

AN EXAMINATION OF MARTIN GALE'S

PORTRAYAL OF THE WICKLOW HILLS

by

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*AN EXAMINATION OF MARTIN GALE'S
PORTRAYAL OF THE WICKLOW HILLS*

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by

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SYNOPSIS

This thesis deals with Martin Gale's portrayal of the Wicklow Hills which appear in the background of many of his paintings.

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I propose to deal with the relationship of the contemporary Irish painter Martin Gale to the Wicklow Hills which appear in the background of many of his paintings. The aspect of the relationship that I want to concentrate on is the sense of alienation from the physical environment felt by the viewer of these paintings.

By portraying contemporary lifestyles in the Wicklow Hills, which seem to bear no relationship to the physical environment there, we are presented with what would at first glance seem to be two separate realities, one imposed on the other, which seem to have no connections between them. However, on closer examination it seems to me that there is a relationship between the physical environment of Wicklow and the lifestyles that Gale portrays taking place there. The nature of this relationship is of interest to me consisting as it does of an apparent lack of integration with, or a sense of alienation from the lifestyle to the surrounding landscape in which it is lived. The demands of a modern lifestyle actually having a direct effect on the physical environment and, this spoilt environment then leads to an ever increasing dependence on a more interior based lifestyle which encourages us to believe that we are becoming more dependent on the powers of the human mind such as invention and ingenuity for an ever increasing number of labour saving devices and less dependent on the natural powers of the land to provide us with what we need. (David Brett, Circa, No. 43, p. 17.)

In this thesis I want to investigate this phenomenon of alienation from the landscape, its history and its present form in Ireland today, and

finally I want to look at some trends which are developing in contemporary Irish landscape painting which point to the possibility for developing a new kind of relationship with the landscape in the future.

In the first chapter I will attempt to define what I mean by a 'relationship of alienation from the landscape'. This will lead on to a description of French Realist and English Pre-Raphaelite painting where I consider this strange relationship would appear to have begun. I will briefly look into the reasons for its occurrence at this particular time. The relationship between Paris and Barbizon at that time would seem analogous to the relationship between Dublin and Wicklow. These similarities and differences will be assessed with regard to the work of Gale. The relevance of the Pre-Raphaelite movement will be examined, these paintings are of interest because they were painted as a response to the industrial revolution. They seem to have been painted by people who were alienated from the landscape, having no day to day social contact with it, as opposed to the French painters who were painting the processes which led to this feeling that the English artists had for the landscape. (T. J. Clarke, 1973.)

In this regard Gale seems to belong to neither one camp or the other but has taken on board the two apparently opposite approaches and shown the connections.

In the second chapter I will look at Gale's relationship to the economic and social climate of Ireland today. I will address the idea of leisure and its increasing importance and influence with regard to contemporary Irish landscape painting. I will look at the difference

between leisure today and in the past and the effect this change has had on the way we now look at landscape, and hence on the dominant critical approach. I want to look at the problems caused by this approach for landscape painting and the ways that Gale has found to expose the limitations of this view.

In the third chapter I will look at Gale's position in contemporary Irish landscape painting and assess how successfully he has dealt with the issues which his work raises. I will also consider the development of recent trends in Irish landscape painting which show the possibility of developing a different type of relationship with the landscape and thus combat the long standing link between the notion of alienation and its hold on landscape painting up to the present day.

CHAPTER ONE

By choosing to portray contemporary life as it is lived in the Wicklow Hills Gale comes up against an interesting problem in his paintings, this problem is the apparent lack of a relationship between the lifestyle portrayed and the physical environment in which it takes place. For example in such a work as 'Tennis in the Mountain's (1977) there are two people playing tennis in flimsy white clothing on a well defined, totally flat court in the middle of the mountains on a cloudy autumnal day, at the edge of the court are two heavily clad spectators whose attention seems to have drifted from the game. All the people seem to be entirely oblivious to their surroundings. Beyond the tennis court there lies a Victorian folly and a flower bed of neatly ordered flowers, beyond that lies a lake and the whole scene is encircled by mountains. The human element in the picture seems to jar with the landscape. The lives of the people portrayed seem to have no connections with the environment where they take place, such strange juxtapositions of urban values in the countryside exist in plenty all around Ireland without any one seeming surprised or startled. No one seems to notice or think it worth remarking upon. Perhaps this is as a result of a feeling of alienation from the landscape in people's lives. The word alienation is here used to convey a feeling of estrangement, in this instance from the landscape, which often seems to arise from a series of problems related to ownership and management of the land, combined with a lack of knowledge about how to interact with and learn from the physical environment (Oxford English Dictionary, p. 3).

The idea of developing an integrated relationship with the landscape is often disregarded, the landscape being seen more often as a kind of

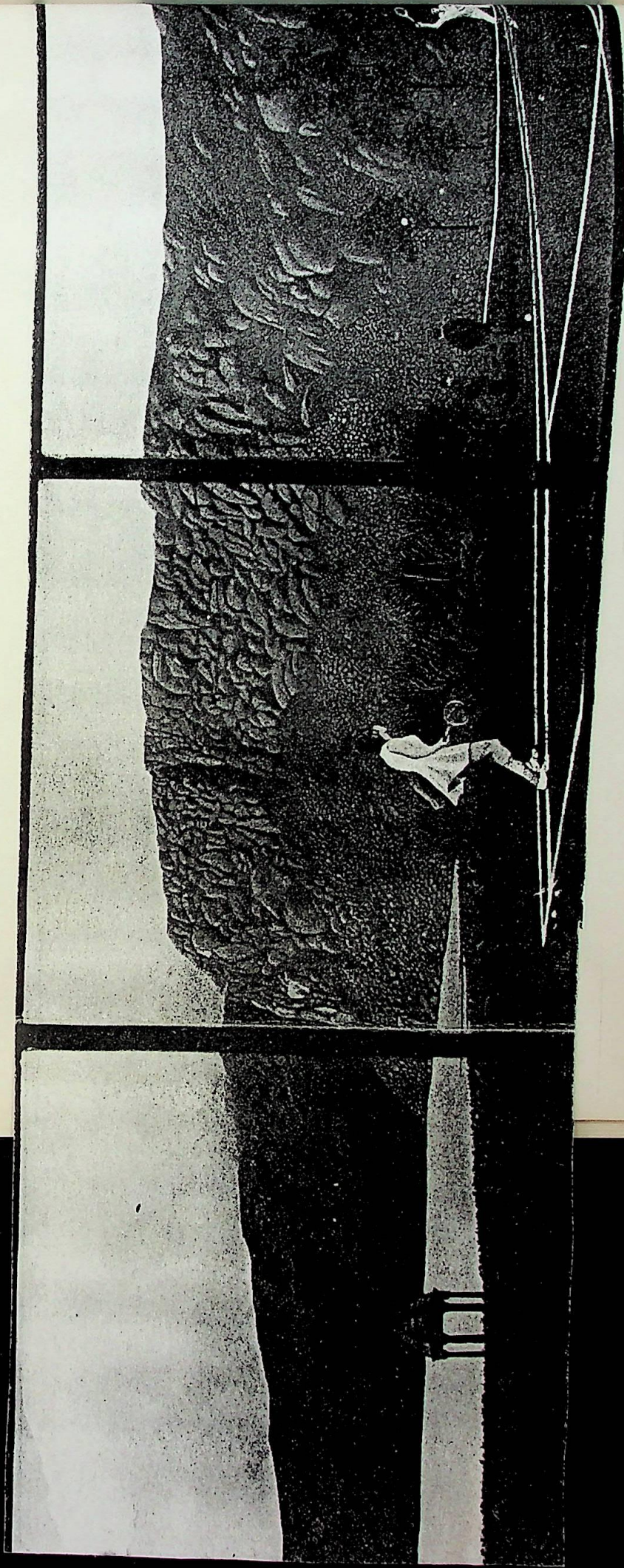


Fig. 1

stage set against which the dramas of modern lifestyles are played out, in which the landscape itself does not play any real part in the action or is not seen to have any major effect on people's lives. This strange almost non-relationship will be examined more closely to see what it consists of, where it came from and what choices it leaves for us in the future.

In trying to develop any understanding of the contemporary situation it is necessary to know something about the history of this relationship.

The mid-nineteenth century art of France and Britain is chosen as my starting point because during this time there were two very different ways of looking at landscape, these evolving simultaneously stemming directly from the growing sense of alienation from the land felt by the two increasingly industrialised countries.

Throughout the nineteenth century, France was going through a period of tremendous social, political and cultural upheaval. Following the 1848 revolution the second republic was established, a government was set up under Louis Blanc. This government proceeded to hold elections with, for the first time, universal male suffrage.

This period was a time of great uncertainty for artists and their recently acquired patrons, the bourgeoisie. The further revolt of Paris in June was supported by the workers and many artists who were resentful of the new governments conservativeness which had led it to close down the workshops which had previously enabled unemployed people, including artists to work for the state. The revolt was seen by the majority of the population, including the middle classes, as a terrifying, godless socialist revolt at a time when all most people

wanted was a secure government (T. J. Clarke, 1973). A legislative assembly was elected for four years. Its first president was Louis Napoleon, elected for four years with executive powers. He proved to be autocratic and anti-republican and presided over the gradual erosion of citizens rights.

Many artists were in a poor financial position, their new patrons in the bourgeois having taken a financial battering in the revolution and their faith in the artists having been undermined by their involvement in the June revolt. (T. J. Clarke, 1973, p. 49.) Thus it was by these events that the artists sense of reality was being formed. This is particularly evident in the work of Courbet who had arrived in Paris in 1839, several years before the revolution but only seems to have realised the political possibilities of his work around the time of the revolts. It was in 1849-50 that he painted 'The Burial at Ornans' which showed a small rural funeral attended by the local bourgeoisie. By painting the landscape and the costumes in a very detailed way he places the event in a specific time and place, making the social and political content of the painting quite explicit. (T. J. Clarke, 1973, p. 81.) He painted a social ritual rather than a religious experience. This new awareness of social position is also evident in Millet's work where he developed in an interesting way, from his earlier portrayal of the peasant as a monumental God like figure in 'The Sower' of 1850 where he stresses the new found importance of the agricultural labourer to his later work where he concentrates on the grinding down effect of constant manual labour on this class. As opposed to 'The Sower' of 1850, the man in 'Man with a Hoe' of 1860-62 no longer has any sense of strength or power about him, he is shown to have given up, exhausted from the struggle for survival. As the

second republic grew older and its earlier aspirations seemed to change so did Millet's portrayal of the peasant existence. He began to paint the new government policies which were driving people off the land. Forests were now being fenced off from the Faggot gatherers, licences were now required for gleaning and citizens had to live for three years in one area before they could vote. Millet used his realism like Courbet, to draw attention to the back breaking labour of the people portrayed in his work rather than the emotions felt by them. (T. J. Clarke, 1973, p. 80.)

It strikes me that during the early days of the Republic artists did not feel alienated from society, they wanted to be part of the new democratic order in which they and their patrons would have more power. This hope for the future is reflected well in 'The Sower' of 1850 following the revolutions and the dramatic drop in living standards artists felt great sympathy with those who had been betrayed by the Republic. They felt an increasing identification with those who worked the land rather than those who owned it, however they still painted with the salon and the Paris art world in mind as the viewers of the works, as if they were pleading a case. As T. J. Clarke says:

... it suggests that the differences in reaction to Courbet in 1850-51 are not a simple matter; that they involve a whole complex set of differences between town and country

....

T. J. Clarke, 1973, p. 122-23

Here Clarke touches on what I consider to be the central point in relation to the beginnings of a concept of the role alienation played in Courbet's relationship to the landscape and the bourgeoisie. Courbet, by painting the countryside for buyers in the towns among the bourgeoisie, developed an understanding and awareness of the urban mind

and its relationship to the country that previously did not exist. The newly developed bourgeois identity based on sharp definitions; where country and town were considered different in every way, found it hard to accept paintings which revealed the relationships between them, often in an unflattering light. The same can be said of Millet's work which was located specifically at Barbizon, not far from Paris. He responds to both the physical environment and the working class who were being driven off the land to work for the bourgeoisie of Paris in their factories. In the work of both Courbet and Millet there is a sense of a tremendous struggle going on in the landscape reflected in change both in its topography (e.g. fencing in of forests) and the struggle the rural working class were having for survival. Their landscape is a place where changing values come to the fore, where issues of the day with regard to religion and politics predominate. It is through these social changes, which were occurring across the countryside at this time, that the conditions, which led to the beginnings of feelings of estrangement from the landscape began to make themselves felt. The kind of art that was going on in England at the same time had interesting similarities to and differences from the French approach. While the French set out to portray reality in a social and political sense the Pre-Raphaelites vision of reality came from a very different outlook.

English society had experienced its industrial revolution some years earlier than France, so while the English Pre-Raphaelites were painting during the same chronological time as the French Realists, their paintings, it would seem to me, show the results of the kind of the society that we see in the process of formation in the works of Courbet and Millet. In the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites the struggle

which is so obvious in the works of Courbet and Millet (e.g. Courbet's 'Stone Breakers' or Millets 'Man with a Hoe') seems to be over. The landscape is no longer looked at from a sympathy with the hardships of those who work there or from an awareness of the relationships between town and country. The Pre-Raphaelite view of reality came from a belief in the ability of minute detail and apparent scientific observation to convey a whole reality. They look at the physical from a removed theoretical point of view, the landscape has become a museum full of biologically accurately rendered specimens of plant life and odd curios from past times for example John Everett Millias 'Ferdinand Lured by Ariel' (1849), Edward Hopley's 'Puck and the Moth' (1853) and William Shakespere Burton's 'The Cavalier and the Puritan' (1856).

The viewer is no longer expected to be involved with the landscape in a political way. What the work seems to satisfy is the bourgeois preference for a landscape one could escape to, within the comfort of one's own home, which was apparently the opposite of city life and denies all connections with it.

While the work they produced does have strong emotional effects, these are somewhat negated by the safety of the fantasy land in which we are allowed to experience them. When the landscape is a portrayal of a specific place it is usually observed in an uninvolved topographical way, rather in the manner of a tourist who takes note of spectacular spots or famous places in a purely visual aesthetic way e.g. Ruskin or Holman Hunts 'The Sphinx Giza looking towards the Pyramids of Saggara'. This may have been due to their relatively secure financial positions in comparison to the French. Ruskin was the son of a wealthy shipping merchant. Millias was a man of independent means from an old Jersey family. George Price Boyce was the son of a prosperous

pawn broker. William Morris was the son of a wealthy bill broker. This security enabled them to travel to exotic places where they had no social involvement, they painted as individuals separated from their view, rather than relating their own experiences to what they saw. By painting from nature they did draw attention to the new scientific way they approached nature but paradoxically the more realistic they tried to become the more artificial and contrived their paintings looked; take for example Ford Maddox Brown's 'A Pretty Bad Lamb', or John Everett Millia's 'A Blind Girl' (1854-56) or 'Ferdinand Lured by Ariel' (1849-50). Nature was being interpreted in a second-hand way by means of books etc., received ideas of the landscape became more influential than what was to be seen at first hand. The influence this had on younger painters is to be seen in Philip Gilbert Hamerton's statement

I perceive now having learnt to distinguish between the scientific and artistic spirits that the proper expression for what I learnt in the highlands ... would have been not pictures but a book with coloured illustrations.

Allen Staley, 1973, p. 174

Again this can be linked to the fact that most of the Pre-Raphaelites spent the majority of their time in the city. Although they claimed that observation was the basis of their work, their concept of observation was quite different from the French day to day social involvement with their subjects. The Pre-Raphaelite observation of the landscape was in general rather like the modern day travel brochure which concentrates on spectacular sights and places of historical interest rather than an examination of the less obvious but often more important forces at work in the landscape. At first glance it might seem that the English and French approaches to a realistic representation of the countryside are split in two, the French objective and the English subjective approach, however this is true



Fig. 2

only up to a point. What the two schools of painting have in common is that paradoxically the French, by approaching the landscape on the basis of their own subjective experiences, ended up with a more objective ordered view of the landscape while the Pre-Raphaelites who set out with the aim of being scientifically objective, ended up producing work which was more subjective, often verging on the fantastic. Thus, because of the clash of opposites of what was represented and how it was represented, it is not surprising that we get such a sense of struggle and tension from the works. At this time there was a great confusion between the new 'scientific' urban values and the traditional rural ones. This is reflected in the difficulties which artists seem to have encountered in finding an adequate language to express their complex position.

Now that I have outlined some of the problems that have occurred in past attempts to deal with a landscape whose role is undergoing dramatic change, I think it will be easier to understand the difficulties facing Gale, painting contemporary Irish lifestyles in the countryside. Though there are similarities it is perhaps the differences that will prove more interesting.

Martin Gale's time studying in the National College of Art and Design, from which he graduated in 1973, spanned two decades in a country which then underwent change more rapidly than at any other period since Independence. The 1960's in Ireland saw what amounted to our version of an industrial revolution. The changes which occurred in peoples lives as a result of this were reflected in a similarly dramatic way on the landscape and it was accompanied by changing attitudes of Irish people to the land. It was only recently that electrification

had come to all rural parishes and throughout the 1960's it revolutionised rural life. It favoured large farms over small holdings, and generally narrowed the gap between rural and urban life. In 1961 it enabled country people to watch television for the first time in their own homes. Television was to be an important factor in luring the young away from the land to the new jobs in the growing industrial sector. For those that remained on the land it meant great changes in their lifestyles. As well as a huge increase in mechanisation on the farm the car meant that shopping and entertainment, as well as trade, could be done in far off large towns which led to the demise of many small villages.

The effect of mechanisation on the farm was enormous both for the farmer and the landscape. Fields were amalgamated and rectangular ones were favoured over the more traditional square shape. Hedges were giving way to electric fences and haymaking was turning to the somewhat less romanticised pursuit of silage making. Marshy land was being drained and reclaimed and in general it could be said that the landscape was becoming more of a place for the interaction of man and machine as opposed to man dealing more directly with nature. During the seventies this trend accelerated with Ireland's entry to the EEC in 1972. This membership was to prove enormously beneficial in many ways, opening new venues for exports and thus encouraging farmers to modernise still further. For a long time the EEC seemed to be an endless source of finance for agricultural, educational and industrial purposes as well as improvement of the national infrastructure. The population was in the throes of changing from a rural to an urban one. Dublin, in 1971, contained over a third of the whole population of Ireland. For Wicklow, all of this change meant the intensive planting

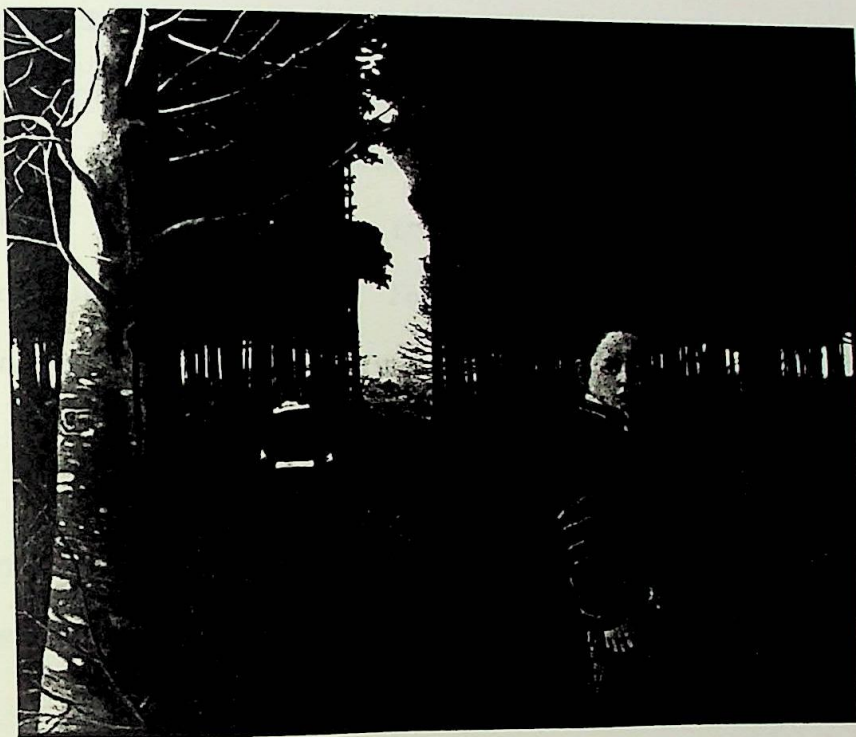


Fig. 3

of conifers in state forests which had previously been areas of wilderness and bog, and the construction of a hydro-electric power station which involved the flooding of an entire valley, including a village.

The increased population of Dublin and greater mobility of the workforce meant that nearby Wicklow became an increasingly attractive place to live in or to visit. This is in contrast to Paris or London where a move to the city tended to decrease the relationship with nature. It now had the effect of not ending but altering that relationship. Wicklow with its great natural beauty became a playground for urban Dublin. For the better off it meant they could live there and commute to Dublin and for the rest it became somewhere to escape to on the weekend.

In Wicklow, in contrast to the situation which existed in England or France of the last century, it is possible to see the visual imprints of the conflict between urban and rural values on the actual landscape. Martin Gale succeeds in creating an air of unease and conflict by portraying the clash between these old and new values, they refuse to harmonise and thus produce a pleasing effect to the eye. In, for example, 'Waking Up' (1986) or 'At the Landing' (1986) the separate realities remain quite distinct. In 'Waking Up' (1986) where he shows his two children in the woods, we can sense the separation between the children dressed in their bright red and blue clothing and the dark dead look of the wood. The boys stands motionless and the girl has turned her back on the boy and is walking out of the wood towards the light. Neither of them are attempting to play with or interact with each other or their environment. Also, they have been separated from the viewer, who is made aware of his/her position by the



Fig. 4

stare of the boy and by a barrier of fallen branches and a long line of grass that stretches across the picture. We are not allowed into the painting in contrast to the work of someone like Millet who draws us into his works intentionally so that we can identify with the hardships of his figures, e.g. 'Two Men Turning Over the Soil' (1866). The struggle for a reconciliation of opposites which was so evident in the works of both the French Realists and the Pre-Raphaelite painters has been abandoned and we have been removed from the landscape allowed only to experience it at a distance.

In his work, it is as if Gale has taken on the problems of the French and the English approaches and has shown the connections between them. He has done this by painting in an almost Pre-Raphaelite style by using large amounts of detail while combining this with the French approach of day to day social involvement, thus he manages to get a full picture of the Wicklow landscape and its inhabitants, the tension in his work not coming from an unresolved clash in what is represented and the means he has chosen to represent it, but from the evidence of the clash between traditional rural values and the recent urbanisation of the countryside. While I am not claiming that this is a conscious deliberate approach he has taken I think it has come about by a simple effort on his part to understand and represent truthfully his immediate environment and the people who live in it.

CHAPTER TWO

Now that I have shown how Gale has united the styles of Pre-Raphaelite and French Realist painting in order to create his own interpretation of the landscape, it is necessary to look at an aspect of his work which differs substantially from any other landscape painter, that is in his portrayal of leisure. Unlike even the Impressionists who portrayed a great deal of leisure in their work. The difference between them being that while they portrayed leisure, and their technique was very apt for that; they did not give any clues as to the meanings and implications of this new relationship with nature.

The depiction of leisure is one of the most important aspects of Gale's work in relation to his portrayal of the Wicklow landscape. His work shows evidence of the causes which have led to a growing sense of alienation from the landscape. The causes lie in the changing relationship with nature from one of work to one of leisure for the majority of the population. This is particularly true in the case of expanding Dublin's growing relationship to Wicklow. For most people in Dublin a relationship with nature consists of going for walks in the Wicklow Mountains or along the seafront at weekends. What this change means is that nature has become increasingly marginal to people's lifestyles. People have ceased to believe that it is having an effect on their lives, it has been relegated to a colourful backdrop which is a weekend diversion and good for the tourist industry.

This attitude comes through in Gale's representations of Wicklow where he portrays family outings (e.g. 'At The Landing' (1986)), people waiting for buses ('Bus Stop' (1981)) in gardens ('Fathers Day' (1983

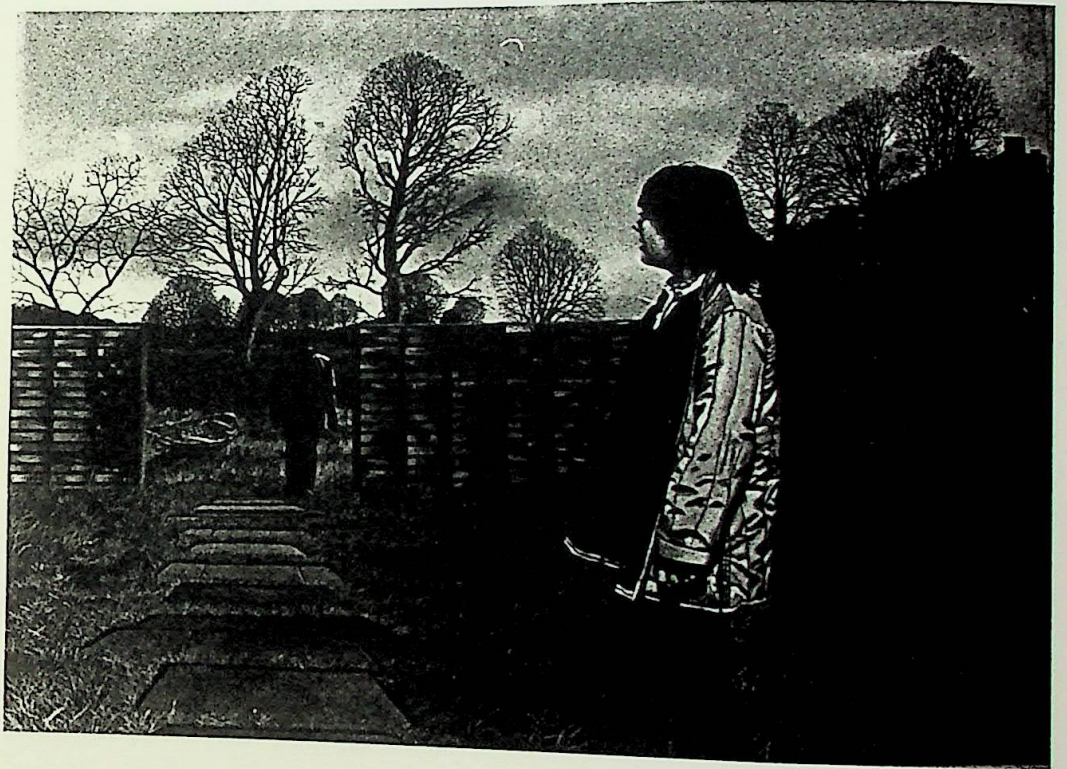


Fig. 5

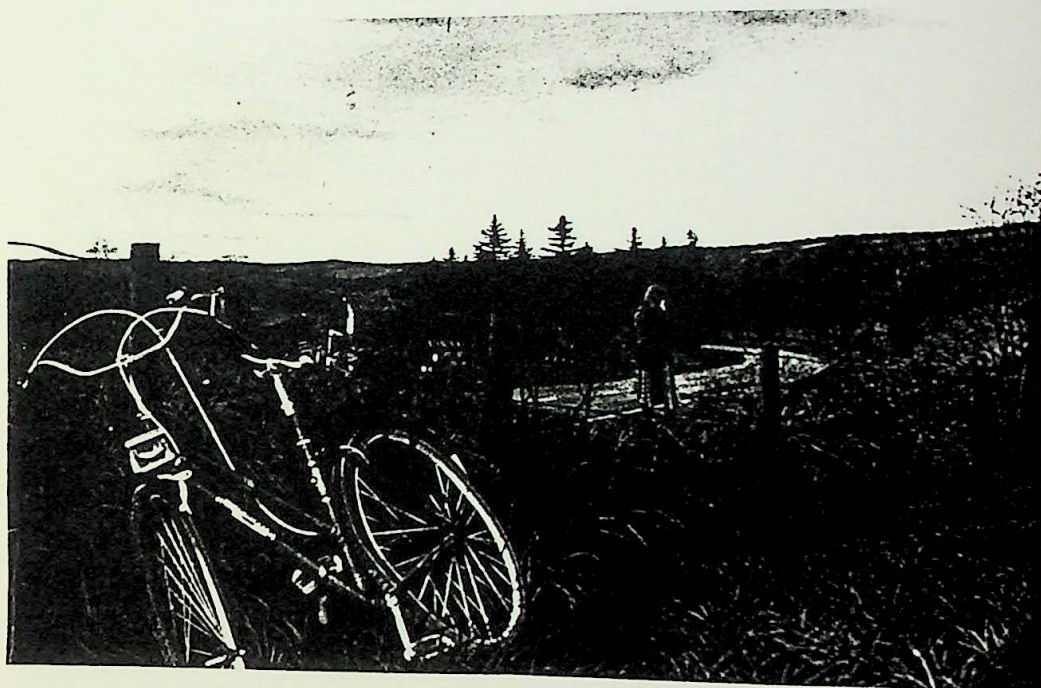


Fig. 6

and 'Hide and Seek (1981)), playing cowboys and indians ('My Heroes have always been Cowboys' (1978)), or tennis ('Tennis in the Mountains' (1977)) etc. Gales photographic style further comments on the family snap shots often taken on such outings. He shows us that this casual formation of our sense of reality from such images is a more serious process than we might like to imagine. When preparing to make a painting Gale usually starts by taking some photographs of the place and people he is interested in, then he does several small watercolour studies in order to see how the photographs can be translated into paint. Having done this he will go out again and take more relevant photographs which enable him to build up the areas of detail which interest him. Throughout this process his idea of a finished image is developing all the time. By devoting this amount of time, and the precise labour that this kind of realism demands, Gale demands that we give more attention to his paintings than we would normally give to a snapshot of Wicklow. Then, if we give our attention we can see the photo-style images are not as random as we previously would have thought. For example in 'Tennis in the Mountains' or 'Bus Stop' (1981) he puts a series of barriers between the viewer and the work. We are invited to look at the work by a series of zigzags which allow one's eye to roam across the picture but conversely barriers such as the bicycle, fences or in other works trees and flowerbeds, keep us from a physical involvement with the painting, we are constantly made aware that we are watching something we which are not part of. It illustrates well our present urban idea of nature where in order to maintain our cosy escapist notions of the countryside we must keep the tour bus or car window between us and the real thing, otherwise our preconceived notions might be disturbed by the social realities of what is really happening on the land and how it relates to us and our present lifestyles.

The kind of leisure that most people enjoy today is not as prolonged as that of the landed gentry who in the past were the great supporters of landscape painting. Leisure is now seen more as being a diversion from the real business of life than as being itself a lifestyle.

Thus, the sense of the 'moment' seems to be significant in Gales work. There is always the sense that something is about to happen, the stillness of the work is threatened, about to be interrupted, an event is about to occur. We are placed in a time when nothing is happening and yet we are made to feel that this space is important. How he achieves this is by taking a moment, and contrary to photography, he puts everything in focus so that we are allowed an unusually intense vision which enables us look all around the painting, for example, 'Fathers Day' (1983) from which we draw out its different layers of meaning, from Gales own personal symbolism of objects and family relationships to the depiction of a wider social reality at our leisure. This would seem in total contrast to the way the French Impressionists saw 'the moment', as something fleeting and insubstantial. He succeeds in making the moment seem to go on forever, timeless, and by doing this manages to connect it to the rest of our lives. He thereby counteracts the concept of leisure as being a mere distraction from life which is I think an important thing to do if we are trying to gain any understanding of our relationship of alienation to nature and what effect it has on us and the landscape. Gale's Wicklow, though outwardly passive, actually has a great deal to communicate with us through this passiveness.

Deeply connected with any modern concept of leisure and the landscape

is the role of the tourist, someone who takes a break from their usual life to visit another area of the country or the world. In his work Gale paints the relationship between the tourist and the landscape, and by doing this he shows us also the system which produces the tourist and why it does so. The tourist is more often than not someone who is detached from the environment they travel through, in both an emotional and a social sense, and thus it becomes very easy to thrust pre-conceived ideas about a country or place at them (Bord Failte, 1966). Such pre-conceived ideas usually contain cliches which exaggerate national characteristics and cultural differences which not only serve to make holidays more appealing but also they make it increasingly difficult to connect how lifestyles and events in one country indirectly affect the lives of people in other countries.

Thus the tourist mentality is more inclined to see the differences rather than the similarities between things. When the tourist is looked at in this light it becomes easier to see why the idea of tourism is officially approved of and actively encouraged by those in power. It encourages a mentality which finds difficulty in connecting ones own life with events and places, which in order to develop a sense of either individual or communal identity is essential. This kind of confused mind is far easier for those in power to control. As regards landscape this confused state of mind manifests itself in the present day relationship of alienation which many people feel towards nature and the landscape. However, I do not think this state of affairs will go on indefinitely because within the tourist system for looking at the landscape lie the seeds of its own destruction. For in a country such as Ireland, with its vast tourist industry making it economically dependent on the diversions of richer countries it becomes obvious to us that these diversions actually form quite an important economic

function and once we begin to see things from this angle all sorts of contradictions and connections begin to emerge and we can fully appreciate the ironies of the present situation where hoteliers are giving out about the pollution caused to the environment by large multi-national industries but yet are only too willing to accept the money from their foreign guests that the salaries from such companies enable them to pay for their Irish holidays. Also we can begin to see the de-stabilising influence that looking at the landscape might have, leading people to question in a new way the government policies of industrialisation which have so radically changed our country in the last thirty years.

With this clash of interests; traditional versus modern, national versus international etc. it is little wonder that many of our artists such as Martin Gale, Brian Bourke, Gwen O'Dowd, Trevor Geoghegan, Barrie Cooke, Paddy Collins, Cecily Brennan, Willie Doherty, Jill Dennis etc. have been drawn towards the confusion of the Irish landscape. It offers fertile subject matter for anyone interested in trying to develop their own personal interpretation on the social upheaval Ireland has been going through in the last few decades. From the 1960's through to the 1990's there has been a long debate about the Irishness of Irish art, how Irish or how international is it? Evidence of this debate lies in the writings of, for example, Brian O'Doherty (1971), Frances Ruane (1980), Robert Ballagh (1980), David Brett (1984) etc. With regard to landscape painting this question of national identity was raised many times. This was because with better communications and easy access to the forms and ideas of modernism, with which artists were now familiar, for example in the semi-abstract works of Paddy Collins, Tony O'Malley or Camille Souter, they never

really took to the ideas for which these forms were originally invented (Frances Ruane, 1980, p. 16). The works which resulted from this mixture of approaches have made younger landscape painters very aware of the problems involved in the way we view and criticise art.

In Ireland this conflict between national interests and an international art style had led to the evolution of a style of art criticism which tries to tackle this problem. It's answer is to look at subject matter (in the case of this essay, landscape) from a stance which is based on the importance of economic and social structures. Examples of this approach can be seen in the work of David Brett, Sean McCrum, Joan Fowler, Christopher Coppock, John Robberts, etc., However it is seldom that the dangers of such an approach are pointed out, for reasons which will become evident after I have shown what I consider these dangers to be. The dangers are that when such emphasis is given to human activities of a social and economic nature the criticism of landscape suffers. The land gets relegated to a backdrop for human activities of a social and economic nature. It often becomes a pretext for critics to expound on their favourite topics. The landscape is not seen as having an identity of its own, independent of humans, which is just as capable of influencing the course of human history as social and economic circumstances, are of changing the landscape. Joan Fowler raises an interesting point when criticising the critics of German Neo-Expressionism, she says:

What these examples from Buchlin to Kuspit highlight is fixation with national character which manifestly limits the art criticism, indeed it could be said that Kuspit's recent writings on the subject are more to do with defining his political position than with German Neo-Expressionism (Circa, No. 15, pp. 7 - 12.)

The same statement, in my opinion could be applied with accuracy to much of the art writing on contemporary Irish landscape work. For example, a similar problem arises in Christopher Coppock's review of Martin Parr's exhibition of photographs and the book version with text by Fintan O'Toole. He spends at least two-thirds of the review establishing the importance of the critic, he says 'photography with the support of con/text has the power to educate - photography alone offers no way forward' (Circa, No. 18, pp. 30-31) and he speaks of the desirability of having a given 'critical framework' with which to view the works. Then he goes on to praise the dialogue between the artist, Parr and the critic, O'Toole. While I can understand how, because Coppock is a critic he will undoubtedly be greatly interested in a dialogue between an artist and a critic, it smacks in this case, a bit too obviously, of self-justification.

Coppock does not seem to realise that a work itself can set up the framework in which it is viewed. There is a danger that in this area the visual content of the images can be passed over, just as the realities of the landscape can be neglected by the artist from a marginal country who attempts to place his/her work within the confines of the language of a dominant culture. The work usually suffers as a result; because the language used is not appropriate to express the reality of a dominated or marginal country. This can be seen to occur in the work of T. P. Flanagan or indeed in the very early work of Gale where he mixes landscape and animals with hard edge abstraction. For example in 'The Master Rabbit'.

The importance of this issue becomes apparent when one observes the amount of time that our critics have seen fit to devote to Martin Gale's work - virtually none. This is, I would argue because,

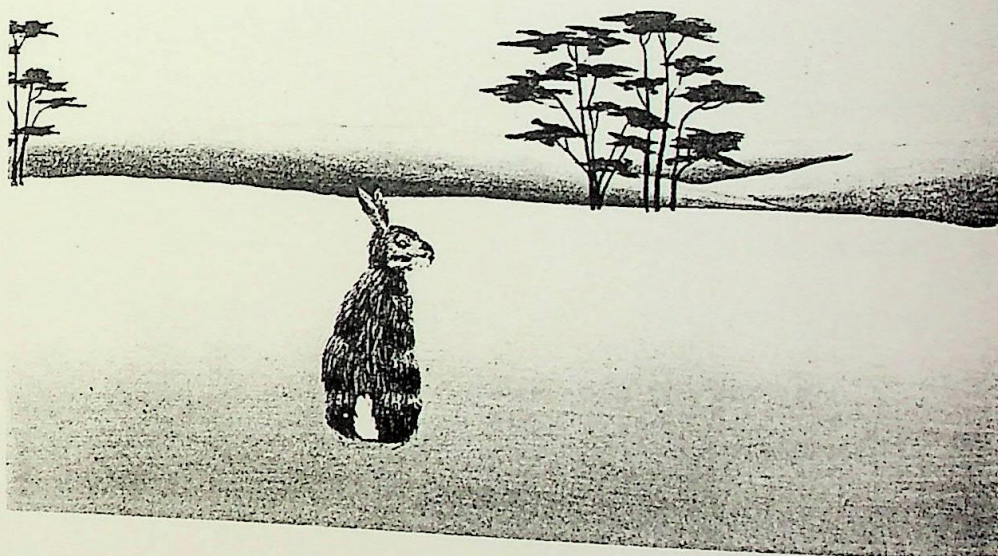


Fig. 7

although in terms of content his paintings deal with subjects which are actually of great interest to contemporary Irish art criticism such as alienation and industrialisation and the radical changes which have subsequently occurred in our lives; people have failed to notice Gale's interesting points because when they look at his work all they see is a painter who is painting in a style which was popular in America about thirty years ago and because he is working in Ireland it is simply presumed that he is behind the times and they investigate no further.

Many of our critics have tied themselves up in the propagation or denigration of various ideological systems e.g. Sean McCrum (Circa, No. 26, pp. 27-31), Paul O'Brien (Circa No. 48, pp. 17-22) and seem to have lost any ability to relate their knowledge to any real physical situation except those that are very obvious. Take for example David Brett's article 'From Local to Global. The Place of Place in Art' (Circa, No. 29, pp. 17-21) he only seems to be able to see; in the glaringly obvious situation of Northern Ireland, the problems of national versus international art. He does not seem to realise that in the south, where despite the fact that on the surface the economic and social problems of the Republic might seem to be far removed from the problems of northern artists, they are in fact quite similar that is both groups of artists have had to question the merits of applying the language of a dominant culture to a country (or in the case of this essay) subject matter which is considered marginal.

It seems to me that because our critics have been so concerned with the idea of getting a modern art practice off the ground in Ireland they have forgotten that it is often the work which is difficult to discuss

in the language of contemporary criticism which is the more interesting. Certainly in the case of Gale by refusing to fit easily in to the category of 'out of date photorealist' allotted to him, has managed to rise some very interesting questions. In my opinion he has opened up the opportunity for a far more interesting and fundamental debate between the artist and the critic than that alluded to by Coppock. I do not seek to denigrate the socio-political stance from which many of our critics chose to view art, I just want to suggest that they examine their own motives for taking such a stance and the full implications of it more carefully.

When it comes to taking an alternative viewpoint there are also many problems. This is because opposition to such a well worked out and internally coherent ideology tends to be a gut reaction, stemming from a vague feeling that the dominant viewpoint does not get the full picture. The result is that the language used to articulate these feelings often sounds emotional and irrational, not having access to a long history of concepts on which to build and refer to, and runs the risk of not being understood by anyone. Such was the case with Sean Dunne's article (Sunday Tribune, 1986) about another realist painter Trevor Geoghegan where he states 'He avoids forcing these paintings into carrying a message'. What he means by this is anyone's guess. Does he mean that this is a good or bad thing and why? I can only guess that what he means is that Geoghegan's paintings are not making overtly obvious statements and that Dunne approves of this approach. But he goes no further and fails to discuss the merits and failings of this approach, rather he launches into a description of his techniques which he also fails to grasp the possibilities of. Similarly Brian Fallon shows a lack of a coherent vocabulary when it comes to expressing his view of Martin Gale's paintings in a review of Gale's most recent exhibition

(Irish Times, 1989) he gets as far as saying that Gale's version of photorealism is far removed from 'the harsh urban ultra-contemporary tone of the New York realists'. But having made this observation he stops dead and seems unable to draw any conclusions from these differences. Then he goes on to talk about technique where again although he states that the paintings are like large photographs he does not seem to be able to grasp the importance of the connections between Gale's style and the content of his images. This is in my opinion because in order to do so Fallon would have to fundamentally re-evaluate the way he writes about art, to become less concerned about styles and categories of work and more self critical. If he could do that then he might succeed in opening the way for others who wish to do more than spend their time scratching at the surface of an alternative stand point from which to view landscape art.

It is little wonder that alienation from the landscape has become such a problem for our society when we have, as demonstrated a totally inadequate form of language in which to articulate any kind of relationship with nature, even an expression of alienation from it. Following on from this it becomes easier to understand how our artists have to overcome great conceptual difficulties if they are to develop a coherent view of the landscape.

It seems to me that Gale by painting in the style he does has found an interesting way to work against the prevailing critical approach. First of all he comes up against the assumption that he is simply out of date, many viewers never get past this assumption, but if you look at the actual subject matter it becomes clear that Gale is playing games. While talking to him at his Wicklow home it became evident

that though he usually thinks about his work on a very personal level his is nevertheless aware of the difficulties his work presents to the average critic. It seems to me that he uses an unconscious awareness of the rigid categories such as photorealist and landscape painter, in which he is frequently placed by critics to show how these categories can be used against the ideologies of the modernist movement which gave birth to them. He succeeds in subverting the narrow values of such systems of perception by honestly painting the combination of objects and ideas that he finds around him. He connects both in the work by a contrast of subject matter with itself; composition, and technique, in such paintings as 'At The Landing (1986). Here he shows a boat in the foreground at the edge of a lake. On closer inspection you can see that the boat is being propped up by old car tyres and in the distance on the other side of the lake there is an open small red car in front of a dark forest, two children are walking away from the car. Here one has several conflicting categories confronting one, the combination of photorealism with such overtly traditional, romantic, escapist imagery as the boat at the waters edge with a dark wood behind. Then the appearance of the red car and the children on this imagery leads on to a sense of disruption. They seem separate from the scene which they are surrounded by, both of them attached to the invisible line of the road. It is this initial sense of disruption that sends one looking for connections between different parts of the painting, why is the car parked there, where are the parents of the children, why is the boat where it is, is one supposed to identify with the parents of these children perhaps taking a snapshot of a weekend outing; but why are the children and landscape so distant, one is invited to enter into the scene by the presence of the boat but is then prevented by the lack of oars. This desire to connect all these seemingly disparate elements in to one story or reality then sets one

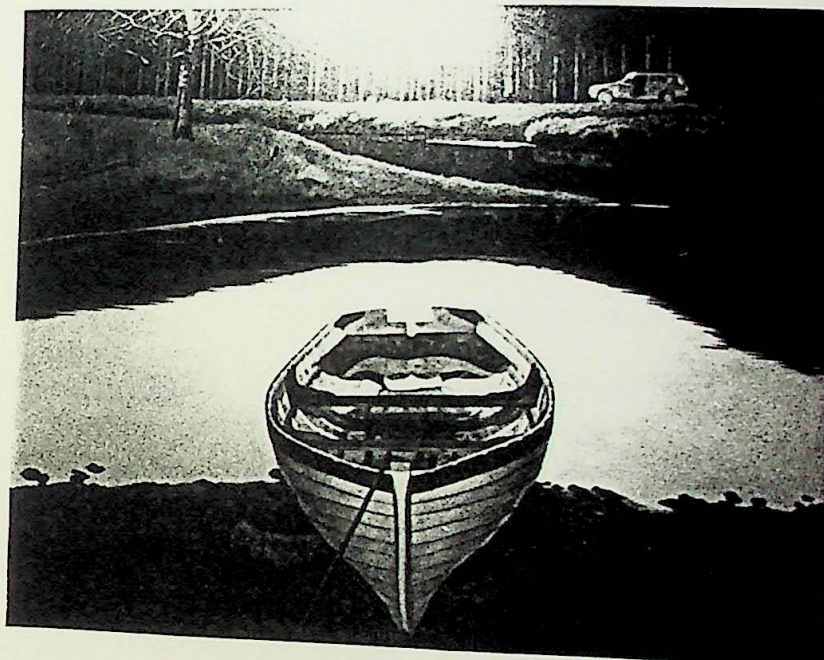


Fig. 8

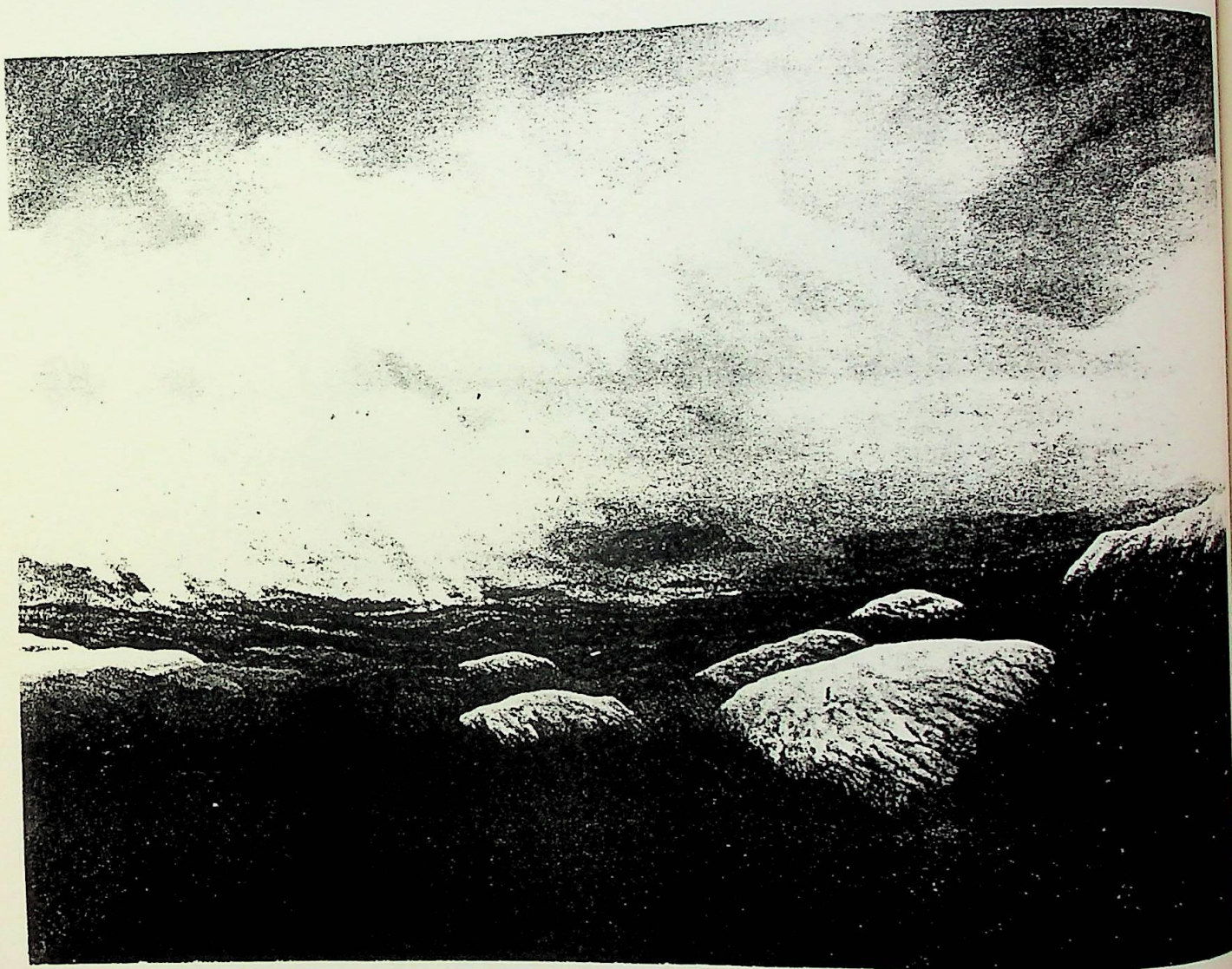


Fig. 9

wondering how and in what way do styles of painting from realism, to romanticism to photorealism; and the traditionally opposed rural and urban values connect, by portraying them in the same picture he suggests that they do and by the jarring effect that the paintings have on the viewer he suggests that showing connections may well reveal some quite unpleasant facts about the large gaps that our various ways (systems) of seeing leave us with. By doing this he maintains an air of independence from ready made ideologies but also shows how it is not always necessary to throw out a whole set of ideas and invent an entirely new system in order to progress but how it is possible to advance by deciding where you stand in relation to them. In relation to contemporary Irish art criticism he manages to use the deficiencies of both camps to his own advantage in producing strong and complex images. Now that I have considered Gale's relationship to contemporary Irish art criticism and the limited choices it offers to landscape painters; it is important for any assessment of his work to see where he stands with regard to other Irish contemporary landscape painters.

Trevor Geoghegan shares the technique of photorealism with Gale but seems to use it for quite different purposes. His works are pure landscape with no traces of humans involved and would traditionally be described as romantic, it is the kind of landscape that people in traffic jams long to escape to, it is a wild, dramatic sensuous and very attractive place. At one level it is about the elements but on another it is about the way landscape itself is looked at. One doesn't get the same sense of unease as in Gale's work, this is replaced by intense emotion. You are allowed into the picture, there are no barriers to make you conscious of yourself and the painting as separate objects. The landscape is seen as natural rather than being

constructed by humans as in Gales work. Geoghegan seems to have an urgent need to make the joys of the landscape accessible. His works I think are subject to a variety of interpretations, on the one hand his work can be considered as escapist and propagating untrue ideas about the state of the countryside, but on the other hand it could be said that he is doing the same kind of thing for the landscape as Millet did for the peasant in his early work. That is showing us that the landscape must be important to us if it is capable of inducing such dramatic emotional effects on us. Here is an attempt at achieving some sort of relationship with the physical environment even if it only lives in the realm of dreams and aspirations.

Gwen O'Dowd is another painter who gives some importance in her work to achieving a physical relationship between the viewer and the work, in her very abstract landscapes she shows the landscape as an organic surface in a constant state of change puckered and scarred by use and abuse but still very much alive. O'Dowd has openly stated her concern for the environment (Circa, No. 48, pp. 41-42) but she doesn't see the landscape as being the victim of humanity but as being something quite powerful with the possibilities for destruction as well as for healing and creating. Unlike O'Dowd and a great many other Irish artists from Barrie Cooke to Cecily Brennan, Gale does not seem to possess this sense of physical involvement and identification with the landscape, if his work is anything to go by. However it is my opinion that he uses this lack of physical involvement intelligently and helps us to be more aware of it and what its implications are when we come across it or its opposite in other work. His work is the work of someone who does not feel very emotionally close to nature but who asks why? The only hint he gives that it might be important to have a relationship with the physical environment is through the emotional emptiness that comes from

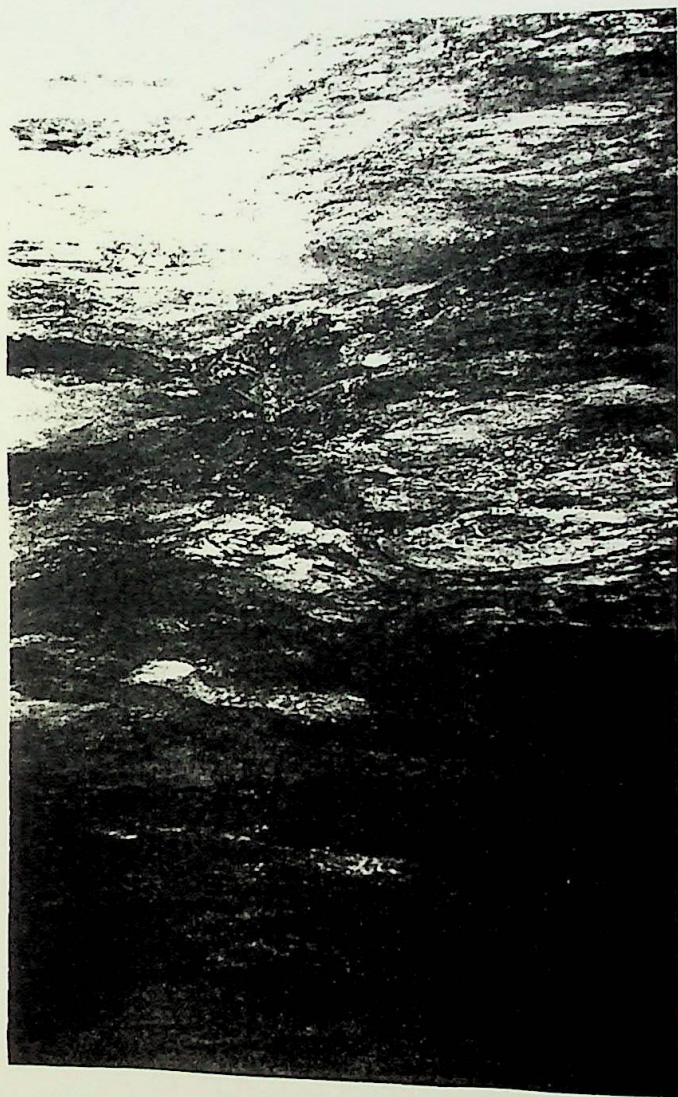


Fig. 10



Fig. 11

a relationship of estrangement from nature personified by the stare of the boy in 'Waking Up' in contrast to the painting 'Like a Crime' (1983) where his daughter is watching two men sawing up a tree from behind some bushes. Gale's representations of landscape raises many issues which are often unseen or ignored. The fact that these have been related to both a specific place and time seems to make these issues stand out all the more. The works draw you in to an historical frame of mind in which you cannot isolate the paintings from the society in which they were created. They offer a new look at the concerns of Irish art over the last few decades, such as the long debate over the relevance of modernism to Ireland and the effectiveness of the work which adopted its forms.

CHAPTER 3

By managing to work in an intelligent way against the narrowness of contemporary critical opinion Gale has shown the true nature of the position in which the Irish landscape painter finds him/herself. He has found a way of articulating the causes for the often baffling feelings of alienation we sometimes feel about the landscape and by doing this makes it easier for us to see the implications of these feelings both for ourselves and for our environment. He does this by confronting us with the choices we have made in the past and their results in the landscape today; from the technological and tourist approach of the British to the implications of the more political French attitudes. By uniting the two approaches in the works he shows us how both approaches were born from the same process of industrialisation but how they are incomplete and succeed in driving us further away from any useful form of engagement with the land.

By making us aware of where we stand today and why we stand in our particular position he has brought us to the next logical step which is to ask what we are going to do next. This is not an easy question to answer but I think that certain trends are becoming apparent. For example the concern with the physical properties of the landscape seems to be gaining importance with a greater emphasis on a sense of the substance of the land rather than the vague obscuring mists of Flanagan or Collins. When this landscape is examined it is often depicted as ravaged or plundered as in the work of O'Dowd or Brennan but it still manages to retain an almost magical vitality, in the works of Sean McSweeney, Brian Bourke or Trevor Geoghegan this quality dominates.

I think that if this evolving concern with the physical identity of the landscape can be linked to our concerns from the past, we may have taken our first step on the road away from the grip that our present relationship of alienation from nature has maintained on landscape work since the industrialisation of our country and towards something more profitable. Though Gale has achieved much through his way of working it also produces its own problems.

Despite the fact that he is painting in rural surroundings he, like Courbet is still painting for the town. It would seem that it is here his work communicates most. However one must question the soundness of a concept which presents an already alienated group of people with an image of the landscape as being a quite uninviting place. It could be argued that this will do nothing to promote new values but rather serves to entrench people in their present relationship with nature. The experience that the viewer gets from one of Gale's works is essentially a negative and unpleasant one not the kind of feeling that makes one want to rush out and get involved in the landscape that one gets from Sean McSweeney's or Gwen O'Dowd's work. The feeling from Gale's work is always a sense of unease or absence. What sometimes happens with Gale's paintings is that the interest of the viewer is lost before the interesting things going on in the work are discovered. Instead there is a feeling of frustration at not being able to form a relationship with the work and it is looked at no further. In this way he could be accused of lacking consideration for the viewer and by doing this allowing himself to fall into an attitude of superior aloofness with which we in Ireland are familiar from the way it was used by the ascendancy landlords to maintain power for so long. This would surely be a dangerous thing to do if he believes that trying to

change our perceptions of landscape is a worthwhile exercise. However in most of his work he manages to avoid this by his compelling use of detail which firstly forces one to examine his work closely and then convinces one of the reality of his world by making one ask oneself how he could paint it so precisely if it wasn't real.

Gale does manage to get to the bottom of the urban lifestyle and uncover its darker side with relation to its effect on the landscape but he is either uninterested in or fails to uncover the causes which sent so many scurrying to Dublin in search of the new jobs of the sixties and seventies. By not dealing with this he ignores a whole side of nature which is very important, if one is to understand why people do not want to acknowledge nature's true role, for in the sixties people were running away from rural life as well as towards an urban one. They were leaving behind the narrowness of the small town mentality, the grinding down effect that this combined with hard manual labour and little prospect of financial reward had on one's individuality. To add to this there were fewer jobs than ever before on the land as farms became more mechanised. At this time the disadvantages of urban life did not seem as obvious as the disadvantages of the life they were leaving behind. He does not seem to acknowledge the grim side of the landscape which contributes a great deal to the uncaring attitude which many Irish people show towards the countryside. A knowledge of this side of nature is in my opinion essential if one is to overcome the present, split ways of viewing nature from either the hard primitivism of the film 'Man of Arran' or the type of arcadia presented in Bord Failte films such as 'Return to Kerry' which follows the two week holiday in Ireland of a honeymoon couple which is full of shorts of spectacular sights (Circa, No. 43,

pp. 26). It appears to me that a unifying action is necessary if we are to get a grasp of the issues which must be faced if we desire the continuation of intelligent landscape painting in this country. On a point of technique, I must say that while Gale has made great use of his photorealist style, from comparing and contrasting the techniques of painting and photography in order to combine the best aspects of both for his intense vision of Wicklow, to how he has simultaneously used this combination of approaches to debunk our pre-conceived notions about the landscape and the way we look at landscape art, he however does on occasion lapse into sloppiness of technique e.g. with his rendering of the forest in 'Waking Up', this cannot be covered up as self expression when he by his style deliberately (for reasons which I have already gone into) draws the eye to a close inspection of the canvas, in order to retain its integrity the work simply must be painted properly. In most cases Gale manages to do this and thus he has opened the way for our landscape painters of the present and future, who take the time to look at his work and learn from it, to attempt to find a new relationship with nature which is more meaningful than our present one. This has not happened very much in the history of Irish landscape painting but perhaps with the increased availability of information about and accessibility of the works of this generation things will be different in the future.

Finally, leaving aside all my various arguments for the necessity of a change in the way we look at nature and art, I would like to finish by saying what the message of this essay is, it might be considered by cynics as a cliché 'above all to thine own self be true'. If one can succeed in doing this as Martin Gale has for the most part, all the art theory and social relevance will fall into place around the work without worrying too much about them.

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