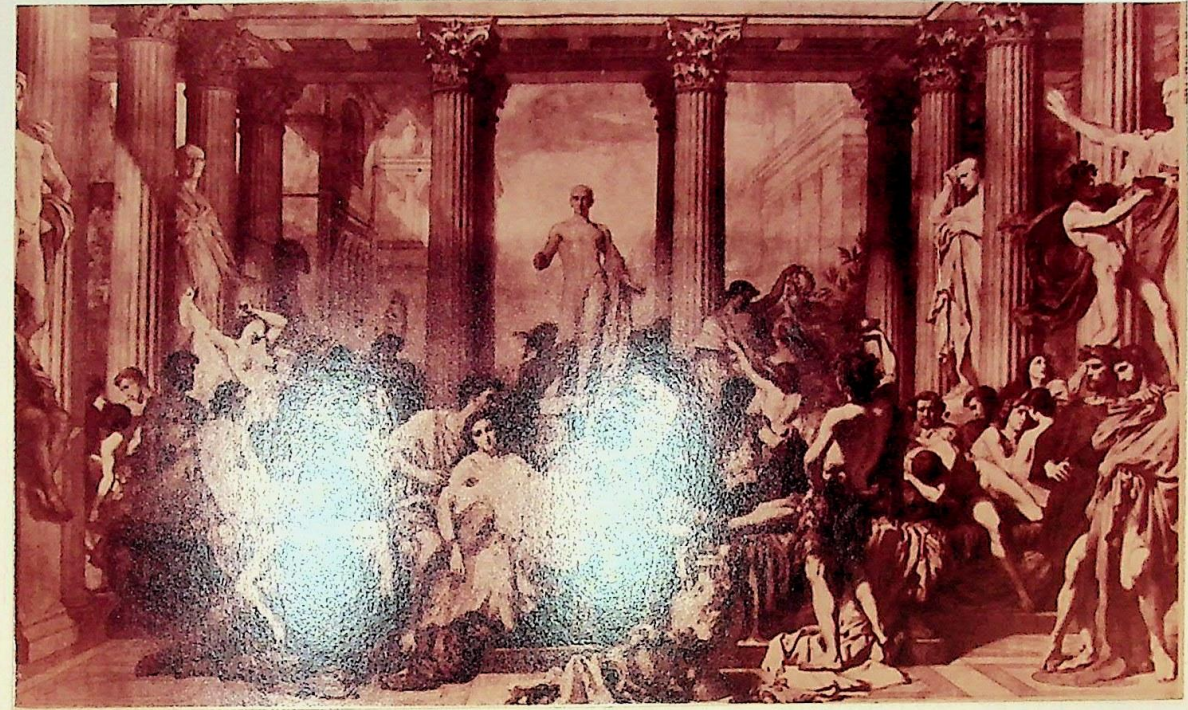
It is interesting to compare Manet's approach to that of his teacher, the master academician, Thomas Couture. In 1847, Couture painted the The Romans of Decadence which in it's time was considered to be a great success.



This painting flattered the public by implying that they knew something about Rome, and it meant that they could condemn the orgiastic, amoral behaviour of the Romans, while at the same time enjoy its lascivious suggestiveness. It is a painting that is moralistic, anecdotal and historical.

Manet's painting is none of these three things. He neither condemns nor applauds the moral behaviour of the people he portrays. His concern for formalism overrules any anecdotal tendency even though he uses the mythological name of Olympia for one of his paintings, his paintings are not historical. The people he portrays are obviously taken from contemporary life. Couture's concern to make his picture tell a story means that he fails to be innovative in his formal concerns. His composition is derived from the Renaissance and his treatment of the figures is the result of hours of posing the model under a window and using carefully graded tones to make a three-dimensional effect.





1. Thomas Couture. The Romans of Decadence, Oil on Canvas, (1847).



The postures and gestures of the figures are dramatic and exaggerated and in an idealized way, their faces reflect the artist's concern to portray decadence.

Couture's conscious or unconscious desire to please his public has made him idealize his subject matter and embellish it with the techniques and attitudes of an art that belonged to the fifteenth Century. Manet does the opposite. Although he has borrowed the compositions from classical masters in Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe and Olympia, these paintings still appear fresh and spontaneous. The reason for this is not just the artist's undoubted skill in manipulating paint, nor his use of bright colours (Manet's colour no longer appears bright by today's standards, anyway) but is, I think, because some of his figures are arresting images, for example the unclothed figure in the foreground of Dejeuner and the figure of Olympia. It is hard to forget the expressions of these two women's faces as they stare so directly and brazenly at us.



In 'Ways of Seeing', John Berger writes:

"If one compares Manet's Olympia with Titian's original, one sees a woman, cast in the traditional role beginning to question that role somewhat defiantly." (4)

He says that the ideal of typical womanhood was broken by Manet's Olympia, but that there was nothing to replace it except the image of the prostitute which characterized avante-garde art. A hundred and twenty years later she is a major part of Jack Donovan's subject matter.

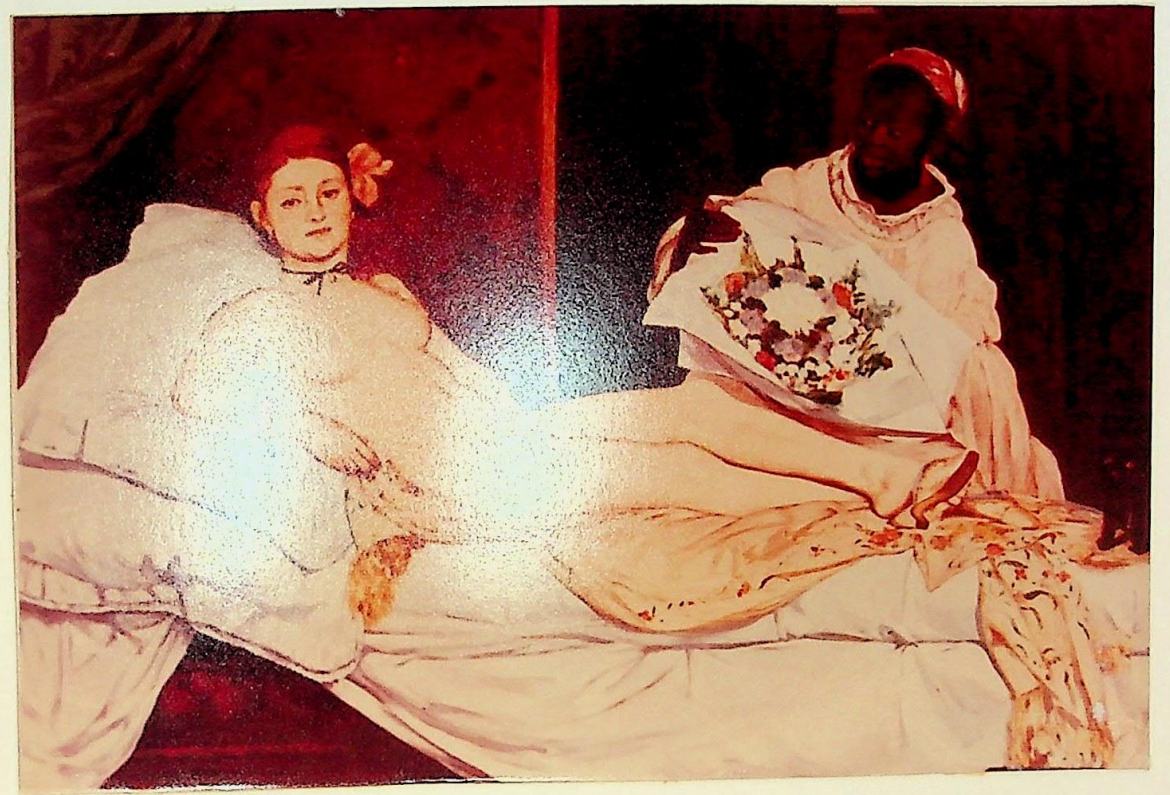
Manet did not merely break the ideal of typical womanhood, he also shattered much of the nineteenth Century's whole approach to the portrayal of personality. Though he could not be described as primarily a painter of human psychology, his lack of interest in having a narrative approach gave him scope for examining his subjects on a psychological basis. Though other concerns such as that of formalism usually dominated his interests he nonetheless gives us an interesting portrayal of character, especially in his later work.





2. Manet. Dejeuner sur l'Herbe,  
Oil on Canvas, (1863)





3. Manet. Olympia,  
Oil on Canvas, (1863)



This is particularly shown in his portrayal of the barmaid in the Bar at the Folies Bergere, which will be described in detail in a later chapter.

Although Gwen John's results are very different, I think that her attitude to portraiture is similar to Manet's. Her highly personal art owes something to a wide range of influences. Though she spent most of her working life in Paris, she is sometimes thought to belong to an English School which includes Walter Sickert, Harold Gilman, Robert <sup>B</sup> Vevan and Spencer Gore. I see more of a French Impressionist influence in her work, especially with regard to her patterned brush strokes as well as the immediacy and directness of her later work.

In her Diploma thesis, Ann O'Regan (5) puts Gwen John in the context of two French religious painters of her day - Chagall and Rouault. She concludes that Gwen John is not a 'religious' artist in the sense of either of these two because her work is 'purely humanistic' and is not based on any religious philosophy such as Chagall's chadissism.



Nor does she share Rouault's preoccupation with sin and redemption. Gwen John's personal concern with religion was private. She was not concerned with the morals and conduct of society as a whole. The content and attitude to portraiture of Gwen John's work will be discussed in chapter two. Here it is only necessary to attempt to place her in an historical context. She was a reclusive person and although she was aware of artistic trends and developments she was highly self-sufficient and did not allow herself to be swayed from the goal she set herself. This point is significant because it shows how Gwen John rejected society because she felt society rejected her as an artist. She was conscious of the schism between artist and public as many artists of the late nineteenth and twentieth Centuries were.

A similar independence of spirit and purpose is found in the work of Jack Donovan. He says that he has been influenced by Goya, Velazquez, to a lesser extent Rembrant and the twentieth Century artist, Francis Bacon.



Eddie Kennedy (i) compares him to the Irish twentieth Century artist Louis le Brocquy and points out both artists preoccupation with the head. This, he claims, has roots in Irish prehistoric art. (6)

Always an avid reader, it is true to say that Jack Donovan found more inspiration in literature than in visual art, especially in his youth. He lived all his life in Limerick and never travelled further than England. Most of his art education came from books and magazine reproductions but he has often said that he does not think this deterred him from getting to know what is important about an artist and what might possibly influence him.

I see Jack Donovan as an artist who has relentlessly pursued his personal vision regardless of the fact that he was not living in a particularly artistic climate. He has not felt the need to reject his own society and culture and seek artistic recognition in one of the 'meccas' of art activity. This is why I think he could be said to share a similar attitude with Gwen John.

(i) A student of Donovan's in the Limerick School of Art and Design.



Independence of spirit and of artistic ambition is a shared characteristic of the three artists that I have chosen. Though it manifests itself in completely different ways in both their lives and their work, it can nevertheless be clearly seen it was this independence that gave them strength and purpose for the making of art.



## CHAPTER II

To begin to understand the message of any artist, it is first of all necessary to have some knowledge of the culture or the spirit of the age in which the artist worked. It is important to realize that it is a difficult if not impossible task for myself and the reader to fully understand the lives of Manet and Gwen John because we have no direct experience of knowing them nor have we actually lived in their time. We can only read about these things and do our best to imagine them with the help of such secondary sources.

On the other hand, I have actually known Jack Donovan as a teacher and friend for the last three years. I know well the Art School which he helped to found and the town of Limerick in which he has lived all his life, I know most of his paintings and have seen some of them at various stages of completion. Jack and I have had many discussions about his art and my art. Jack Donovan's being Irish obviously helps me to understand what is characteristically Irish in his work.

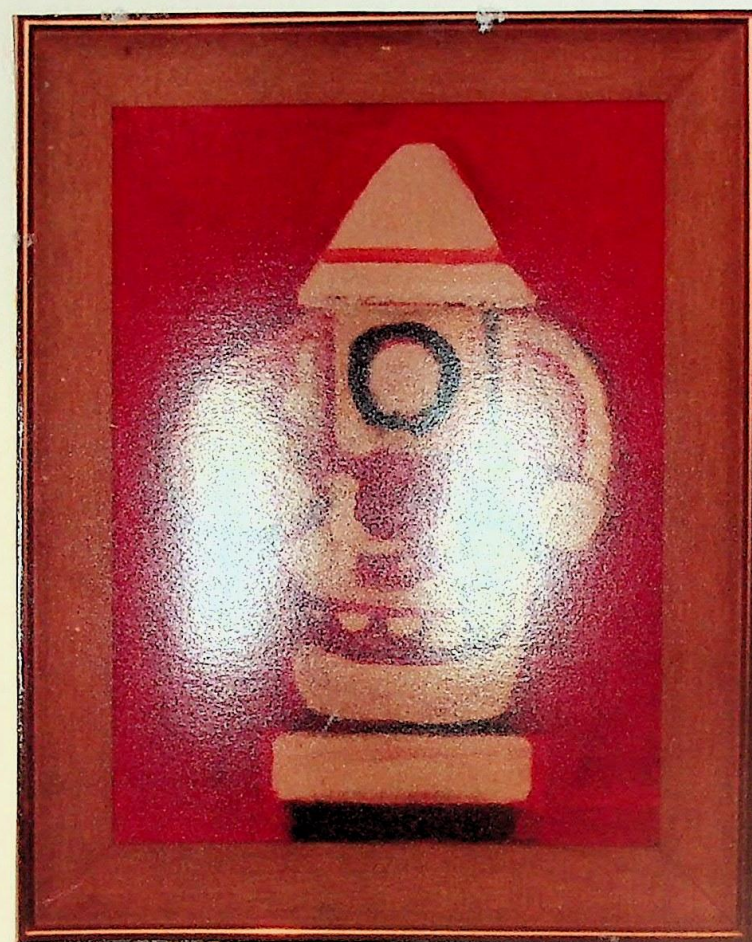


His sense of humour, the element of tragi-comedy in all his work, and his sharp sometimes cruel comments on sexuality seem to be particularly Irish. Donovan has not travelled much in his lifetime and though he has looked abroad for artistic inspiration, his work is thoroughly steeped in Irishness.

Desmond O'Grady, a long time friend of Donovan's describes how from the beginning of his career the content of his work was essentially marked by its humanity (1). This human characteristic was to remain integral to Jack Donovan's attitude throughout his life. On one occasion I heard him say 'of course I do not find a painting really interesting, unless there is a figure in it'.

As he matured, Jack Donovan's painting became increasingly concerned with sexuality, the relationship between men and women and his idea of women as they are seen by men. The main body of his subject-matter falls into three themes: that of marriage ceremonies, prostitutes and balcony scenes. In recent years the clown has also become one of his favourite motifs.





4. Donovan. Clown Head,  
Oil on Canvas (1983)





5. Donovan. Pinkey Downey Series,  
Oil and Collage on Canvas, (1984)



Donovan draws much of his raw material imagery from pornographic magazines and often selects parts of such imagery for use as collage. When I, as a student visited his tiny studio in St.Mary's Convent, Limerick, I often found torn pieces of magazine depicting breasts, buttocks and other parts of the human female anatomy scattered round the floor. Some of these were eventually worked into his paintings.

Asked once why did he hate women, Jack replied 'Oh no, I love women'. Ask him why he always depicts women in subservient and even degraded positions, he will reply ' It is a part of nature that women are dominated by men. It has always been so. I depict women the way I like to see them'. (ii) This reply is of course infuriating to women and to anyone who considers equality of the sexes as a change for the better, but the truth is that Donovan's vision of women is not his own but that of generations of European male artists going back to the Middle Ages.

(ii) Conversation with Jack Donovan.



John Berger, in Ways of Seeing describes it as follows:

"Women are depicted in quite a different way from men - not because the feminine is different from the masculine - but because the ideal spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of woman is designed to flatter him." (2)

Jack Donovan is continuing this tradition.

What then of the essentially 'Irish' characteristics of his work? What part do they play in his attitude to women? The Irish writer AE who was interested in the part played by women in the development of Irish civilization, complained that:

"....women in Ireland had a slave mentality and submitted unprotestingly to marriages 'for cows and fortunes'." (3)

Donovan depicts just such women who 'submit unprotestingly' but the issues at stake are not economic but sexual.



Donovan's typical marriage scene is more like a sacrifice rather than a ceremony. The woman is the victim and her virginity is to be sacrificed. Surely this attitude is consistent with the particularly Irish Catholic tradition as it is interpreted by many people, even though Donovan himself insists that he is totally non-religious.

One way of looking at Jack Donovan's approach is to imagine him getting fun out of shocking some of the worthy citizens of Limerick. The desire to shock and provoke is evident in his work, in his subject-matter and in his cynical, often cruel interpretation of the human situation. This, no doubt, arises from living in a society that is sexually repressed, and from a desire to depict and mock that society's attitude to sex.

A completely opposite characteristic is found in the work of Gwen John. Instead of wanting to shock and provoke, she seems to want to express a neutrality and passivity in the attitude and mood of her sitters.



Always overshadowed by the extravagant personality of her famous brother, Augustus John, she felt compelled in 1903 to flee to Paris. There, she felt she could be free of his influence.

In Paris, she and her fellow students were tutored by Whistler. This Whistlerian influence is described by Daniel George:

"she arrived at that careful  
methodicity selective taste and  
subtlety of tone which she never  
abandoned. Though she owed much  
to this training her power of  
drawing was entirely original  
as was her more aesthetic sense  
of life." (4)

Like Jack Donovan, Gwen John drew on life and people around her. Betsy G. Fryberger sums up her subject matter:

"The single figure became Gwen John's favourite subject. Most frequently she drew young women and girls, occasionally boys, rarely men. At first she used her friends as models, but then as the person mattered little to her, she used those around her: in Paris, her neighbours; in Brittany, the village children; and in Menton, the nuns, orphans and women who attended Mass at the Convent church." (5)



In about 1908 she produced two paintings which were influenced by C17th Dutch painting. Though they are not typical of her mature style, I think they have a characteristic that is to be found in all of her mature work. The figures are monumental and pyramidical in shape. She has given them an air of serenity and calm that belongs to 17th Century Dutch masters. Later, Gwen John was to develop her own technique and inimitable style for rendering figures with an air of majestic calm.

Much has been written about the events of Gwen John's life, and their influence on her work. Her affair with Rodin, her reclusiveness and her conversion to the Catholic Church, for instance seem to have been of greater importance to some writers than her painting. I do not think there is any evidence to show that her work was greatly affected by the various happenings and changes in her life. Her art progressed serenely and one of her strongest characteristics is her sureness of purpose.



This strength of purpose is entirely her own, though like all good artists she was able to perceive what was notable and useful for herself in another artist. So, it could be said that she was influenced professionally as well as personally by her relationship with Rodin. In 1908 she wrote about this influence to her friend Ursula <sup>T</sup>Syrwhitt:

"There is only one way to follow Rodin, that way is to study nature with humble and patient love. If you are really influenced by nature, your work need not resemble him except that it is good." (6)

Certainly Gwen John did study nature with humility and patience but not slavishly. Ann O'Regan writes:

"I think she gave careful consideration to what she saw and condensed it to something she could easily apply to her own work using her specifications." (7)

Gwen John still retained her characteristically English and personal way of looking at things despite Rodin's influence.



Betsy G. Fryberger writes of Gwen John and Rodin:

"Her studies are more traditional and conventional. Where he exploited the body with a probing curiosity, sensuality and inventiveness, she observed more discreetly. Her figures are passive and chaste." (8)

This way of seeing helped to create her personal style.

As a person Gwen John was a strange mixture of great strengths and weaknesses. She went to Paris not only to escape Augustus, but also to escape her father, and her home life which she found oppressive. On the one hand she appears to have been a strong-willed and even domineering person, and on the other hand she was so intimidated and affected by people that she gradually began to see less and less of them, towards the end of her life became totally reclusive. Her art reflects this ambiguity of character by having an extraordinary strength of purpose although it is so delicate, almost fragile in its making.

One of the striking aspects of her work is that though her figures are usually calmly majestic they often have an understated air of fear about them.



This is usually expressed in the tenseness of the hands.  
Gwen John always gave great attention to hands.

This aspect is especially revealed in her paintings of a model with coarse 'slavonic' features, done around 1915. In Girl with a Blue Scarf and Young Woman in a Mulberry Dress the nature of the sitter is sensitively portrayed. Her dark eyes look at us warily and her hands are clasped tensely in front of her. The thickly clad peasant girl is obviously unused to sitting for portraits and may have been somewhat intimidated by Gwen John. She has portrayed her as such, but she has not done so in a cruel manner. Her attitude is wholly sympathetic.

As Gwen John's career progressed and she developed her personalized style her primary concerns changed. As Cecily Langdale put it:

"The artist has abandoned her interest in portraiture as such and is concerned with formal problems. The static monumental figures seem .... flattened and pyramidical in shape." (9)





6. Gwen John. Girl with a Blue Scarf,  
Oil on Canvas, (1915).





7. Gwen John. Young Woman in a Mulberry Dress,  
Oil on Canvas, (1915)



But if her interests became more formal her images did not lose anything of their poignancy of expression. If anything they gained by it. Susan Chitty in her biography of Gwen John compares two of her portraits:

"Around 1910 there was a permanent change in Gwen John's technique, demonstrated in a portrait of Chloe Broughlon Leigh in oils .... The rather vacant face of the earlier portrait has developed a contemplative cast (Chloe was now 42). The fussy blue and white dress have given way to a dark grey one which emphasizes the sitter's sloping shoulders and gives a triangular and monumental character to the figure." (10)

Gwen John recognized that she achieved a more powerful image through simpler means. She also gained a clearer insight into what it was precisely that she wanted to paint and realized that she must not dissipate her energies in painting "vague things and people. That kind of painting and only that kind depresses me", she said. (11)



Towards the end of her life Gwen John became increasingly interested in religion, and she became a Roman Catholic in 1913. This interest manifested itself in various, interesting ways in her work. Her tendency to repeat certain images now became compulsive and in the early 1920's she produced a series of ten or more oil paintings of 'The Convalescent'. A refined looking young girl is seated in an armchair reading a book. Beside her is a teapot. The positions of the objects alter but each painting retains the same essential characteristics. It is as if the artist is seeking a composition that will most aptly describe what it is she is trying to say. Instead of experimenting on one canvas, she experiments on many so that each image can retain its freshness. This desire for directness and spontaneity is even more apparent in the series of small gouache drawings of the backs of people in church, executed around 1923. The medium of gouache naturally lent itself to rapidity and directness and later Gwen John was to abandon oil paint entirely.



The subjects for these gouches were mostly seen from the back, but through them she managed to convey as much if not more feeling than through her frontally seen figures. Susan Chitty describes them as 'the most personal thing Gwen John ever made'.(12) The figures usually convey devotion but sometimes they are frankly comic.

An example of these gouaches is one entitled Several Worshippers. It like most of Gwen John's latter work is tiny, only 6½" x 4¾". She has used backs of the chairs and the figures of the women with their oddly-shaped hats to make an interesting and structured composition. But more importantly than this, the rapidly sketched figures convey a poignancy that is characteristically Gwen John's. This, I think can be particularly seen in the attitude of the woman who is third from the right, with the white band around her hat. With her sharp chin, slightly outstretched neck and button nose one can see where Susan Chitty saw the comedy in Gwen John's work. However, as in her depiction of the countrified slavonic peasant girl there is nothing unkind in this portrayal of an over-zealous worshipper.





8. Gwen John. Several Worshippers,  
Gouache and Pencil on Paper, (1915-1920)



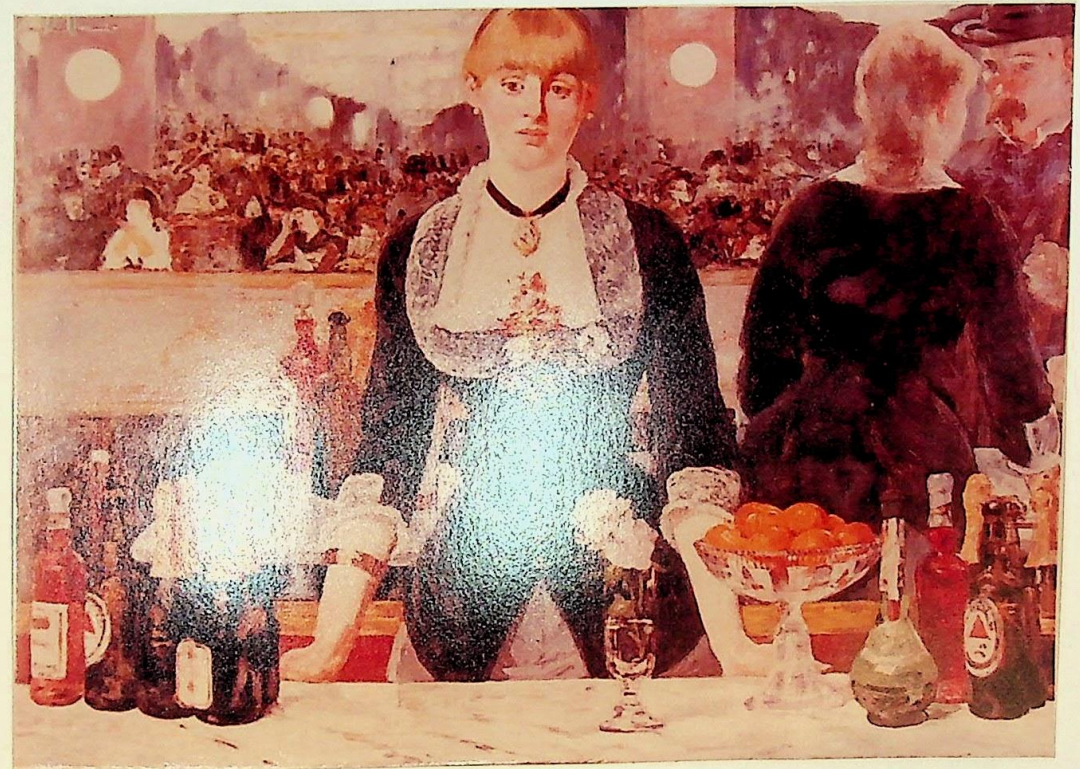
I see Gwen John's work as being sweet in a poignant and tender manner, without ever becoming sickly or sentimental. A feeling of vulnerability is also a dominant part of her work. It is a feature that greatly helps to create tension in some of her portraits.

In a peculiar sort of way this same vulnerability is found in one of Manet's last pictures - The Bar at the Folies Bergers painted in 1881. Here the very frontal figure of the barmaid faces us, her hands resting on the bar in front of her. Her fresh country girl's face barely conceals utter exhaustion. This may be the result of the model posing for long hours for Manet, but it suits her role as barmaid.

The cafe where the scene takes place - the Folies Bergere was a well-known and popular Parisian night spot. Maupassant described it as:

"the only place in Paris that stinks so sweetly of 'maquillage', of purchased favours and the extremes of jaded corruption". (13)





9. Manet. The Bar at the Folies Bergere,  
Oil on Canvas, (1881)



It is not surprising that Manet should have chosen such a place for the scene of his last great painting. Even in his day he was known to be a man of his own time, interested in what was contemporary and in many respects, a follower of fashion. He was renowned for being a dandy. "Paris has never known a Flaneur (stroller) like him" wrote Antonin Proust. (14) No doubt he would have frequented such places as the Folies Bergere and so would know from experience the atmosphere of festivity and licentiousness that prevailed the place as well as its visual characteristics.

It is necessary to ask why Manet chose the barmaid to be the central character of his picture. He could for instance have focused on any one of the revellers or even the trapeze artist in the top left hand corner of the picture. The fact is that the character of the Barmaid had gained a great significance in the everyday and cultural life of nineteenth Century Paris.

A parallel can be drawn between Donovan's use of popular magazine imagery and Manet's use of popular journal illustration.



Novelene Ross in her book, 'Manet's Bar at the Folies Bergers' describes how popular illustration had long celebrated the Parisian café. Illustrators such as Lami and Gavarni depicted Parisian night-life and the character of 'la dame de comptoir' often played a major role in the work. The Parisian barmaid's popularity as an image came about partly because of her economic importance. Women in Paris had a much more influential role in economic affairs than they had in other European capitals. They often presided over shops and bars and frequently women were hired for their beauty so as to attract customers.

Baudelaire admired the art of Lami, Gavarni and Constantin Guys because it made no pretentious claims to profound revelation (15). What it did was to provoke a new interest in portraying women in intimate domestic scenes. Gavarni depicted the young Parisien coccotte in her simply-furnished flat, eating a meal or washing her hair. Usually her figure is uncorseted and her hair undone which further adds to the feeling of intimate naturalism that the artist is trying to achieve.





10. Gavarni. Grisette Combing her Hair,  
Lithograph, (1841)



Literature also began to reflect this new-found image of womanhood and French writers portrayed her in various characters. Monnler's typical woman suggested wholesome sensuality. Grevin's was a mercenary coccotte. Zola's 'Nana' possessed only the lowest animal instincts. Duma's drama 'La Dame aux Camelias' shows a woman capable of love and nobility. Of course other painters also found new ways of expressing womanhood. In the 1880's Degas and Toulouse Lautrec portrayed brothel scenes. (16)

In fact it is true that towards the end of the 19th Century the figure of the so called 'realistic prostitute' became the quintessential image of woman. Manet himself had partly brought this about by his rendition of the 16 year old girl in the Olympia, painted in 1863. Although this painting carries a mythological title, its subject matter is strictly contemporary. It openly depicts a courtesan awaiting a client and Manet has made no attempt to shroud this incident with mythological mystery nor has he made any moral judgements. The Olympia's gaze is more challenging than provocative and her hard little body is portrayed without idealism.



Though the Bar at the Folies Bergere has many of the characteristics of the Olympia it is a more contemporary painting. Novelene Ross explains:

"With the 'Bar...' the painter fully recaptured the monumentality of the Olympia.... In the earlier painting Manet had grafted a boulevardier subject onto a Renaissance composition from Titian. That memory so dominates the image that Manet's affirmation of the present seems dependent on the authority of the past. In the 'Bar...' however, the iconographic references are firmly grounded in the present moment-personal experience, topical preoccupations and a thoroughly contemporary Parisian body of literature and images". (17)

It is obvious that Manet was a contemporary painter but his work goes far beyond being merely a recording of the life of his time. Max J. Friedlander observed that:

"Manet painted what he saw, apparently without discrimination; but he saw what he expected to see, what he was on the look out for, what he loved." (18)



I think that this statement supports the view that I have expressed in the previous chapter, that the subject matter of his work mattered much to him and it was this more than formal concerns that initially inspired him to paint. The same could be said of Jack Donovan and Gwen John. Each loved their subject matter. I remember discussing this question with Jack Donovan. Should a painter be able to deal with all subject-matter with the same passion that he might feel for his or her own favourite subject-matter? Donovan thought that theoretically this could seem to be so, but practically it was rubbish. All aspiring artists must find the subject matter of an emotional as well as representational aspect that they feel most passionately about. Only then will they find the commitment to push their creative ability to its limit as Manet, Gwen John and Jack Donovan have done.



### CHAPTER III

I remember on one occasion seeing one of my fellow students cover a wall with large, close-up, black and white photographs of old men and women.

The harsh black and white of the medium showed the lines etched on their faces and their expressions seemed to be of pain and sadness. The student wanted to use these photographs to assist her in making portraits, in which she wished to depict old people's vulnerability and pain. I was puzzled for some minutes trying to understand why I did not like the photographs and why I instinctively felt that they were the wrong material for her attempted portraits.

Another student was looking at the photographs with me and after some thought and discussion we concluded that the artist was insensitive in her treatment of the old people's faces. Her feelings and aspirations might be sincere enough, but she had failed to see that taking a harsh black and white snapshot of an old person's face is not even a good beginning to understand anything of the nature of old people's existence.



The impression she created was that she was using the old people, in a blatantly crude and insensitive manner. The effect was made all the more cliched and embarrassing by the fact that she was dealing with emotions such as pain and isolation.

Martha Rosler - the twentieth Century feminist photographer expresses a similar view when, pointing negatively to the issue of politically motivated art practice, she speaks of "the indignity of speaking for others".(1) She decided then to omit the human form altogether from her work and only depicts the debris they leave behind them.

In a recently presented television interview Patrick Caulfield, the English pop artist, expressed a similar view. He prefers to depict the urban environments that people inhabit rather than the people themselves because he feels that in this way he can be more subtly expressive.

In contrast to this idea the three artists that I am considering have decided to hang on to an essentially human image.



They have made portraiture the central pivot of their painting and whether they do it on a grandiose, large scale like that of Manet, or in a small, intimate manner like that of Gwen John, it means that they each have to use the human image in a direct manner.

In my opinion, portraiture is a more difficult and demanding discipline than that of other genres because to make the human form express what one wishes requires subtle control and respect for the human image. The expression of the human face is a particularly sensitive and vulnerable aspect because the slightest alteration of the slant of an eyebrow or the curve of a lip can completely change its character. One can experiment with this by doodling with a pencil and piece of paper. A multitude of expressions can be got just using simple linear strokes. But often it is not easy to gain the exact expression you are searching for.

In figurative art it is difficult to put a person in a painting without it becoming the focus of attention.



Recently, for example I did a quick sketch of a doorway. One's eye was led into the centre of the image through the doorway but on the whole the image was fairly diffuse. Then I added a tiny figure, at the edge of the doorway, peeking round it. Instantly the figure became the focus of attention even though it was just suggested. In a sense, the figure in a painting carries a great responsibility. A spectator tends to see the rest of the painting as relating in some way to the figure because one imagines that the figure must be doing all the action.

Manet uses this expectation on the part of the spectator as a technique to puzzle his audience in the Bar at the Folies Bergere. The barmaid is part of a noisy, gregarious crowd, yet she remains still and silent. Her aloof, austere, and rather bland gaze does not fit with her surroundings. Manet has used these inconsistencies to separate her from the crowd purposefully.

The mirror is one of the most important devices of this painting. In the large catalogue of Manet's recent exhibition in the Grande Palais in Paris it is described how:



"the image mirrors a space in which we the viewers would really be stationed. It is as though the canvas itself were but a reflection of our world and only the barmaid stands between the painting and ourselves, her physical presence affirmed between two absent places - the one in which her gaze situates us and the reflection. The woman's presence gains by this visual play, a singular emotional force". (2)

There is another reason why the bar maid looks detached; this is linked with Manet's own personal vision and his approach to painting. Manet is usually regarded as an objective painter who frankly depicts a subject the way he sees it, and who is largely concerned with the formal aspects of painting. This is true although, as previously explained, formalism was not his only concern. He was also interested in human thoughts, emotions and ideas.

Manet never commented on the moral behaviour of his characters. though he was influenced by the portrayal of character in the literature of Baudelaire and Zola there is a pronounced difference between his portrayal of it and theirs.



While both Zola and Baudelaire portray humanity at its basest and most animal-like, there is none of this attitude to be found in Manet's work. In his paintings, the women are attractive, the flowers fresh and a general air of lightness and gaiety pervades the atmosphere. Nonetheless, his Bar at the Folies Bergere has disturbing undertones. The figure of the man facing the barmaid and reflected in the mirror, is slightly too large to be in proportion. There are perhaps sexual overtones in the way he stares so fixedly and intensely at the woman. Pierre Schneider, sums up this strange aspect of Bar at the Folies Bergere. He writes:

"At first glance Bar .... appears simple enough. A barmaid standing exactly in the centre of the picture, looks at us across a marble counter cluttered with bottles of whisky, Ale, champagne and liquors, a glass holding two roses and a fruit bowl filled with oranges. The girl is young and attractive; the place, the hour, the occasion speak of frivolity, of merrymaking. Yet there is something strangely solemn about Bar .... as if the celebration being depicted were that of sacrifice. Like an expiatory victim, not over bottles of beer and champagne but above candles on an altar. Perhaps it is because she seems fragile, vulnerable despite her grandness." (3)



What makes Bar at the Folies Bergere work so ambiguously and yet so well is due to the fact that Manet was subtle and circumspect in his use of technical devices. The intelligent use of the mirror device combined with the shrewd placing of the single figure give this moving and sensitive, yet unidealized portrayal of what would, to many artists, be a very difficult subject.

This same sensitivity, so lacking in the photographs described earlier is seen in the work of Gwen John. Like Manet she gives us non-idealized and non-sentimental portrayal of people. She too has a detached attitude and as she progressed she became increasingly austere. Unlike Manet she did not work on a large scale, and the grandness that her subjects have is achieved in spite of her small and delicate manner of working. Her approach is not as intellectual as that of Manet's. Her devices are simple but apt.

Part of Gwen John's technique was not to place her subjects in the midst of their natural environment, as Manet does, but to separate them.





Gwen John. The Student,  
Oil on Canvan, (1903)



Besty G. Fryberger describes how in Brittany "she drew children of a nearby village, not at play, or in their rural setting, but singly isolated from their lives." (4)

Earlier in her career, however, Gwen John did make a conscious use of props. In 1908 she painted a portrait of Dorelia, entitled The Student. In this, Dorelia, with the lamplight falling on her face approaches a table on which there is an open book. The painting could hardly be described as narrative, but there is an element of using props - the book and the lamp - to describe Dorelia as a student who was never a student in real life. In contrast in the portrait Girl in Blue painted in the early 1920's, the background of a window and skirting board is only vaguely suggested. The downcast sidelong expression of Dorelia is replaced by a frontal and direct gaze. Much of the detail of Dorelia's portrait has been eliminated and the composition has been simplified. Moreover the colour has changed from the warm orange and brown of Dorelia's portrait to the cool greys and slate blues of Gwen John's more mature palette.





Gwen John. Girl in Blue,  
Oil on Canvas, (1920's)



Undoubtedly she owed some of her interest in formalism to Whistler, who declared that he "did not teach art, but the scientific application of paint and brushes".(5) On one occasion when Augustus John met Whistler in the Louvre and remarked that he thought Gwen John's drawings showed a feeling of character, Whistler retorted "Character? What's that? It's the tone that matters. Your sister has a fine sense of tone." (6)

Susan Chitty quotes Cecily Langdale as saying:

"The artist has abandoned her interest in portraiture as such and is concerned with formal problems. The static monumental figures seem ... flattened and pyramidical in shape" (7)

It is probably true that Gwen John was concerned with formalism, but still she has not abandoned her human interests. I believe that the opposite is true. Like Manet she has used the detachment she gained on a formal level to deepen her actual involvement with her subject.



This renewed involvement centred not on the character of the sitter but on the creation of an atmosphere generated by the sitter.

The portrait of Dorelia shows a young girl in the light of innocence and tenderness. In Girl in Blue the feeling of tenderness is still there, as it is in nearly all Gwen John's work, but the more direct approach makes for a sharper, more intense image. Defining the exact meaning of the image is difficult. It is likely that for every individual it would mean something different. One of the first things that I noticed is the way the figure is clad in a dress of such thick material that it appears quilted. The forms of the woman's body are completely hidden by it. This emphasizes Gwen John's chaste, often puritanical approach. But the expressive and slightly outsize hands, the full lips and direct gaze counter-act this and show that if she observed discreetly, she nevertheless, observed closely and well.

The same feeling of intimacy is found in the work of Jack Donovan.



Much of his more recent work depicts figures in interiors. In his recent Pinkey Downey series the figure is placed in a room in which the architecture of walls, ceiling and doors is used to create a closed, sealed, box-like environment. Occasionally the architectural forms are simplified to make a frame of coloured shapes around the central image of the figure and this, combined with Donovan's usual use of warm colours, makes for a close atmosphere.

He and Gwen John share the same stress on intimacy within a small scale rectangular format. Beyond this there are few similarities between them.

Gwen John's chaste and sometimes even puritanical approach could not be said to bear any resemblance to Jack Donovan's slightly perverse and often cruel spectacles. But they do share a love of the paint they use as well as a passion for their chosen subject matter.

More importantly, they each have a highly personalized approach to portraiture which manifests itself in the way they emphasize certain parts of the body to make them particularly expressive.



It has already been described how Gwen John enlarges the hands of her sitters. Donovan carries this use of distortion much further so that the eyes of his figures become circles, their mouths and teeth are sometimes exaggerated and hands and arms are often placed out of proportion to the rest of the body. Donovan often expressed his wish to make a painting that is 'balanced'. He believes that every artist has a personal aesthetic criteria (i). He has rejected literal visual representation in favour of his personal representation so that he has more freedom to experiment with composition as well as gain a greater poignancy of expression.

Described in a recent edition of Circa (8) as a game player, Donovan juggles with imagery on a symbolic as well as a visual level. Like Manet he makes use of pictorial devices which work better in some paintings than in others. The open door behind the figure in his 'Pinkey Downey' series seems too obvious as a sexual symbol.

On the other hand I remember a painting of Donovan's that I saw in an exhibition in Pery Sq., Limerick some three years ago.

(i) Conversation with Jack Donovan.





Donovan. Wedding Scene,  
Oil and Collage on Canvan, (1980)



It depicts a wedding scene, only the bride and groom are depicted. His head and hand are collage taken from a magazine. The hand is masculine in character, short and blunt. The head would be ordinary enough but for the fact that Donovan quartered it and has cut a section across its middle, shortening the nose and face, giving it a grasping and avaricious expression though at the same time he looks smug and self-satisfied. She leans more towards the viewer, her neck and face outstretched. Her face and breasts are collaged, and have the translucency of photographed skin but the rest of her body is encased in a stiff, white, almost box-shaped wedding dress. The warm, living, top part of her body emerges from this as from a chrysalis. Her eyes are marked with Donovan's characteristic circles so that her wide-eyed expression is both terrified and acquiescent. She is accepting her fate.

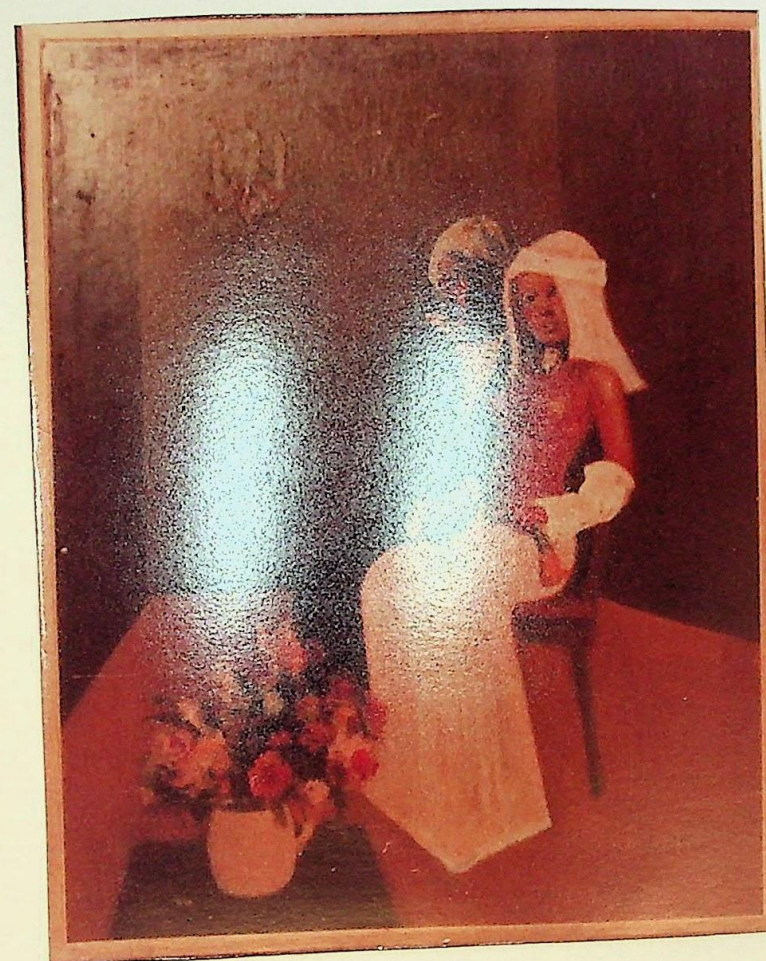
I think this is a painting in which the technical devices of the man's collaged head and the box-shaped wedding dress work successfully to make a powerful and emotive image.



An earlier wedding scene is similar but much softer and more tender in its effect. Perhaps this is due to the colours, which are muted browns, greys and blacks and to the fact that the figures are less frontal. I think that both these paintings show Jack Donovan at his best. He has combined imagery and technical devices imaginatively and creatively to produce a powerful picture.

For an artist to be as successful as possible, he or she must strike a balance between technical means, use of symbolism and emotional representation. Even a painting that is a direct and immediate response (such as some of Gwen John's latter works), sensitivity towards materials and subject matter is essential for the painting to work. I have attempted to show that Manet, Gwen John and Jack Donovan possessed this sensitivity and were thus successful artists.





Donovan. Wedding Scene,  
Oil and Collage on Canvas, (1978 approx.)



## CONCLUSION

My choice of these three artists who each come from different generations, and countries, with such diverse, even contradictory approaches may seem strange to the reader. But it is important for any artist today to recognise that he or she is influenced by a multitude of images, ideas and philosophies. The task of all young artists is to sift through the surfeit of information at their disposal and draw threads between things that normally would not fit together. Placing apparently ill-assorted artists in conjunction with one another and analysing their similarities and dissimilarities, is a method of seeing those artists from a new angle.

I have attempted to discuss the work of Manet, Gwen John and Jack Donovan with respect to their attitudes to portraiture and with special emphasis on how they balance their concern for formal values with consideration for their subject matter. I have tried to show that the three artists interest me not so much because of what they have to say, but because I want to discover how and why they say it and show how much they had to know themselves in order to externalize their subjective selves in paint.



Making art must be an attempt to discover oneself. The best artists are those who know themselves well. Knowing oneself means responding to the environment and listening to that response so that one has an understanding of it. It is in this way that an artist knows what he or she wants in his or her paintings and what to leave out.

Manet knew that he had to reject the pretentious approach of Couture and develop his own style based on observation of contemporary life. Gwen John knew that she had to persist in making her small, humble and cool portrayals of people, and Jack Donovan knows that for him an exaggeration of details such as facial features, hands and parts of the female anatomy is more necessary than a literal visual representation of the human figure.

For a young artist like myself it is necessary to find my own personal vision as the three artists I have chosen have done. This can only happen by trial and error and by being consistently thoughtful and inquiring in my approach to painting.



In the first chapter it was described how the three artists I have chosen use portraiture as a vehicle for their subjective intentions, rather than to portray character or personality. I tried to show that in spite of, or maybe because of this approach, the three artists succeeded in giving us provoking and penetrating pictures of humanity. An attempt to show why this happened leads one to ask the question of why for instance Couture's painting The Romans of Decadence becomes mere illustration in comparison with Manet's Bar at the Folies Bergere. This can be partly explained by an analysis of Manet's use of formal techniques but it is also necessary to examine Manet's feelings towards his subject matter, in real life as well as on the canvas. The borderline between illustration and art that is worthwhile is indistinct but discernible. Every figurative artist constantly treads this borderline and the sincerity of his or her intentions combined with an intelligent and imaginative use of formal values determines which side he or she will fall on.

Of all the three painters I have chosen to study, Manet has exerted the most on the history of art.



Seen by some as one of the first artists who could truly be called 'modern', his non-moralistic, non-narrative approach to painting is found in my work as it is in that of most of my peers. Gwen John and Donovan, however have had a more personal influence on me. I particularly admire their singularity of purpose and the strength of their determination.

I do not think that a young artist should allow him or herself to be very much influenced by an established artist, to the extent of losing his or her own personal vision. This would mean that the artist becomes merely derivative. When looking to another artist for inspiration and ideas, it is necessary to be selective about what aspects of the artist are important to you. My paintings do not particularly look like those of Manet, Gwen John or Jack Donovan. Perhaps my interest in the single, still female figure is similar to Gwen John's and my use of architectural props to create an enclosed environment could be compared to some of Jack Donovan's brothel scenes. But on the whole, my interest in these three artists stems not from a desire to copy or emulate them, but from admiration for the way their work is so richly human and so sensitive.



Great or even good art does not happen quickly or easily. Manet, Gwen John and Jack Donovan were successful partly because of their perseverance. I, like many another young artist, can only hope to emulate them in their courage and determination.



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4. Berger, Ways of Seeing, p. 63
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4. George, Finishing Touches - Augustus John, p. 80
5. Fryberger, Catalogue for Gwen John's 1975 New York Exhibition, p. 52
6. O'Regan, op. cit.
7. Ibid.
8. Fryberger, op. cit., p. 34
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11. Ibid. p.121
12. Ibid. p.171
13. Manet, Catalogue from the Metropolitan Museum of Art - New York, p.478
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15. Ross, Manet's Bar at the Folies Bergere, p.26
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