

"WOMEN'S EXHIBITIONS
ARE GOOD FOR WOMEN ARTISTS
IF"

PLEUN VOLKER

B.A. THESIS
NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN
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In Sisterhood
with love and gratitude

To my friends,
Joan McCarthy and Pauline Vink,
without whose invaluable help this Thesis
would never have been written

This Thesis is the Product of the
Women's Liberation Movement

INTRODUCTION

(i)

One traditional view of art still held today by many artists, art historians and art critics, sees art as something inspired and as such universal, objective and indifferent to the prejudice of the class, gender, creed and colour of the artist and his/her audience. In this view the artist is identified as the "creator", a separate entity, untouched, uncontaminated by his/her environment, past and present, and the "creation" is seen as an unchanging whole, a total reality onto itself.

My thesis is not addressed to the holders of this view, but rather to those who reject the neutrality of art and who believe that its production and assessment emerge out of a political reality. The specific political reality with which I am concerned is that of women, and what my thesis is intended to explore is the development of women artists' exhibitions and in particular the first Irish Women's Exhibition held in Dublin 1987.

Internationally, for the last 20 years and in the context of the ideas of the Women's Movement, women artists have been looking at their position in society and their own identity in a variety of ways. Based on the notion that the personal is political,

(ii)

all women's experience have been examined and validated. Retrieving, rediscovering, recovering, removing, "woman" from patriarchal definition, women artists began to make strong symbols of femaleness, as the basis for creating and establishing a woman-centred identity.

Two central aspects of this development have been:

1. the promotion of a vision specific to women about the reality of our world (this involved the breaking of many taboos surrounding menstruation, sexuality, childbirth, women's (and men's) bodies. And,
2. that the significance of gender in the making of art, challenges in a very fundamental way all the hitherto assumed categories for evaluating art. This meant that when for instance women were organising their own exhibitions that the way in which it was organised was subject to critical analysis, i.e. that it be co-operative, that it be representative of as many perspectives as possible (young/old, working class, black).

(iii)

My thesis describes two international exhibitions, "Women Artists International" 1877-1977" (West Berlin 1977), and "Women's Images of Men", (London, 1980). This provides a context for my analysis of the first Irish Women's Exhibition which was held in Dublin in July, 1987. The latter I have documented in some detail; with an account of its origination; a number of interviews which I conducted with its organisers; and an analysis of the Reviews which it provoked.

What I have attempted to explore are the many features of the Irish exhibition, how it has succeeded, and how it has failed as a promotion of Irish women artists and their art. My critique of the exhibition is carried out in terms of what I have already identified as fundamental strategies of feminist art:

1. that it promote a specific female reality, and
2. that it submit its own organisational processes to analysis.

CHAPTER 1

INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITIONS

Women's art exhibitions have been held since the last half of the 19th century, but it is only since the second feminist movement at the end of the 60's, that they have been organised with the specific political intention of promoting the cause of women, and as a consequence the cause of women-artists themselves. Since the 70's then, women's exhibitions have been organised largely in terms of a feminist ideology and are the result of years of pioneering activity.

Exhibitions, such as "Feminism, Art and Creativity", (Vienna, 1975); "Women Artists 1550-1950", (Los Angeles, 1976); "Women, Art, New Trends", (Copenhagen, 1976); "Women Artists International 1877-1977", (West Berlin, 1977); set out to explore historically and critically just about everything that could be investigated in connection with women artists and their concerns.

Women Artists International 1877-1977

The scope and breadth of the German Exhibition in 1977, challenged the narrowness of a German art world, which

had hitherto ignored the possibility of a specifically female art critique. The exhibition, "Women Artists International 1877-1977", held in Berlin, showed 182 women artists, who had been working within the main European art streams in the previous century. The exhibition organisers were feminists who were themselves artists, theorists, academics and art public, and not professionals in the art business world. They were deeply concerned with the struggle to discover an alternative aesthetic perception to the prevalent one, based as they saw it in a patriarchal culture.

In their selection of artists for the exhibition, what was looked for were women who had made innovations in artistic form and content, "for which we had to relearn to look, the art market criteria are disputable".¹ That women artists were capable went without question. The main goal was to show, that women artists were under-represented and that the women did have predecessors: women artists in history, who could provide inspiration, insight and direction for contemporary women artists.

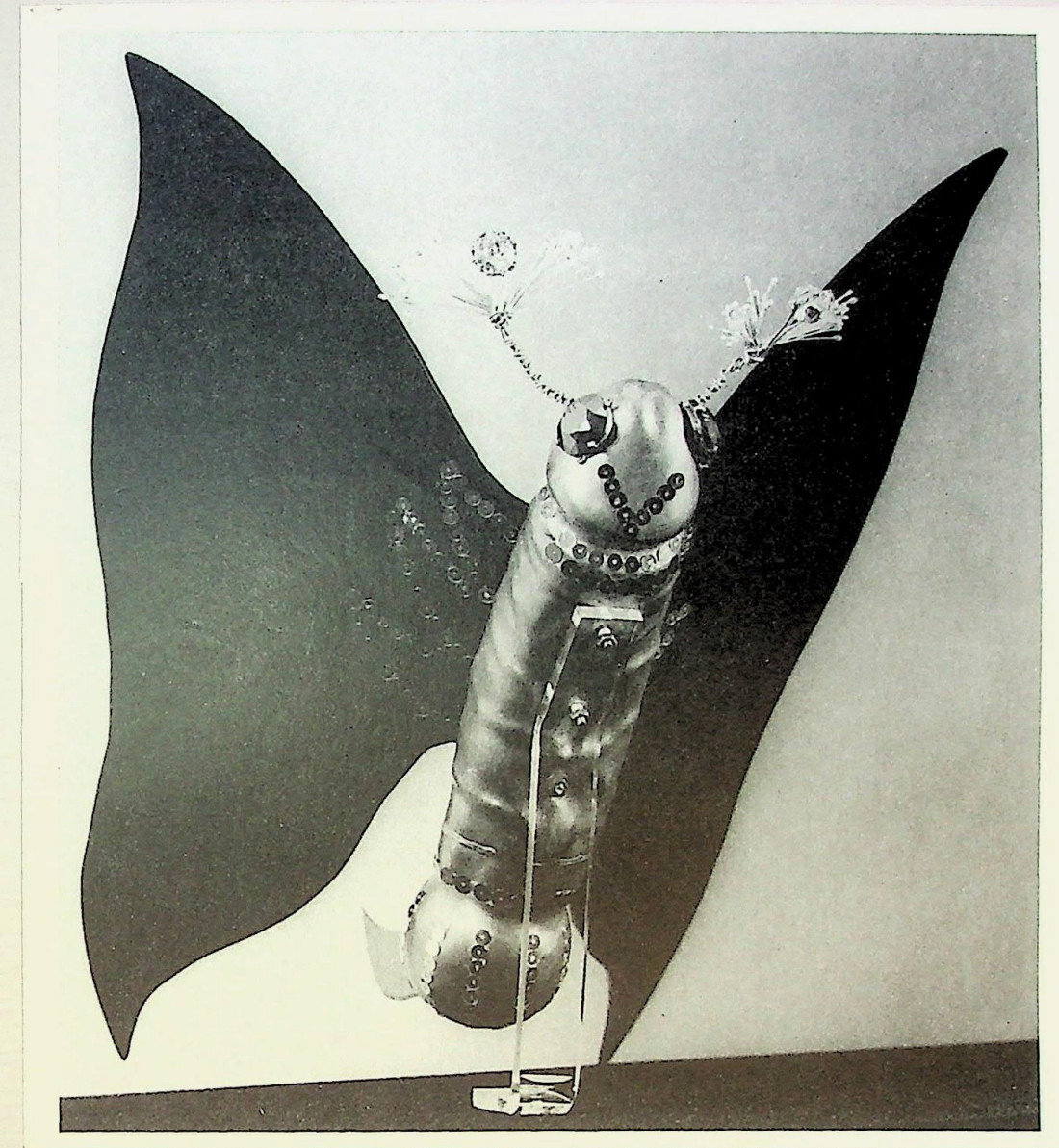


Plate 1 Renate Bertlmann.

"Diverse Farphalle Impudiche". 1975.

"The consciousness of our own cultural tradition is an important prerequisite for our actual understanding of ourselves and our abilities and not only in regard to women artists".¹ (See Plate 1.) It was also decided to show the most well-known artists in the exhibition, because so often in art history, individual women artists are separated from one another and subsequently presented as singular and exceptional.

From Historical To Thematic

While the success of such historical type exhibitions in the 70's did establish the existence of an alternative aesthetic perception (a specifically female as opposed to a male or "human" perspective²), the feminist exhibitions of the 80's went one step further.

Establishing themselves in terms of a particular theme they now became part of the wider political movement. In this way, "Women's Art" could not be isolated and marginalised as a cultural phenomenon and confined to the odd "women's exhibition", but it would be seen as a serious challenge to



Plate 2 Jacqueline Morreau. Pope John-Paul II, Study for
"The Children's Crusade". 1980.

accepted definitions of "Art", and as part of an overall political strategy.

Women's Images of Men

One such exhibition on the theme, "Women's Images of Men" was held in London in 1980. It was organised on a co-operative basis by Jacqueline Morreau (artist), Joyce Agee (artist), Sarah Kent (artist, historian and critic) and others to highlight their concerns. These were firstly, that there was very little knowledge of women's attitudes toward men as opposed to those attributed to them, and secondly, that there was a substantial group of women using figurative and narrative images to express their ideas (see plate 2), who were not represented by the Feminist Avant-Garde (who like their male counterparts did reject figuration), or by the more conventional political artists. Those two concerns then were combined in a theme show on the "hidden" subject of men.

The main aim of the exhibition itself was to show the comments



Plate 3 Elena Samperi. Madonna. 1979.

of a diverse group of women on men and the patriarchy and to demonstrate the quality, originality and excellence of as many women artists as possible.

Other aims were:

1. To reach a public beyond but including the women's art movement and the regular gallery visitors.
2. To bring women artists in touch with each other and to create a dialogue between them.
3. To encourage women to address wider social issues.³

Women artists were asked through advertisements to submit work for the show, for which the criteria for admission were: that work submitted had to be relevant to the exhibition theme; that it made a strong personal statement; and that it made skilful and imaginative use of figurative languages. (See Plate 3.)

The response was overwhelming. Finally 40 artists, working in painting, sculpture, soft sculpture, prints, ceramics and photography were accepted and also 21 artists working in time

based activities, with film in a separate but simultaneous programme. It was felt, that because of the variety of work and the wide range of events, it would be impossible for the critics to define a category called "Women's Art".

The show was held in the Institute for Contemporary Arts and commanded record crowds (an average of a thousand people a day). Some of the reasons, it was thought for its success was its incorporation of three elements: the rebirth of figurative art; the use of art as a vehicle for political comment; and the increasing significance of women artists in the art world. One other contributing factor was the conflicting reviews of the critics, who, although they seemed to accept that women were under-represented in the art world and that they brought a different social experience to art, they tried to discredit the show in any way they could think of. According to Sarah Kent writing in Women's Images of Men, the critics were almost unanimous in their condemnation of the "hysterical overkill"⁴ and "shrill scream of pain and frustration"⁵ that they discovered. She writes,

Twenty male nudes were included amongst ninety eight



Plate 4 Jenni Wittman. Untitled. 1978.

works; only two of them drew particular attention to the genitals ... yet ... Edward Phelps was abused by many "full-frontal assaults"⁶ Marina Vaizey encountered "a veritable forest of penises"⁷ and Waldemar Januszczak found it hard to stomach the "aura of sensationalism" created by so many "penises for penises sake"⁸. (See Plate 4.)

As a result they were highly subjective and their comments varied widely. As long as the artists showed "Feminine qualities" in their artwork such as compassion, sympathy and tenderness, they were praised. If not, the critics, male and female, found it hard to cope. Humour was viewed as decidedly unfeminine. Some tactics to devalue the work was to ridicule some of the "man-hating aspects", or to select one or two good works and use these to ridicule the rest. Also the term, "eclectic" was used, implying lack of originality (while the same thing, borrowing images from other artists' work when practised by male artists, is called "working from tradition"!)). They ignored the angry statements and instead focussed on the more traditionally female ones. If the work was figurative it was regressive; if the show attracted too many people, it was too popular, and thus could not be "High Art".

Another tactic was to ignore this unusual phenomenon of women being publicly acknowledged and shown as creators of art, and instead to concentrate on audience reaction.

The Emergence of Women's Art

In spite of adverse criticism however the net result of the exhibition was a highly significant one, i.e. the emergence of strong women artists groups and the organisation of other exhibitions and events in London and the regions. Also it created a climate of greater acceptance for women artists as did similar exhibitions throughout Europe. It established that women have skill and imagination with something unique to offer. Moreover, it greatly contributed to the emerging dialogue on Women's Art. This last created and developed a strong network and support system for women artists.

CHAPTER 2

THE IRISH EXHIBITION

In 1987, a major women's exhibition was held in Dublin. It was organised at the request of the co-ordinators of the "Third International Interdisciplinary Conference on Women's Studies", a major international event, which was held in Trinity College that year. The art exhibition was located in three different venues, one a historical museum, The National Gallery, the second one was a museum for Modern Art, the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art and the third, a contemporary gallery, The Douglas Hyde.

The National Gallery, organised a historical overview of art by Irish women up to 1943, the Municipal showed artists from then until 1977 and the Douglas Hyde exhibited contemporary women artists.

The aims of the overall exhibition were: to show in the first gallery, as many Irish Women Artists as they could find and have space for, and to document them; in the second, to highlight the role women had played in the development of Modernism; and, in the third, to establish that contemporary women artists were just as capable as men. The last point everybody agreed upon

and also on the fact that women artists had been under-represented in the past (if not now).

A sponsor was found to produce a catalogue. A catalogue, it was felt, which had to be very good, so that "it would not in any way detract from the artists being women".⁹

Finally, 56 artists were selected for the National Gallery, 31 for the Municipal and 13 for the Douglas Hyde with a total of 171 works of art.

The Background

The background to the Irish Exhibition was a very confused one, and much of this confusion derived from the inability of the people concerned to deal with what is at the core of women exhibitions - the question of having them at all. Without an understanding of the exclusion of women, without an understanding of the ideological questions directed by the Feminist Movement at what the mainstream call "Art", it is

inevitable that such confusion persists. In relation to the Dublin exhibition, this lack of understanding resulted in the deliverance of the first major women's exhibition into the hands of people who:-

- (a) Denied that women artists are discriminated against.
- (b) Saw no difference between art by women and art by men.
- (c) Were against this type of exhibition from the beginning.
- (d) Used the show to promote their own image.

At the end of this Chapter, I include three interviews (abbreviated) with Ann Reihill (Board Member of the National Gallery); Kim Mai Mooney (National Gallery, Catalogue Compiler) and Pat Murphy (Director of the Douglas Hyde Gallery) which I conducted in the Autumn of 1987. Those interviews provide some insight into the ideas, ideologies and events which were decisive of the kind of exhibition which eventually emerged.

By way of introduction to the interviews some clarification of

issues is needed. The idea for an exhibition emerged (as I have stated before) from the co-ordinators of the International Congress on Women's Studies. It was seen by them as a fringe event to their Congress, and there were no artists among them.

From within the group itself there were differences of approach. Some did not see any political relevance in a women's art exhibition; others, who valued it as part of an overall feminist strategy, were reluctant to hand over control to the major museums. These women approached the artists Pauline Cummins and Breda Mooney to organise an alternative, specifically feminist exhibition in the Project Arts Centre, Dublin. This exhibition which was open to all women artists, consisted of a slide show of 320 pieces of work by 80 women.

The National Gallery

The National Gallery was also approached by the co-ordinators and it subsequently decided to organise separately from the Congress. As they were a historical gallery, they said that they would not have a particular political ideology behind the

show. Ann Reihill, a Board Member of the gallery, commented in her interview that

"art is either good or bad, it doesn't matter if it is done by a man or a woman".

The Douglas Hyde Gallery

The Douglas Hyde Gallery also ran into ideological/political muddles. Pat Murphy (its Director) identified his dilemma vis a vis a definition of "women's art" as choosing between "art that pertains particularly to women and their situation" or "artists who happen to be women". Murphy opted for women who are "just artists like everyone else". This determined him to build the exhibition around the theme, "women's contribution to the development of Modernism". This however was subsequently dropped in view of the National Gallery's option for a historical overview.

The Municipal Gallery

The Municipal Gallery was a reluctant latecomer to the scene. It initially refused to participate due to renovations taking place in the gallery, but later decided to participate on a limited scale. It joined the other two in their adoption of a historical perspective.

Ambiguity of "Women's Art"

While the interviews speak for themselves, I would point out that they reveal the ambiguity and confusion inherent in the exhibition itself, and further they indicate the prevalent lack of understanding of the issues and concerns which the women's movement have raised with respect to women involved in the art world. For instance, while Pat Murphy (Douglas Hyde) considered that it was "arbitrary to put a show together based on women", he also states in his interview that women "have to be better"; that in the major shows and museums, women "are in the minority"; and that "the market seems to support

chauvinism". Similarly, while Ann Reihill (National Gallery) claims that women "are not so much discriminated against in this century", she acknowledges as "ridiculous", that of 17 Board Members of the National Gallery, "I am the only woman". Finally, Kim Mai Mooney (Catalogue Compiler) cites the exhibition "as just an exhibition, it could be called anything" while she observed with respect to the bad press "that was strange, I mean, if you come to look at it, all the critics were male".

INTERVIEWS

PAT MURPHY, DOUGLAS HYDE GALLERY

Summary of the interview with Pat Murphy, Director of the Douglas Hyde Gallery.

We were approached by the organisers of the Women's Conference and asked if we would do an exhibition. Initially we said no, as we didn't want to ghettoize our artists, we could just as well do a left-handed artist show, (its) arbitrary to put a show together based on women.

But then we began to think, and realised, that women had been to the forefront in Irish Art, they introduced Modernism and were the first people to organize an alternative to the Royal Hibernian Academy, i.e. the Living Art Exhibition. And I started to wonder why did that happen?

So I got interested in an exhibition in a socio-historical

sense, only we could not do that as we are not a historical gallery. But what we could do, was to build a mushroom exhibition, with a tight historical base, (in the development of Modernism) where women would no longer have a particular role, but would be part of the art scene, just artists like everyone else and get on with the job.

So we went to the National Gallery and asked would they be willing to take the show, the other end, and they agreed. We also involved the Municipal Gallery. Only what happened now was that the National decided to have a historical overview, way back to the 18th C. and the show lost its theme. If we had kept to the 20th C. both from the point of view of quality of the work and from making the political point of art being to the fringe of society at that period, the show would have been more coherent. Also a difference of approach came up in the way the catalogue was handled. The National Gallery took the main chunk to do an anthology, while we tried to do a chronological overview, decade by decade, and we got in two art critics, Joan Fowler and Aidan Dunne, to handle our part of the show.

Joan Fowler's essay in the catalogue is probably the best in that it is treating art history issues and feminist issues in its broadest cultural sense. In his essay Aidan Dunne very much took an anthological approach, he looked and enumerated all the women artists that were working.

And that brought another problem, how do you go about choosing contemporary women artists, because are you talking about feminist art, art that pertains particularly to women and their situation or artists who happen to be women. As to the fact that we didn't want to create an artistic ghetto, we chose the latter - artists who happen to be women.

We then decided to do a broad show, on various techniques like video, traditional media, photography, that women were working in and also the different issues, like landscape issues, feminist issues, abstraction, media issues, to try to say: these are the issues today and those are the ways artists are approaching them, and those artists happen to be women. Now this is where we were worried. How would it be received. We had the problem of the title (which was not of our choosing, but

of the National, but we had to use it), which was read in a feminist way.

So because of that confusion, we organised an afternoon in the Gallery on the topic "Exhibitions on Women's Art is no good either for art or for women". Some interesting ideas came up in that seminar. One was about male domination in the art world, which was not really talking about the Irish art world, because this is so small and unimperialistic. People were feeling that "the dealers, major museum curators, are all male and when are we going to get our hands at the power". Also that their work was manipulated by males, in the art market and art scene. Counter to that was the opinion "well we make our own work and nobody can tell us what to make in our work". That was coming from the political scene. What we learned afterwards was that it would have been better if we had done a series of seminars, but then the issues weren't apparent to us before we started.

As regards the selection, I worked closely with Joan Fowler and the artists to make sure that I wasn't interpreting or putting things in the wrong way, to make it a more collaborative

exhibition. The result from the gallery's point of view was, that it was one of the best attended shows ever. The reason for that was, I think, that people who would normally only go to the National, now came to see us as well, as it was part of the overall show. For me, the show failed, because it did not show the area I was interested in - Modernism.

The reactions from the critics were terrible. They never put it into context. What was interesting for me when you see a piece of work and you relate to a piece of work, and you start investigating, after the initial sort of emotional cerebral reaction to the piece of work, then you want to start investigating about yourself, why you are reacting, and you too want to investigate about the work, knowing that a woman made it can add to the investigation.

Women's art is a big question, that is why it is a good thing, it is arts job to question itself anyway. What it does is upset the apple-cart, but in a very pointed way, because it immediately gets into a sort of polarised sexual politics, some art is like that too, extremely polarised, it upsets your politics, Western

politics when you are dealing with the Southern Hemisphere or something.

With sculpture in Ireland the most dynamic work is coming from women, their professionalism is incredible, has to be, you have to be better.

In the shows, that you find in the major museums, women are always in the minority, a lot of that has to do with the dealership too, the market seems to support chauvinism.

ANN REIHILL, NATIONAL GALLERY

Summary of the interview with Ann Reihill, Board Member of the National Gallery, Managing Editor Image Magazine and involved in the organisation of the Congress.

The committee of the Congress was divided on what kind of an exhibition they wanted. Some wanted an Exhibition of Art by women, others wanted a Feminist Exhibition. In the end it was decided to hold an Exhibition of Art by women in the National Gallery and the Douglas Hyde Gallery, because it hadn't been been done before, because we had the money and they didn't and because women artists are very important in the 20th C. Very powerful and mainstream and can hold their own with men. Also there was a chance that the show would travel to the Museum of Women and the Arts in Washington.

At this stage it was difficult to get co-operation from the Municipal, but they did come in at the last minute and their selection from an artistic point of view is very good. It was decided to do a retrospective of all women artists and the show

would not have a theme, because art is either good or bad, it doesn't matter if it is done by a man or a woman. There was no Feminist thinking behind it. Women are not so much discriminated against in this century but undoubtedly they were in previous centuries. They were not even catalogued. I found a sponsor to get that done now. I am not sure that the exhibition was a success, but at least we have a catalogue....

On the National Gallery were are 17 Board Members and I am the only woman, ridiculous.

And it is very difficult you know, one has to work within that in order to achieve something, otherwise they will say she is being difficult.

The work normally hangs scattered, and it went back to where hung normally.

The women's movement generally here is a long way behind the rest of Europe.

KIM MAI MOONEY, NATIONAL GALLERY

Interview with Kim Mai Mooney, compiler of the catalogue and employed in the National Gallery.

We weren't really aware of the Congress, but we were approached by Ann Reihill, Managing Editor of Image magazine and so quite involved with women's things one way or another. She suggested, that we should do something to coincide with the Congress, we branched away from her, and decided to do it separately from the Congress. We decided we would have a very different show than the Douglas Hyde as we are a historical gallery, so therefore we would have no particular political ideology behind what we were doing. It was just an exhibition to coincide with something else, it could be called anything, like next year we were asked to do something to coincide with the Dublin Millenium.

But we put a lot of effort into the exhibition, much more than we normally do, so we were aware, that it was something special. It was an important cultural event, there would be a lot of international people here, as it had never been done before.

Also the fact that the three museums would put on a show together meant a lot to us. The shows were not necessarily related, only to the fact that it was about women. A big problem we had was that we had a very short time, as we normally need about one and a half to two years to prepare for a major exhibition. We were very keen to have a good catalogue, i.e. that it would be accurate, in that it wouldn't in any way detract from the artist being women, or whatever. About the critics, that was strange, I mean if you come to look at it, all the critics were male.

CHAPTER 3

THE CRITICS

ART CRITICS

Nine critics reviewed the exhibition.

For Southern Ireland:

Aidan Dunne: "An Eye Opener", 5th July, 1987, and "Sisters, Sisters", 12th July, 1987, both for The Sunday Tribune.

John Hutchinson: "Show does women artists no good", 5th July, 1987, for The Sunday Press.

Joe Burns: "Major Exhibition of Women Artists", 4th July, 1987, for The Cork Examiner.

Brian Fallon: "Irish Women at the National Gallery", 5th July, 1987, "Women Artists at the Municipal and the Douglas Hyde Galleries", 12th July, 1987 for The Irish Times.

Brian de Breffny: "Irish Women Artists, Summer 1987 for Irish Arts Review Vol. 4, No. 2.

Ciaran Mac Gonigal: "Irish Women Artists from the 18th C. to the Present", Autumn 1987 for Irish Arts Review, Volume 4, No. 3.

For Northern Ireland:

Theo Snoddy: "Women in Spotlight", 27th July, 1987 for
The Belfast Telegraph.

For England:

William Feaver: "Goddess on an off day", 2nd August, 1987 for
The Observer.

Waldemar Januszczak: "Women framed in gentility", 30th July,
1987 for The Guardian.

AIDAN DUNNE

Aidan Dunne is very much the exception to the rule when he displays some knowledge of the possible reasons to hold an exhibition specifically about women artists' work. In his article "An Eye Opener", 5th July, 1987, he refers to Germaine Greer's book The Obstacle Race (1979) in which she explains why and how women have been prevented from entering the painting profession. Greer attributes the absence of good women painters up the 20th C. to the fact that women could only paint as a leisure activity, as in the case of "ladies who painted as an antidote to boredom and as a manner of social accomplishment", but who if they had any inclination to slip the bounds of amateurism, were frowned upon and who, if in spite of that still did become professionals, be it from inclination or economic necessity, would be barely tolerated by their class. Other reasons given are the difficulties women encountered in getting appropriate professional tuition, as it was considered inappropriate to study the nude figure or at times even the subject of anatomy. This explains why so many women artists were related to male artists be it as sisters, daughters, or



Plate 5 Evie Hone.

A Landscape with a tree. 1943.

wives, as they were virtually the only women, who could obtain instruction.

In order to overcome these obstacles, Aidan Dunne goes on to say it has taken exceptional personalities and circumstances, and mentions the example of "the gifted, and versatile", Sarah Purser (1848-1943), "intelligent, energetic and a fine painter", who was a successful portrait painter in England, founded the An Tur Gline stained glass studio, was a great promoter of a wide range of artistic activities and used her money and prestige to promote and encourage younger artists, like John Butler Yeats.

According to Dunne the situation for women artists has changed; the obstacles have been removed.

As examples, he names Mainie Jellett (1897-1944) and Evie Hone (1894-1955) (See Plate 5), who went to study Cubism in Paris and returned to Ireland as "standard bearers of their own particular brand of Modernism". Both were also founder members of the Irish Exhibition of Living Art (1943).

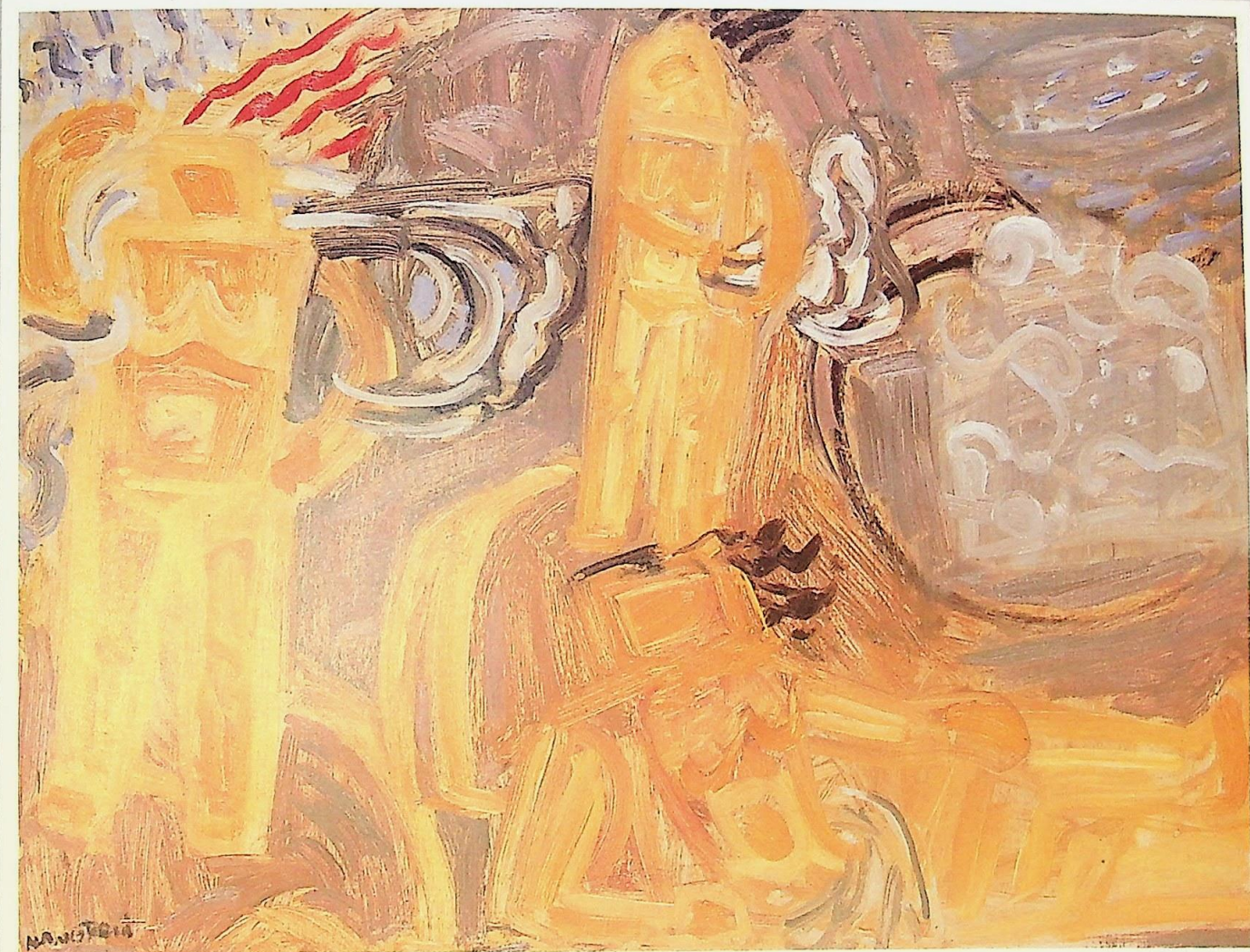


Plate 6 Nano Reid.
A Wild Day. 1959.

Of other women active around the 50's and shown in the Municipal Gallery he describes Norah McGuinness, Nano Reid, (See Plate 6) Mary Swanzy, Camille Souter and Gerda Fromel as "formidable, unique art personalities, secure in their identities".

In a later article "Sisters, Sisters", 12th July, 1987 he mentions Camille Souter's "lush, intense paintings, vivid and crisp"; a marvellous Maria Simmonds-Gooding, white relief, which has immense presence and poise"; Anne Madden's epic mystical megalith", and bemoans the lack of space in the gallery for them.

Dunne's optimism with regard to the contemporary art scene and its acceptance of women artists must have been severely dented when he read the observations of his colleagues vis-a-vis the exhibitions.



Plate 7 Susanna Drury. The East Prospect of the Giant
Causeway. Date Unknown.

SNODDY, BURNS, Mac GONIGAL, De BREFFNY

Of the shorter articles, Theo Snoddy's unique contribution in The Belfast Telegraph was to benignly admonish women not to worry about the fact that the exhibition "has aroused some criticism from the critics" because "no one can accuse the Ulster Museum in letting the side - or the women - down". Joe Burns's review printed even before the exhibition opened, predicted that the theme of the exhibition will be introduced in a section devoted to the talented amateur lady artists, such as Susanna Drury and Mrs. Delaney, (See Plate 7) who were prominent in the 18th C. followed by "such accomplished and delightful 19th C. watercolourists as Mildred Ann Butler and Rose Barton", as well as "Sarah Purser, Constance Markievicz, Edith Somerville of Somerville and Ross fame (See Plate 8) and Harry Clarke's talented wife Margaret". In another brief article "Irish Women Artists" Ciaran Mac Gonigal criticises the aesthetical aspects of the show like, lighting, choice and overcrowding of work in both the National and the Municipal Galleries and describes the middle period in the National as resembling "in selection and hanging, a backroom at a Mother's Union Assembly".



Plate 8 Edith Somerville.
Retrospect. 1887.

Finally while Brian De Breffny in his article "Irish Women Artists from the 18th C. to the Present", considers it arguable that it is "antifeminist" and "divisive" to organise women only exhibitions (he agrees with Aidan Dunne that our problems are over) he himself makes some intriguing divisions of the women artists in the exhibitions, separating them into such categories as Dead/Alive, Married/Single, Protestant/Catholic, i.e. he observes:

"of one hundred and forty deceased women artists noticed, no less than at least one hundred and twenty were Protestants, and half of the deceased women artists remained single".

According to de Breffny, "the lack of birth dates for several living artists is difficult to account for". This lack he then explains with the question: "Surely they were not held back on the grounds of vanity?"

WILLIAM FEAVER

If William Feaver's article "Goddess on an off day" is longer, it is one long litany of misery. Even Whistler's mother isn't spared, she is dragged in as an example of "a traditional woman's role in art, passive, repressive, repressed". He describes the shows in the National and Municipal Galleries as "incoherent" and complains that the gentility of the women artists "gives almost all portraits that glazed look". He goes on to describe Elish Lamont's "thoroughly soppy" Miss O'Hara of Ballymena "who displays the perfectly formed ringlets that were to secure her General Wardlow in marriage". Unlike Aidan Dunne, he considers Mainie Jellett's contribution to Irish art to be "second hand Cubism" and mentions Evie Home's "fry up" landscapes, wishing "for the female equivalent of Jack Yeats always his own man"(?) or the probity of a Gwen John (presumably always her own woman!). Feaver concludes his piece with the enlightening questions "why the tidy nicety? Why the whimsey?"

BRIAN FALLON

Brian Fallon in his article "Irish Women at the National Gallery", 5th July, 1987 warns the public that those

"looking for the bold pioneers, the vivid imaginations burning under crinolines(?), the female Blakes and Rosettis and even Picassos meditating masterpieces while cooking the dinner for Mick or Pat, had better forget it and pass on".

According to Fallon the Irish artists exhibited are a

"circumspect lot, rather conservative and hidebound, interested in prettiness more than in power, and in appearance rather than imagination".

He equivocates the show with a horse race commenting that if the show were to be matched against the best of Yeats, Hone, Osborne, Danby, Maclise, et al, the men would canter home against three legged fillies. This he claims is "not intended to be sex propaganda".

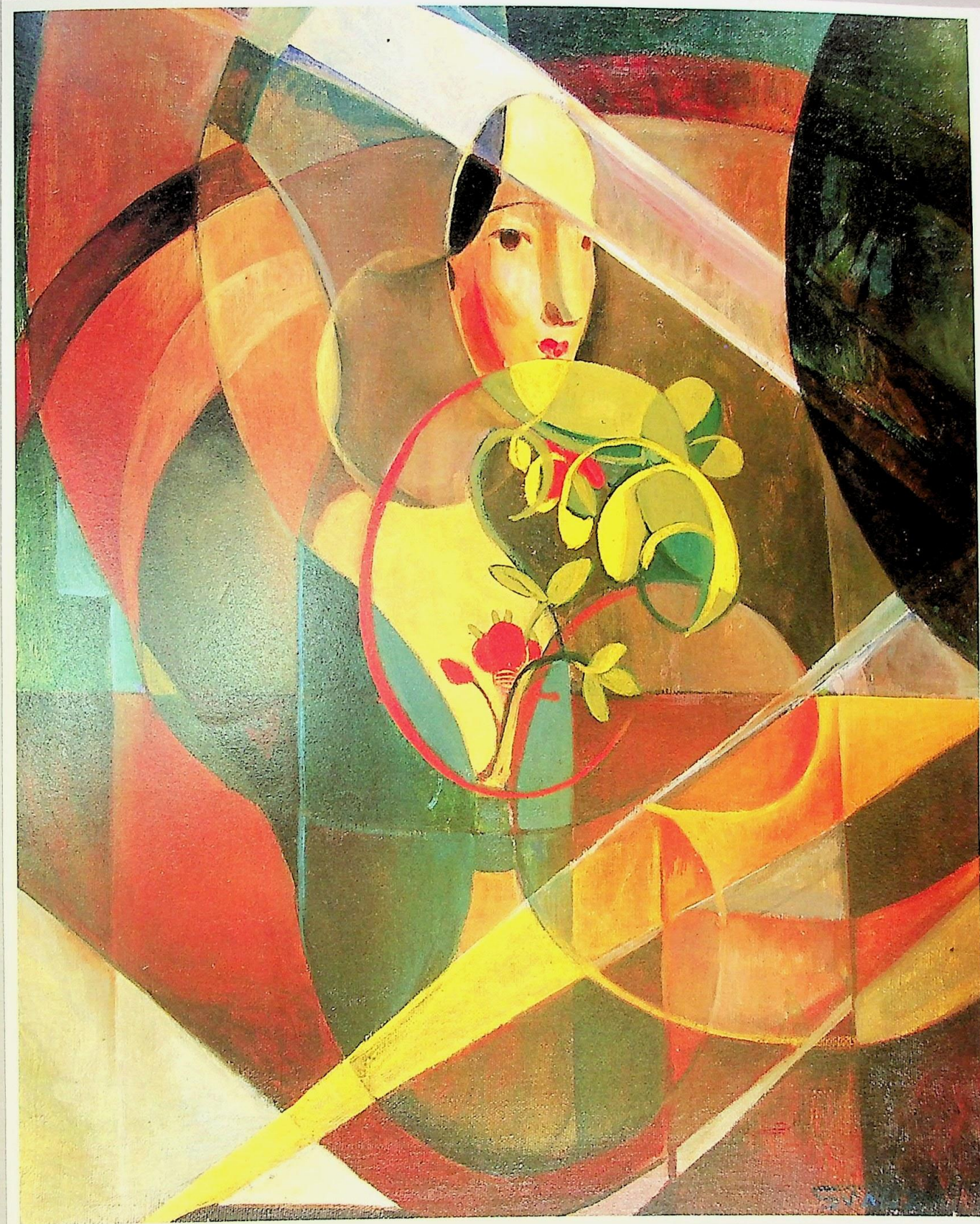


Plate 9 Mary Swanzy.

Young Women with Flowers. Date Unknown.

A rather mystifying remark.

Of the artists and their work, he praises Mary Swanzy, who he says, in her lifetime informed him that she respected his judgement of her work(!). (See Plate 9.) He goes on to mention Kathy Prendergast (ingenious, but close to intellectual gamesmanship); Vivien Burnside's large mural piece (effective on its own terms); Cecily Brennan's work (can be enjoyed as virtual abstracts by those so minded); Mary Fitzgerald (her cool, tasteful and slightly laboured Minimalism, lacking in real linear style and bite); Alice Maher (her mix collage effects have a rather shrill colour and a visceral surreal kind of imagery). Of the sculptors Fallon mentions Eilis O'Connell (whose piece "Bundu Uprights", seems closer to recent British sculptors); and Louise Walsh (large macabre pieces). (See Plate 10.)

Fallon concludes of the exhibition that it is too "narrow", that it lacks "substance" and "real quality". He explains this in terms of the exhibition being

"geared to a special angle on things,

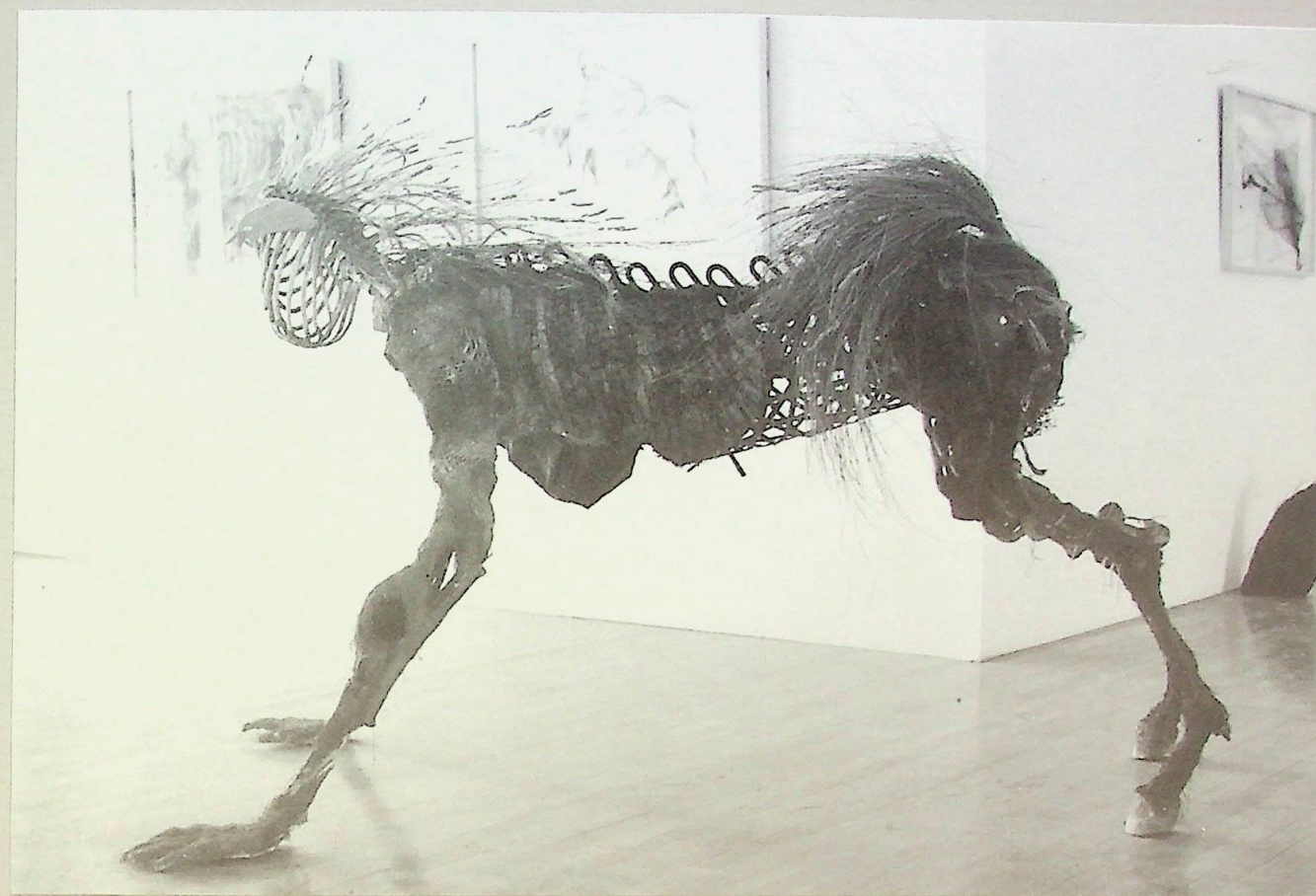


Plate 10 Louise Walsh.

Harvest Queen. 1986.

and to a special occasion selected
according to the dictates of a special
"line" or "policy".

WALDEMAR JANUSZCZAK

Another critic, Waldemar Januszczak, is deeply concerned with
the supposed narrowness of women only exhibitions stating in his
article "Women framed in gentility", 30th July, 1987,

"the chief danger of women only exhibitions
is that they spend so much time exploring
personal and sexual politics, that they become
unbearably narcissistic and self-centered"

While he admonishes the overcrowding of the National Gallery, he
singles out for comment (from the more than 56 artists ex-
hibited - 78 paintings) Henrietta Deering who he claims is
"clearly no great talent". Also mentioned are Elizabeth Still
Stanhope who draws her "six squidgy children"; Lady Blake who
draws life-cycles of butterflies; Dorothy Cross, who makes

symbolic feminine portraits in which according to Januszcak a male shark rips their sex apart; Louise Walsh, whose powerful horse/women hybrid "Harvest Queen", is also according to him a "monstrous personification" of male fertility myths.

Januszcak's main criticism of the show however, is according to him, its "total absence of insights into, or records of Ireland's political history".

Observing that many of the women were ladies, he concludes also that "Irish feminism appears to have been colonised by British art school orthodoxies". He pertinently asks:

"how are we to explain this missing subject matter ... real life in Ireland during three such turbulent and problematic centuries".

Even more pertinent Mr. Januszcak is the question which this one raises - problematic for whom?

JOHN HUTCHINSON

John Hutchinson writing in the Sunday Press, 5th July, 1987, ("Show does women artists no good") does indicate awareness of feminist concerns at the heart of women only exhibitions and indeed berates those who compiled the show's catalogue for their lack of reference to the most recent studies on women's art. The exhibition in the National Gallery, he calls "a glum affair, that corroborates all one's stereotyped notions about lady painters of the past". To whatever extent, Mr. Hutchinson is informed, he also cosily concludes that "women artists now suffer from fewer restrictions and repressions" and this he derives from the fact that "many of the most promising artists are women, who are well able to hold their own with their male peers".

However reassuring Mr. Hutchinson's remarks are, and certainly the possibilities for women artists have improved, I am inclined to agree with Januszcak's comment in "Women framed in gentility" that there is more than one way to ignore a woman artist's career" to which I would add, not only to ignore but also to denigrate and ridicule.

CRITICISING THE CRITICS

Since the beginning of the 70's when the first feminist exhibitions were held, the organisers of such shows found in their assessment of the effects of the shows on artists and public; that in the area of art criticism, the reviews were almost invariably negative. A certain pattern of criticism emerged which has been documented in numerous feminist journals and books such as: How to Suppress Women's Writing, Joanna Russ, 1983; The Obstacle Race, Germaine Greer, 1979; From the Center, Lucy Lippart, 1976; Old Mistresses, Parker & Pollock, 1981.

In the language used, it became clear that in connection with women's work, certain standard words were being employed to belittle the women, their work or anything remotely connected with them, words generally not understood to pertain to men's work or men, but to second class citizens, like women, children or people of colour as mentioned in Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff's article "Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture":

"high art" (means) man, mankind, the individual man, individuality, humans, humanity, the human figure, humanism, civilization, culture, the Greeks, the Romans, the English, Christianity, spiritual transcendence, religion, nature, true form, science, logic, creativity, action, war, virility, violence, brutality, dynamism, power and greatness.

In the same texts other words are used repeatedly in connection with "low art": Africans, Oriental, Persians, Slovaks, peasants, the lower classes, women, children, savages, pagans, sensuality, pleasure, decadence, chaos, anarchy, impotence, exotica, eroticism, artifice, tattoos, cosmetics, ornaments, decoration, carpets, weaving, patterns, domesticity, wallpaper, fabrics, and furniture...

The criticisms of the Dublin exhibition were no exception.

Words like: delightful: J. Burns.

 eclectic, gentle, charm: C. Mac Gonigal

 limpid: B. Fallon

 prettiness, gentility, soppy

 picturesque, whimsey, dabblers, skill,

 folksy, idyllic, nicety: W. Feaver

 elegant, instinctive, wobbly, squidgy,

 tedious wistfully, genteel, polite,

 feminine, twee, narcissistic: W. Januszczak

It was also found that women artists were denied an independent identity by describing them in terms of their relationships with men. And in the Dublin exhibition there were:

 "Harry Clarke's talented wife Margaret":

 J. Burns

 "Margaret Crilly who became Mrs. Harry Clarke":

 W. Feaver

 "Susanna Drury, whose brother was a
miniature painter": Id.

 "Hazel Martyna became Lady Lavery". Id

Another tactic was to describe the women's physique.

"Helena Maguire drew herself but
with hair worn looser": W. Feaver

Or if they could not ignore the work, because the women were
well known, the insinuated that they are only well known because
of their social position or their husbands:

"Henrietta Deering seems to have drawn
much of her Dublin clientele from the ranks
of her husband's fashionable friends":

W. Januszczak

Of if they were not married, speculate on the reasons why:

"Was this one wonders, the choice of
strong independent women? Or did their
talent put off would be suitors? Or did
they take up pencil and palette to
compensate for being unattractive and
unwooed": B. de Breffny



Plate 11 Mildred Anne Butler.

A Preliminary Investigation. 1898.

Of if they were independent:

"they leap-frogged London and went straight to France", where they chose the wrong -ism "not the radical impressionists or indeed of the stuffy Academics of the salon but of the occupants of the French late 19th C. middleground, the tedious plein-air mimics of Bastien Lepage": W. Januszczak

and not only the wrong -ism but the wrong subjects as well: like French peasants, French family interiors, friends, flowers, religious mementoes and oh horror the latest French fashions, because, (according to W. Januszczak) Irish people should paint Irish subjects (even if they are in France apparently) and if they paint Irish subjects like the giant's causeway by Susanna Drury (See Plate 7), or Elizabeth Still Stanhope, who paints her Irish children with an Irish wheelbarrow, or Edith Sommerville who makes a painting of a local Cork woman (see Plate 8), or Mildred Ann Butler's Pigeons (see Plate 11) they are the wrong ones for Januszczak, because what they should have been were

"insights into, or records of Ireland's political history". But then of course if the work is political, it shouldn't be that type of politics, like "the Arts and Crafts movement" with its "folksy and nationalist associations". W. Feaver

Then finally, when it couldn't be denied, evaded, circumvented or ignored, that some of the work was GOOD, the work would be "good", but"....

"The watercolourists, Rose Barton and Mildred Ann Butler, show up well, but then neither is a painter who really breaks the mould of convention": B. Fallon

Of Kathy Prendergast's "Body Map" series:

"ingenious, but close to intellectual gamesmanship and the effect, curiously, is one of rather conventional prettiness":

B. Fallon

CONCLUSION

The glaring ambiguity inherent in the Irish Exhibition was a result of the failure of the organisers, critics and some of the artists themselves, to challenge the supposed "genderlessness" of "Art". Given the general society's denigration of women's lives, experiences and concerns, that women's reality could be uniquely expressed by women artists was not deemed significant.

The absence of this "raison d'être" of women's exhibitions (that they represent a specifically female vision) meant that the Irish Exhibition, while it was generated in terms of the fact that women's exhibitions had taken place internationally, was organised without any of the dialogue which had preceded these. Without this dialogue it became an incoherent collection, controlled as I have stated in Chapter 2 by people who saw no artistically significant difference between women and men. This incoherence became the easy prey of hostile critics, confirming for them, on the one hand, the pointlessness of women only exhibitions, and on the other, the poverty of women's concerns.

The organisational process was also affected by the absence of dialogue. Without any critique of the way in which the selection criteria should be decided on, the artists exhibited

were selected by the "chosen few" experts in the field. This hierarchical model is the antithesis of the procedures adopted by women's exhibitions internationally, as for instance, the co-operative model adopted in "Women's Images of Men".

Not that Ireland should import international ideas uncritically. In a paper given at the International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women, Sue Pentel, remarked,

"... there were severe political ideological obstacles in Irish society to the development of feminist ideas. These are directly the result of imperialist domination, reflected in the backwardness of the economy, the ideological hold of the church and the effects of partition.

Because of all these unique features of Irish society the women's movement that does exist is small and fragmented.... it would be wrong to use the model of the European feminist movement and transplant it into Irish Society".

THE FUTURE FOR IRISH WOMEN ARTISTS

What is important for Irish women artists is to develop our own analysis specific to an Irish context in order to build a coherent strategy for action. While we begin our dialogue there is room for optimism. We can look to and gain from the experience of our international counterparts, the growing literature of women in art history, and the existence of strong effective groups in other countries: INTAKT in Vienna; SVBK in Amsterdam; The Women Artists Slide Library in London and many more. Moreover, we can take heart in the formation of the first Irish women's artists group W.A.A.G. (Women Artists Action Group) which was formed in 1987 and which is presently organising a Slide Library, a newsletter and seminars on women artists and their work, all of which must ensure that the dialogue and the support for women artists will continue.

A central issue of that dialogue must be that which the Irish exhibition failed to come to terms with - our coming together both as women who happen to be artists and artists who happen to be women. It is important to acknowledge that a priority given to feminism can be both a source of bonding and of division.

There must be acknowledgement of difference and that this difference forms a part of the ongoing dialogue about women's art, feminist art, the ongoing dialogue about what Art is.

A further issue is the growing numbers of women in the arts. This has to be viewed with suspicion. Could it mean that it is simply because men are moving into other disciplines (like the media, T.V., Film and Video), that the resulting space is available to women? According to Jaques Maquet in The Aesthetic Experience (p.70)

"For approximately 3 centuries, the artistic locus of the Western tradition has been practically limited to art. In fact we seem to be at the end of art as the aesthetic locus of the industrially advanced societies. As I have argued elsewhere artworks are physically disappearing or are getting lost in our industrial environment. It is the time of the fading out of art".

And Shulamith Firestone writing in The Dialectic of Sex (p.166)

"For the higher percentage of women in art lately may tell us more about the state of art, than the state of women. Are we to feel cheated that women have taken over in a capacity soon to be automated out? (Like 95% Black at the post office, this is no sign of integration, on the contrary undesirables are being shoved into the least desirable positions) Art is no longer a vital centre that attracts the best men of our generations...."

This leaves women artists with obsolete techniques, in an area of extremely low pay, and a limited audience.

If this is the pattern that is emerging it is imperative that women move out of the once again "marginalised areas", and into the mainstream, doubtless with increasing difficulty!

Further it is imperative that we continue our analysis of what we are about - to map the relationship between ourselves and our

work. Is our work full-time, part-time, commercial, useful, personal or political? Should we show it in the galleries or on the streets? Should we organise women's exhibitions or support networks? Our questions go to the very centre of aesthetic concern; what does it mean to be an artist; what does she mean when she says I create?

FOOTNOTES

1. P.2 Catalogue
2. Adrienne Rich has written that "in pretending to stand for "the human", masculine subjectivity tries to force us to name our truths in an alien language, to dilute them".
3. Source: Women's Image of Men, Eds. S. Kent and J. Morreau, Writers & Readers Publishing, London, 1985.
4. Edward Phelps, Bath West Evening Chronicle, 25th November, 1980.
5. Philip Midgley, Times Educational Supplement, 10th October, 1980.
6. Edward Phelps. See Footnote 4.
7. Marina Vaizy, Sunday Times, 19th October, 1980.
8. Waldemar Januszczak, Guardian, 6 October, 1980.
9. Kim Mai Mooney, of the National Gallery, from an interview I conducted with her, Autumn, 1987.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Plate 1

Renate Bertlmann.

"Diverse Farphalle Impudiche"

Object from the "Pornographie" - Section
(detail). 1975 Mixed Media.

300 x 100 x 180 cms.

Plate 2

Jacqueline Morreau

Pope John-Paul II, Study for "The Children's
Crusade" 1980. Ink and Charcoal, 36" x 20"

Plate 3

Elena Samperi.

Madonna. 1979.

Plate 4 Jenni Wittman.
 Untitled, 1978. Oil on Board.

Plate 5 Evie Hone. 1894-1955
 A Landscape with a tree. 1943.
 Oil on Board. 69 x 69 cms.
 National Gallery of Ireland.

Plate 6 Nano Reid. 1905-1981.
 A Wild Day. 1959. Oil on Board. 45 x 60 cms.
 The Arts Council.

Plate 7

Susanna Drury. 1733-1770.

The East Prospect of the Giant Causeway

Gouache on Vellum. 34.3 x 68.6 cms.

Private Collection.

Plate 8

Edith Somerville. 1858-1949

Retrospect. 1887. Oil on Canvas. 81 x 122 cms.

Private Collection.

Plate 9

Mary Swazy. 1882-1978

Young Women with Flowers. Oil on Canvas.

76 x 63.5 cms. Private Collection.

Plate 10

Louise Walsh.

Harvest Queen. 1986. Collection of the Artist.

Plate 11

Mildred Anne Butler. 1858-1941.

A Preliminary Investigation. 1898.

Watercolour on Paper. 65.6 x 97.5 cms.

National Gallery of Ireland.

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