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GERARD DILLON:

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN
AND
COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

FACULTY OF FINE ART
DEPARTMENT OF PAINTING

BY
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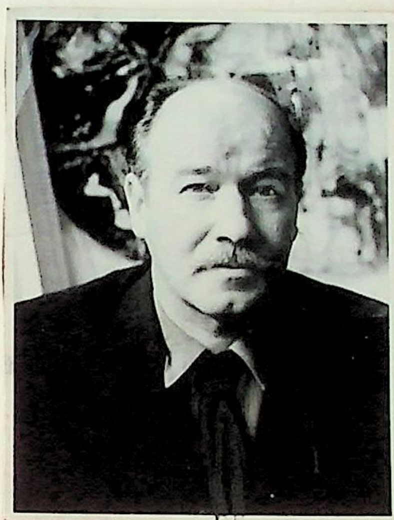
MARCH 1990



GERARD DILLON (1916 - 1971)

In order to get on the road towards modernisation, is it necessary to jettison the old cultural past which has been the raison detre of a nation? There is the paradox, how to become modern and to return to sources.[1]

IN MEMORY OF GERARD DILLON

You walked, all of a sudden, through
The rickety gate which opens to a
Scatter of curlews,
An acre of watery light; your grave
A dip in the dunes where sand mislays
The sound of the sea, earth over you
Like a low Irish sky; The sun
An electric light bulb clouded
By sandy tides, sunlight lost
And found, a message in a bottle.

You are a room full of self portraits
A face that follows us everywhere;
An ear to the ground listening for
Dead brothers in layers; an eye
Taking in the beautiful predators -
Cats on the window sill; birds of prey
And, between the diminutive fields,
A dragon fly, wings full of light,
Where the road narrows to the last farm.

Christening robes, Communion dresses
The shawls of factory workers,
A blind drawn on the lower falls.

MICHAEL LONGLEY

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INTRODUCTION

Gerard Dillon was a key figure in the development of modern art in Ireland. His career spanned the early struggle and consolidation of Modernism in this country and his work reflects the prevailing societal and cultural influences of that period.

An evaluation of Dillon and his work offers us an understanding of the personal necessities and actual conditions attendant upon the 'progress' of Irish art in this century (Biography is useful to the extent that a life reflects and acts upon it's times).

My own interest in Dillon, stems from a long standing attraction to his work (which is sometimes uneven in quality, but always interesting) and this essay was both an exercise in primary biographical research and an attempted understanding of certain threads and motives of Irish art.

Dillon confronted and overcame problems of artistic creation in a provincial milieu (with both personal and artistic consequences). It is worth relating that he himself thought it was 'impossible to translate a purely visual experience, that pictures work only on your imagination',[2] so to a degree, he denies analysis.

Since his death in 1971, interest was briefly generated in him by a retrospective organised by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. The public consciousness of Dillon should be raised with the forthcoming biography written by Dr. James White. I would like to thank him and the others listed for their information, correction and confirmation for me of Dillon's worth: Arthur Armstrong, Michael Longley, John Kelly, Brian Ferran, Gerard Dillon (Nephew), Belfast Public Records Office and the Taylor Gallery Dublin.

CHAPTER ONE

The Formative Years

Gerard Dillon was born in 1916 in Clonard Street, Belfast. It was a traditionally Catholic area and his early life was similar in most respects to the average childhood in West Belfast.

There were difficulties for the Dillon family, however - Joseph, his father, was an alcoholic and his mother, Amie, responded to this with a vigourous Catholicism (the fact that four of the seven children were homosexual in later life suggest they were an unusual family).

Belfast was different from any other city in Ireland or Britain, due to the particular problems of sectarianism and as a Catholic, Dillon was lucky to get a painting and decorating apprenticeship in 1930. He said later:

> I was sent to serve my time as a house painter; that was not bad at all, for at least I learnt to be familiar with brushes and paint, but it became a bit boring having to cover large spaces with one colour only, when my hand was itching to draw and compose.[3]

He was involved in local drama groups and his early drawings of Belfast are a theatrical treatment of the daily life of the Catholic people, The Bride in the Grotto, The Baby in the Kitchen. For instance, Dillon's city is folksy - the Falls Road is his parish. It was not an urban vision, but rather a depiction of the Catholic village called West Belfast.

His only formal training was three months of still life and water colour classes in the Belfast 'tech', so he was never to be constrained by observational or academic concerns and was able early on to idealise reality towards a humourous and romantic approach. He said: 'When I'd see prostitutes coming out of pubs with drunken sailors, I used to paint them fatter and blowsier than they were'.[4]

At 18 years of age, his mother allowed him to go to London, where he qualified as a tradesman with a firm in Park Lane. In London, he began to take up painting seriously. Like most immigrant Irish, he did not mix with the English community and the work was very much an assertion of his identity (he signed these paintings in Irish).

Dillon shared his generation's profound awareness of their nationality. He was hostage all his life to the nationalism which Ernest Gellner observed:- 'usually conquers in the name of primitive folk culture it's symbols drawn from the pristine vigourous life of the peasants'.[5]

He had made some trips to the West of Ireland in the late 1930's and saw there (as a Belfast Catholic) an uncolonised way of life which could be an ideal for a future Ireland. His work was beginning to articulate a vision of a native community (an imagined society), obviously he was influenced in this by the aspirations which were embodied in the 1937 Constitution. Paintings such as The Black Lake (Fig.1) of 1940 and Omey Island Ponies (Fig.2) of 1942, correspond with De Valera's eulogy of traditional and residual ideology.

What artists of the post-Independence generation like Dillon felt they were doing, is outlined by Edward Said:

> With the new territorality, there comes a whole set of further identifications, assertions and recoveries, all of them quite literally grounded on a poetically projected base. The search for authenticity, for a more congenial national origin than that provided by colonial history and for a new pantheon of heroes myths and religions'.[6]

The ambition of a 'National' painting was nothing new right through the Celtic revival and the struggle for independence there had been an assumption that the 'Common Race Instinct',[7] as Hugh Lane put it, would be reflected in the arts.

But there was a weak response to the emerging national identity in the fine arts, because they had been (unlike literature) the cultural domain of the Anglo-Irish. Dillon's generation had the task of de-colonising those fine arts and this is reflected in his lifelong concern for the West. He was in Connemara at the outbreak of the war and was unable to return to London due to emergency labour restrictions. Being forced to remain in Ireland, he chose the relative sophistication of the South. He explains: 'I went to Dublin and sold some work; that made Dublin seem heaven! People looked and bought'.[8]

In Dublin, he came into contact with those artists who were working towards the genisis of Irish modern art and he experienced the particular material constraints upon art practice in Ireland.

Painting was of little social consequence in the free state at that time. Thomas Bodkin outlined the governmental ambivelance in a report on the arts in 1949:

> Measures which might have been taken effectively in 1922 to foster the fine arts, are no longer likely to prove sufficient. We have not merely failed to go forward in policies concerning the arts, we have in fact regressed, in that we arrived many years ago at a condition of apathy about them, in which it had become justifiable to say of Ireland that no other country in Western Europe cared less or gave less for the cultivation of the fine arts. It might almost have been assumed that any sense of responsibility for the welfare of art had faded from our national tradition.[9]

The marginality of the fine arts in Ireland also meant that Dillon and other artists who were sympathetic to Modernism, could only be spectators of the accumulation of modern styles in 20th Century art. There had been no Irish influence in the direction of international painting; instead there had been an assimilation of modernist ideas and methods for an authentic and living Irish art.

In his article on painting in the 1950's, Brian Fallon writes of the pre-war period that:

> Modern Art was still regarded by the mass of the people as either fraudulent or subversive or both, that is in so far as the mass of the people thought about art at all.[10]

This general antipathy towards fine art and modernism in particular, was understandable, given it's origins and it's ethical and secular aspect, which (for those who understood) clashed head on with the free state 'moral agenda'.[11]

Mainie Jellet opened Dillon's first one-man show in February 1942 in the Country Shop. James White writes of the 'flat patterned style' and 'naif vision' which he had 'devised for himself up North'.[12]

What Dillon was doing was sympathetic to both 'native' and 'modern' concerns. He was finding his own synthesis in a romantic subjectivity, which was both in continuity of previous tradition and an engagement with Modernity.

The romantic ideal of 'individual vision' and the primacy of the subjective marks all of Dillon's work. Richard Kearny lists the operating terms of the romantic imagination as follows: 'Desire, will, drama, conflict, energy, tension, style, mimesis, mask, power, self and self transformation'.[13]

The Escape Artist (Fig. 5) painted in this period, powerfully illustrates his romantic vision. It is also the only work of his that I have seen, which might be described as 'Camp'.

Dillon's combination of folk and modern elements relied also on symbolist methods. In the work at this point, he would paint a cow for instance, as a bovine symbol rather than one which would 'Moo at you'.[14]

His interest was above all in the meaning. The pride of the small farm, the beef and the the milk of the people. Figures from the 10th Century had equal rights as citizens of the 20th. Dillon used Celtic figures in the sense that they were an integral part of the Irish landscape. He would frame them (as on high crosses) with fields stood on their heads, in an effort to make a whole and modern picture of the West.

The symbolist language of allusion had been a cornerstone of the Celtic revival. It was the one branch of modernism which promoted rather than negated previous cultural forms and much of the possibilities and weaknesses of Irish art would stem from it. Standish O'Grady, a progenitor of the Celtic revival, outlined the power of symbols in a society which is making itself from the past.

> The legends represent the imagination of the country, they are that kind of history which a nation desires to possess, they have a value far beyond the tale of actual events and duly recorded facts.[15]

The attraction of the symbolic for Irish modern artists is obvious in Albert Auriers definition of 1891, that symbolism was:

1. Ideative, since it's sole aim should be the expression of an idea.
2. Synthetic, since it will express those forms and signs in a way that is generally comprehensible.
3. Subjective, since the object will never be considered as an object but only as perceived by the subject.
4. Symbolist, since it must express these ideas in forms.
5. Decorative, since decorative painting properly speaking, such as it was conceived by the Egyptians, very probably by the Greeks and the primitives, is nothing other than an art at once synthetic, symbolist and ideative.[16]

With this modern aesthetic, artists like Dillon were able to connect with ancient heritage and folklore and thus align themselves with the contemporary cultural demands of the new nation.

Dillon's residence in Dublin during the war was fortunate, because paradoxically it was during this isolated 'emergency' period, that there was significant breakthroughs in the visual arts. There was the founding of the Irish Exhibition of Living Art (IELA) in Dublin, The Council For The Encouragement Of Music And Art (CEMA) in Belfast and there was also the activities of emigre artists and intellectuals (the most important of which belonged to the White Stag Group).

The IELA had developed from the nucleus of the Dublin painters group, in response to the obduracy of the academy (in common with other European academies the R.H.A. did not understand Modernism, but recognised it as the complete negation of it's own traditions). Due to the small size of the Irish art world, there was an overlap of exhibitors in the two annual shows (Dillon was to show in both the IELA and the R.H.A. throughout the 1940's).

Edward Sheehy wrote of the second IELA in 1944: 'It clutches the academic robes firmly with it's right hand, while welcoming a wide diversity with it's left'. [17]

The founding of the IELA was the point where modern art practice overtook (in a critical sense) the traditional in Ireland.

The White Stag Group had been founded in pre-war Bloomsbury, by Basil Rockozi and Kenneth Hall. They had lived initially in Galway, but came to Dublin in 1941, organising exhibitions, lectures, publishing and a centre for creative psychology in Baggot Street (which was chiefly influenced by Freudian and Jungian theories).

Their specific interest in the 'subjective' and unconscious and their homosexual ambiance (best described by Terence de Vere White in 'The Fretful Midge),[18] would have been appreciated by Dillon, who became a member in 1942.

Before the end of the war, they had organised a definitive exhibition on 'The Nature Of Subjective Art'. Herbert Read wrote the catalogue which explores surrealist themes ('Subjectivism' and Surrealism were interchangeable terms for the White Stag Group).

It is hard to estimate the effect these people had on Dillon (he was not as involved as, for instance, Patrick Scott), though it is clear that they brought a certain injection of ideas to the Irish art scene and gave an example of Modernist praxis. Their influence was noted (a touch xenophobically) by Oliver St. John Gogarty in The Bell:

> The abominations, which I beheld at the Irish Exhibition Of Living Art, were not reality; they were attempts to exploit the already debauched taste of an ignorant and dealer directed public.
>
> If you investigate, you will find that these atrocities are the work of lately come aliens who infiltrate a country through avenues of "Art".[19]

Other important events during the war were the loan exhibitions organised by James White and the Friends of the National Collection. These were the equivalent of armory shows, drawn from Irish private collections and they served to ease the passage of modernism into this country.

CHAPTER TWO

The Post-War Years

For financial reasons, Dillon had to return to London at the end of the war. He worked on the demolition squads in Lewisham, where a sympathetic employer gave him a few days a week to paint and he lived in the basement of his sister Molly's house in Abbey Road (it was his home and studio for the next 20 years).

In all his years in London, he did not establish himself to the extent of being able to give up jobs. He had some early successes, such as his inclusion in The Artists of Fame and Promise in the Leicester Gallery in 1947, but showed mainly in Dublin throughout his life.

The extent to which he pursued success is not clear; it was very difficult to get a solo exhibition in London at that time and the financial arrangements of the galleries were disadvantagous for artists. For these reasons, he sold a lot of work privately.

The fortunes of Irish artists have been shaped considerably by the Dublin galleries and their guiding personalities. Dillon had a show with Waddingtons in 1950 and thereafter, was given six pounds a week by the gallery to sell his work.

Victor Waddington had not initially been interested in showing 'Modern Art' or indeed women's work, until his former employee Leo Smith, who had left him over these policies, made a success of the Dawson Gallery.

There was a prestige attached to showing in Waddingtons, because many internationally established artists exhibited there. Through the gallery, Dillon, Cambell and others of the living art generation found a public.

In the early 1950's, his straightforward figurative romanticism was giving away to an aesthetic which would allow for new materials and meanings.

James White writes of staying with him in London during this period:

> His eyes blazed at the suggestion that the artist might in anyway be limited in the use of materials, or in the researches which could lead to the discovery of new subject matter.[20]

While this subject matter was essentially the same, Dillon, through the 1950's, was beginning to improvise with diverse media. Collage had been practiced by the surrealists; they enjoyed, as Dillon now did, it's technical accessability and it's potential for transmutation.

For example, he used a monoprint to great effect in <u>Connemara Moon</u> of 1956, to suggest the hugeness of the moon as perceived while drunk. Dillon was sympathetic to surrealist ideas, but his interest was specifically in the possibilities of everyday materials.

He started using sand in his paintings, making elaborate tests in a gas oven to ensure their durability and in the same thorough fashion, he learnt how to use a sewing machine so that he could make tapestries when he had no oil paint (he also made his own clothes).

He was getting to the West of Ireland as often as he could, doing jobs and trading his pictures for the use of peoples summer houses. By this time, he was familiar with Letterfrack, Moyard and had spent almost a year on Inishlackan, rowing himself to and from Roundstone.

When he got a teaching post in the London County Council School in Shepard's Bush, it gave his life a certain stability. He was signed up by Leo Smith's Gallery in 1957 and began his last paintings of the West.

Many of these were his best yet, in the Yellow Bungalow (Fig.9) of that year, two children sit in a magical wooden space, more like a European cabin akin to Chagall. The boy has an island haircut and is resting an accordian on his lap; it's painted in an unlikely modulation of yellows and really shows just how charmed Dillon was with the island life.

He was pressing ahead with experimentation and the work became more obviously 'modern'. He had always been aware of what was happening in Europe and by 1960, he was using cloth sacking and leather objects in his modestly sized work. He began improvising on reproductions of Picasso and Matisse, which lead to accidental forms and meanings that delighted him (much of this came from Jazz rather than art influences).

Dillon was abstracting his pictures in an effort to overcome depictive restrictions and extend the subjective vision further. One sees in this work, elements of the gestural surrealism of Joan Miro or the more textural concerns of post-war European artists like Burri (it's interesting to note the strongly regional basis of Miro's surrealism).

Dillon's most interesting work of this time is paintings like The Money Bird is Dead (Fig. 12) or The Beast/Bird Works of 1962, which were made from crocodile skin accessories.

The Glove Bird (Fig. 13) achieves a kind of compromise of figuration and abstraction. It's quite small, only 14 X 19 inches and the straps and pores of the leather, make it more P.Teradactyl than bird.

Much of Dillon's abstract work of the late 1950's and 1960's, is quite weak. He failed to develope a convincingly abstract ouevre because of his figurative imagination (his titles would always leave room for figurative interpretation).

He said 'I like modern art, but I am not a snob'.[21] This was a remark about the modern art public, but also a recognition of modernism's esoteric tendancies.

For him, to take on purely formal concerns, would have been a denial of his own character and personal experience, whether one considers this as the stultifying effect of a working class and self-taught background, or an honesty, one can evaluate in the paintings. Dillon could never be accused of a lack of courage; he was always prepared to try something and his abstracts are interesting in that they provide a counterpoint to his overwhelmingly narrative ouevre.

He represented Ireland in the Guggenheim International in 1960 and 1962 and in 1963, he travelled to the United States with Norah McGuinness as part of an Irish Goods promotion. All of this is a good indication of the States' increasingly outward looking attitude and of his own reputation in Ireland (due for the most part to his five Dawson Gallery shows since 1957).

He was exhibiting regularly in the CEMA and Arts Council Galleries in Northern Ireland and although his work did not refer to Belfast, he had never cast off his identity with that city. His attitude to the North was to be seen in the context of the institutional bias against Catholics there. He had direct experience of sectarianism in the Belfast art world (there was an opinion bluntly stated that 'Taigs' could not be good artists). 22 Had he stayed, the 'Nativeness' and modernity of his art and his sexuality would have caused him problems.

Culture in Northern Ireland, specifically art which the establishment patronised, reflected the unionist character of the state. Sir John Lavery had helped William Conor to get the Stormont Governments most important civic commissions, such as the inauguration of The Northern Irish Parliament or portraits of Craig. Conor was interested in the parochial world of Protestant East Belfast. He has been called a 'proletarian artist without protest'. 23 The quintessential 'Ulster' artist.

John Hewitt's 1951 survey of painting and sculpture in the province is defensive about the state of the arts. He found visual culture distinctive to Northern Ireland in the banners and popular iconography of the two peoples and in the masonic architecture of the state. He also found that individually, Ulster artists had carried 'Irish' art forward since independence, proving for him that artistic consciousness did not depend on religion and that it was not lacking in the North, but that public and state enthusiasm was.

In March 1958, the Belfast Telegraph ran a series of articles on the arts. They interviewed Dillon and Cambell in London about why they had left the province. Dillon said:

> It was a lean area for painters, that's why so many of us are here and not there; George Cambell last year, the year before Kenneth Mahoud, yesterday it was Arthur Armstrong, tomorrow it may be Dan O'Neill, the day after tomorrow; Who? Let Ulster art not kid itself.[24]

By 'Ulster's Art', he meant the art establishment. By all accounts Dillon did not go unrecognised in the North. Hewitt's article had ended optimistically, noting the emergence of young artists. Paraphrasing James White, he wrote that Dillon was:

> Almost a naif, he has retained his visual innocence, but more recently has found inspiration in Irish Romanesque Sculpture, thereby suggesting an unexpected means of reassessing his heritage (for he is of native antecedance) and of adding a new factor towards the solution of our aesthetic equation.[25]

In 1964, he had to move from his large basement flat due to road widening plans. This led to changes:

> I found that I just wasn't able to continue doing noisy abstracts for fear of annoying the other tenants; I couldn't be sloshing buckets of sand around; I was using a lot of sand in my abstracts at this time, or banging things about in a small flat, so I had to change. [26]

One can see this in the difference between the 1962 and 1965 Dawson shows. The first is abstract, titles like Grey Black, Misty Abstract or just Painting or Picture (he could never leave a painting untitled!).

In the 1965 show, the theme was figuratively Canvas and Clowns, the Pierrot features in most of the paintings, jostling with nude painters and the depicted canvas within the canvas. (Fig. 19)

Dillon was prolific through the 1960's (averaging 40 paintings every 18 months). In 1966, he was showing Drawings and Collages, virtually all Pierrots interacting with birds, nude figures and those canvases again.

The change in his work was the last major change in his art and there were more reasons for it than the contraction of his working space.

Dillon abandoned his 'noisy abstracts' for a figurative style which drew upon abstract and modern techniques. He was creating a symbolised world of unconscious dream and desire. The paintings would play out his feelings for Ireland and his personal life.

> I got the feeling I was dead and that the doctors and nurses were dead too and didn't know and just kept walking around in white coats. I thought to myself this must be the sort of purgatory we go through when we die, then I thought, Oh God, there's a whole pile of paintings at home I haven't signed. [29]

In an article in the Irish Times of January 1968, Dillon humourously described his heart attack of the previous September, which had precipitated his return to Ireland. Much of the article is about death, homeland and burial. Arthur Armstrong remembers a foreboding Dillon had of dying aged 54 as three of his brothers had. [30]

Feelings like this appear in his paintings via the Pierrot figure; listening to the ground or standing in an open grave. These were his last paintings, sparse and elegiac in western settings. After recovery, he returned briefly to London, but found his friends were bothering him there and anyway: 'It was a time when the Irish were coming home'.[31]

So he came back to Dublin and bought a house with Arthur Armstrong. He was not painting much and said reflectively in an interview:

> I like my own paintings so much, but really it is humility; I see a painting I did years ago and sit down and look at it and say, God, Imagine me being able to do that, I never thought I was that good.[32]

He got back into working by helping design an Abbey production of <u>Juno and the Paycock</u> and making Christmas cards for some of the semi-state companies. His next Dawson Gallery show had 44 collages. The subjects were evocative, smiling skys and lovers in hayfields, etc.

The Municipal Gallery and the College of Art asked him to give lectures in 1969 and along with Cambell and Armstrong, he started working in the Dublin Graphic Studios. It was his first time printing and he produced 21 different etchings.

Bord Failte commissioned a large wall hanging, which he handstitched with purple and green wool. All of this activity, particularly the printing, which occupied him until 10 o'clock at night, led to a stroke in February 1971. He had been staying in Belfast with Tom Davidson, the pianist and was hospitalised in the Royal Victoria.

Dillon missed the opening of his Early Works show at the Dawson. These were 29 early 'naif' pieces brought from London, which Leo Smith was selling to pay for his hospital bills.

James White wrote in the Catalogue: 'I am most grateful for the opportunity to re-examine these early pictures without which, it would be impossible to assess artistic life in the 1940's'. 33

It was his ninth show in the gallery. He was removed to the Adelaide Hospital in Dublin, where he died on 14 June 1971. He was 55.

CONCLUSION

Previous and present criticism:

> If Monet loves with a particular affection nature that man makes modern, certainly I would not admire his work much if he were not a true painter, I simply want to verify the sympathy that sweeps him towards modern subjects.[34]

If Zolas view of Monet's Modernity were applied to Dillon, he would fail on his subject matter. In 1975, Brian Fallon's survey of Irish painting in the 1950's, repeats this critique, complainting of: 'A Bord Failte school of painting' who 'could not get enough of the Western seaboard'. Some of the better living artists he believes 'layed on the Irishness with trowel, or at least a palette knife'.

He accuses Dillon of an 'enormous charm sometimes genius', but a sophistication expressed through a format equivalant of folk ballads. Ultimately, 'picturesque rather than intense or searching'. Fallon's evidence for this, is the appearance of the peasantry in Dillon's work 'one does not find a nation's soul by painting her peasantry'. 35

The reaction against the stereotyping of Irish culture had worked against Dillon. By the 1970's, his early paintings resembled some of the more worn cliches of the tourist board. But he is not as provincial as Fallon would have us believe, if one considers the extensive 'regional' influences in the early French Avant Garde for instance.

Technically, he was using collage in about half the work, introducing an often jarring element in an otherwise painted picture. He combed the paint (a house-painters technique) to give a directional grain and pulse to what were unmistakably Irish landscapes.

There is somthing quite desperate about paintings like In The Blue Hills (Fig. 15) of 1966 or Shy Sweetheart (Fig.24) of 1969. The landscapes are empty vibrating backdrops, similar to Klees work, where people dressed in patterned clothes, but without facial features, are communicating. In the latter, two figures row across a lake, these are Joe and Sean Dillon, his brothers who had died.

Like all of Dillon's work, there is another worldliness, but there is an added existential quality to these paintings which is new and related to changes in his own life. His use of the clown as a signifier of emotional meaning is worth considering.

> They can be identified as cyphers of an enforced regression; they serve as emblems for the melancholic infantilism of the Avant Garde artist who has come to realise his historic failure. The clown functions as a social archetype of the artist as an essentially docile and entertaining figure. [27]
>
> Aware that Bourgeois Society looks at him only as a charletan, the artist deliberately and ostentatiously assumes the role of the comic actor between self pity and self criticism, the artist comes to see himself as a comic and sometimes tragic victim. [28]

The above are two quite determinist views on the frequency of the comic figure in Avant Garde works, particularly with the ebb of cubism. While Dillon was not an 'Avant Garde' painter, the quotes do reveal some of his reasons for using the clown. They were for him figures of premonition.

The painters Denis, Bernard and Gauguin, with whom Dillon identified, had found their flat arrangements in the peasant costumes and landscapes of Brittany and even the Cubist generation had reacted to the powerful expression of underdeveloped colonies. Granted Dillon's work was happening 40 years later, but this was a given time lag in most aspects of Irish life.

The 'Living Art' painters had, found Fallon's ideal of 'elemental and intense' in the mediation of the landscape, without inhabitants, using modern brushwork and quite often vagueness or a lack of resolution they implied homeland. The landscape had a potency for Irish people and in their eyes, it accounted for what was different about this island.

Dillon was working from a similar emotional and romantic frame of reference, but his paintings were always inhabited. He never shirked detail and his full picture of the folk lifestyle, is not so regressive if we consider Gramsci's view of folklore as: 'A conception of the world and life implicite to a large extent in a determinate strata of society and in opposition to "official" conceptions of the world'.[36]

Dillon had been formed by the late Celtic revival. He was unfortunate, as was the entire population, in that the De Valerian ideal was losing touch with reality just as it was enshrined in the constitution. Any sense of anachronism in Dillon's work, merely reflects the formative isolation of the 1930's and 1940's.

James White who helped the artist in many ways while he was alive has written extensively and excellently on him. I would take issue briefly with his ideas that Dillon was: 'Revealing the primal element of life in the West'. In fact, the West was the primitive microcosm of Ireland. Also that: 'he was revealing memory history and the subconscious through gestures of the brush or the stroke of the pen'.[37]

While Dillon was ultimately a 'subjective' artist, the idea that he was the purveyor of an exclusive vision (an art historical idea of the artist as genius) goes against the very folkness of his work and Dillon's constant demystification of his own personality. White is right when he describes Dillon's contribution as: 'Investing in Irish art, an iconography of forms clear and limpid, which reveal contemporary attitudes and poses related to the traditional legends and myths'.[38]

Dillon's narrative artistry is closest to that of storytelling, drawn from his own life, people and nation. He rises above simply 'native' expression, because of his conscious use of the liberatory and expressive qualities of modern art.

The body of work which Dillon has left us raises questions of art practice in post-colonial and regional contexts, which have yet to be laid to rest.

While his paintings are rising rapidly in monetary value, the real value of his work lies in it's accuracy as a measure of the limited horizons and lack of inevitability in Irish art of the 20th Century.

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28.	Gerard Dillon by George Cambell	1970's
29.	Commemorative Stamp Issue	1972

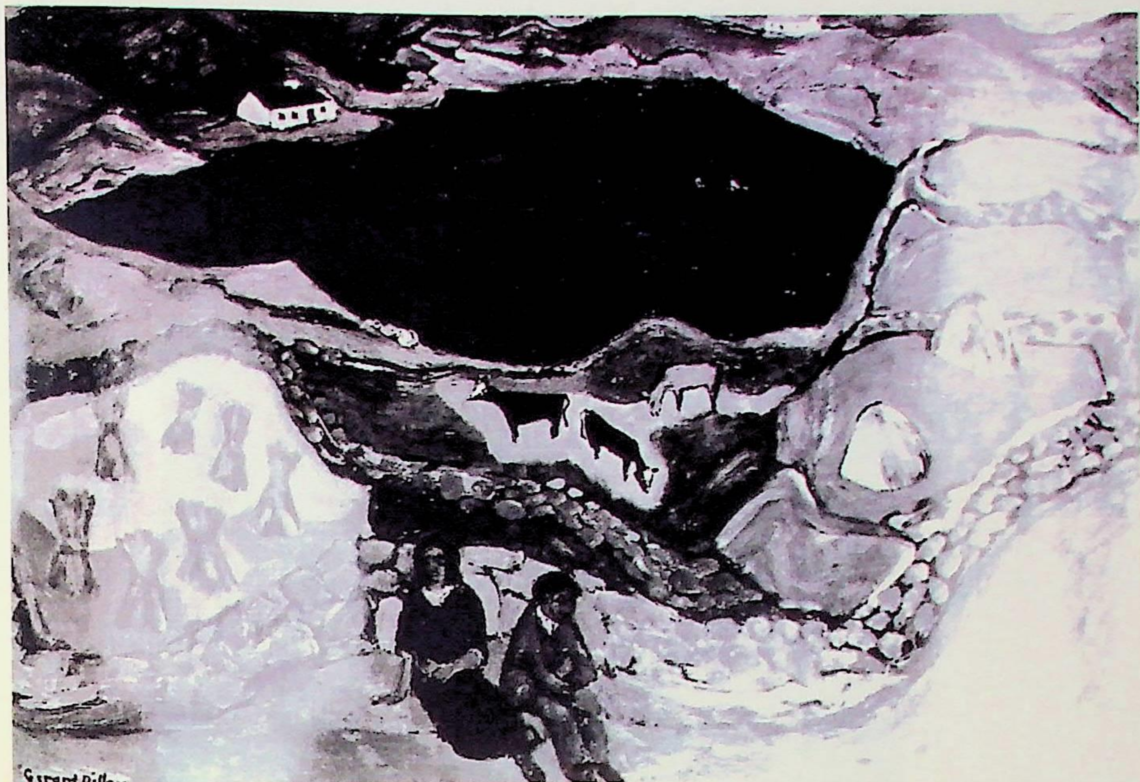

FIG 1.

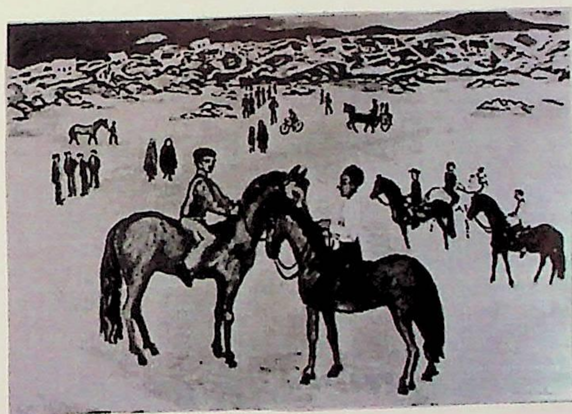

FIG 2.

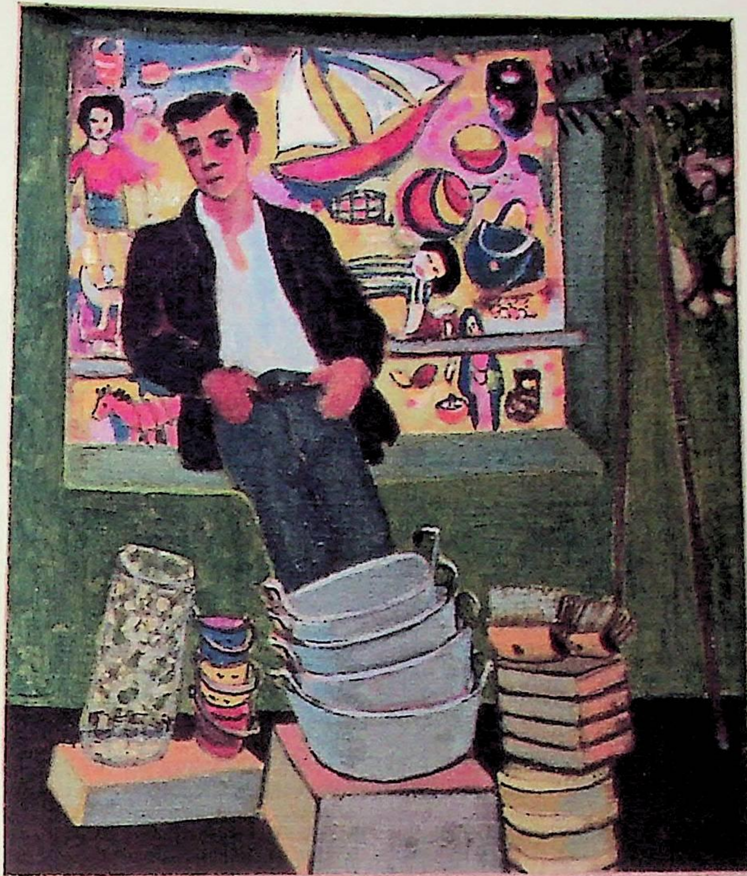

FIG 3.

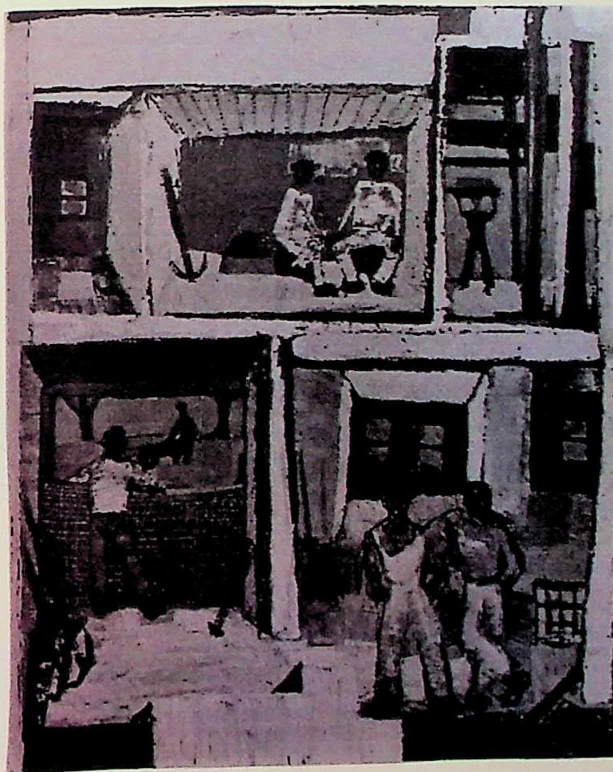

FIG 4.

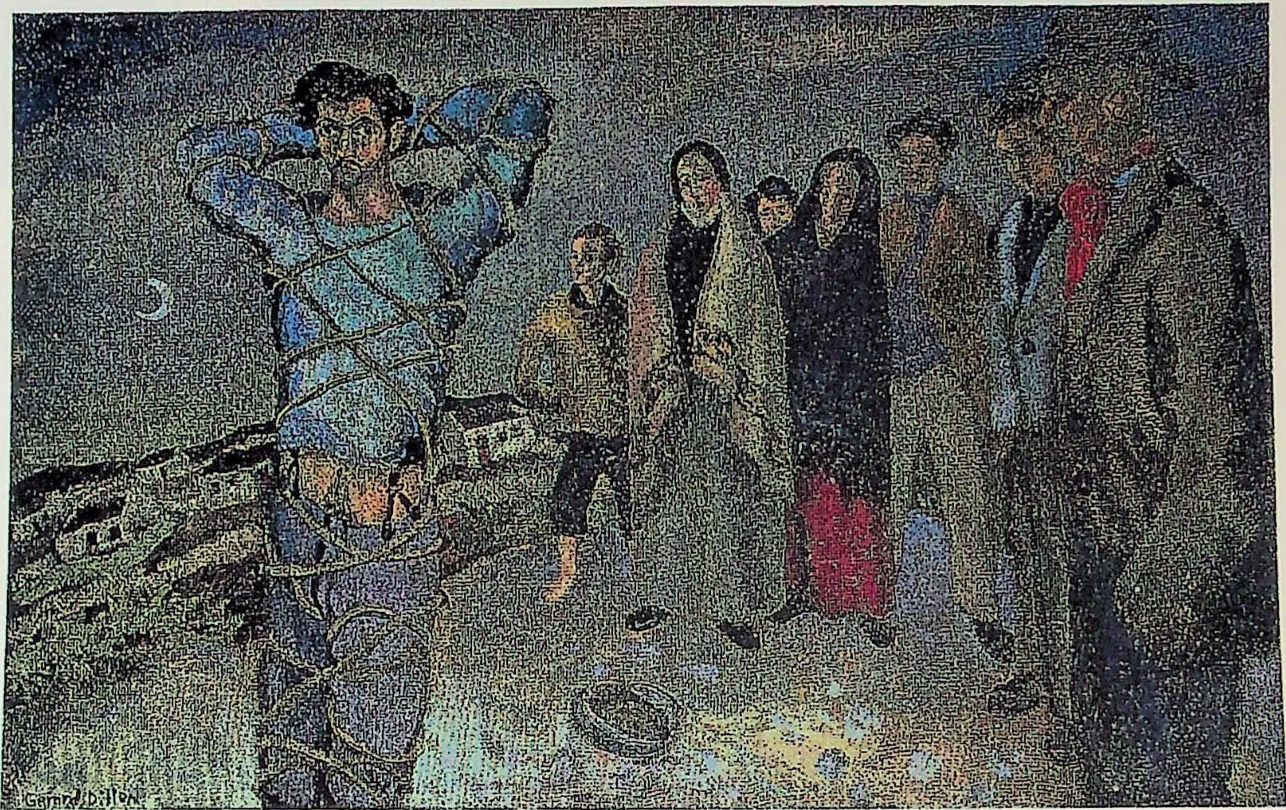

FIG 5

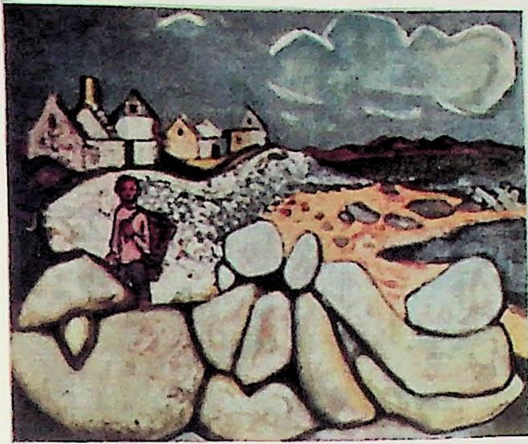

FIG 6.

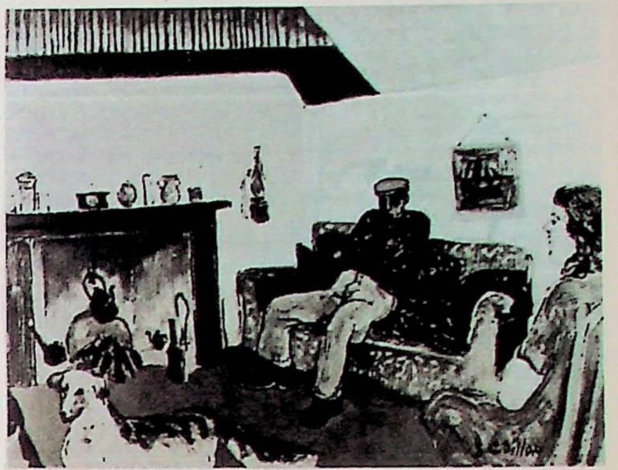

FIG 7.

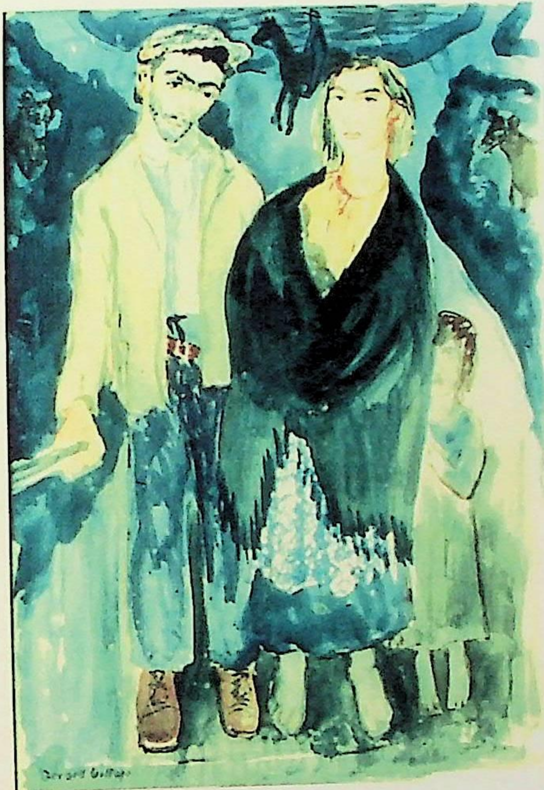

FIG 8.

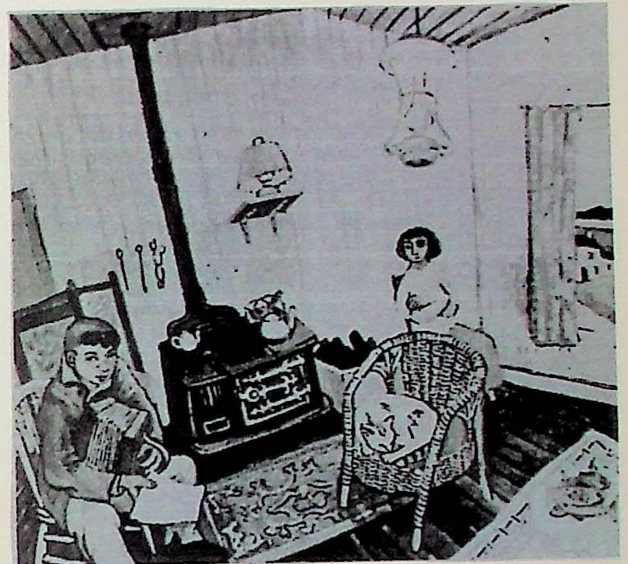

FIG 9.

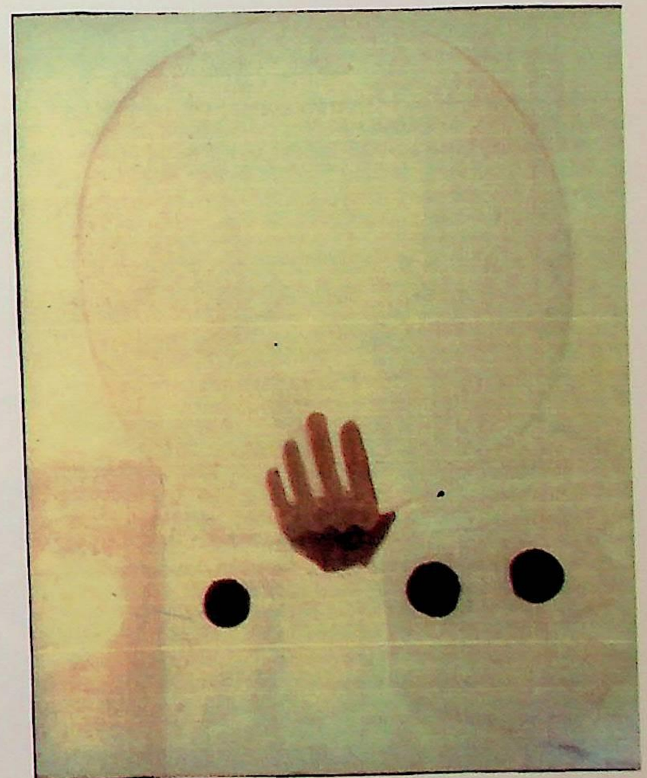

FIG 10.

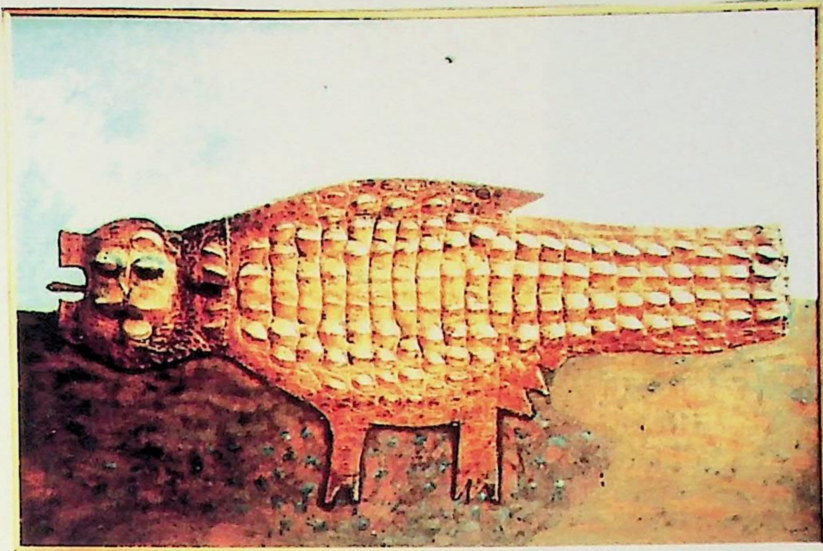

FIG 11.

FIG 12.

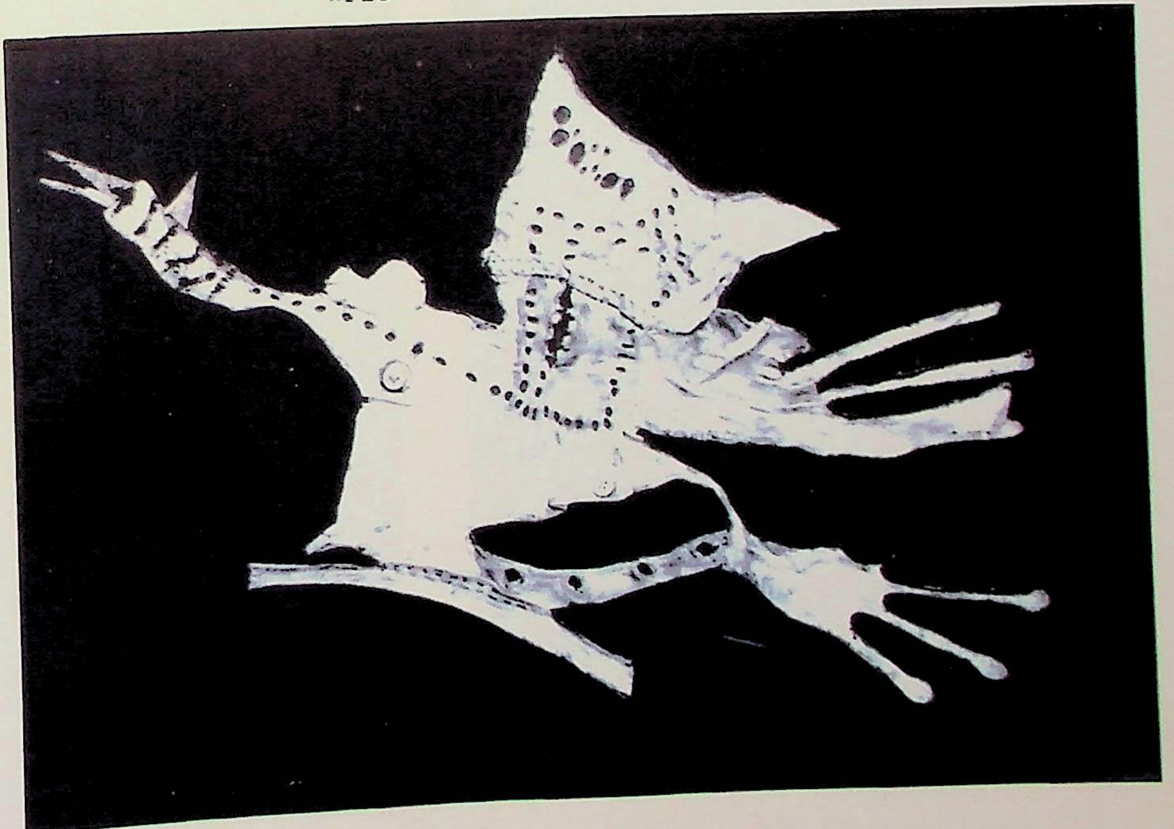

FIG 13.

FIG 14.

FIG 15.

FIG 17.

FIG 16.

FIG 18.

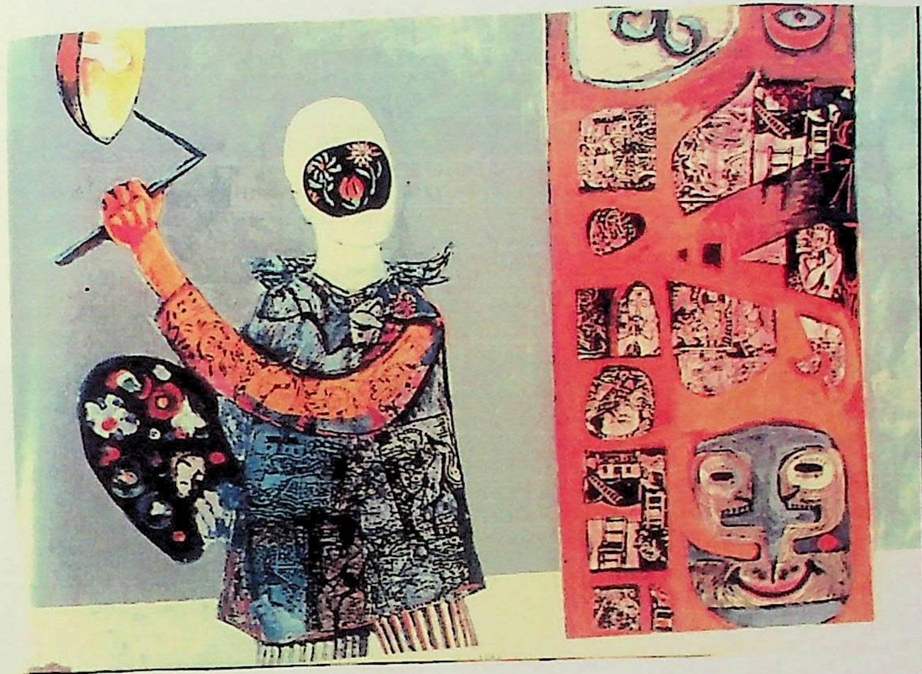

FIG 19.

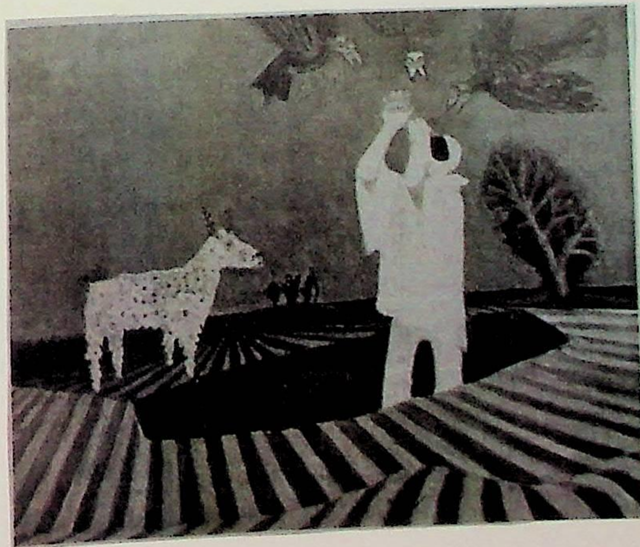

FIG 20.

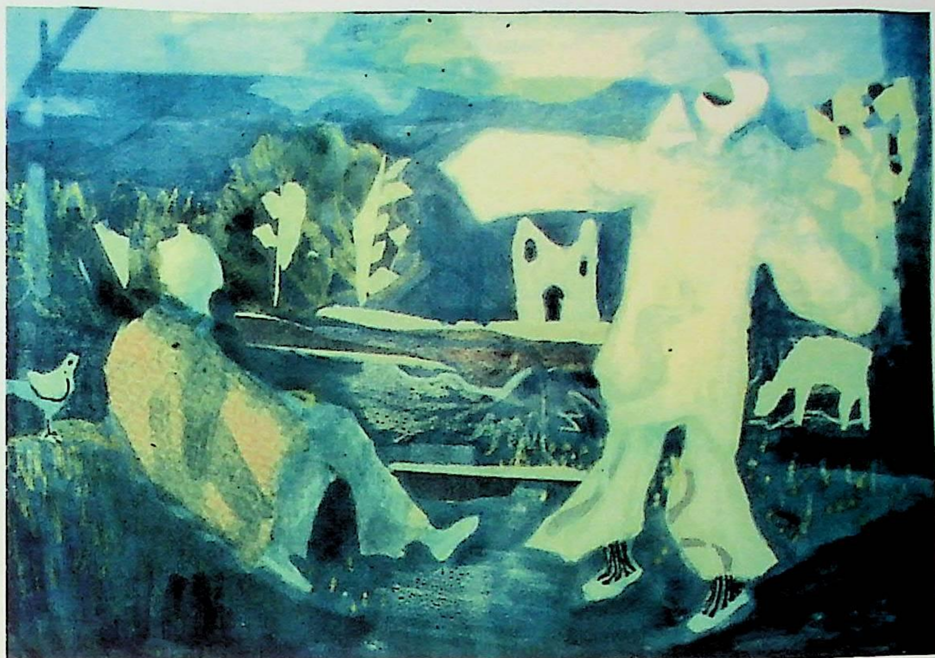

FIG 22.

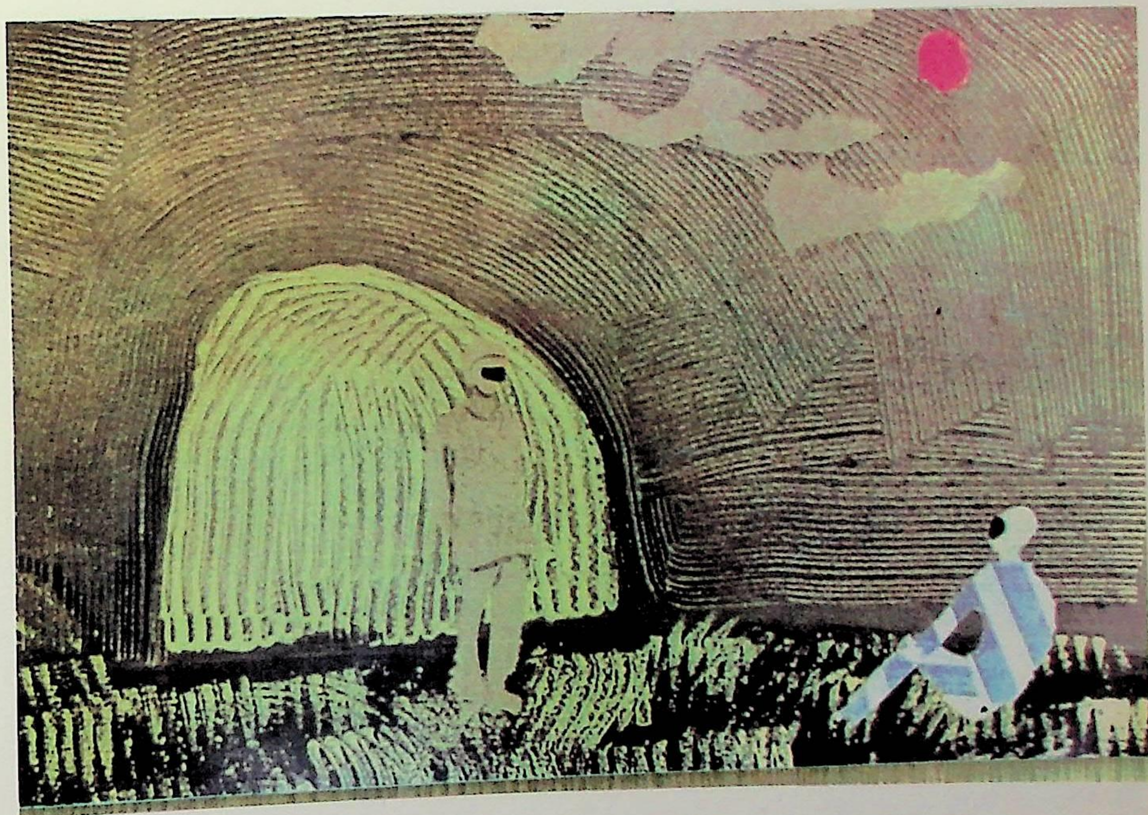

FIG 23.

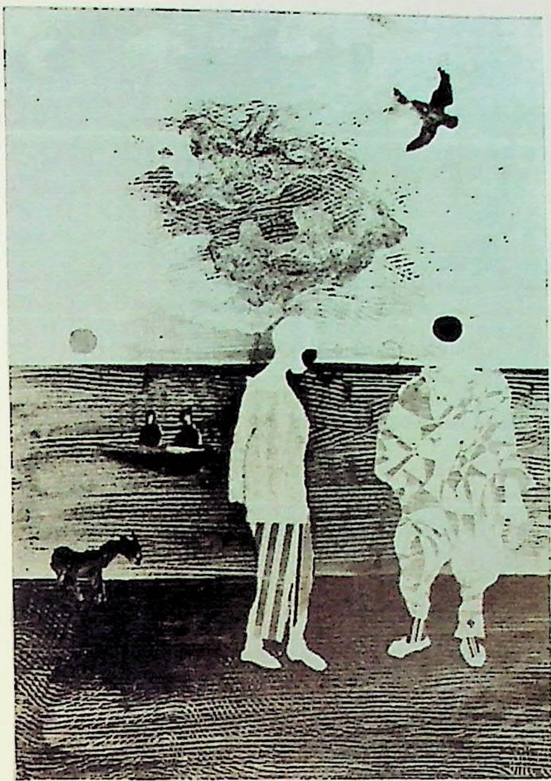
FIG 24.

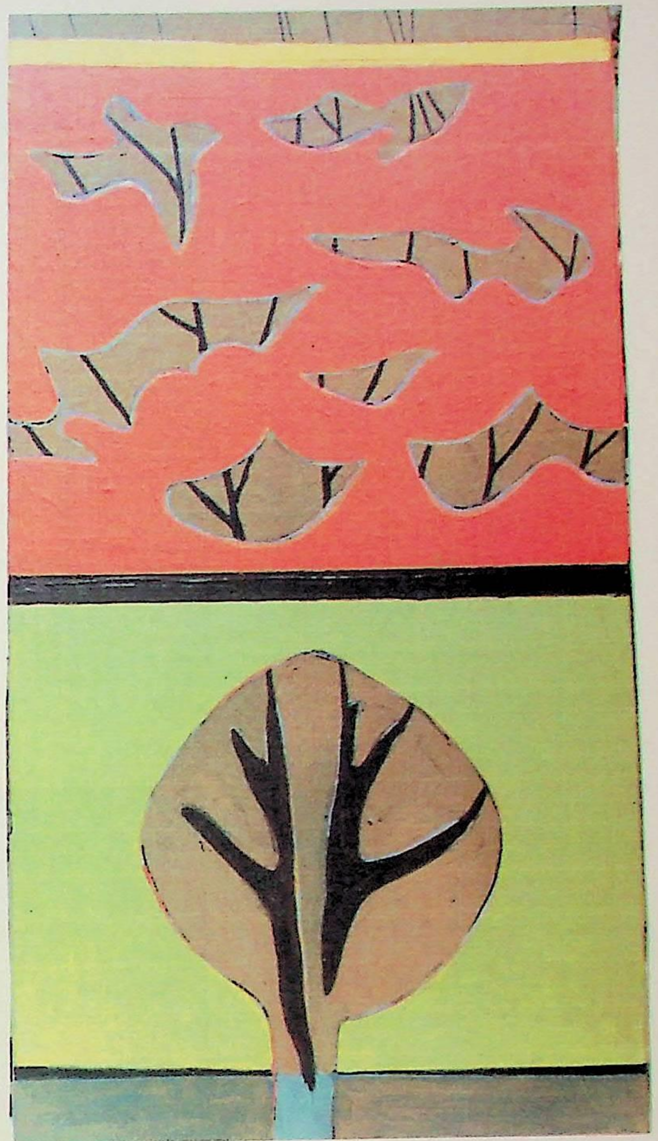
FIG 26.

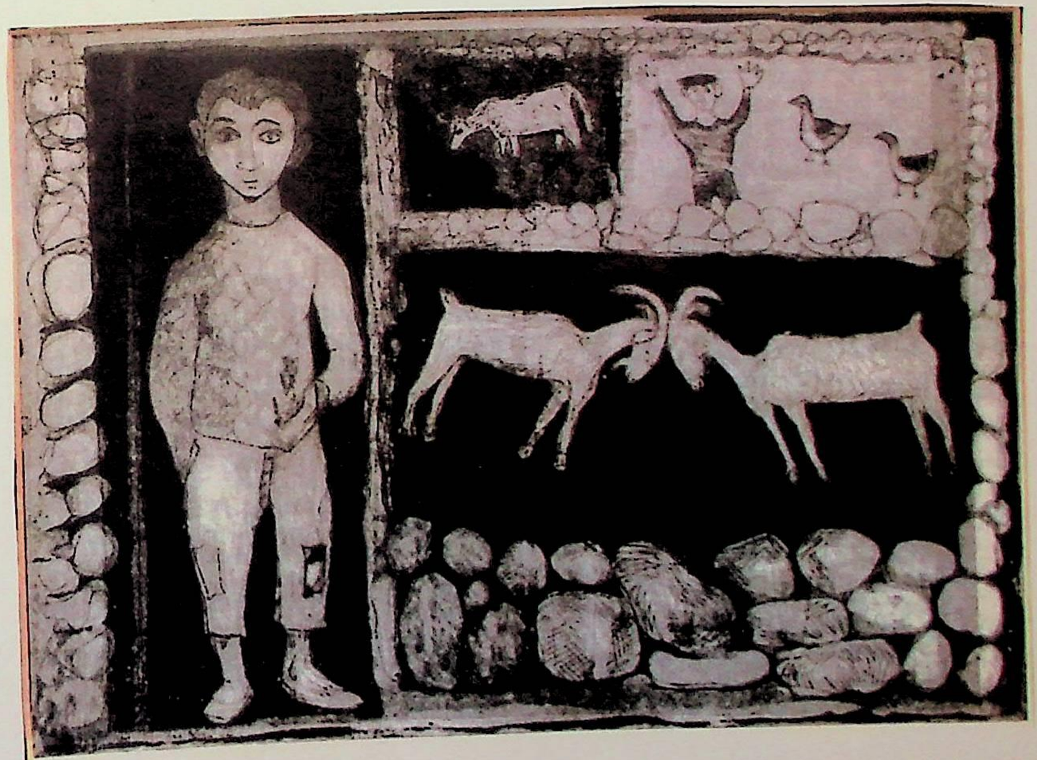
FIG 25.

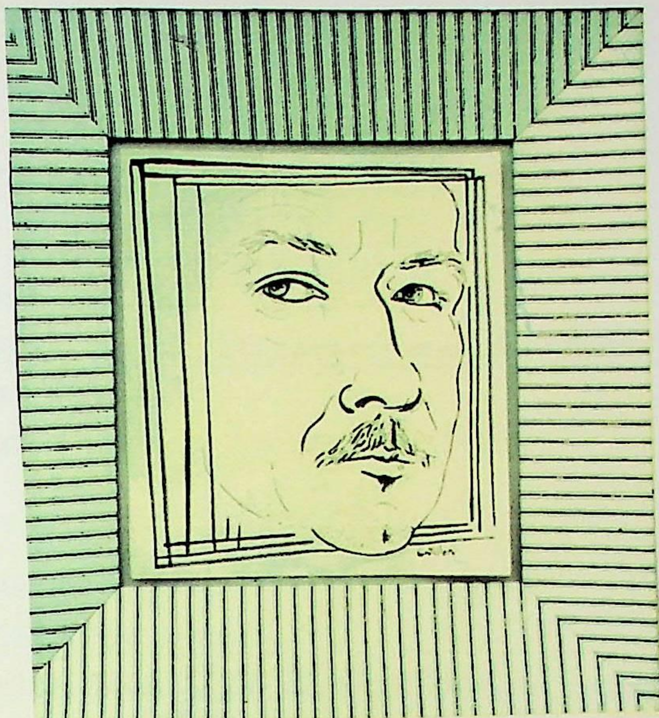

FIG 27.

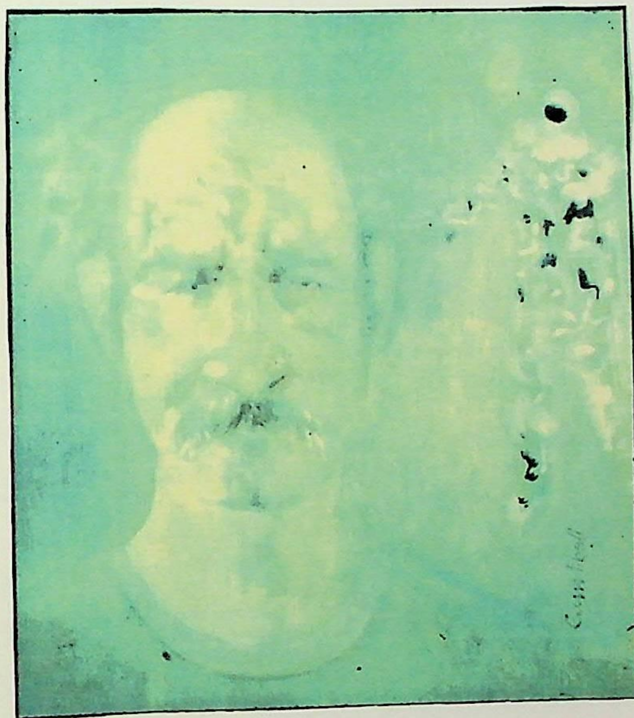

FIG 28.

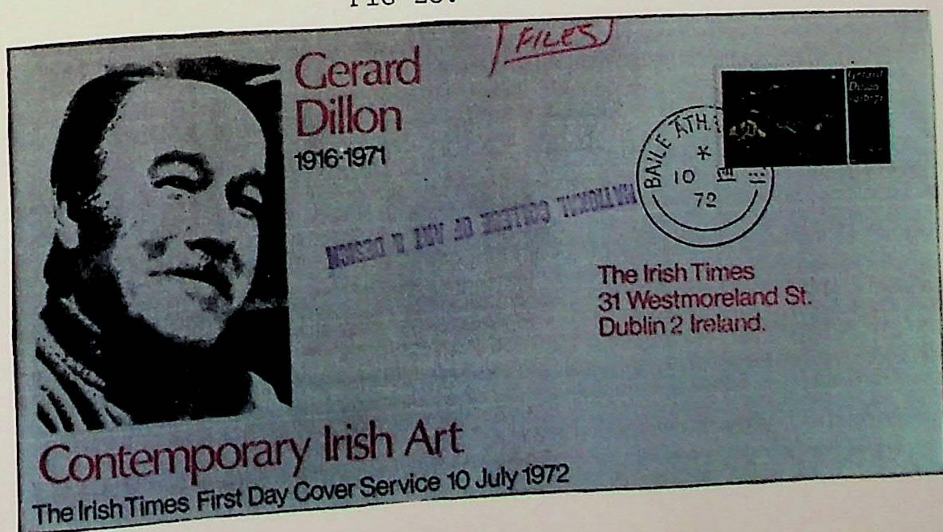

FIG 29.

FOOTNOTES

1. Paul Ricoeur
   Universal Civilisation and National Cultures in History
   (p. 276)
   North Western University 1965.

2. Wesley Boyd
   Dillon in Dublin
   Irish Times, 25 January 1968.

3. Gerard Dillon
   by Gerard Dillon - August 1966
   Retrospective Catalogue N.I. Arts Council 1972

4. Death of Mr. Gerard Dillon
   Irish Times - 15 June 1971

5. Ernest Gellner, 1983 (p. 57)

6. Edward Said
   Yeats and Decolonisation

7. Hugh Lane
   Loan Collection of Pictures by Irish Artists
   London 1904
   See p. 110, J. Sheehy's Rediscovery of Ireland's Past.
   Thames and Hudson 1980.

8. Gerard Dillon
   by Gerard Dillon - August 1966
   Retrospective Catalogue N.I. Arts Council 1972

Footnotes contd/

9. Thomas Bodkin
   Report on the Arts In Ireland - 1949
   See p. 190, J. Sheehy's Rediscovery of Ireland's Past.
   Thames and Hudson 1980.

10. Brian Fallon
    Irish Painting in the Fifties
    The Arts in Ireland, Vol. 3. No. 1.

11. Irish Modernism, such as it had been practiced by Evie Hone and Mainie Jellet, was concerned with modern style rather than it's philosophical equivalent; an excellent example of this is Evie Hone's My Four Green Fields. A stain glass work of modern style which is loaded with Catholic and Nationalist meaning. It was exhibited by the state in the New York World Fair of 1937.

12. James White
    Early Paintings
    Dawson Gallery Catalogue, Dolmen Press 1971

13. Richard Kearny
    Transitions Narratives in Modern Irish Culture
    Wolfhound Press 1988.

14. Death of Mr. Gerard Dillon
    Irish Times - 15 June 1971.

15. Standish O'Grady
    History of Ireland, The Heroic Period - Vol. 1, p. 22
    Dublin 1878.

Footnotes contd/

16. Albert Aurier
    Symbolism (pp. 83-84)
    Robert Goldwater
    Penguin 1979.

17. Edward Sheehy
    Commentary - (Magazine of the Picture Hire Club)
    Dublin 1944

18. Terrence De Vere White
    The Fretful Midge - London 1957

19. Oliver St. John Gogarty
    The Bell Vol. XI No. 1 - Dublin.

20. James White
    Retrospective Catalogue (p. 10)
    N.I. Arts Council 1972

21. Death of Mr. Gerard Dillon
    Irish Times - 15 June 1971.

22. Arthur Armstrong
    Interview - November 1989.

23. John Hewitt
    The Arts in Ulster
    (Painting and Sculpture chapter)
    Harrap 1951.

24. Belfast Telegraph - 25 March 1958

Footnotes contd/

25. John Hewitt
    The Arts in Ulster
    (Painting and Sculpture chapter)
    Harrap 1951.

26. Wesley Boyd
    Dillon in Dublin
    Irish Times - 25 January 1968.

27. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh
    Theories of Contemporary Art
    Richard Hertz
    Prentice Hall 1980.

28. Renata Pogglio
    Ibid.

29. Wesley Boyd
    Dillon in Dublin
    Irish Times - 25 January 1968.

30. Many of his paintings refer to the death in quick succession of two brothers and the illness and death of a third.

31. Arthur Armstrong
    Interview - November 1989.

32. Wesley Boyd
    Dillon in Dublin
    Irish Times - 25 January 1968.

Footnotes contd/

33. James White
    Early Paintings
    Dawson Gallery Catalogue
    Dolmen Press 1971.

34. Emile Zola
    From The Aesthetics of Modernism
    Joseph Chiari (p. 49)
    Vision 1970.

35. Brian Fallon
    Irish Painting in the Fifties
    The Arts in Ireland, Vol 3, No. 1.

36. Antonio Gramsci
    Selected Writings (p. 188)
    Lawrence and Wishart 1988.

37. James White
    Early Paintings
    Dawson Gallery Catalogue
    Dolmen Press 1971.

38. Ibid.

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