

Sean McSweeney

HIS WORK TO DATE, AND CRITICAL ACCLAIM.

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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

Sean McSweeney

HIS WORK TO DATE, AND CRITICAL ACCLAIM.

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INTRODUCTION

*"From his beginning's to modern times; man feels,
has emotion, and must naturally express this
in all forms throughout his life". (1)*

The term expressionism characterises every race on earth; indeed it could be said to reflect the endeavours of every man on earth. In this essay I will use the term expressionism and some of its characteristics relating to the visual arts in order to introduce and describe the artist I have chosen, and why his work exhibits many of the qualities that associate him with the term or movement - Expressionism.

Expressionism in relation to Irish art has grown and developed from a poetic sentiment and romanticism within Irish Culture. The poetic and romantic ideas have always been inherent within the Irish nation. The consequences of the political upheavals and the forming of the Irish free state led primarily to the newly stimulated desire of the people to express themselves independently both politically and culturally. Inevitably the creative minds within the provincial communities, i.e. poets, playwrights and artists gained much inspiration, and renewed emotions then became evident within their work. This was to continue and intensify before and especially after the second World War when visual artists such as 'Jack Yeats' and 'Paul Henry' began to unleash a more fresh approach and an insight into visual awareness. From this point the birth of more modernist sentiments can be seen derivative of modernism.-

the movement which aims at expressing the mind or the emotions of that time. Both of the above artists began to fuse the poetic and romantic sentiments with semi-abstract, yet individual styles. These of course were not totally original developments but more-so the result of international influences and contemporary beliefs, however they did provide a major break for many of the artists yet to follow - A variety of trends developed in Ireland over the last few decades. Many of these trends have been enthusiastically pursued by individual artists but many found it difficult to develop these ideas due to strategic limitations within the country, the biggest limitation being a very narrow and unpredictable art market with few resources.

On a European and American scale the visual arts' advancements enjoyed a more affluent source of support financially from their individual Governments. These advancements included the introduction to Video, installation and performances which Ireland because of the economic climate could not pursue to such an extent. Due to this, painting during the late 20's and 30's consequently became the most prominent form of visual communication. Although numerous art trends drifted in and out of fashion, example -- Hard edge Abstraction, - one theme remained constant - 'The use of landscape' as a source of inspiration right through Irish painting history, Landscape has always existed strongly no matter what the trend of the time has been.

Although the accounts by Francis Ruane in the 'Delighted Eye' seem over enthusiastic and romantic in parts, her most valid conclusion about Irish artist's choice of subject matter seems worth mentioning -

*"The land has an important in an
Irishman's heart, It tugs at him and makes
him feel guilty if he leaves it." (2)*

*"Agricultural roots, Conservatism an
obsession with the past, and a passion
for indirect statement shape the way
he expresses himself visually." (3)*

Undoubtedly over embellished with Romanticism but it is most definitely the deeprooted determination for re-claiming what was and is rightfully theirs that strengthen this ongoing interest in 'landscape' painting. It certainly is not the only source of interest but is very much a primary one. 'Republican', almost but a trigger for creativity none-the-less as will be discussed in the work of one of those many artists - Sean McSweeney. The interpretations of the landscape have without doubt been very diverse and individual ranging for example from Patrick Collins' evocatively mystical imagination to the more ethnic work of Barrie Cooke whose 'Bone Boxes' are comparatively sterile. These artists have chosen to use a non representational form of markmaking in the mode of abstract expressionism. Even the most abstract works communicate a sense of light, form and colour which make us instantly aware of the artists affinity with his location.

The following sequence of questions revolving around the work of Sean McSweeney are points with which I hope to deal specifically in my thesis. Why does he choose the Irish landscape? Is it

important for him to live in or close to this landscape? Is he using the landscape as a form of departure from where his imagination can take over? Is he looking for a dramatic accident within the process of painting? Or is he always conscious of this? Is the element of chance important in his work? Many European expressionists painters in the past have used these concepts while still emphasising the importance of subject matter, e.g. Oscar Kokoschka. He used the element of chance and dramatic accident while trying to portray an underlying psychic awareness of his subject matter. More importantly from my familiarity with the work of Kokoschka, it becomes very clarified that his use of this element of chance was for him heavily laden with analysis and theory. On the other hand I question the angle from which McSweeney views this 'chance' in the second chapter. In the first part of this thesis I shall lay the foundation on McSweeneys background and artistic developments before dealing directly with the above points.

Because there is so little written information in existence on Sean McSweeney it is first necessary to introduce, explain and define his work and main concerns - As the current information and documentation remains very limited on McSweeney it was necessary to interview the artist at length and gather all the information possible from reviews and catalogues. The reactions and comments are backed up where possible with direct quotes from the artist himself. This is followed with varying criticisms on his works which have appeared in the press over the years, most particularly in relation to the comparisons made by these critics between J. Yeats and McSweeney.

INTRODUCTION. FOOTNOTES

1. Herbert Read, A Concise History of Modern Painting
Chapter 7, p218.
2. Frances Ruane, The Delighted Eye
Introduction, p6.
3. IBID, p6.

CHAPTER I

"The artists work proceeds not from a finished imaginative experience to which the work of art corresponds, but from passionate excitement about the subject matter". (1)

The energy initially stimulated in the artist by the subject matter is the actual vibrancy that artists strive to achieve in their markmaking if that medium is paint on canvas. Referring to the sentiments of the above quote, John Dewey obviously sees this vibrancy as the key ingredient of a successful piece of work. Another essential ingredient is the total honesty to that feeling, - unrelentless honesty without the introduction of superficial elements or surface decoration. The basic concepts behind Abstract Expressionism centered around these requirements.

From the Writings of Francis Ruane, in the 'Delighted Eye', she discusses one relevant aspect of Irish Expressionism. This expressionism to which I am referring covers not only visual communication but more ironically verbal communication. The general tendency of the average Irish person to 'beat around the bush' as the cliché goes seems to directly reflect in the visual arts - i.e., Abstract Expressionist painting seems to be a direct reservoir and best means for expressing abstract concepts which would be least successful in perhaps direct representational work. so Abstract Expressionism in many respects could be equalled to 'beating around the bush' - but in a much more productive way than the verbal more negative one.

Sean McSweeney, born in 1935, arrived on the art scene in the early 60's, from this early stage his work can associated with expressionist tendencies. His father was a portrait painter so naturally it was an ideal setting for the young McSweeney to familiarise himself with painting technicalities, colour and markmaking -

*"After my father's death a lot of his work,
Some unfinished was left around the house,
My mothers time and energy was taken up coping
with the family so I was free to do what I liked
with my fathers oil paint, therefore from an early
age I was working with oil paint." (2)*

Sean McSweeney, spent the early years of his life in Dublin living in an old Georgian house which still remains the family home. He lived only a short distance from the 'Hugh Lane Gallery' and so had ample opportunity to observe the paintings of many of his predecessors. As a result of this he would have been exposed to the work of Yeats, Utrillo, Rouault, Hone, Constable, Sergent, Augustus John, Antonio Mancini, Hennessy, Henry, and he was particularly impressed by much of Nano Reids work - *"its a joy to see Nano Reids fine painting of Cats in the Kitchen".* (3) These early observations were to form the basis of his early background as a painter.

McSweeney received no formal education in art and did not develop from an Academic foundation, however he did attend night classes in the "National College of Art" for life drawing and composi-

ional studies but he essentially remains a self taught painter.

Despite living in Dublin he also spent much of his early life in Sligo, Meath or Wicklow and so from an early age, he developed a strong awareness for the landscape. After finishing school he was employed in a variety of jobs, he even went to England for a while, but returned to pursue his career in painting. His ambition to be a painter increased from an early age and during his school days he had continuous creative vibes. He always had access to oil paint canvas etc., and as a child never took them for granted - to him they were just part of the furniture. From the following quote the spontaneity of Creativity is obvious.

"You could open a wardrobe and a bundle of his drawings would fall out, So as young children there was nothing precious about works of art, We had them all around the house, you could turn over a chair and find a painting nailed to the bottom of it in order to keep in the springs." (4)

He therefore never made any serious decision based on Careerism be that to become an artist or painter, it seemed to be the most obvious and natural step for him to take. However like many young artists he did not find it easy to subsidise himself as a painter, in his late teens and early twenties he worked during the day in order to obtain an income - his painting was confined to the night and early hours of the morning. He intentionally shunned becoming over involved with any job or responsibility

to prevent distraction from his painting flow. Consequently and quite unconsciously a tremendous amount of self made pressure developed.

From 1965 onward he endeavoured to become a regular exhibitor with the 'Living Art', the 'Oireachtas' and the 'Dawson Gallery' (now the Taylor Gallery). He considered this an essential part of gaining status as a painter. In 1967 he gave up his permanent and pensionable job as a shipping clerk in order to work towards a one man show in the Dawson Gallery. The challenge presented by an opportunity to hold a 'one man show' presents perhaps the greatest challenge to any young artist. It forces one into regular and disciplined work, it can mean the pressurised production of fifty to sixty pieces of work or more from which a selection can be made. It can become the determining factor in the artist's career to 'make or to break'. All these points pertain to the pressure he experienced, considering his lack of experience with the formalities of Gallery systems.

Exhibitions and one man show in 1965 which I only briefly mention strengthened his determination to work more profusely. This led to the major determining factor of his continuing career, brought to life in his one man show in July 1967 in the form of an outstanding sellout. In general terms this exhibition proved McSweeney to be a semi-abstractionist with a strong tendency towards nature's organic constituents and personal sensations triggered off by his interaction with the environment.

The landscape provided his major source of inspiration but this was not a new concept in Irish painting, it had been the dominant motif with both painters and patrons for the past two to three

hundred years. However for McSweeney it provided him with a source from which he could develop his own individual style. This specific style became more evident in his 2nd one man show in 1967, his landscapes were abstracted, but were also quickly recognisable as landscapes through the series of forms and emotions which they conveyed. The general trend in landscape painting in Ireland had changed greatly since the beginning of the century. Jack Yeats, who began as a draughtsman of Mastery in line and composition who gradually changed in his later years to more expressive and romantic interpretations of the landscape. The major fundamental influence of Yeats on the development of other artists versions of the landscape rested in his encouragement for other painters to express their own inner feeling towards the landscape or indeed any subject matters in an independent manner, but with a more strengthened sense of self confidence.

McSweeney's semi-abstract style was more concerned with depicting a sense of place which was appreciable even by those who were far removed or who had not explored modern painting. This factor obviously contributed to his success and popularity in his 1967 show. He was finally recognised as a prominent landscape painter by critics and public alike. One particular critic namely, Brian Fallon whom I quote from the article titled "Works that place painter to the front" featured in the Irish Times dated July 4th 1969 undoubtedly had very positive influences on the public -

"With so much greyish or monochrome painting filling the galleries, such unabashed romanticism is welcome, and the public response to McSweeney's work proves how starved it has felt in this respect." (5)

This 'unabashed' romanticism is exactly the aspect of his markmaking that emphasises those two points mentioned in the introduction, the first vibrancy, the second honesty to initial reaction are absolutely vital ingredients for the effectiveness of his element of chance. I will deal a little later with his occasional lack of structure and discuss its affects. Brian Fallon in that early 1969 review picks up on this point quite vehemently and clearly recognises the weaknesses which result in the over-reliance on that important element of chance -

"But there are times when his shortcomings are equally obvious, and then one realises how boneless and soft a large part of his work is, how lacking in structure and real thinking power." (6)

In some respects the above quotation gets a little over presumptuous about McSweeney's work - Fallon by referring to the 'Soft' - 'Yeatsian legacy' is assuming an over negative aspect of Irish intelligence if not 'lack' of intelligence and the statement about his lacking 'real thinking power' is unnecessarily condescending, McSweeney as a person rather than a painter. Surely the following statements made by McSweeney

in an interview with me recently embodies a deep psychological understanding by him of art in general - but yes in plain simple English. Perhaps if he had embellished this same sentiment with fourteen lettered adjectives, Fallon could then associate McSweeney with intellecticism of a kind - verbal dexterity is not a gift enjoyed by all, and credit for one's intelligence should not rely on ability with words alone.

*"A piece of work is not worth tackling
unless you are prepared to dig for a
share of creativity and let the
imagination have its head." (7)*

One of the high points of the 1967 exhibition was the sale of his 'Summer 66' painting, (FIG 1.) to the Municipal Gallery, Parnell Sq. This was the first painting bought by the gallery in fifty years from funds donated by a private benefactor. The painting 'Summer 66' echoes the foundations of his current style. It is a predominantly yellow canvas with subtle breaks in the landscape which differs immensely to the greater body of his works. This was one of the largest works in the exhibition, seen by Raymond Gallagher in a review titled, "fine show by young artist" featured in the Irish Press dated Sat. July 15th 1967 as McSweeney's greatest achievement in "fluency and handling a large area", dominantly yellow and in the tradition of Turner". (8) Gallagher expected him to go on to much larger canvases at this point. Personally this particular piece is an experimental piece which perhaps laid the foundation for not just a change in style but ironically



FIG 1. SUMMER 1966

the switch to canvases the same size in diptych or smaller form. In simplistic terms McSweeney justifies this choice of direction -

*"I enjoy working on a large canvas,
however I feel you can get as much
into a small canvas as a large one." (9)*

followed by a more practical justification

*"It takes a lot more energy and costs
a lot to produce a large canvas." (10)*

The source of McSweeney's inspiration is the landscape but the medium proves to be the most vital element in the creative process. He avoided and continues to avoid being representational as this does not form part of his expression, although some of his work can give the effect or suggest a figurative approach. However the mood and light are often the only means of identifying the subject matter. Using these means he captures the atmosphere of Sligo, the West of Ireland, Wicklow, parts of Dublin and the general atmosphere seems to be of an anonymous nature but is very Irish.

There is a consistent criticism of McSweeney's lack of structure throughout the numerous reviews written over the past twenty three years, but critics alike appreciate unanimously his indisputable use of rich colour and vibrant pigment. Considering for example the following statement made by Bruce Arnold in

the Irish Times 1969 - *"The Content of his pictures emerge from the physical mass of paint and vivid, strident colours"*. (11)

From this half of the statement it is clear that the vibrancy of his use of primary unmixed out-of-tube pigments constitutes a primary strategy of McSweeney's. This strategy leads to the strength of his initial impact. The colours are exaggerated and imaginative which differentiates his works from of his many Irish Expressionist Contemporaries i.e. - Camille Souter and Patrick Collins whose colour schemes seem much more subdued and reflected the Irish damp and overcast atmosphere less adventurously. Arnold goes on to say - *"The imprecise nature of his shapes and lines is part of the delaying tactics essential to the artist if his message is to have impact."* (12)

- From this 'the lack of structure' is a most positive strategy characteristic of his early works, as opposed to his less affective 'lack of structure' in the later works which will be discussed in the next chapter.

In his early work strong colour and tone is particularly evident "Old Walls" 1965 (FIG 2.) is a good example of one of his earlier pieces that combine this intensity of colour with structure. In this painting he seems to focus more on a central structure with a combination of drawing and painting at the same time. If one was to rely on this painting's structure entirely, as an untitled piece - one would have difficulties in interpreting the intention of the artist. The series of vertical and horizontal marks form abstract shapes which suggest the outline of walls. But the painting also holds a definite mystical quality that is expressed through the



FIG 2. OLD WALLS 1965.

transparency of light and colour, - a spontaneous streak of yellow in an otherwise red painting creates a dramatic effect. This has remained a characteristic right through McSweeney's work and we can see a continuation of this in his more recent works. In this 'Old Walls' painting he also captures the ancient image of a street deteriorating, a ruggedness which would be associated with this, and a general feeling of disorder and decay. He was also developing a very fluent style which form the basis of his later works. While the structure in this painting bears certain references to landscape environment etc, the colour remains very much drawn from the artists imagination which may be a combination of the scene together with the more abstract emotions of the painter himself.

McSweeney consistently uses the landscape as a primary source of stimulation and he admits to the fact that this basic source born in the form of sketches may never have a direct equivalent in the finished piece - the landscape is there fore his lever of energy.

"I search around the landscape with a sketch pad, during a session in the landscape I could make a few dozen drawings or sometimes I will just walk in the landscape and look. From these notes I might find something that will help me into a piece of work. Its what happens during the first few hours on the canvas that will

shape the work. I might refer back to the notes from time to time or more often than not, dismiss them completely". (13)

From this we learn that McSweeney does not go out intentionally to find a certain landscape or aspect of it. He may find certain stimuli in the landscape which recur in his work but his is consistently looking for the potential for invention.

In his painting "Wicklow Hills" 1979 (FIG 3.) we are confronted with his strong contrast of colour, which he fuses subtly together. Again an underlying landscape is recognisable only as a localised view as opposed to a panoramic view. However the landscape would seem to be of little importance in this painting, he is concentrating more on the flow of paint, colour and technique. Much of his work is done with finger painting to which McSweeney frequently resorts. As well as being in direct physical contact with the surface it allows him much greater freedom and movement. It also increases the spontaneous effects which are evident in this work. He frequently changes his paintings in this spontaneous manner, shifting paint around on the canvas. At this stage the subject matter becomes irrelevant. Unlike many painters McSweeney mixes his paint directly on the canvas and often uses paint direct from the tube using the surface itself, as in this painting, where he is basically using two colours - Blue and Yellow, the greenish tint resulting from the interaction of the colours. With this limited 'palette' he stretches the colour as far as possible, still managing to hold on to the original,



FIG 3. WICKLOW HILLS 1979



freshness or intensity of both colours - One can detect a sense of urgency in much of his painting. It very often seems important for him to catch a movement in the landscape, perhaps a gust of wind shivering through the trees or grass. He uses this device to create much of the spontaneity and excitement in his painting.

This spontaneity and energy is strongly captured in 'Bogland Wicklow' 1982, (FIG 4.) Here he uses burning vivid colours in a fast sweeping manner. The landscape is almost swept past and yet is held constant by the dramatic break between land and sky again a common characteristic in his work. Indeed this break or horizon line is the only reason why we perceive it to be as landscape in the painting. It automatically gives us a sense of depth and reference to associate it with its title.

McSweeney relies strongly on the texture of the paint as in this painting where he has physically dragged the paint across the surface. Carefully sanded boards are used in his work also, as is a fine grained canvas. By using supports like these he can eliminate the surface texture completely and concentrate on the application of thick paint. In his early life he many have been influenced by the heavy impasto type painting of 'Antonio Mancini' whom he would have frequently observed in the Hugh Lane Gallery. Mancini created very rough almost pebbledash texture over which he used a dry brush technique. His subject matter is almost unrecognisable on close observation as the texture takes over. It is only at a certain distance you can preceive an image in his work. McSweeney often approached this type of texture in his painting but also varies greatly towards



FIG 4. BOGLAND WICKLOW 1982



the other end, where he sometimes uses rough canvas.

In 'Bogland Wicklow' 1982 (FIG 4.) the paint as well as been textural, stands out strongly in his use of vibrant reds and yellows against an earthy background which is almost black at times. The dark burnt umber colours naturally associate us with the images of the bog. McSweeney has a constant fascination for bogland marsh and the landscape adjacent to such areas. Much of his work is created from either mountain or bog landscapes or from very bleak remote areas of countryside. He steers clear of urban cultural landscape as this does not produce the wildness or energy he can gather from the natural environment. When he moved from Wicklow to Sligo in 1984 he moved to the very edge of Western landmass. The area is sparsely populated and as a result has a greater harshness and wilder sense of nature unaffected by man's presence. Although he may have experienced a sense of this in Wicklow he is certainly in daily contact with more severe elements in Sligo.

Since moving to Sligo he has focussed on a bogland environment around his home. Much of the area is wet and produces many colourful flowers and plants together with a combination of organic growth and vegetation. Much of the bogland surrounding his home has been barbered by the blades of harvesting machines for domestic purposes and these sections of the landscape provide McSweeney with an endless variety of visual inspiration.

In a recent 1988 painting titled 'Kellys Bog' (FIG 5) McSweeney portrays strong imagery of this bog. There are a variety of



FIG 5. KELLY'S BOG, 1988

interpretations grouped within this painting. It is possible to identify Boy cotton, Wild flowers, rushes, water, turf banks etc. but he is forcing our imagination to see these, as the painting still remains a personal representation of the bog. His attraction and relentless obsession with this environment is very evident in most of his more recent work.

In one of most recent paintings 'Bogland Trees' 88/89 (FIG 6.) he is again portraying a sense of the elemental conditions using the imagery of trees which are quite sparse in this landscape. His vigorous and confident application of paint to the surface strongly expresses that elemental force in nature. The trees slant at the mercy of this force and there is no ambiguity, its just simply and strongly conveyed. However my next chapter will deal specifically with aspects of McSweeneys work which are far more questionable.



FIG 6. BOGLAND TREES 88/89

CHAPTER I FOOTNOTES

1. John Dewey, Art As Experience P64.
2. Sean McSweeney, Questionnaire, Question No2.
3. IBID, Question No5.
4. IBID, Question No3.
5. Brian Fallon, "Works That Place Artist To The Front"
Irish Times (July 4th 1969) P8.
6. IBID, P8.
7. Sean McSweeney, Questionnaire, Question No12.
8. Raymond Gallagher, "Fine Show By Young Artist"
Irish Press (July 15th 1967)
9. Sean McSweeney, Questionnaire, Question No25.
10. IBID, Question No24.
11. Bruce Arnold, "Three Shows With One Thing In Common"
Irish Times (July 4th 1969) P9.

12. IBID, P9.

13. Sean McSweeney, Questionnaire, Question No10.

CHAPTER II

"The big battle of form and rigorous structural analysis have not been fought to the bitter end." (1)

So, to what was Fallon referring in the above statement, - yes, it was one of McSweeney's earlier one man shows in the late sixties at the Dawson Gallery Dublin - but never the less has equal validity with regard to his later and more recent pieces. The battle is comprised of on the one hand with his skillful usage of powerful hues with purity and directness which intensify the strength of his uninhibited energies and on the other hand one could wish as Fallon states for rather less *"lyricism and a little more hardness"*. (2). Lyricism is a term which can be interpreted in numerous ways. - To describe lyricism in terms of colour usage is a very individual assessment depending upon one's reaction to tones of colour and mixtures. From a personal stance, this lyricism which Fallon criticises profusely is seen in the piece entitled "Bogland Trees" (FIG 6.) 88-89. The lyricism in relation to this piece is not an apparently intentional one but has strong overtones in the form of his harmonious use of tones seen in the comfortable fusion of emeralds, cobalts viridians and Cadmiums. Considering the fact that the subject is actual 'bogland trees' we find ourselves seduced into a scape of over co-ordination in many respects - e.g. the horizon line in the painting gives off a 'halo' of filtering and very 'lyrical' light - I fully believe this lyricism is not fully intentional of McSweeney for lyricism' sake, as I have witnessed

his working process in the studio itself. On that occasion he became so ecstatically involved with the markmaking and the uninhibited use of paint itself, even directly from the tube, that it is undeniably obvious that the urgency to get the pigment to the canvas supercedes any preconceptions. In 'Bogland trees' FIG 6. 88/89 it seems that McSweeney has transferred that elemental forces which exists in nature to the canvas itself and I hope not to sound romantic in this respect - he grabs that sudden gust of wind certainly, but in his over preoccupation with this urgency he perhaps overlooked the harshness of the bogscape. Emotional is a good word to use here. I do believe that Sean McSweeney is too emotionally involved to be adequately objective in this particular case. Yet he most certainly succeeds in energising that relief through his marks but he forgets to deal with the over harmonising of tone which lends to this 'lyricism'.

Critics like Brian Fallon compare McSweeney to the Irish landscapists Patrick Collins - ie:-

*"McSweeney is to be classed with
the colourful lyrical and less formed
side of Irish Art, the side represented
outstandingly by Patrick Collins." (3)*

Patrick Collins portrays a similar environment in an atmospheric mystical manner but focuses on centres of emphasis such as sheep, birds, stones, etc. - This automatically means he can combine an atmospheric quality with structural image. On examining the usage of titles by both, Collins uses very specific ones such

as "A place with Stones" (Fig 7.) while McSweeney uses a title like 'Bogland Trees' (FIG 6.) which is far more general. Referring back to the comment made by Brian Fallon at the beginning of this chapter, the work of Patrick Collins can most certainly be seen as having those qualities of 'hardness' which Fallon cannot find in McSweeney's work. On initial viewing of for example Collins 'Travelling Tinkers' (FIG 8.) 1968 one can see that although Collins uses a very minimal amount of structure but succeeds in saying a great deal with that minimal amount, McSweeney on the other hand uses generally an apparently unconscious structural device found in his use of darker tones. These darker tones solidify what is undoubtedly a mass of dashed markmaking. A prime example is 'Bogland Pools' (FIG 9.) 1987, Collins does not rely on this structural device in the same manner because of his different technique in applying paint, it being a much flatter smoother approach.

Fallon unleashes another important point in the article "Landscapists, purity and directness" - This point has contemporary validity also, ie -

"McSweeney has a knack of seeming at first a good deal more abstract than he is, but the underlying landscape pattern is quickly recognisable." (4)

So, how does this point apply to both artists. Regarding McSweeney's work in general in answer to my question included in



FIG 7. A PLACE WITH STONES

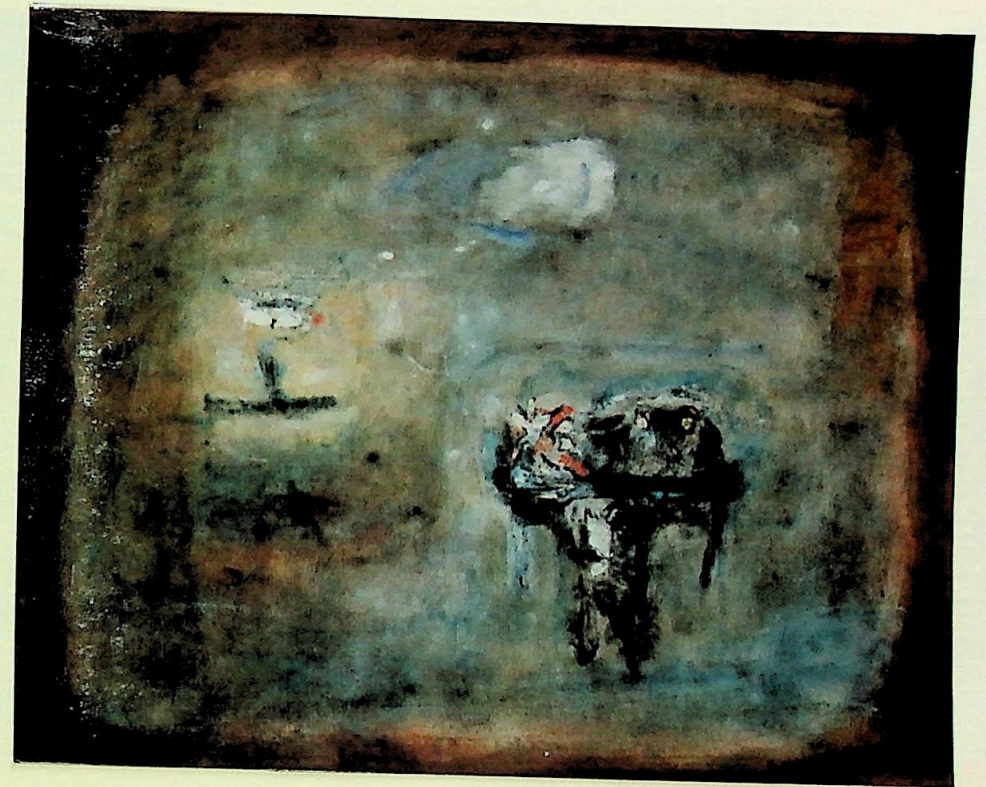


FIG 8. TRAVELLING TINKERS 1968



FIG 9. BOGLAND POOLS 1987

the written interview - "To what degree are you concerned with depicting the landscape in a representational way"? His reply -

*"I have no interest in representational work,
I am more concerned with a sense of place,
the mood, the light and what the elements have
done to the landscape, I think my work at
times is often more semi-abstract than figurative. (5)*

Taking this point at its face value McSweeney is denying to a certain extent the undoubtful ease by which one can actually recognise the landscape in his work. Without even taking a hint from his titles one can see clearly a strong representational element but through a very personalised and expressionistic manner. Of course this can only be expected from an artist living and depending so much on the feeling of the place, and the urgency to express those elemental qualities of that particular place. Patrick Collins on the other hand does not feel this same sense of urgency as clarified in The July edition of 'Magill' 1984. When asked to revisit a particular location in Sligo he replied, according to Aidan Dunne -

*"He had it all in his head, he didn't
need to see it. It would spoil it too see it." (6)*

From this the memory bank of his mind takes the place of the actual scape or location. - His painting "Travelling Tinkers" FIG 8.) certainly gives this very transient quality. It evokes a rather strange and in a sense detached mood which could only

come from that distancing of himself from the source.

While concentrating on and emphasising the dash and freedom of paint McSweeney has again fallen prey to critics for his lack of drawing. As his initial drawing on bare canvas is nearly always covered up by the application of paint much of his work does not portray much draftsmanship -

"The paint is treated with a similar dash and freedom, with plentiful impastos, tube squeezing (at least it looks like that) and apparently scoring with the end of the brush handle. This incidently is about as close as McSweeney gets to drawing in the strictest sense." (7)

By combining the techniques on the canvas paint drawing, composing and mixing in a simultaneous fashion, he is constantly changing the effects and imagery. This may be why the evidence of drawing is not visible. From this stand point it is appropriate to discuss the most unavoidable criticism, that being the continuous reference to the work of Jack B Yeats by critics alike. The impasto use of paint is where the immediate similarities between Yeats and McSweeney lie - but undoubtedly as referred to in the last comment made by Brian Fallon the major difference lie in McSweeneys apparent lack of draughtmanship. When interviewed by aidan Dunne of the Magill magazine in July 1984, McSweeneys own personal reaction to these statements was clarified -

"That got to me. I possibly tightened up a little too much as a result. I still feel I have to work at shaking off the literal thing, at allowing energy; and freedom in". (8)

Some people might react to this reaction by assuming that McSweeney is 'playing safe' as the expression goes, without really justifying his apparent usage of drawing as a tool. In the interview I held with Sean McSweeney I questioned him about his normal procedure with regard to the importance of drawing in the initial stages of his work, -

"I search around the landscape with a sketch pad. During a session in the landscape I could make a few dozen drawings or sometimes I will just walk in the landscape and look. From these notes I might find something that will help me into a piece of work. Its what happens during the first few hours on the canvas that will shape the work. I might refer back to the notes from time to time or more often than not dismiss them completly." (9)

Here he justifies the fact that he obviously finds little need to develop his drawing towards a sophisticated level and I find the justification could be equalled to the fact that 'Patrick Collins' has no need to refer and keep referring to the landscape itself - both are equally applicable to Brian Fallon's questioning - fortunately for Collins he has not fallen prey to the

critics for his lack of reference to source.

With regards to this point about McSweeney's lack of drawing, Yeats has been made a prime competitor by Irish critics alike. To discuss this a little further McSweeney's 'Ballyconnell Sligo' (FIG 10.) and Yeats 'Many Ferries' (FIG 11.) are appropriate samples. Yeats - who was born into an academic tradition, reveals in this piece a rather clear recognition of his seriousness about drawing and its relevance. Just taken on visual terms alone McSweeney's piece does not have such an obvious recognition, as the fluidity of the markmaking seems to take over in an urgent mood.

Both McSweeney and Yeats utilise sculptural or three dimensional qualities through the use of paint, both in terms of texture, and dramatic contrasts. The critics jumped at this similarity of approach and immediately hailed McSweeney as an almost unworthy successor to this tradition.

"In style manner and approach he takes up landscape painting where Jack Yeats left it at the end of his life. But whereas Yeats, after a lifetime in which the mastery of line composition draughtsmanship and graphic ability could afford to give way in his later work to the riot of colour and sheer power of the rich impasto technique he developed, Sean McSweeney lacks the necessary discipline to do this entirely without success." (10)



FIG 10. BALLYCONNELL SLIGO



FIG 11. MANY FERRIES

Looking directly at both the 'Ballyconnel Sligo' (FIG 10.) and 'Many Ferries' (FIG 11.) I really cannot find a full justification for the above criticism, - ie McSweeney lacks the necessary discipline to do this entirely without success. Grant it, Yeats developed to a very highly accomplished level, as regards his painterliness taking into consideration his very graphic, academic earlier pieces. Perhaps this formed a very relevant lever from which McSweeney could spring into an even more fully developed Expressionism. Taking all this into account McSweeney's sense of adventure with markmaking seems to be much more highly advanced, less inhibited, less safe than that of Yeats. Aidan Dunne of the Magill magazine 1984 draws the same conclusions - *"His work has been about not just landscape, but the adventure of painting."* (1) This sheer adventure is lacking in Yeats 'Many Ferries'. (FIG 11.)

Supposing one were to remove the figure from Yeats pieces - What then would be confronting the viewer? Admittedly - a backdrop, a stage set, a platform - any one of these terms could be applied. Why is this so? Without the figure or figures we substract the strength of his ideologies, we substract the very essence of his works. So what justification has any critic to even suggest that Yeats has more of a right to the richness of impasto, more of a right to indeed anything over anybody, more particularly in relation to McSweeney because it is clear that Yeats is not even a landscape painter.

Yeats in his actual application of paint treats both grass and flesh alike. On a deeper psychological level this similarity of treatment is a metaphor for the unison of man and earth. - This unison seen by Yeats as the natural and vital connection between man and nature. McSweeney on the other hand does not allow any human interference. We are not conscious of an inhabited environment and therefore cannot relate it to the human emotions expressed in Yeats's work, in any direct way. The landscape exists by itself - for itself, - as itself, It relies on nothing but itself.- What ingredients comprise to give his work this quality? - From a personal level it seems to be that strong Element of chance - and accident as varified by himself -

"You work towards freeing the thing, you have to find a sympathy for the paint, for the texture. After that it doesn't matter what it looks like." (12)

or as Aidan Dunne has revealed in Magill magazine July 1984 by McSweeney -

"You should do what you like and take chances, enjoy the excitement of risk." (13)

From this point, the element of chance is recognised by McSweeney himself as a very vital part of his method of working. He is very much aware of becoming too precious, which he feels would encourage elements of dishonesty to the initial emotion and lead to superficiality. However McSweeney is not the first

painter to respect this chance element in painting. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Czechoslovakian artist, Oskar Kokoschka who painted also in an expressionist impasto style was to a certain extent supportive of this concept. He is quoted saying that he was, -

"looking for the dramatic 'accident' which will weld the individual spirits into a higher order." (14)

He also pioneered what he called the "Fourth Dimension" - which he claimed was based on man's creative ability. This is a higher level of vision than the ordinary three dimensions seen with basic eyesight. It is the coupling of real world, as seen with the outer eye, with that of the more hallucinatory image of the inner' eye. All of his work is created in this context, his striving towards a form of expression that blended the outer with the inner.

Karl Krous later referred to this concept when he wrote -

"I am proud of Kokoschka's testimony, because the truth of the genius that distorts is higher than the truth of anatomy and because in the presence of art, reality is only an optical illusion." (15)

This point seen in the light of McSweeney's distortion of reality, expression of impression or spiritual presence as in the sense of place can be most definitely compared to Kokoschka's approach. Kokoschka transforms his pictures to reflect his highly imaginative and creative power and deliberately distorts his compositions and colours to give full force of his inner image. To deal with this point a little more deeply two pieces of work can be discussed - 'Bride of the Wind' 1914 (FIG 12.) by Kokoschka and 'Bogland 87' (FIG 13.) by McSweeney. The concepts behind 'Bride of the Wind' is essentially a poetic imaginative ordeal. He and his lover float in a swirling sea of turbulent confusion, totally remote from anything earthly. The relationship between the conscious and the unconscious is fully contained in this picture. This painting was definitely created in Kokoschka's "Fourth Dimension" or on his higher plane of vision - The intense highlighted hues of colour and dramatic distortion has much in common with McSweeney's almost ecstatic urgency to intensify his hues in the 'Bogland '87' (FIG 13.) painting. From the study of both pieces the element of chance comes through both painter's reliance on spontaneous, uninhibited markmaking. Oskar Kokoschka's work was heavily laden with strong psychological analysis which he expressed in visual verbal and literal means. Here marks the difference between both artists - as McSweeney values the visual as of primary importance. Both see visual art as a language, every colour has a value and evokes a response in human beings of all nationalities. much more so than language in the literacy sense. The language of



FIG 12. BRIDE OF THE WIND 1914



FIG 13. BOGLAND 87

the emotion is primarily evident in the work of McSweeney,
its emphasis being on vital power and energy rather than on
humanity and observation.

CHAPTER II FOOTNOTES

1. Brian Fallon, "Landscapists Purity And Directness"
Irish Times (Oct 1965) p9.
2. IBID, P6.
3. Brian Fallon, "Landscapes By Sean McSweeney"
Irish Times (Friday June 6th 1980) P6.
4. Brian Fallon, "Landscapes Purity And Directness"
Irish Times (October 1965) p9.
5. Sean McSweeney Questionnaire, Question No11
6. Aidan Dunne, "Sean McSweeney At The Taylor"
Magill (July 1984) P48.
7. Brian Fallon, "Landscapes By Sean McSweeney"
Irish Times, (Friday June 6th 1980) p6.
8. Aidan Dunne, "Sean McSweeney At The Taylor"
Magill (July 1984) P48.
9. Sean McSweeney, Questionnaire, Question No10.
10. Bruce Arnold, "One-Man Show Sellout"
Sunday Independent (July 16th 1967) P21.

11. IBID, P48.

12. IBID, P48.

14. Wolf - Dieter Dube, The Expressionists
Chapter (4) P189.

15. IBID, P184.

CONCLUSION

In retrospect, Sean McSweeney has been over scrutinised by critic's who make presumtious statements such as that made by Brian Fallon, who refered to his "lacking real thinking power" as discussed in Chapter One. Its a pity that verbal dexterity or intellectualism enjoys such a pedestal - that pedestal created by critics and historians alike. I cannot empathise with such direct personal insults, however I have learned a great deal from some of the valuable objective criticism.

Dealing with the reasons for his choice of subject matter, opened for me a vast arena of questions and answers. I find his basic honesty to himself, by choosing to deal continually with the landscape, evidence of a very deep rooted genuine feeling. This honesty to his roots, expresses an energy fed on, one could say, a 'single minded' yet vibrant reservoir that has developed with intensity and yet retains that same freshness over the years. As Herbert Read has promptly put it -

*"Vision is fed by human experience, as a
lamp with oil." (1)*

By this I want to make it clear that I see the fact that he does not pretend to the critics that his work is full of concepts, he is honest to that single minded obsession with the landscape. His 'vision' is 'single minded' as viewed by many, but the fact that it is direct reaction to his own 'human experience' justifies his many simple but valuable philosophies.

He most certainly uses the landscape as a form of departure from where his imagination can take over, most effectively in his later works as discussed in Chapter II. To the question about whether his use of dramatic chance is conscious - I have concluded that it is a device but not a conscientious one, as discussed in relation to my witnessing him in his studio. Of course this 'chance' is important as it opens up a vast array of opportunities in which he can afford to be less precious and where markmaking can have room to be as adventurous and spontaneous as possible. This aspect of chance was argued at great length in the 2nd Chapter while relating his work to that of Kokoschka. I have argued in the second chapter about the great Yeatsian legacy and how his ideologies lay primarily in a dependence on the figure, My conclusion was that no critic has a right even to suggest that Yeats has more of a right to the richness of impasto, - more of a right to indeed anything over anybody, more particularly in relation to McSweeney because it is clear from my investigation that Yeats is hardly even a landscape painter.

The following quotation from Sean McSweeney is one example of his simple yet very valuable philosophies and one, I as a developing landscape painter hope some day to fully appreciate -

*"Painting is all about whether you have
the stamina and the guts to go on,
anything else is an extra." (2)*

CONCLUSION FOOTNOTES

1. Herbert Read, 'A Concise History Of Modern Painting'
Chapter (7) P244.
2. Aidan Dunne, "Sean McSweeney At The Taylor"
Magill (July 1984) P48.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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13. Fallon, Brian: "Sean McSweeney Exhibition"
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QUESTIONNAIRE

SEAN MCSWEENEY

1. *Childhood Influences*

Family Life

Background and Education

One of a family of six, my father was killed in an accident when I was five years old. I was the second youngest of the family. I attended night classes at the N.C.A.D. for life drawing and composition. Attended Saturday afternoon class for oil paint given by Terry Gayor.

2. *What age did you become aware of your interest in Art?*

My grandfather, uncle and father were decorators by trade. They did a lot of Church work which included touching up images of saints, marbling and graining. My father was a very good amateur painter and showed his work in the painters gallery which was on St. Stephen's Green. After my father's death a lot of his work, some unfinished, was left around the house, my mother's energy and time, was taken up coping with the family so I was free to do what I liked with my fathers oil paint and unfinished paintings so from an early age I was working with oil paint.

3. *Was there any tradition of Painting or Arts within your family?*

My father painted portraits of all the family. We had lots of his work around the walls. You could open a wardrobe and a bundle of his drawings would tumble out. His paintings were used as firescreens - they were fashionable in those days - During the war years fuel was scarce and damp so from time to time his paintings were used to fan the fire and encourage the flame. So to us as young children there was nothing precious about works of art. We had them all around the house, you could turn over a chair and find a painting nailed to the bottom of the chair to keep in the springs.

4. *When you did become aware of your interest, did you make a conscious decision to become involved in Painting or was it something that developed over a period of time?*

I don't ever remember making any conscious decision to become involved in painting. I always felt that I was always part of the whole act of picture making from a very early age. My mother was a very practical person and while she admired all the good work my father had done, the late 30's and 40's wasn't a good time for selling art so my mother went on with the job of earning a living to keep us fed and we had the pleasure of enjoying my father's work, mind you a lot of his work was destroyed.

5. *Who or what was your immediate influence at this stage?*

I lived in Dublin most of my young life. We lived in an old Georgian house which is still the family home, 7, Synnott Place, Dorset St., just 5 mins walk from the Hugh Lane Gallery. I spent a lot of time in that Gallery, looking and learning. I was lucky that I had the works of major artists right on my doorstep. There I saw the works of Yeats, Utrillo, Rouault, Hone, Constable, Sergeant, Augustus John, Antonio Mancini, Hennessy, Henry, Corot, a lovely head by Degas and also the very fine visiting exhibitions. I found this study in the gallery a great help to my work and I enjoy going back to the Hugh Lane to see my favourite works. Its a joy to see Nano Reid's fine painting of Cats in the Kitchen and Ambrose McEvoy's study for "The Dancers" and particularly the Hugh Lane Collection.

6. *Was there any particular motivation or driving force behind your work?*

The driving force behind my work was a simple one. I wanted to be a painter and I was always aware of that fact. I had no doubts, however like all young artists I had to work during the day to make some money and confined my painting to the night and early hours of the morning. I was fortunate that we lived in a big house so from an early stage I was able to set up a studio.

7. *When you started painting was it something you had to work hard at or was it more spontaneous?*

From time to time the act of picture making can be spontaneous but on the whole the painting act is hard work and as time goes on it doesn't get easier because the painter is becoming more critical of his work.

8. *What sparked off your interest in using the landscape as a source for painting?*

Although I lived in Dublin I spent a lot of time in the country - Meath, Sligo, Wicklow - I was always aware of a strong organic feel to my work and its important for me to keep in touch with the landscape as a source of inspiration.

9. *Being from a city background had this influenced you more towards the freedom of the countryside?*

I was first generation Dublin so my links with Meath and Sligo were very strong. I lived in Meath for a few years before my fathers death and most of our Summer holidays were spent in Sligo.

10. *How do you begin to create a painting?*

I search around the landscape with a sketch pad. During a session in the landscape I could make a few dozen drawings or sometimes I will just walk in the landscape and look. From these notes I might find something that will help me into a

piece of work. It's what happens during the first few hours on the canvas that will shape the work. I might refer back to the notes from time to time or more often than not dismiss them completely.

11. To what degree are you concerned with depicting the landscape in a representational way?

I have no interest in representational work. I am more concerned with a sense of place, the mood, the light and what the elements have done to the landscape, I think my work at times is often more semi-abstract than figurative.

12. Do you allow your own creativity and imagination to take over at any stage within the painting process?

A piece of work is not worth tackling unless you are prepared to dig for a share of creativity and let the imagination have its head.

13. In the imaginative process do you work colour into the process or are you always aware to keep an element of reality in your colour?

I don't go out to copy nature, however the light and mood of the landscape is bound to be echoed in the palette I use.

14. *Is colour primary concern in your work - why?*

Colour plays a big part in my work. It must be dreamed and must be imagined. I am conscious of light. You can be told about the qualities of colour, juxtaposition of hues, cold - warm contrast, complementary contrasts etc. etc. but its only in using colour and working with it that you learn all about these qualities. Colour is a very personal thing, you are born with a colour sense in the same way as a person is born with a singing voice.

15. *Have you any preconcieved ideas about colour before you actually start a piece?*

At times the colour flows, for that again you have to work at it and then there are the days when everything turns to a muddy grey.

16. *Do you have your palette mixed before hand?*

Most of the time I use the support as a palette but from time to time I will set up a palette.

17. *Do you mix colour from a few basic colours or, do you use colour straight from a tube - why, or why not?*

I use a very limited palette and most of the time I use the pigment straight from the tube onto the canvas.

18. *Oil paint seems to be the most constant medium in your work - Why?*

Yes, I use oil paint all the time and enjoy it. I would like to spend more time at watercolours. I tried encaustic painting the smell was wrong and the fumes nearly killed me. I wasn't happy with the finish on the work. It resembled enamel.

19. *In preparing your paint etc. is it important for you to use linseed oil thinners etc?*

I use a lot of turps or petrol, I enjoy using wax.

20. *Do you consider priming an important aspect of preparing your surface?*

Its very important to select a suitable support and then get the priming right. I use rabbit skin size and a good quality primer. PVA and emulsion is not suitable for permanent painting.

21. *Do you think different primers giver different qualities?*

Depending on the work in hand you must decide whether you need an absorbent ground or non absorbent ground.

22. *Do you ever give thought to the texture of canvas and how it will effect the finished surface?*

I enjoy working on canvas. Good quality canvas is very expensive but if you can afford it it's a pleasure to use. When the canvas is well stretched, sized and ready for use it should sound like a bodhran but when the work is completed it can be quite limp but you can get the tension back by knocking in the wedges. My preference is for a fine tooth canvas but at the moment I am working with a jute canvas which is quite rough.

23. *Is the size of the canvas an important factor if so, Why?*

No, it is not important, I work very small and large.

24. *Do you find size restricts or inhibits your development - small/large?*

No I don't, however it takes a lot more energy and costs a lot to produce a large canvas.

25. *Do you find painting larger more expressive in content, scope, etc. Why?*

Yes, I enjoy working on a large canvas, however I feel you can get as much into a small canvas as a larger one.

26. *Your paintings have been described as expressive would you agree?*

Yes, my work has been described as expressive.

27. *Do you think the application of paint indicates this expression?*

Yes, the application of paint can play a big part in the finished work. It's very exciting when you get the pigment moving well. I enjoy the works of Frank Aurbach and admire the bold way he uses his pigment.

28. *Your painting indicates the use of the palette knife and finger painting to a great degree, does this enable you to have a closer more direct association with the painting or landscape? Do you ever use brushes?*

Yes, I use the palette knife a lot. I also use a rag and I enjoy applying paint with my fingers. I use brushes constantly particularly when i'm starting off a painting.

29. *Do you ever utilise any other surface apart form canvas?*

I paint on canvas some of the time. I paint on well sanded hardboard all the time. I sometimes use good quality water-coloured paper, sized and primed for oil paint.

30. *In many of your paintings texture and buildup of paint is very evident, while others remain sketchy. How do you arrive at a balance or decision as to which way you paint?*

I use paint in different ways. I sometimes use it very heavy and for that again I use just essence of colour.

31. *Bog Landscape seems to be a recurring motif within your painting, Do you feel drawn towards the isolation of this type of landscape, or do you feel a more original sense of Irishness within the landscape?*

I am working on the Bogland for the last number of years and will continue on this area as I feel there is still a lot more work I have to do. It is very much a West of Ireland landscape. The area of bogland I work on is a beautiful area of cutaway bog. Late Spring and early Summer, its a wild garden with bog iris , bog cotton, flag and lots of other wild flowers. Its an area I've known since my youth when I saw the local farmers cut away a lot of the bog. At the moment we are hoping to preserve this bog as it now stands.

32. *Many of your paintings reflect a romantic aspect of landscape which may be difficult to avoid when dealing with this type of subject, are you conscious of this romanticism associated with this subject matter?*

Yes

33. *Do you regard your work as European or is there any specific Irish influence?*

Did your work change when you lived in Spain?

I regard myself as very much an Irish painter in the same way as I would regard Nano Reid and Paddy Collins as Irish painters. I did a lot of watercolours and drawings when I was in Spain. I was delighted to get an opportunity to visit Prado and admire the works of Velasquez, Goya and El Greco. I also enjoyed visiting the modern gallery in Cuenca Las Casa Colgados and enjoyed the work of the modern Spanish painters particularly Tapies. The five months I spent in Spain helped my work particularly when I came back to the Irish landscape.

34. *What do you regard as the content in your work? Is it Topographically specific?*

Is there any interest in Mythology?

Is landscape a metaphor for anything else?

In no way is my work topographically specific. Regarding mythology, no - it doesn't enter into my work however I am aware of a mystical sense in some of the work. I do not use the landscape as a metaphor.

35. *What are your ambitions in relation to painting?*

In the mid seventies for a full two years I found myself in a black hole. I saw no reason for painting and just couldn't do anything. It's a wonderful feeling when you greet the day with a strong urge to express yourself with paint. it is important

to get to your studio everyday, even if some days you do nothing more than move your work around and look at it.

36. How do you see your work in relationship to Major 20 Century Art Movements?

I see myself mainly as a landscape painter and I don't see myself fitting into any movement.

37. What is your attitude towards abstraction?

Would you associate any abstract artist with your work or ideas?

I love pure abstract painting. One of my favourite modern painters is Mark Rothko.

38. Do you ever destroy any paintings because they don't work?

I am a fairly prolific painter but I also destroy a lot of my work.

39. What makes a painting work for you?

When you marry form and colour together.