NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN.

DEPARTMENT OF FINE ART - PAINTING.

TONY O'MALLEY

CONTEMPORARY IRISH ARTIST.

Fig 1.

B Y

NOREEN WALSHE.

Submitted to the Faculty of History
of Art & Design and
Complementary Studies
in Candidacy for the Degree of
"Bachelor of Fine Art" 1992
Painting.

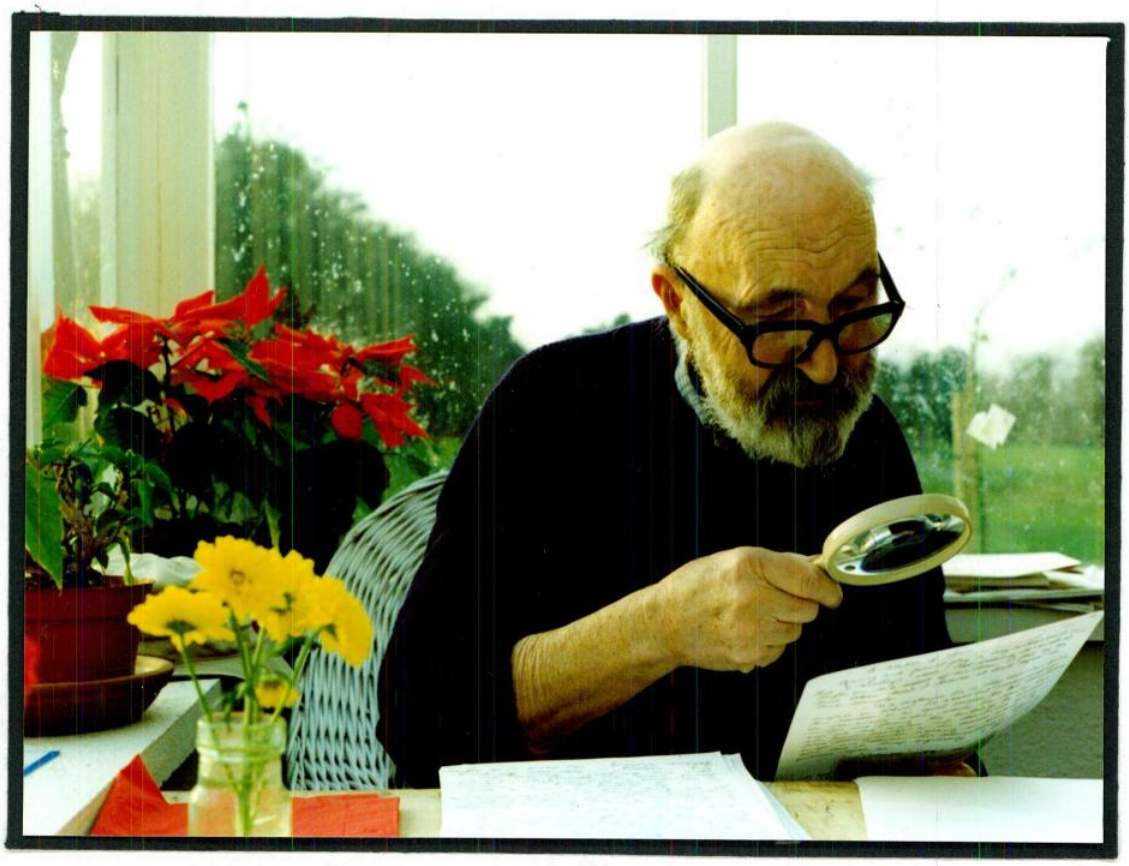

Fig 2. *TONY O' MALLEY AT HOME IN PHYSICIANSTOWN.*
PHOTOGRAPH BY: NOREEN WALSHE. (FEBRUARY 1992)

My concrete world would be the world of intuition, freedom of spirit, awareness of the world around you, nature ... (49)

Tony O' Malley.
11th. October 1991.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.

My thanks and appreciation to the following people who have helped and co-operated with me in the preparation and writing of this thesis:

Tony O'Malley and his wife Jane; John Taylor of the Taylor Galleries Dublin and Dr Frances Ruane.

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INTRODUCTION:

It has been ten years since I first met Tony O'Malley. I was on a painting holiday with the St. Ives School and the director of the school, Roy Ray asked me one day during the course if I would like to meet the 'Irish Painter'who worked at Portmeor Studios, Number 4. I didn't know the Irish painter and it was with much expectation that I turned up for the rendezvous on that pleasant Summer's afternoon.

And so I was introduced to Tony O'Malley(FIG.2) and his wife Jane. It was right in the middle of a work day for them and the studio was imbued with an atmosphere of engagement, Tony working at one end and Jane at the other.

In what could be termed a state of ordered chaos, many boards and unfinished canvasses peopled corners and easels. What with the smell of paint and the overgenerous windows which lined the seaboard side of the studio there was an overriding feeling of happy contentment there.

Tony O'Malley was then sixty eight years old and had spent roughly twenty years living and working in the Cornish seaside town of St. Ives, coming back to his native Kilkenny for just brief holidays.

He took much trouble that day to talk and to show some of his paintings in progress and others which were finished,but at no time did he impose any strong opinions or beliefs.

Time didn't matter that day as the visit to his studio extended into an evening of entertainment. He had time to sit and eat, time to chat and time to share recollected experiences of life in Ireland as a bankclerk and of his first tentative efforts to respond to a world about him that was demanding an explanation in image and colour.

In 1982 I didn't understand Tony O'Malley's work. I knew it had depths which I would find difficult to fathom. I saw that his art was beautiful and it evoked in me responses of awe and sometimes of desperation, knowing that I wanted to be part of the image - making of which he had such a control.

In choosing Tony O'Malley and his work as the subject matter for my thesis I wish to be able to read what I consider to be a remarkable language of colour and light. I see his work as being an integrated response to life and its struggles. A more in depth examination of his art will, I hope, inform my own personal engagement with the process of image - making.

I consider it to be of great benefit both personally, and to those who will read my research, to have dealt with the work of a living artist. In spite of the fact that there is no great body of written material on Tony O'Malley, I have been able to meet him on two occasions, talk with him, see his image-making in progress and most important of all I have been able to ask pertinent questions which might never have left the realm of speculation had he not been able to respond to my enquiries.

True to his nature he has generously shared information, about his background, his motivations,and the philosophies which have empowered his work. Through talking with me he has revealed more and more of his personality and the inherent psychology which influences his work in general.

The following considerations are those which will be dealt with in the course of this thesis:

(a) Tony O'Malley's beginnings as a professional artist,

(b) The language and philosophy of his work and, finally, an aspect of his personality which possibly influenced what is now a great art of counterbalance,

(c) His inclination towards being a melancholic.

It is hoped that this study will ultimately reveal Tony O'Malley in a clearer way to those who wish to understand him better as a contemporary Irish artist.

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CHAPTER 1.

APPRENTICESHIP TO AN ARTISTIC LIFE:

Introduction

Tony O'Malley went on a painting holiday to St. Ives in Cornwall in 1955 and returned to live there in 1960.See (FIG.5) AND (FIG.6) Life changed radically for him after setting foot in this thriving community of working artists. Aidan Dunne declares that 'in St. Ives, he certainly found himself as a painter'(30.) He seemed at last, at the age of forty two to have found his purpose in life or what he would term a distinctive point in his 'journey'(47).

What had been a life of relatively joyless endurance prior to 1955 continued now to be one of committed focus on what he knew must be right for him. ' I wanted to get out. Instead of being a man who worked in a bank, or a man who had been ill, I wanted to simply be a painter'(30)

His meeting with the innovators of the St. Ives School at that time must have been a very exciting experience, his becoming acquainted with artists like Patrick Heron, Bryan Wynter, Terry Frost and Peter Lanyon in particular, a source of inspiration.

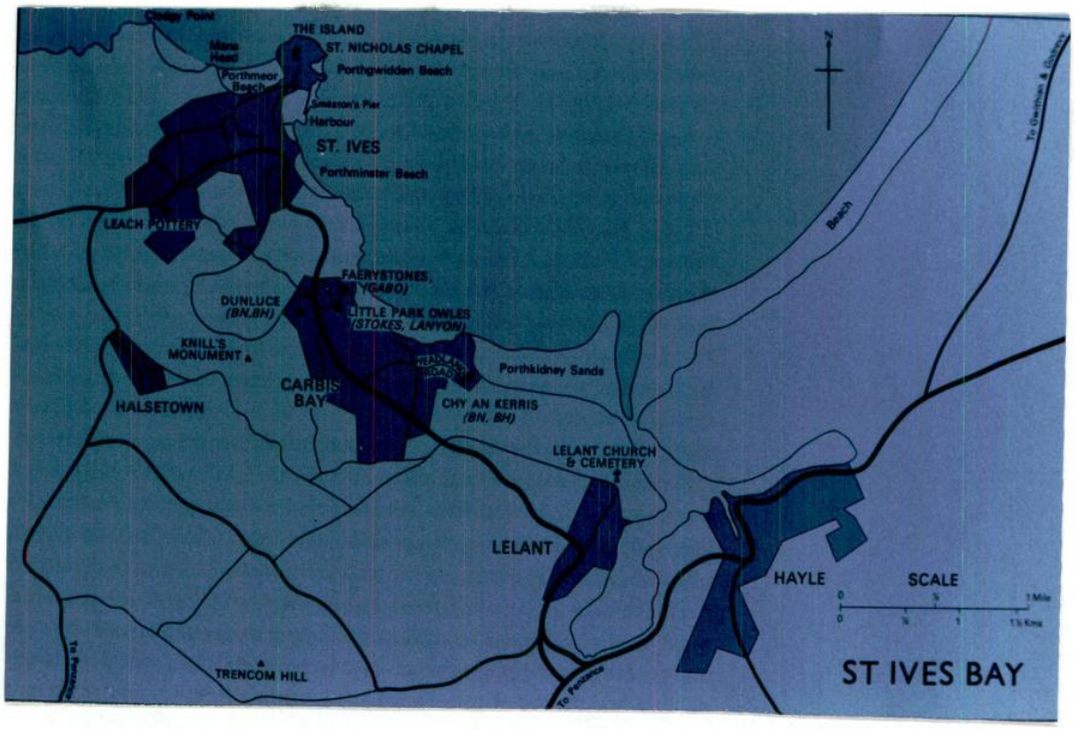


FIG. 5. *St. Ives Bay, Cornwall, England.*

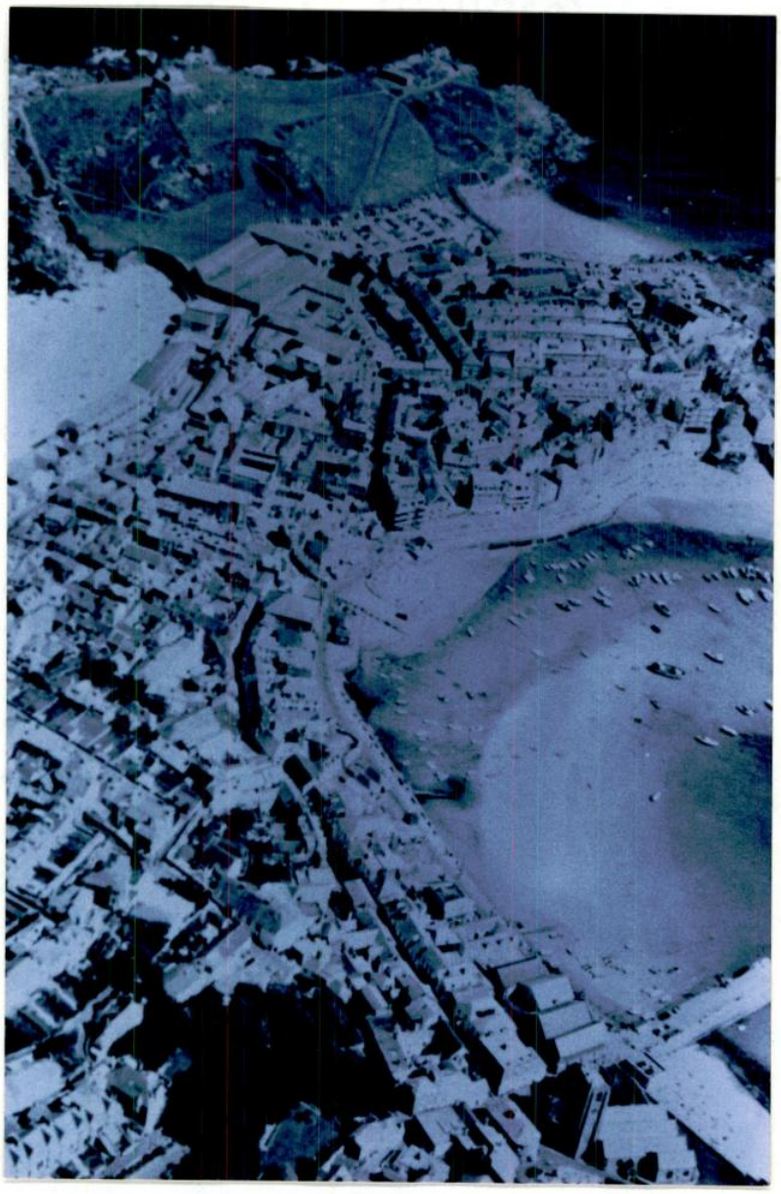


FIG. 6. *Aerial View of St. Ives.*

Human relationships always being of great interest,especially the relationship between individuals involved in a common pursuit or area of discipline, Tony O'Malley's relationship with Peter Lanyon as distinct from others, and its consequent effects on his artistic life merits examination.

O'Malley's place within the context of St. Ives and his artistic association and friendship with Peter Lanyon are the main focus of Chapter 1. Without first addressing these concerns it would be impossible to assess his life as a painter because it was at this time that he would have formulated his more defined ideas about painting, at the same time creating a working language with which he could express his experiences.

NEW DEPARTURE:

What can be speculated upon as his 'epiphany', as Joyce would term it, began with his meeting with the post-war moderns, Peter Lanyon, Bill Redgrave, Patrick Heron,(FIG.7) to mention but a few of the very individual painters who were giving momentum to this West Cornish school of expressionism.

Tony O'Malley arrived in St. Ives during what David Brown cites as the liveliest times in the art history of this small community (19). In the early 'fifties St. Ives was witnessing, a resurgence of energies created by the younger generation of artists whose careers had been interrupted by the second world war. Artists such as Wells, Lanyon and Wynter had by this time established themselves as painters of notoriety. Lanyon in particular was showing his work in New York from 1952 onwards as a result of his having taken the opportunity of a commission offered by the Arts Council 1951 Festival of Britain, to work on larger paintings. His scale of work was unrivalled by any of his St. Ives contemporaries. An attractive and stimulating environment had been created by the activities of the Crypt Group which had been set up by Lanyon in co-operation with Guido Morris, a printer and Sven Berlin another resident artist. The establishing of the Penwith Society in 1949 had equally added to the growth of the artistic community.

FIG. 7.

Patrick Heron, Peter Lanyon and Jack Smith
at the Tinners Arms, Zennor. August 1956.

The history of St. Ives as a painting community goes back to 1884 when the Painters Whistler and Sickert visited it for the first time. For many years after, it shared a rivalry with another small community called Newlyn, to become the art capital of West Cornwall. Newlyn retained priority in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century but it was St. Ives that in 1939 achieved a more outward - looking perspective and gained the reputation of what can now be considered as being an important international art centre.

The war climate in Europe forced a massive exodus of avant-garde artists across the Atlantic to New York while a smaller proportion settled in St. Ives.

Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth and Naum Gabo arrived in 1939 bringing with them the abstract language of the flourishing avant-garde movement.

David Lewis sums up the evolving character of the St. Ives Community in the ensuing years:

> The hard-edge language of the international style of the 'thirties, so full of optimism of new artistic and social orders opposing the rising tides of fascism and transcending national boundaries was being recast to reflect a deep sense of mans' relation to the land, to the infinite rhythms of nature, affirming age-old cultural values in a contemporary world that was falling apart (19).

One cannot help but wonder at what the experience must have been like for O'Malley, leaving his native climate of conservatism and finding the necessary freedom to experiment and explore with people whom he calls 'kindred spirits.'(47)

MEETING PETER LANYON:

Peter Lanyon,(FIG.8) one of the pioneers of this community, was to become a close friend of O'Malley's and remained so until his death in a gliding accident in 1964. Looking now at the work and life of Lanyon, one can see how his charisma and energies could open windows for the eyes of another. There is a vibrancy in his paintings and in his constructions which were influenced by Gabo who resided in St. Ives until 1946 but whom O'Malley never met during his time there.

In an analysis of O'Malley's relationship with Lanyon and of the possible influences, it could be said that O'Malley derived some of his inspiration in subject matter from Lanyon. His early semi-formalist representations of place would certainly bear a resemblance to those of Lanyon. But whereas Lanyon became a figurative painter, by which I mean that he painted the figure in abstracted images and combined them with motifs of landscape and experience, O'Malley never painted on this figurative social level. Maybe 'never' is too strong a word as he is known to have painted a series of self-portraits.[1] These along with PORTRAIT OF MY MOTHER 1953(FIG.9) are nothing short of direct social representations. He has also painted characters from his home place.'I painted a portrait of an old travelling woman. That kind of woman you wouldn't see anymore. That's the real old decent tinker woman.'(47)

FIG. 8. *Peter Lanyon, artist, friend and associate of Tony O' Malley.*

FIG. 9. *Portrait of my Mother (1953)*

Oil/Board
30x18 cms.

However, these direct portraits never really translated into his later abstractions, certainly not as complete works within themselves, but perhaps now and then as visual comments within larger paintings. For an example of such usage refer to the painting Outdoor Studio Morning Bahamas, (1983) (FIG.10).

On the contrary, the figure asserts itself fairly often in Lanyon's paintings. On his return from the war he expressed that' really my interest was in people and not in ideas,' and Whether or not he is consciously representing the figure as in Susan(1958)(FIG.11), where the figure itself is more important than the landscape, he is expressing his personal connection with people and his responses within a wide spectrum of experience. In this painting there is no direct reference to any specific part of the body but the movement of a girl rolling over is the essence of the painting. It is a unified image of several different positions. He is treating the figure in a similar way in Girl in Wood (1953) (FIG.12) What, on the other hand, began as a landscape in Porthleven (1951)(FIG.13) leads us into a search for the hidden figure with the abstraction of organic forms. Of this painting Peter Lanyon himself says:

> The water runs right down the middle of the picture, which is rather like an aerial view; There are some frontal planes, but down at the bottom are a number of shapes which roll and pitch - like boats moving around in the inner harbour. The forms in the picture have always suggested two people to me. This may be accidental or at any rate unconscious; but I always look for figures in my pictures when I've painted them.

FIG. 10. *Outdoor studio - morning Bahamas.*
(1983)
Acrylic on Canvas
5' x 4'

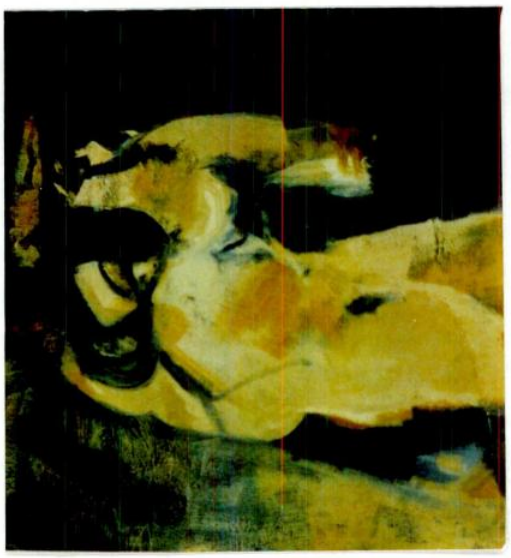


FIG. 11 *Susan (1958)*

46x46 inches
Oil on Masonite

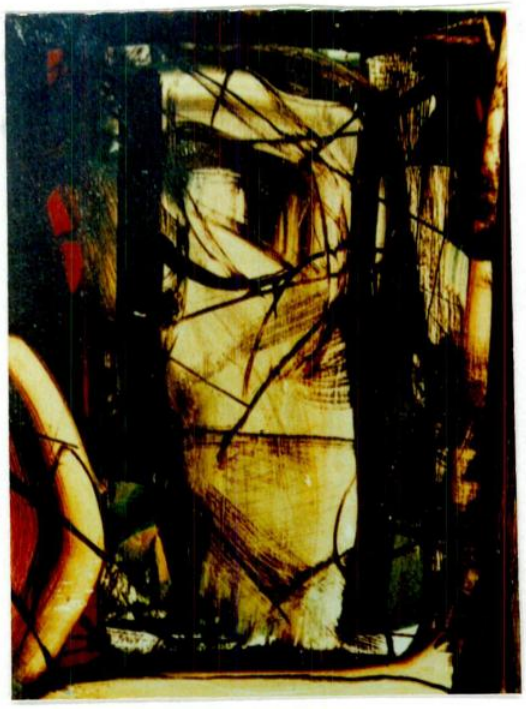


FIG. 12 *Girl in wood (1953)*

Oil on Board. 16x12 inches

FIG. 13. *Portleven (1951)*

96x48 inches. OIL

> On the left there's a very tall masculine shape holding up something that looks like a lamp: and on the other side there seems to be a woman in a shawl - someone you could meet anytime walking around the Porthleven Shore.(7)

Neither is Tony O'Malley a narrative painter in the sense in which Peter Lanyon pursues meaning. For example in Lanyons painting Yellow Runner (1946)(FIG.14) subtitled Myth -horse, fox home, and primitive enclosure site: Gunwalloe, Lanyon paints the rituals of fertility using visual allegory and compositional dynamics. He says himself that it is a painting of a story:

> Its a runner with a message on way to stockaded horses. Fox as field Reference to horses cut in hillside. Yellow runner as fertilizing agent. Stockade as womb. A homecoming.

In reference to another painting of storytelling Cape Family (1946)(FIG.15) which he painted after the war he said

> I think most of the paintings I made on my return in '46 were concerned with problems of family and return to my own country. Cape Family for instance was conceived and worked through from about 1947 to '49. It was a storytelling picture, an attempt to try and bring myself back to my own environment.(7)

Tony O'Malley deviates from narrative style painting to paint mood, atmosphere and the effect of light on colour. He follows a sensory trail in his later developement.

FIG. 14. *Yellow Runner (1946) Peter Lanyon.*
Oil on Board. 18x24 inches.

FIG. 15. *CAPE FAMILY. (1949)*

72x48 inches
Oil on masonite

Brian Fallon calls O'Malley:

> a man of the nineteen-forties, both mentally and emotionally, a product of DeValera's Ireland, that strange age with its contrast of stagnation and vitality, introspection and snugness,frustration, and aspiration.14

He aslo cites him ' as a citizen of that very special milieu, the Irish small town'.(12)
O'Malley himself talks about his native Callan as being 'a very introverted town'.

He continues, 'the culture then was respectable, decent,repressive. There was a tremendous suffocation.'

He belonged to what he calls

> a nomadic society - guards, bank clerks, warble fly inspectors. I was painting and suffering their criticisms each evening - and they were never short of opinions. The first question asked always about a painting was "where is that?"

This was the atmosphere out of which Tony O'Malley came in 1955 when he visited St. Ives. Like Joyce'who was away from his own natural field when he was in Europe and listening to the voices here'(47). O'Malley in St. Ives, had stepped outside his native un-nurtured isolation and he had stepped into the relative freedom of the highly charged modernist movement in fields abroad.

Coming from a point in his career where he was dealing primarily with the visible, of which he says 'In my earlier drawings I was just trying to deal with landscape itself, never mind how I felt about it',(47) he met with the Cornish artist, Peter Lanyon who must have quickly and radically helped to change O'Malley's perspective on the visible and its potential.

Lanyon himself said:

> My paintings have been influenced by Cubism and the Constructivism of Naum Gabo and Ben Nicholson, and now like most paintng today they look abstract and expressionist. But I am only using these means as part of the process of making a image of my environment. My concern is not to make pure shape or colour on a surface, but to charge and fill up every mark I make with information which comes directly from the world in which I live'.(7)

Such apparent committment and enthusiasm must have stirred the Irish artist greatly. Suddenly he was in the midst of people who spoke his language 'For myself I went away to meet kind of kindred spirits and I found them in Cornwall. Kindred spirits who recognised psychological feeling.'(47) In further explaining what the atmosphere was like in St. Ives he says:

> There was a great energy in the painting then which came from the moderns who had settled in St. Ives. Also, there was the tremendous weight of the old Impressionists as well as their knowledge and treatment of the subject matter when the Moderns arrived, say, like Gabo and other painters coming up after the war, like Peter Lanyon and all those. They were all young then, and confused. They started in a traditional way but gradually they became modern. The word 'modern' was treated with contempt in Ireland but I always understood it as, that once you deal with it in relation to appearances and description, you then feel that the painting had to speak in an inward way. It has to have a subjectivity that can still be seen and looked at - the invisible.(47)

The artist as distiller of image became the key to O'Malley's approach to painting, a philosophy which would govern his painting right up to the present day.

Tony O'Malley speaks with great respect and affection for Peter Lanyon and we might well wonder what exactly this man represented for him in the mid-fifties. Even though O'Malley was forty-two years of age when he first met Lanyon, artistically he would have been young and impressionable , probably desperately looking for a source of enlightenment to direct the rest of his artistic life. When I asked him who he worked with in St. Ives he said 'I worked in a studio in St. Peter's loft. I worked with Peter Lanyon and the great Bill Redgrave.'(47) Even his use of the word 'great' suggests awe, in recollection of successful and more advanced painters such as these two

Some thirty years after Peter Lanyon's death it is difficult to look at reproductions of his paintings without an initial surge of excitement at his use of colour and his intellectual handling of semi-abstracted imagery. This was probably O'Malley's first reaction to the work of an artist who was five years younger than he.

TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF PHILOSOPHY:

In assessing the common elements which drew the St. Ives' group of painters together at this time David Brown says:

> So the landscape was the common factor for all of us, a presence of perpetual power which in its transitioriness reminds us of our own, yet simultaneously contains infinity. Everyone uses it differently for their voyages of self discovery. In a way we were all refugees, blown by the winds across its face, its gaunt cliffs, its windscoured uplands, its seething sea searching for somewhere to take root.' Yet any pathway we followed, over moorlands, or down the shafts of mines, or along the corridors of gales, led only to oneself.(19)

'You experienced yourself when you went there'(47) Tony O'Malley said of St. Ives - Having moved from 'dealing with the visible'(47) in the landscape in his immediate environment in Kilkenny and New Ross and for that matter in many other provincial small towns, O'Malley had in fact transitted from what Andrew Lanyon termed as the 'eternal problem of the horizontal - perpendicular'(7) into confronting other problems of space and proportion. These problems would later resolve themselves in highly worked, layered canvasses which breathe space and the illusion of space.

Brian Fallon reckons that:

> what attracted him so powerfully in Lanyon was a new approach to landscape for which he had half consciously been groping about - a kind of physical, mental and emotional synthesis of a landscape, realised in terms of "organic" painterly images and not surface representation.(14).

He continues:

> One thing which cannot be overstressed, however, is the sense of place both shared, the consciousness of having roots in their own region, O'Malley the exile feeling at home however in his adopted Cornish locale.(14)

In looking at Lanyon's and O'Malley's linear handling of landscape or of place we see a primary difference between the two. Whereas Lanyon trained as an academic and handles subject matter in a more formal way than O'Malley, the latter has filled numerous sketchbook's over the years with a very individual graphic language.[2] As regards his response to place or landscape he says:

> Places are only an experience and some places I may not like at all but I will respond in the same way usually to them. I may not even like them. I may remember a small thing in a place; it might be just the window sill or something very, very simple and that might seed itself in my, mind or it might disappear altogether. That's why I do drawings in these places. By putting down just a note you feed the computer of the brain and you draw on it from the subconscious.(47)

Of Peter Lanyon's drawings of landscape or place, Andrew Lanyon says:

> Many of his drawings represent his first explorations of a place. These often reveal an interest not so much in the portrayal of a particular landscape but in a design which the place suggests. As a result the land is bent and twisted in the interests of this design. Cornwall is frequently dissected and there is a suggestion in both sketches and the skeletal constructions, of bones and tendons. Lines convey structure, though they move with his fluidity. In some of the looser drawings he lassoes a place with lines that convey the velocity of eye movements and others that are playful , imitating a chimney stack or a tree, then a sheer drop.7

The drawing Anticoli Corrado (1957) (FIG.16) merits examination in relation to this statement.

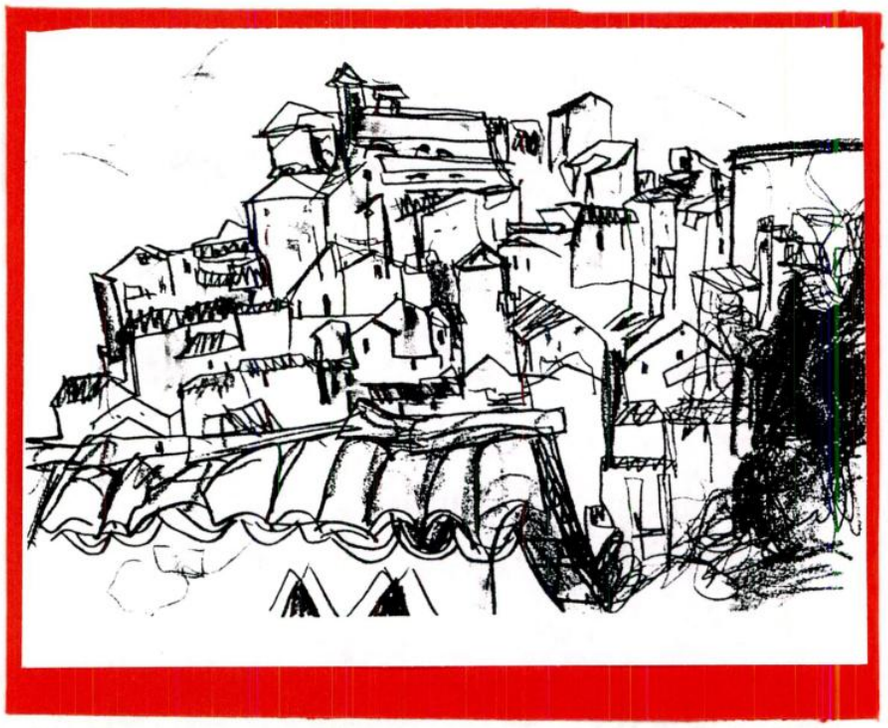


FIG. 16. *Anticoli Corrado (1957) Peter Lanyon*

15x20 inches
Charcoal.

The dominant philosophy of painting in Tony O'Malley's life as a painter is based on the concept of experience and the visual event. This philosophy is echoed in Peter Lanyon's words:

> To the artist his experience is fundamental, he is able to retain the image which was 'set' and create an object to exist in space and time. This object may have no resemblance to the visual aspect of the experience but will be of the nature of that experience in its time space arrangement(7).

Lanyon's experience of place is to be found within the essence of the 'placeness' of place. He says:

> I paint places but always the Placeness of them. In the Farms painting you saw at Corsham there are many meanings but they are all meanings of farmness - animals are implied and not represented to a photovision. My painting is a revelation, a turning outward of experience - a making immediate of a time process - in - space. I do not start with the idea but with the experience.(7)

Tony O'Malley in turn talks about the essence of place. In fact 'essence'(47) is a word much used in his vocabulary. In his reference to his paintings of crows and such birds of ill-omen, he speaks of the 'crowness'(47) of the bird and how he may fragment the basic shape of the bird, scattering it throughout the plane of the canvas, dissipating a completely representational view of the bird but never losing sight of the nature of the bird.

Brian Fallon lauds Tony O'Malley's 'genuis loci'(14) or his ability to express essence and atmosphere through his painting.

Was it by pure coincidence or by some happy stroke of purpose that O'Malley was guided towards a man who was already at ease with essence and what O'Malley would later call 'the beyond - thing'(47). Peter Lanyon in the early 'fifties had already begun to deal with place paintings beyond a photovisual representation.

Two of Lanyon's most accomplished and interesting paintings from this period, St. Just (1952)(FIG.17) and Bowjewyan (1952)(FIG.20) deal respectively with the mining and the farming communities of Lanyon's native area. Narrative in content but also sensory in essence they make interesting subjects for inquiry when looking at the relationship between Lanyon and O'Malley.

St. Just is a triptych, indirectly representational, of a mining area where many died in mine related disasters. It is primarily a landscape painting and yet behind the organic forms there is a vitality and an empathy in the composition. The dominant element in the central panel is in cruciform shape and represents a mineshaft, open, gaping and ominous.
Lanyon took up gliding in 1959 and regularly used his flying to experience changing perspectives on landscape. In fact it is of interest to read his first responses to this new aerial perspective.

FIG. 18.

Harvest Festival

(1952)
74x24 inches
Oil

FIG. 17.

St. Just.

(1953)
96x48 inches
Oil on Canvas

FIG. 19.

Green Mile.

(1952)
62x19 inches
Oil

FIG. 20.

Bowjewyan Farms. (1952)

Oil on masonite.
48x96 inches

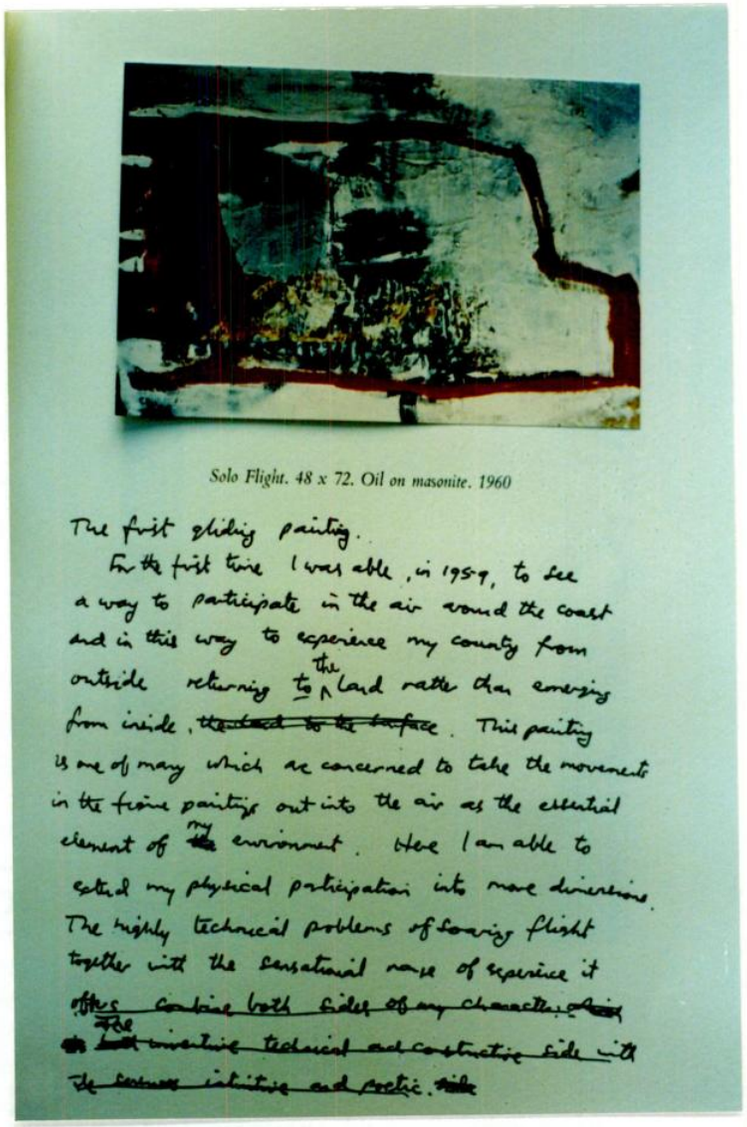
Having documented Solo Flight (1960)(FIG.21) as his first gliding painting, he says:

> For the first time I was able in 1959, to see a way to participate in the air around the coast and in this way to experience my county from outside returning to the land rather than emerging from inside.(7)

Lanyon's aerial perspective on landscape which Brian Fallon calls 'a twentieth century motif'(14) was one of experience translated into essence whereas O'Malley's sense of aerial perspective has been achieved through his experience at ground level. However they both reach this 'beyond - thing' in their paintings. St. Just in particular is strongly narrative in its symbolism. The central panel is a crucifixion in itself and the two accompanying panels, Harvest Festival(FIG.18) and Green Mile(FIG.19), act as mourners.

As three landscapes, they are strong compositions with a dynamic sense of movement. The strong mark-making and the well textured surfaces convey a primitiveness which is evident in many of O'Malley's large board paintings. However, each artist treats the application of paint differently, Lanyon's handling being heavier than that of O'Malley. Even Lanyon's paintings of the 'sixties still retain the heavy impasto, treatment. He layers paint on paint, but I see O'Malley as achieving a luminosity through pigment which Lanyon never achieved.

In Lanyon's Bowjewyan Farms there are some interesting nuances. There is no real central focal point as there are many pockets of busyness throughout the canvas.



Solo Flight. 48 x 72. Oil on masonite. 1960

The first gliding painting.

For the first time I was able, in 1959, to see a way to participate in the air around the coast and in this way to experience my country from outside returning to the land rather than emerging from inside, ~~the land to the surface~~. This painting is one of many which are concerned to take the movement in the frame paintings out into the air as the essential element of ~~the~~ my environment. Here I am able to extend my physical participation into more dimensions. The highly technical problems of soaring flight together with the sensational range of experience it offers ~~combine both sides of my character, which the left inventive technical and constructive side with the serious intuitive and poetic side~~.

FIG.21. *Solo Flight Peter Lanyon. (1960)*

Oil on masonite
48x72

Lanyon actually painted this 8 foot x 4 foot board as a painting to be placed beneath St. Just.

It is a unified triptych in format, a format which is very much used in O'Malley's paintings[3]. Again, the forms are organic, and life, birth and death, can be read from left to right across the surface of the painting. These three phases he represents in the sea, the haystacks and the grass on the left; the centrepiece being womb-like with its blood-coloured section and the contained blue water infusing life into the circular form. The right hand section is harvesting time, a time of passivity and death.

The subsectioning of the picture - plane by black lines is directly representational of the dry stone walls which actually divide the land of the Bowjewyan farms.

The romantic in Peter Lanyon identified with the physical proportion of man within the Cornish landscape of fields and hedges that were centuries old. This probably created an equal excitement for O'Malley. Feeling at home within the Cornish landscape would have come easily to O'Malley because apart from purely geo-physical similarity, there are many archaeological sites in Cornwall which resemble those found here in Ireland.

Lanyon's main concerns were with his own familial connections, with miners working under the ground, under the sea, coming to the surface from the belly of the earth and also with the fishing life. His native St. Just became a central focus in his work for his thirty-odd years as a mature artist.

In addition to this Lanyon became obessed by the 'surface - thing'(7) of weather and the sea. This obsession intensified with his gliding experiences.

Tony O'Malley, who confesses to being a 'romantic but not necessarily a man of fantasy',(47) retained his concerns for the landscape and his relationship to it. However, O'Malley's work of the past ten years or so seems to have reached a level of etherealism which Peter Lanyon never reached in his shorter lifespan.

St. Ives of the 'thirties, 'forties, and 'fifties was a breeding - ground for romantics;people who had a vision beyond the ordinary, a vision which took them beyond the pure craft of painting or sculpting. O'Malley appears to have truly landed among soulmates, at a time when a common cohesive philosophy of painting was being practised by not just one painter but by many others within the community. I wonder was O'Malley's response to Lanyon's creations similar to the latter artist's initial response to Gabo's constructions.

Lanyon wrote that:

> I'll never forget the first time I went to Gabo's house and saw a perspex construction. You know that feeling that people always find mysterious: hello, I've been here before. Well, I got exactly the same feeling when I looked at these things, this is so familiar, I've seen this before, and I don't think I had ever seen an object which was so obviously right in every way, and full of poetry.(7)

Conclusion

> Tony o'Malley was included in the large exhibition of the St. Ives school in the Tate Gallery in 1985, and he was friendly with most of its major figures: Lanyon, Hilton, Heron, Frost, Wynter, Wells etc. But he has never belonged to any school or group and his links with the St. Ives painters were more a matter of friendship and propinquity than of common aims. After all he was a fully fledged artist before he settled there, though he carries the stamp of the St. Ives style with its basically abstract sense of form.(31)

The above is how Brian Fallon sums up O'Malley's association with St. Ives during the twenty five - odd years that he spent living and working there.See (FIG.22) O'Malley himself says 'In St. Ives, I met Japanese philosophers and artists and I found that I had much in common with them'.9

Brian Fallon also talks of the effects of Lanyon's presence, in Tony O'Malley's life. While O'Malley had initially arrived as a' relatively obscure Irish exile, Lanyon was already an artist of international standing and an influential teacher and powerful personality, in his creative prime and leading a high powered, many - sided life.(14).

He continues to say

> Lanyon's painting had been a revelation to O'Malley when he first saw it on early visits during the nineteen fifties, and it is to Lanyon to a large extent that he owes his initiation into a genuinely international modernist art.(14)

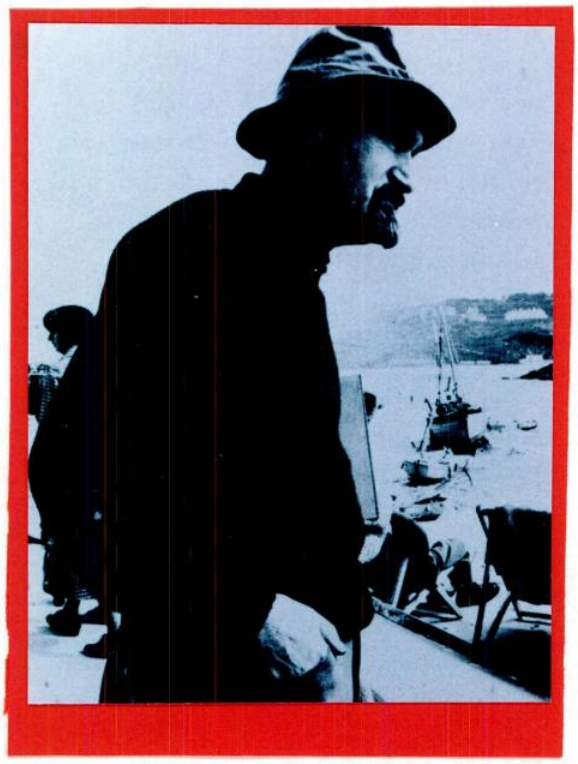


FIG. 22. TONY O'MALLEY (St. Ives Habour) (1962.)

Fallon maintains that there is not much direct influence, if any at all as the two men from the start were radically different as painters and personalities. Peter Lanyon as well as Patrick Heron acted as catalysts in O'Malley's growing outside of his Irish and insular context. In fact Heron as an art critic and writer, did his best to make O'Malley's work known. Not alone did Tony O Malley find himself as a painter in St. Ives when he entered the Cornish community among the 'giants'(14) of modernism but he found the facility, be it in the form of an energy or a commitment, or perhaps both, to emerge later as a quiet giant of colour and light, in his own right.

ENDNOTE:1

Refer to Chapter 3, FIGS.78,79,80,81 and 82 and the discussion on O'Malley's self portraits.

ENDNOTE:2
Right up to the present day Tony O'Malley works with the immediate concept of space through his driftwood constructions, many of which are imitative of primitive musical instruments. Ref. to Chapter 2. DECIPHERING THE IDIOM. FIGS.50 AND 51. I wonder if O'Malley borrowed from Lanyon the idea of creating a construction as a preliminary to a painting!

ENDNOTE:3
Ref to Chapter 2. See (A Matter of Structure & Space.)

Fig 23. West Penwith Landscape,
Cornwall,
England.

FIG. 24. *View from the rear garden of the O'Malleys' home in Physicianstown, Co Kilkenny.*

February (1992.)

CHAPTER 2.

FROM CRAFTSMAN TO PHILOSOPHER.

INTRODUCTION:

Tony O'Malley is a private person but behind this privacy there lies a dual personality. One aspect of this personality is his rational side, a side which enables him to connect with logic and the practicality of crafting. The other side is that of intuition the subconscious reflex which can be opened to suggest the 'something given' once he has fully directed himself to his discipline. This is his side of abandon, the part that takes him beyond the material, into realms of created colour and luminosity. This is how he explains himself in relation to these aspects:

> My mind is private ... what interests me about painting, poetry even, is the beyond - the beyond what, I don't know ... digging the grave out of it - beyond all this. I feel all the time that there is a beyond - thing, yet I'm common-sensible enough to know that the cats are in the chair. I've painted them and I look at them when I draw them, because they're phenomena around me.(47)

In the early part of this Chapter, I will focus on O'Malley's creative process, while drawing on the contents of an interview which I did with him in October 1991. The remainder of the Chapter will be sub-divided in particular sections dealing with the actual language of his work. This is the part of the thesis where I will be referring most often to his paintings in an effort to decipher his idiom and the concerns which underlie that idiom.

MEETING THE ARTIST

In meeting and interviewing Tony O'Malley,(FIG.25) one realises through the discussion that this artist knows himself very well as a painter and in spite of his being a private person, he possesses a generosity that makes him willing to share his world. He doesn't subscribe in a conscious way to an academic knowledge of the world of art. He in fact, shuns academic language that might lead you into a sophisticated wordy reading of his work. He confesses:

> My view of my own self is a very subjective one. I dont see it in relation to anything outside. That's not a self obsession. My mind is private. I find it hard to digest what others say about my painting - the exteriorisation of it.(47)

However, in the course of discussion you realise that you are in the presence of a very well-read man; a man who has lived life to the full with a wisdom which can be nothing other than inspiring. Having never had a recognised training in an art-school, he is nonetheless conversant with the main influential art movements of the century.

A man who recommends that one be the 'servant of many paintings' (47) is himself constantly engaged in the process of image-making, from the departure - point of the experience, through the crafting process, right up to the point of the resolution of the 'problem'(47) which that painting may have presented. It may have been a problem of colour balance, of finding the correct 'key'(47) within which to play the palette. More often than not he admits it is a problem of colour.

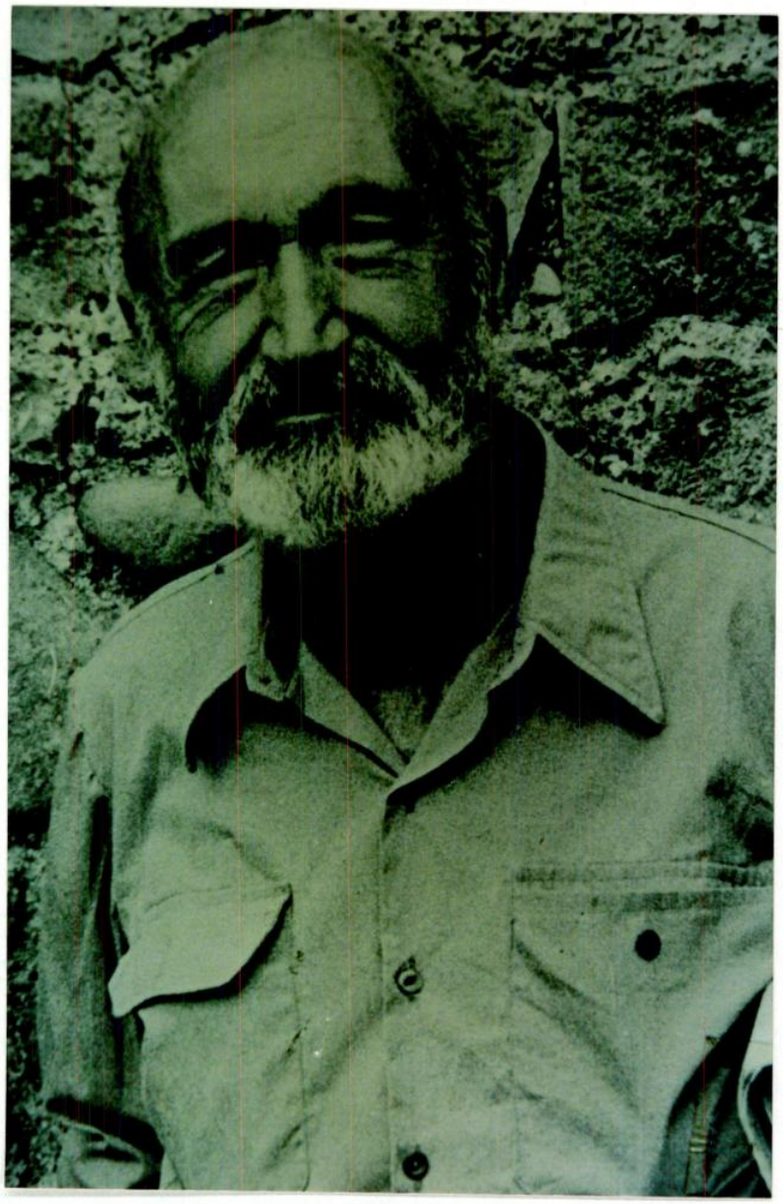


Fig 25. Tony O'Malley.

His own definition of what painting is, gives us an immediate insight into his very personal world of the constant question and answer process which carries him through the entire engagement.

> My own idea of painting is not really a spontaneous one. It is just a painting demanding something from me, so it continues to exist and demand until the day I take it down and put it away. (47)

There is an ongoing dialogue between the object out there and O'Malley's facility of response to that object. Painting for him has become the commitment to the integration of the external world and the internal response of the artist.

From a practical point of view, the surface is the primary concern for him. It is all too evident in so many of his paintings, with their incised lines and bored holes, that he breaks a barrier beyond the vacuum of a blank canvas before he engages in the colour process of abstract representation through his technique of laying paint on paint. By what he calls the 'organic sense of painting'(47) he means the constant growing of image upon image, whether in the mental sense of one image growing out of another or the actual layering of ground upon ground.

Secondary to this concern with surface, O'Malley works from what he terms 'a kernal'(47). This he further defines as the initial response to an experience of a place or an incident. This 'kernal'(47) then extends and carries through the whole painting.

Within the gentle personality of Tony O'Malley there exists a quiet stubbornness. He pushes and involves himself with an initially blank surface, consciously trying to break beyond and shed the ego. He has no time for the rational inquiry'What am I going to say?'(47). He maintains that it is better if you say I'm not going to say anything. I'm just going to paint that board' to overcome any inhibitions'.(47) He continues:

> What the hell, life is short, and you find where you have nothing to say, what you're really saying is a painting. You disappear out of it and it remains a painting after that. Your ego is the thing that says " What am I going to say" ? Initially, you think what you have to say, must be important, it need not be important at all. I always say that painters should paint all the time and overcome the thing of the initial statement of a painting - that's the way I approach it.(47)

So there is a job to be done and the craftsman begins the crafting. He now starts to draw out the inner world of response into material tangible forms. Rather than beginning from preconceived forms, his intuitive responses will sometimes swing him from form related to Nature and to place, to quite a minimal statement perhaps on weather or atmosphere.

He holds that painting is a'mystery'(47) and in the most personal connection it is 'a long invisible line in my own spirit where I can see.'(47) By this definition he is probably referring to his internal powers of sensing or to his intuition.

To the onlooker with no great interest in the philosophy behind a painting, O'Malley could be seen to be decorative and sweet in relation to certain aspects of colour and structure. It must be admitted that there is an extreme attractiveness in the colours of his paintings from the past decade or so. He possesses a fluency both in his use of strong primary colours and within his very individual, subtle tonalities of secondary colours. Colour is probably the primary attraction for purchasers of his work. His sense of structure is also eyecatching and on further examination can be found to be both decorative and philosophical. He maintains that, 'yes, painting can become decoration but it can also be philosophical'(47). After coming to terms with the visible phenomena around him he talks about the search for form that satisfies his inner need for structure.

His early works, whether they are landscapes, interiors or still-lifes are all reflections of his experience within his facility of response. In these paintings which are direct representations of a world outside of himself, he is already steering a course, intent on finding a form to express something within himself. What could be construed as indulgence, where he plays with colour, light and diffused images, is his method of expressing the 'beyond -thing'(49). In more esoteric terms we could speak of his work as having elements of transcendentalism.

The raising of one's interest from a basic material level to a more mystical or spiritual level, plus the looking within for response and meaning can only be interpreted as transcendental. Anyone who has consciously engaged in this process is certainly in touch with something 'beyond' (47) apart from the material world of surface appearances.

O'Malley talks about the constant 'pull and tug' of the 'something given'(47), the added dimension that makes a work sing after the craftsman has crafted as far as he can go. He is always conscious of the fine line there is between the music of the unconsciously given and the mechanics of the rational mind. It is this same rationale which can kill movement in a painting.

O'Malley, the non-trained painter finds poetry in the sound of crows tumbling in squalling flocks in Bowers' Wood near his home in Kilkenny and translates the audio into the visual in what is recognised as' the art of synaesthesia.(10)Sense translates to another sense and the 'song of the blackbird' (47),becomes a collage of two wooden panels linked by another piece of wood as a backing. He uses string criss-crossed and pulled diagonally from nail to nail. The tension of this construction as well as the colour harmony of the images on either panel, suggest music. The cross-fertilization of the audio with the visual is a popular practice with the artist and can be observed in such constructions as A Blur of Distant Music,Summer (1991)(FIG.26) Autumn Harp(1991)(FIG.50) and Plate Spring Lyre with Caw Crow (1991).(FIG.51).

FIG. 26. *A Blur of Distant Music. 1991.*

ne of Dista
Music, Sem
91

His knowledge of music is also non-academic. He simply knows music, feels music, hence his 'seeing through sensing'(47) as he terms the phenomenon himself. In his explanation of the construction A Blur of Distant Music he talked about his 'visual recall'(47) of a sound of music on the radio being carried on the wind across some fields from a neighbouring farm. The aural event became the visual reality wrought in wood and paint. Crossing intersensory bounderies requires a shift of consciousness from its ordinary level of function. O'Malley seems to have found easy access to this ability. Maybe this innate ability would have been hindered had he had an academic training.

It is also useful to consider O'Malley's use of repetition and formula. Formula can certainly be seen in his work. However, he is not a slave to formula, the word 'formula' suggesting a dry clinical method of working. I reckon that O'Malley lives with themes. He nurtures these themes, evolving them and reconstructing them according to his inner needs at a particularly given time. His repetition of these themes in varying interpretive creations are conducive to his getting to know himself better as a painter. There is a security also in the familiarity of theme. Rather than forever expanding one's attention to a variety of thematic material, one contains a greater potency of energy when working within a limited range.

O'Malley chooses to paint things that interest him, responding to that which is most immediate to him. As his engagement with painting grew he saw that it was 'light and colour and shape and form and the job of doing it'(47).

Crafting carried him from his wanderings around Jerpoint Abbey in County Kilkenny and from his admiration of the craftsmen who carried their vision in stone, to his adaptation of the same incised lines and marks which translated well into his modern idiom of painting.

Accident or co-incidence can always be read into the abstract in painting, but before what is visually resolved to both artist and viewer, we must understand that on O'Malley's part there is a constant interplay between the conscious and the unconscious, the optical and the vision of the third eye.

Peter Lanyon, friend and associate of Tony O'Malley in St. Ives said of the abstract in painting:

> It requires from a spectator that they should look at the picture and be prepared to invent for themselves information about what they are looking at. I have claimed before and I think it's so, that today the person who is looking at the picture is very much the subject. This may be a very difficult thing to understand, that in fact the picture doesn't come to life until somebody looks at it.(7)

No great analytical ability is needed to decide on what one responds to in an abstract painting even though certain marks or forms may have occurred on the canvas by 'accident'.

What would appear to be as haphazard or bizarre as a series of punched holes on a board, may in fact be the end result of much engagement with the surface in an effort to find some structure or design.Referring to one particular painting in his studio which had several lines of these very same holes , Tony O'Malley related how balance and harmony, leading towards a musicality within this painting is a result of consistent work and experiment.

Being close to Nature and painting from Nature ensures that a painter remains within the world of reality and not in a world of fantasy.

DECIPHERING THE IDIOM

Surface.

Looking for the crafting in O'Malley's paintings leads us to examine the actual organic surface of the work. He says of the feeling of the organic in a painting: 'The surface itself has to have a visual interest, the actual surface apart from the subject-matter and the lines and all that. Its technical; it has to do with paint on paint.(47)

The organic is the continuing process of evolution until the painting 'demands'(47) no more and the end result is the 'problem'(47) solved. I have already quoted O'Malley, earlier in the chapter as saying that the problem is often one of colour and of finding the right key. But well before the artist must confront the problem of colour he must consider the surface itself.

Tony O'Malley uses natural materials, the bulk of his paintings being worked on board and canvas. Prior to his going to the Bahamas in the mid-'seventies, he used board mainly as a painting surface for his larger pictures. Board or masonite is ideal for the distressed surface which is so essential to his work. The resistance in the board is necessary for the physically worked ground which includes the scoring of line and the punching out of small holes. However, travelling to the Bahamas and the inconvenience imposed by the transportation of heavy boards of masonite necessitated his switching to canvas for periods of work completed abroad.

However, he is still most at home working on his original hard surfaces.

Many of his smaller works in gouache and watercolour have been executed on paper. See November (1976),(FIG.39) St. Martins Fields (1973),(FIG.40) Birds (1975)(FIG.39) and Bird Flight (FIG.45.) as examples of small works in gouache on paper.[1] The nature of paper demands a delicacy of treatment from the artist and here as well as in his range of board and canvas paintings he excels.

Themes.

Having looked at the surface of Tony O'Malley's paintings and the technique he employs in his treatment of surface before engaging in the painting process, I would now like to look at the thematic element of his work.

'Endowed with' what Aidan Dunne calls 'a strong native impluse',(27) O'Malley paints close to the earth and its elements. With nature as a departure-point he is never far from the landscape and its organic shapes and forms. In his early representational days, he painted directly from the landscape with a worm's eye view. In Mines,Avoca (1952)(FIG.27) and Winter Landscape,New Ross (1957)(FIG.28) we see him grappling with linear perspective. I like the sharp sense of recession that he sucessfully captures in Winter Landscape. However traditional his perspective may be in both of these paintings, his colour is already echoing an expressionist response which would evolve in the following decades.

He talks about being close to Nature and for him 'Everything is included in that - fields, the woods and the farms. I'm sensing it and the mountains in the distance'.(47) When I asked him what he would find enduring and permanent in landscape he answered:

> My idea of landscape is a landscape of an older time, of my generation. So I'm quite shocked when I come along to an old part of the country that I knew so well and find that I can't find my way through it on the new roads.

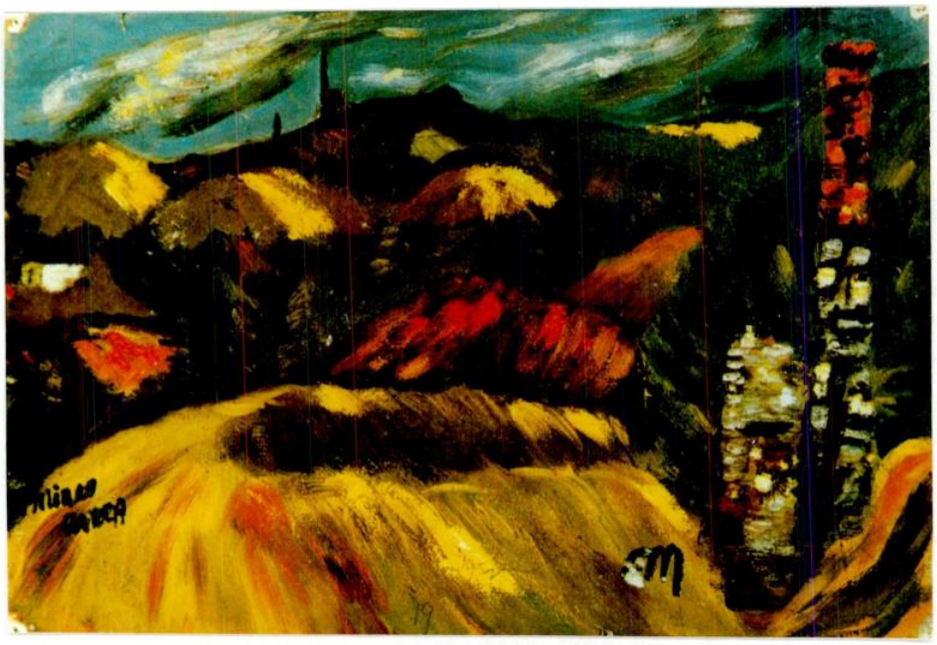


FIG. 27. *Mines Avoca (1953)*

Crayon/ink/pastel.
24x32 cms.

FIG. 28. *Winter Landscape, New Ross. (1957)*

Oil/Board.
61x75cms.

> I don't want to do anything about that in art; this is me now, being old-fashioned, trying to find my way to an "old place" that I found on my bicycle and find I can't find it. There is a flyover on the road. This was in Cornwall as well. That would be a new landscape. I'm quite conservative inside, you know. The enduring part of the landscape would be the landscape of the woods and the mountains and if the country is flat, it is alright that it is flat.(47)

Actually the area around his home in Callan is extremely flat with only the mountain of Slievenamon breaking the regular rhythm of the landscape.

So his earliest works represent the countryside to which he was accustomed as a young man. However, years of experience and experimentation have richly endowed him with an ability to respond to a fragment of nature, maybe a moth's wing or the feathers of a bird. Landscape is so ingrained within the man's nature that such minutiae or even other abstract subjects will materialise in what would appear as landscape forms. The painting The Long Night of Brian Keenan(1990),(FIG.29) exhibited in his most recent show, Novemeber 1991, has an organic reality of form which, if we didn't have the title as a reference, we would almost say evolved from the artist's in-depth knowledge of the landscape, either here in Ireland or in Cornwall. In looking at the forms in the detail of the painting(FIG.29-Detail) we could be looking at a seaboard area with mountainous contours, from an aerial perspective. Contrary to visual impressions, the subject matter for this painting had its genesis in the captivity and consequent hardship suffered by Irishman Brian Keenan, while held hostage by Arab paramilitaries in Beirut.

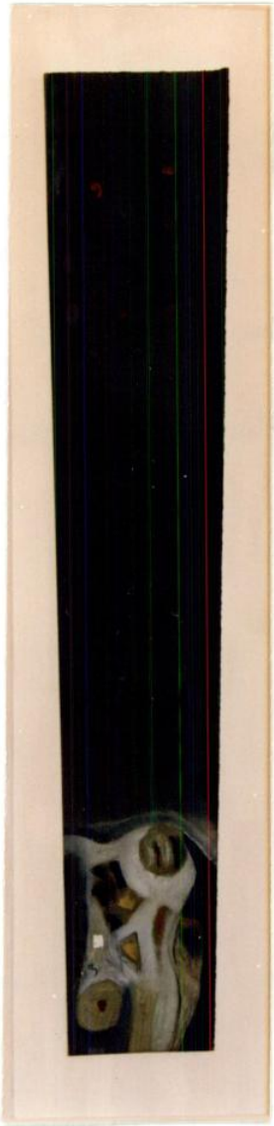


FIG. 29. *The Long Night of Brian Keenan 1990.*

Oil/Board 64x12 inches

Detail

FIG.29

23.

ng Night

ian Keen

With the passage of years and through living abroad, away from his own rural locale, O'Malley has risen above the 'ground level' of his early landscapes as in the two paintings I have already mentioned (FIG.27) and(FIG.28) and in the painting Ballywater Road, Callan (FIG.30). He has attained a different perspective on his world. The Valley Cross (1990),(FIG.31) an oil on paper demonstrates this in particular. He says himself that he based this work on an old celtic cross near his home in Callan, but yet how evocative this painting is of Irish landscape with its fields and its land markings. There is certainly what Brian Fallon terms a 'richly regional feeling (14) in this painting as in paintings which he did in his younger days, around Callan, and even though he is not a strict painter of landscape or panorama in the sense in which Peter Lanyon captured in Cornwall, in his own image, Tony O'Malley incisively captures the essence of the places with which he was well acquainted, through his dealing with fragments of the locale. In Ballywater Road, Callan he encapsulates the steely coldness of a backroad in the snow. There is a certain loneliness in this painting with its absence of people. And still there is a nostalgia surrounding it as is evident in many of the paintings of Callan which he has created through recollection. Moving many years forward in time to dealing with place in its essence we see him in a painting such as The Bird Lake, Paradise Island, Bahamas (1986)(FIG.32),as wholly absorbed in the exoticism of flora, birds and the traditional associations of those islands.

FIG. 30 *Ballywater Road, Callan. (Undated).*

FIG. 31. *The Valley Cross (1990)*
Oil & Collage on paper
23x16½ inches

FIG. 32. *The Bird Lake, Paradise island Bahamas. (1986)*

Acrylic on board
4' x 6'

The owl appears here again,the bird most often associated with the voodoo lore of the Bahamas. There is a sense of breathing evident through the many layers of colour and brush marks which he has applied, and image seems to grow out of image. Even the half-face of the artist and the nearly full-face of his wife Jane, seem to emerge from the thick jungle-like tapestry which is filling the canvas. Their images are certainly not imposed as a final layer. They have grown there.

The craftsman in O'Malley has worked and struggled with 'coming to terms with the visible (47) around him and has inspiringly transmuted to the philosopher who lives and reveals from within the rich world of 'inscape.(47)

'Inscape'(47) he says of the term first coined by the poet Hopkins 'is a very good word because it is the inscape of the thing that is the reality of the thing because it is that out there and you.'(47) By this he means the intuitive nature within himself which guides him towards reflection. He looks inside after looking outside, recalling the experience when distant from it. O'Malley does not abstract in painting for the sake of abstracting. His paintings offer deeper levels of response within his layerings, than the first obvious response. In fact you could call his paintings 'growths' of subconscious response.

His strength in an overall analysis, lies in his handling of the sensory response to whatever catches his attenition outside of him. He may wish to make 'a landscape of the caw of a crow'(47) or moving indoors he may wish to capture the stillness of a cluttered table or window-ledge, or he may wish to indulge in what Brian Fallon calls the 'genre specially close to him, still life'.(14)

As early as 1961 O'Malley was painting in his then slightly expressionist style. He is many experiences away, in the painting Interior(1961)(FIG.33) from the diffused luminous palette of the pictures painted in the Bahamas or in Lanzarote. In the painting entitled Night Crows and Still Life - Physicianstown, Callan(1986/87)(FIG.34) he is exercising his many skills of colour manipulation, observation and fragmentation. Paintings such as this do not accomodate the viewer as would the small gouache Country Still Life with Crow and Magpie Feathers No.2. (1980)(FIG.35). The complex personality, (even though he would deny possessing such a personality) of O'Malley playfully sets up the cryptic visual puzzle in the former and demands examination. We feel obliged to question the significance of the title Night Crows and Still Life. The crows seem to be everywhere within the frame, in fragmentation of course and the mood is one of evening, suggested by the violet tonalities of the ground. It isn't dark night as there are many areas of luminosity. The incised lines, triangular shapes and deliberate relaxed flowing panels of colour, inject movement into what is paradoxically called 'still life'.

FIG. 33 *Interior (1961).*

Oil / Board.
61x122 cms.

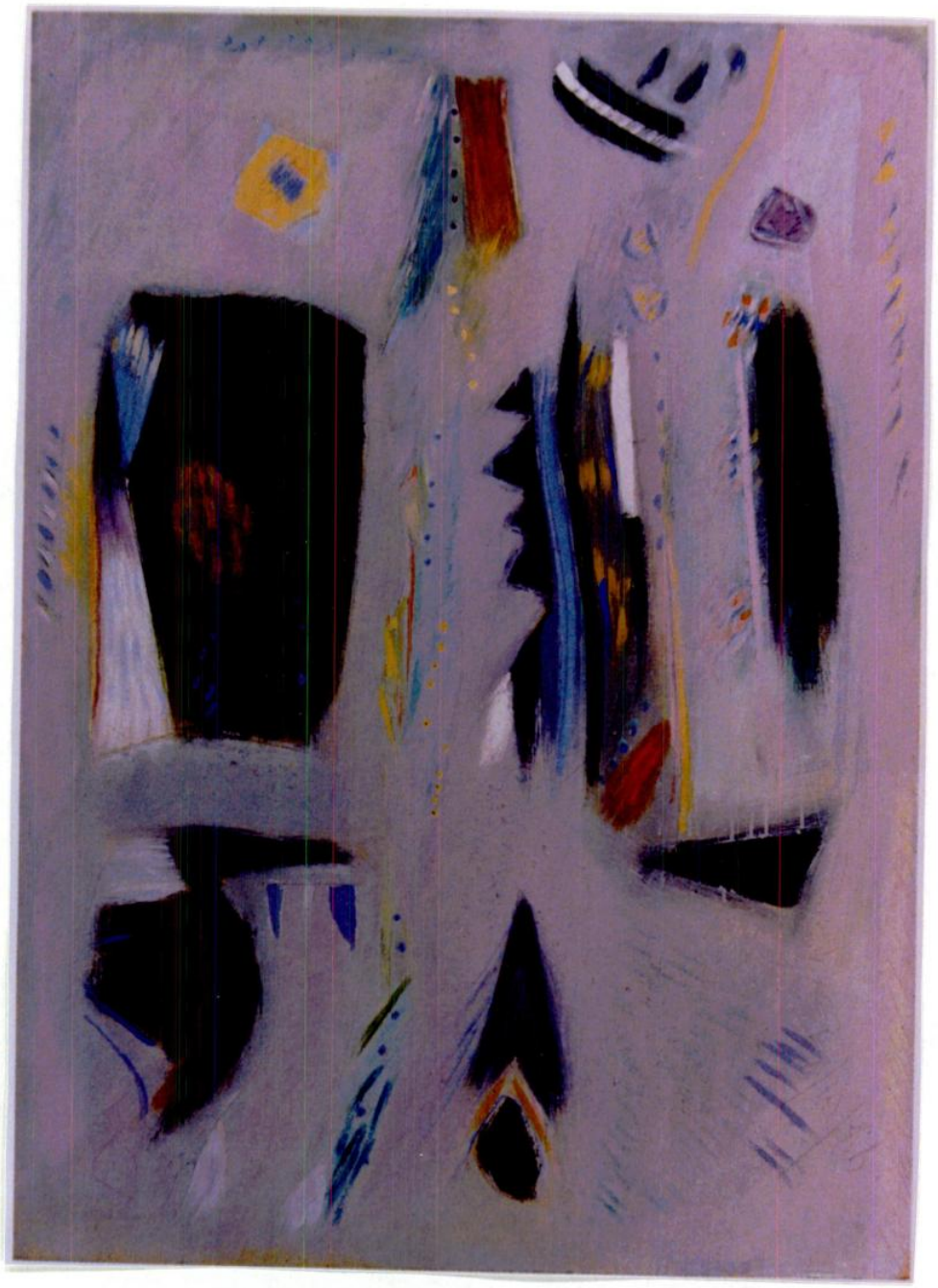


FIG. 34. *Night Crows and Still Life - Physicianstown.*
(1986/'87)

Oil on Board 48 x 36 inches.

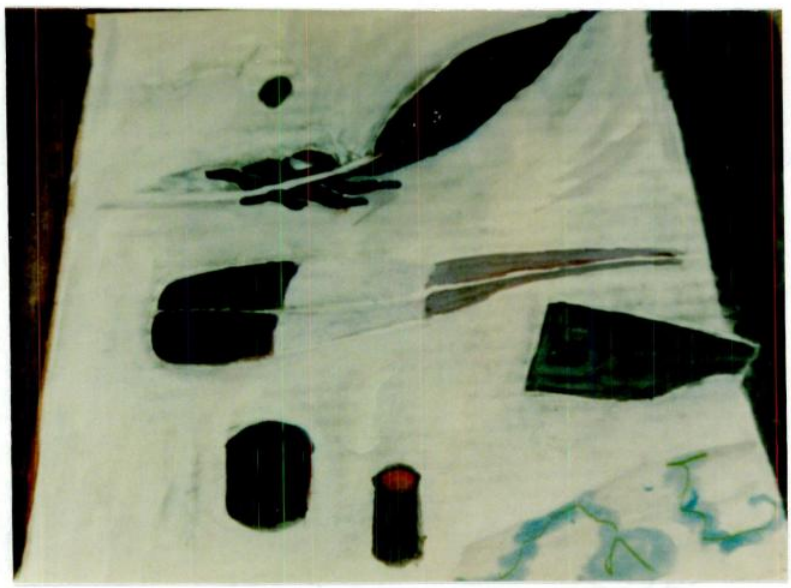


FIG. 35. *Country Still Life with Crow and Magpie Feathers (3/1980).*

Gouache on Paper

Magpie feather
(No 2)
5/80
10½" x 14¾"

The subtlety of tone and the intimacy of the homely objects in Worktable (1981)(FIG.36) are the attractive elements in this still life. He is as much in control of the pictorial formality in this painting as he is in command of the composition with the twin paintings Gull Passing By No.1 (1975)(FIG.37) and Gull Passing By No.2 (1978).(FIG.38) In these two pictures, it is interesting to note the juxtaposition of the interior against the outer space. Rather than focus on a traditional horizon or maybe something of architectural interest he has suggested the exterior by concentrating on a bird in motion.

O'Malley's commitment, not just as an abstract painter but as a sensory painter takes him beyond this material world of the optical and seeing merges with sensing. 'I think the main thing about seeing is sensing, because if you can see through sensing, the painting becomes a sensory thing, it has a presence in it then.(47) The visually curious artist in him searches constantly for new experiences and stimuli and on occasions of painting an unusual work he may explain 'because it was a new sensation I put it down.(47)

Thematically, Tony O'Malley's world is a world of motion or one of repose whether in the figurative or in the abstract sense. He extracts constantly from nature and his immediate environment, painting what interests him alone.

FIG. 36. *Worktable. (1981). O'Malley.*
Gouache on Paper.

Wapatabb — 182

11 3/4" x 16 1/2"

Gouache

FIG. 37. *Gull Passing By N°1 (1975).*

FIG. 38. *Gull Passing By N°2 (1975).*

7" x 9 3/4 gouache

Leaping Boy 21. 2
1975.
7 x 9 3/4 gouache.

Matters of Structure and Space.

Structure, format and space play a very central part in Tony O'Malley's work. As a craftsman, he is very conscious of the surface on which he works but accompanying this is an equal concern for the boundaries or framework within which he creates his images or forms. The tendency to almost map out the surface into structured space was perhaps greater in his earlier work. In later paintings, besides working in more diffused images and colours his delineation of space also lost its sharp angularity so typical of pictures such as November (1976)(FIG.39) or St. Martins Fields (1973)(FIG.40).

Already viewing landscape from a 'bird's eye view' he is abstractly mapping out that which is of immediate importance to him. The pacing or composition in both of these works is extremely geometric and in both there is what could be termed photographic positive and negative images of the landscape.

His painting St.Martins - Spring (1972)(FIG.41) is a more complex composition comprised of four integrated panels, each displaying geometric shapes and linear patterns. These shapes actually appear later in work from the 'eighties and 'nineties as softer areas and markings. The main difference in his later treatment of such similar organisation of composition is that shape and pattern take a visually secondary place to colour and they lose their strong definition as geometric figures in their merging through multiple layers of paint.

FIG. 39 *November (1976)*

FIG. 40. *St. Martins Fields (1973)*

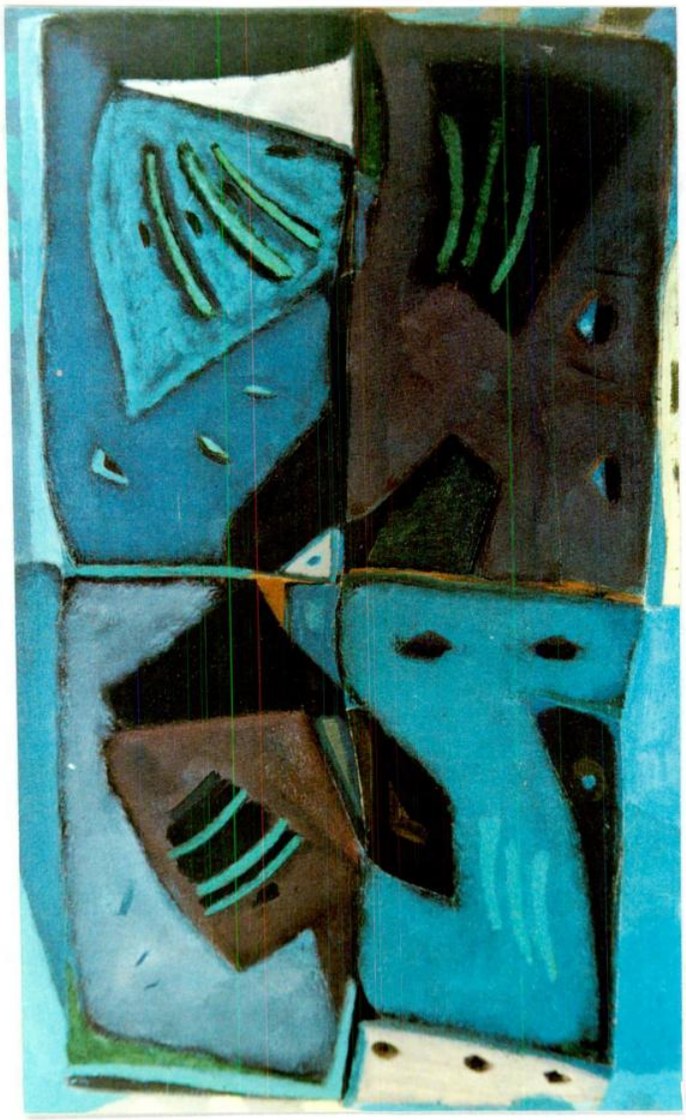


FIG. 41. *St. Martins - Spring (1972)*

Oil / Paper on Board
122 x 88 cms.

A deviant diptych format is to be vaguely detected in Lanzarote - Moth Series, (1990)(FIG.1) but whereas the fields in the Scilly Isles may have been the inspiration for the treatment of space in earlier works, his latest fascination with moths' wings probably provided the stimulus for this most recent painting.

The iconographical format of the Celtic High Crosses and old Monastic sculptures which fascinated him in Jerpoint Abbey as a boy, probably lend their small panel-spacing to paintings such as Sea - Windows,(FIG.42.) and Spring (1972) St. Martins.(FIG.43) The same composition subdivides the surface of two other /gouaches from 1975 and 1977; Birds and Bird Flight No.2(FIGS.44 and 45) respectively'. The latter two, I think, are more interesting visually, in that the subsections are unevenly delineated and each little panel has a particualr focus of interest. The markmaking in each of the panels of Bird Flight No.2 is different and is certainly reminiscent of looking down on landscape from a high viewpoint.

Cruciform format is another compositional device which O'Malley uses frequently. The four integrated panels in St. Martins Spring (1972) fit within this design.(Fig. 41) The Valley Cross (1990),(FIG.31) his two Calvary paintings (1983)(FIGS.59 and 60) and his Bahamas Dusk (1981)(FIG.46) all fit within this category of formal structural planning. The format is somewhat diffused in the last painting where colour and his concern with light have predominated.

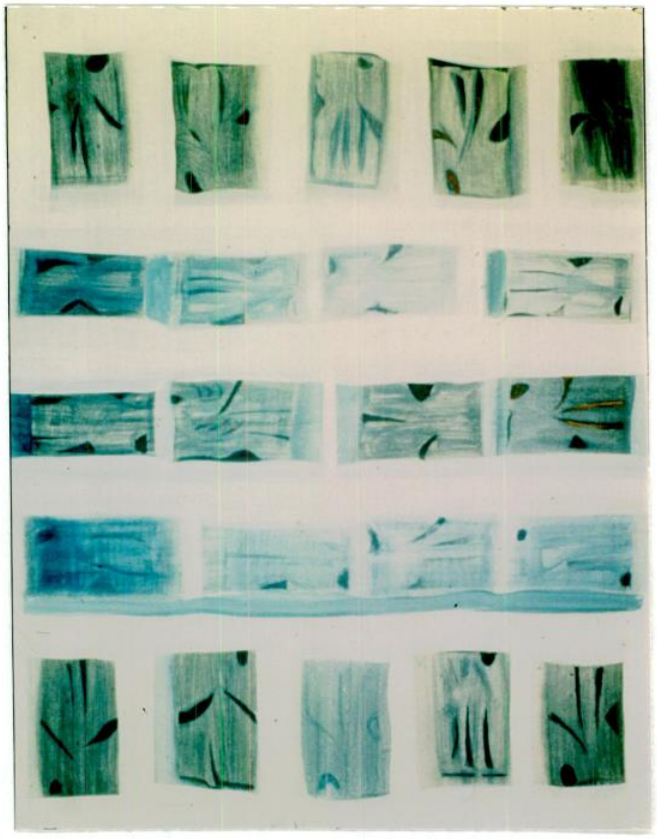


FIG. 42 *Sea Windows (undated)*

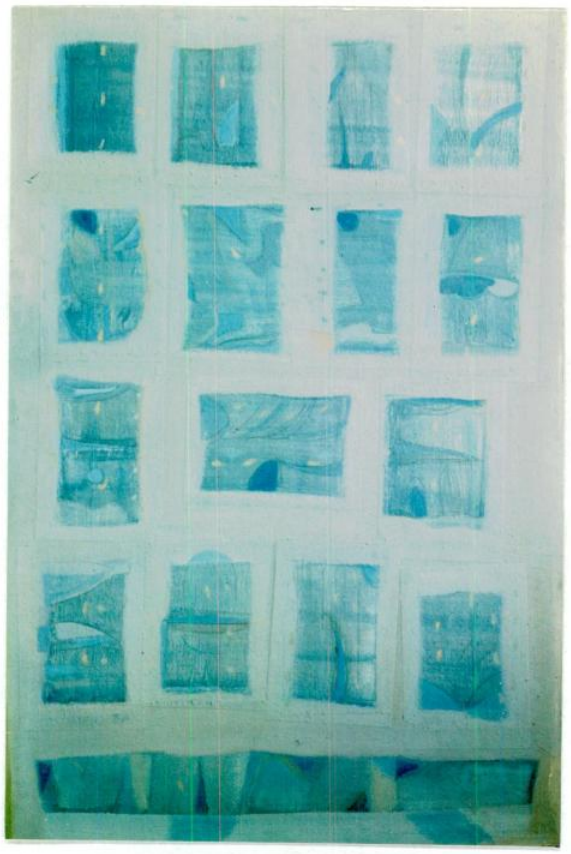


FIG. 43 *Spring St. Martins April/May (1972).*

Oil on Board
128x91 cm.

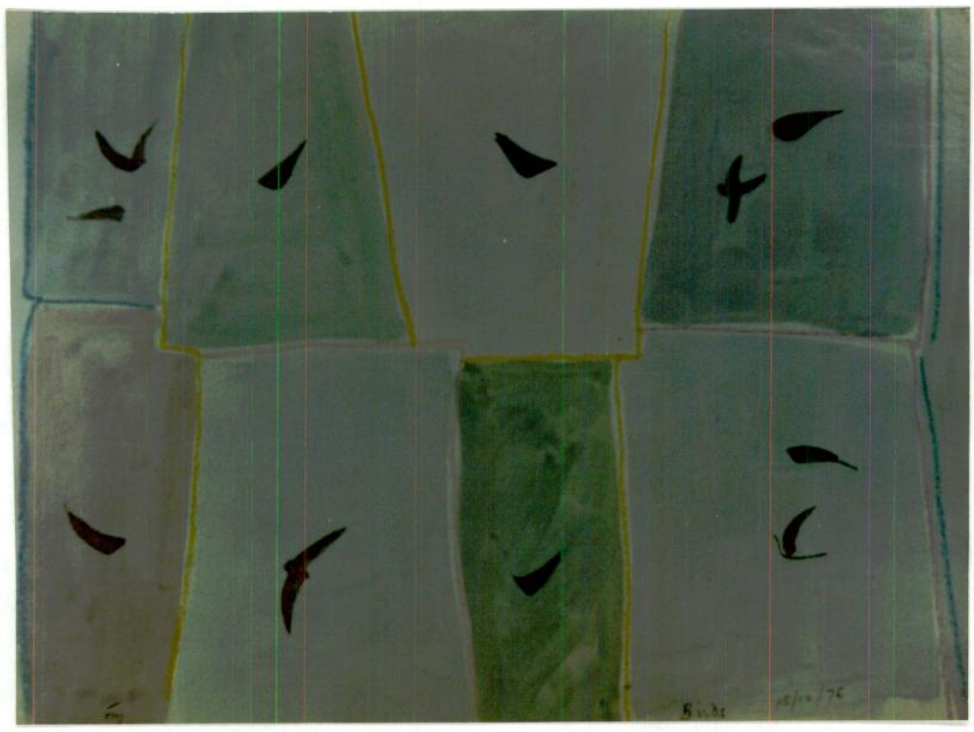


FIG. 44. *Birds Gouache (1975)*

Gouache $11\frac{3}{4}$x$16\frac{1}{2}$ inches

FIG. 45. *Bird Flight N°2 St. Martins (Undated).*

Gouache $11\frac{3}{4}$x$16\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

Parido 19 [illegible] 25.

11 3/4 x 16 1/2 gouache

Bird Flight No 2

St. Nicholas,

11 3/4 x 16 1/2

Gouache

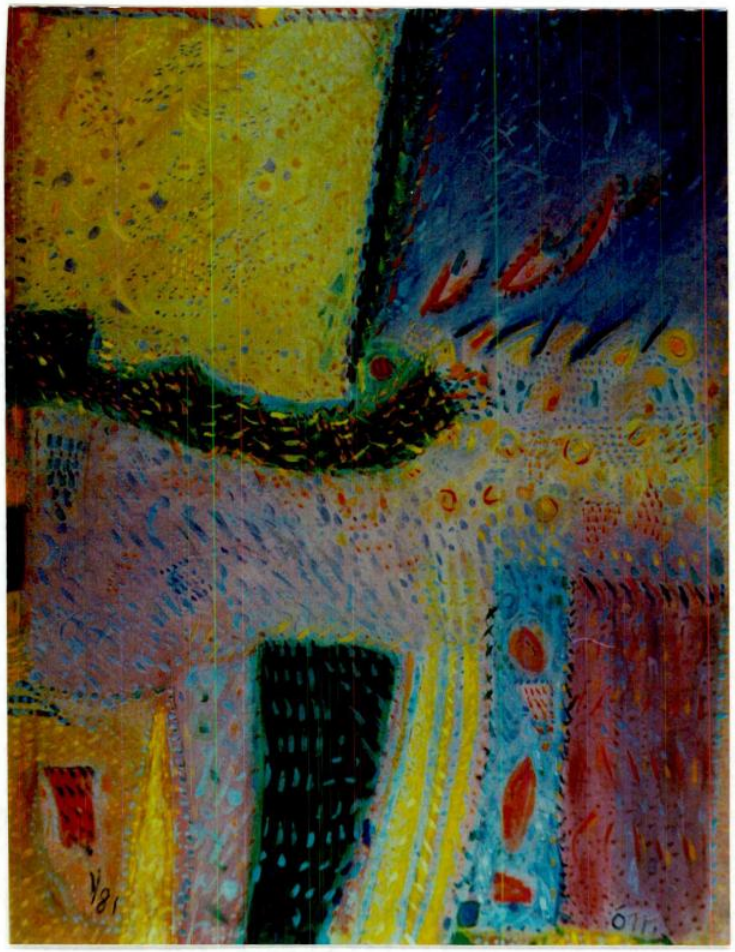


FIG. 46. *Bahamas Dusk (1981).*

5' x 4' Acrylic on Canvas.

O'Malley experiments just as ably with the triptych format, creating three individual panels within the one unified space as in Obeah Signs - Bahamas (1985)(FIG.47) or in Goombay Music (1977).(FIG.48) In a very sparse statement he uses this structuring also in St. Canices (1976-81) (FIG.49)..

In assessing O'Malley's structuring of the picture plane there is a feeling of his need to find a rhythm and a structural within the looseness of the empty canvas. His inbuilt feeling for music and rhythm are just merely crossing those intersensory boundaries between the audio and the visual.

To further examine structure within Tony O'Malley's idiom we can see that constructions have become an integral part of his repertoire over the years. For these he has used driftwood and dried out wood from felled trees. One of the most striking constructions in his own collection is a piece built in the form of a set of panpipes. He calls this Srynx after the legendary deva or elemental, who, in her efforts to elude the god Pan, changed herself into some reeds by the side of the river. Pan oblivious to her disguise, plucked the reeds and made a piped instrument with which to woo her. O'Malley's own personal reason for making this construction was:

> When the sycamore was sawed down here, I missed it so much that Jane saved a lot of the top-wood and I made that out of it. I called it Srynx. The ideas came out of nature. That would be my love of the old Sycamore tree.(47)

FIG. 47 *Okeah Signs (1985).*

4' x 6' Acrylic on Canvas.

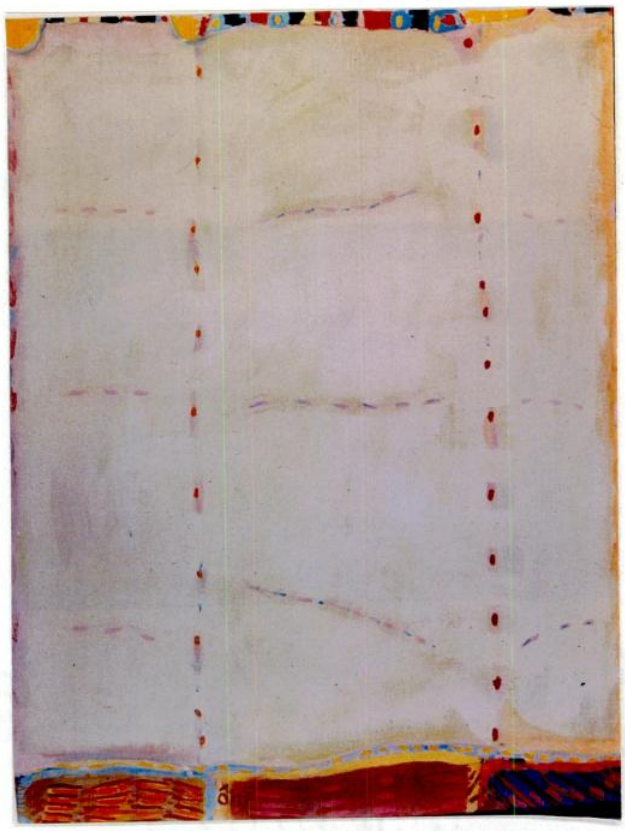


FIG. 48: *Goombay Music 1977*

Acrylic on Canvas
$58\frac{1}{4}$ x46 inches.

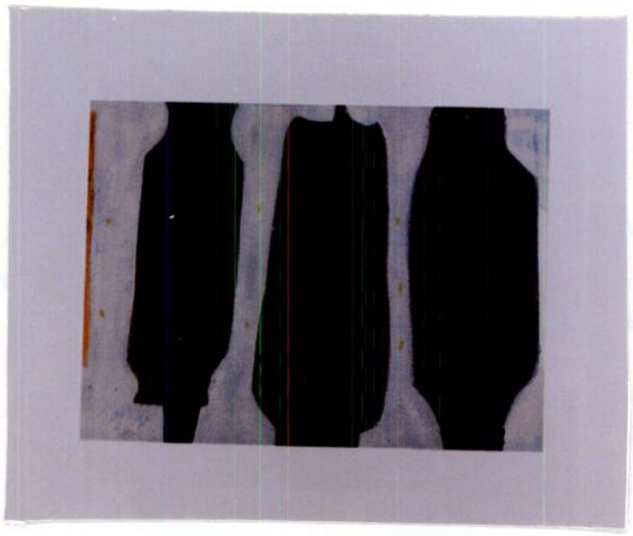


FIG. 49. *St. Canices. (Undated).*

Living beside the sea in St. Ives allowed him continuous access to driftwood washed ashore by the tides. In his interview he spoke of an exhibition of Cornish Sea - painting:

> There were tremedous collages there from wreckage. There would have been a lot of wreckage in that area. It has grounded a good many ships in pieces around Land's End. And there were some lively colours in them.... Rusty Reds and blues. I'm still very interested in collage.(47)

Both the constructions and the collages are the nearest that Tony O'Malley has come to working in 3 - D. Even though he says that he does not have a feeling about sculpting he still manages to lift above the flatness of the 2 - D surface. While collage is the primary extension of a 2 - D surface, construction certainly carries the initial trademarks of sculpture.

In works such as Autumn Harp (1991)(FIG.50) Plate Spring Lyre with Caw Crow (1991)(FIG.51), he is not far from the transition - line between the smooth surface of 2 - D representation and the form in space of a 3 - D creation. It is true that paint plays an integral part in these two works in their final presentation but in his usage of nails and string he is actually expanding the flatness of picture surface into another space. However these constructions are not free standing in the conventional tradition of 3 - D presentation. In the sense in which they are presented they are still conforming to 2 - D format.

FIG. 50 *Autumn Harp (1991)*

Acrylic & Collage on wood. Construction.

21x4½ inches.

FIG. 51. *Plate Spring Lyre with Caw Crow. (1991)*

Oil on wood. Construction.

48x4 inches.

ASPECTS IN APPLICATION.

Taking that Tony O'Malley is primarily a colourist and conjuror of light in painting, it would seem only fitting to consider some of his work in greater detail.

In this section I have chosen a number of paintings in chronological order which are most expressive of O'Malley the colourist, both in his early and mature work.

The painting Portrait of my Mother,(1953)(FIG.9) was painted in 1953 two years before he visited St. Ives for the first time, a period in his life which may be considered as the greatest transition in his artistic life. It is obvious in this painting that his feeling for colour was already strong. At the same time the concern with representing the figure in a semi-realist way, takes precedence over what would later become a nearly total concern with colour. The tonality in this shows that he could then handle a high-key palette as well as paint on a lower chromatic register.

It is interesting to see the initial drawing lines emerge through what we could consider to be an unfinished painting. Some might consider the blue line as being invasive, because in one way it fights with the fairly close palette of browns and yellows of the main composition. But, on the other hand, does its coldness not accentuate the warm, almost sculpted beauty of the face and of the upper figure?

The face has been resolved in realist tones and his use of light and shade to define the features is a mature one bordering on academicism. As regards the treatment of colour in this portrait it could be suggested that the genesis of his later palette is already in existence. The yellow he has used here, is laid as a monotane top layer on a warmer more earthy ground in the top right hand corner, and applied over white in the centre which in turn is painted over burnt sienna. The same yellow can be read in paintings such as Harvest Light (1990)(FIG.52). However, his handling of yellow in this recent painting is more refined and sophisticated in its many tones.

His painting East Wind, St. Ives (1961)(FIG.53), a gouache, is rendered totally in tones of brown and white. Without ever considering the climatic associations of the title, East Wind, the colour rendering in this painting suggests the cold and the rawness of an unsavoury day by the sea. Representing weather in chromatics was probably the artist's main concern in this painting. The absence of any great colour is probably reflective of a day of depression; a day spent indoors, windowed away from the elements. In fact O'Malley has painted many pictures from inside his studio window in Portmeor, St.Ives and a good number of them are painted within the same colour range.

It is of interest to note that while looking at the work of other artists who worked within the St. Ives context, I have come across some paintings by Ben Nicholson and Peter Lanyon which employ the same use of palette as that in Tony O'Malley's painting.

FIG. 52. *Harvest Light (1991).*

Oil on Board
48x36 inches

FIG.52.

Detail Harvest Light.

Harvest Light

27

Harvest Light

FIG.53. *East Wind St. Ives. (1961).*

Gouache 16 x22½ inches

FIG. 57. *Drift (1961).* Lanyon

Oil on Canvas
60x42 inches.

Nicholson's two paintings of Portmeor (1928)(FIG.54) and Portmeor Window looking out to sea(1930)(FIG.55) plus his tinted drawing St. Ives'Harbour from Trezion (1951)(FIG.51) are all worked within the low range of colour as that in which Drift (1961)(FIG.57) by Peter Lanyon is painted. The question that could be prompted here is 'could there be a borrowing of palette on Tony O'Malley's part or was he just using the tones of the celtic palette which he had already earned through observation prior to his coming to St. Ives?

Similarly a study that was painted in 1965, A Hill -Farm in Winter,(1965)(FIG.58) is quieter in colour than works of the 'seventies, 'eighties or 'nineties. This painting does not seem to have had the same intensity of engagement as that used in Portrait of my Mother (1953). Brian Fallon described the 'sixties as being a difficult introspective time for O'Malley. In 1958 he lost a much loved brother, Mattie. In the early 'sixties he was once again beset by illness which hospitalised him for long periiods of time. By 1965 he had lost one of his closest Cornish friends Peter Lanyon, so it is not surprising that his work is lacking the vibrancy which he injects into his later works done in times of greater happiness and integration. In Hill-Farm in Winter, maybe all he wished to do was to sketch in paint, and to capture the atmosphere of a Winter's day. Or then again, maybe it was the pleasing contrast between the red of the door and the dominant grey greenness of the surrounding area that excited him to representation. Still leaning towards horizontal-perpendicular representation, this picture raises a few considerations.'

FIG. 54.

Ben Nicholson.
Portmeor.
(1928).

Oil on Board
16x22 inches

FIG.55.

Ben Nicholson.
Portmeor
Window Looking
out to Sea.
(1930).

Oil on Canvas $25\frac{1}{4}$x$34\frac{1}{2}$ inches

FIG. 56.

Ben Nicholson.
St.Ives Habour
from Trezion.
(1951).

Oil & Pencil on Board.
17x$20\frac{1}{2}$ inches

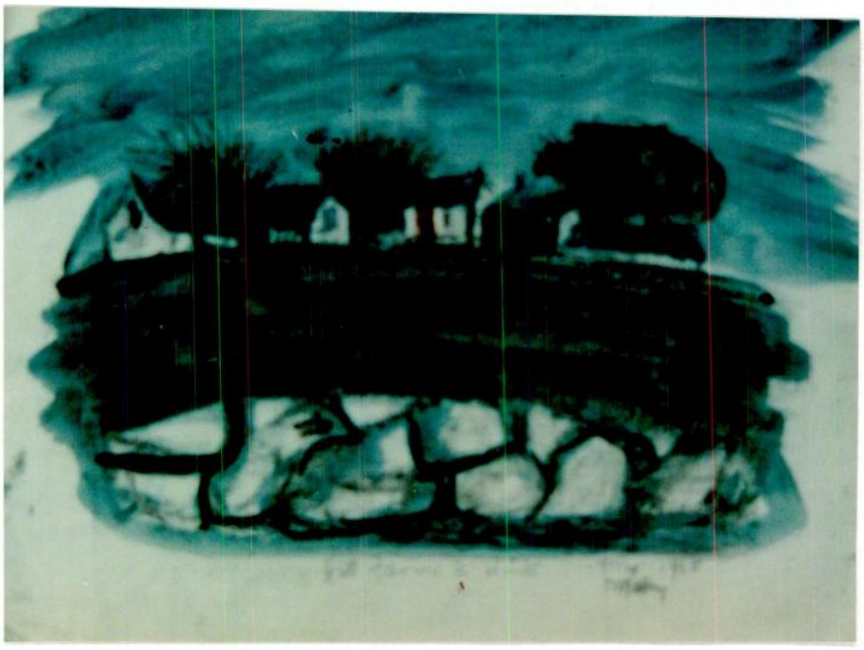


FIG. 58 *A Hill - Farm in Winter. (1965)*

We may wonder if Tony O'Malley by 1965 would still have sought the comforting security of such a local familiar sight as this farm. After all, this was painted ten years after his first visit to St. Ives. A lot of artistic experimentation had been done by now. Was he just going back to an old style to test if he still had his roots? There is a looseness in the handling of paint, where he may be testing his facility to represent in tonal painting, what earlier he would have represented in a wider range of colour.

Tony O'Malley's twin paintings Calvary 1 and 2(Figs.59 and 60) which Brian Fallon classifies as a diptych are two powerful works from 1983. Non-illustrative in the strict sense, of the actual event of the crucifixion, their language and colour would suggest that they are rather studies of the materialisation of a search within on the part of the artist himself, a search for an explanation of death, suffering, and a going beyond the darker side of life, to resurrection. Brian Fallon says of these that 'they are full of the presence of death and suffering yet hint that the crucifixion myth is also one of hope and resurrection'.(14)

In Calvary 1 we see a frame packed with macabre almost skeletal abstractions of figures and implements. There is an intense impression of activity suggested by the interpenetrating angular forms. However, there is a certain grace and elegance to be observed in the simple forms of the standing figures, especially in the one on the extreme right.

FIG. 59. *Calvary N°1 (1983).*

Oil/Board
122x92cms

FIG. 60. *Calvary N°2 (1983).*

Oil/Board
122x92cms

It could be interpreted that O'Malley painted this painting from his dreaded 'black hole '(47) of depression. The essential celtic palette of the artist's stony blacks, greys and browns is used here and the colour recession from the outer bright layer through to the dark distant layer is almost an invitation to the viewer to enter into a sympathetic state of introspection or more constructively to a meditation on death and suffering.

In Calvary 2, if taken in logical sequence to Calvary 1, there is a move away from the severe torturous introspection in the first half of the diptych. It could be suggested that this painting was created from a departure - point of hope and illumination. The lifting of the colour from a bass register to the higher ethereal blues and aquamarines suggest more of a serenity and give an impression of looking outwards and upwards. The dark skin of death has been left behind and this second meditation is focussed on more ethereal matters. Something as simple as the transmutation of the skull-like head in the left-hand upper corner of Calvary 1 to the somewhat upward-looking ecstatic face in the right-hand upper section of Calvary 2 could read as a change of mood and attitude on the part of the artist.

The essential marking of O'Malley's calligraphy adorn both of these boards. Within the characteristic multipanel structures, we can see the triangular and lozenge shapes, the scored lines and the irregular elongated parallel forms.

FIG. 61. *Earth - Lyre*
(1990 - 1991)

Oil on board
48x36 inches.

FIG. 61.

Detail
Earth - Lyre

Earth Lyre.

FIG. 62. *Jane Harris, the Canadian artist who became Tony O'Malley's wife in 1973.*

These are paintings which would appear to have taken time and much work to integrate in their images, and lack the spontaneity of smaller, more immediate works. However, the meditative aspect is strong in both of them and they reflect Tony O'Malley's excellence both as craftsman and stragegist in colour.

The painting Earth-Lyre (1990-'91)(FIG.61) is but one of many board-paintings which show Tony 'O Malley at his lightest, his most exultant and certainly at his most mature as a colourist. Laying skin upon skin of translucent colour, his palette range in this painting, reaches from very cool blues, a strongly luminous cerulean, through secondary greens both cool and warm, right up to the heat of an economically used vermillion. There is the odd visual pause at a sensually flesh coloured irregular stripe, or at the strongly contrasted shorter strips of black in the shell - like form in the lower third of the board.

O'Malley's sensitivity to colour in its highest frequencies is in distinct contrast to the colour range which he used in his Irish paintings and his works created in Cornwall. Subsequent to his marriage in 1973, to Canadian artist Jane Harris (FIG.62) and ensuing visits to some of her relatives in the Bahamas, he could not but be excited by the difference in light, colour and vegetation in this other place. It is my opinion that O'Malley would not have refined his sensitivities to colour in the same manner, had he spent his maturing years as an artist, in either Ireland or Cornwall.

How could he have retained his celtic palette of quiet sombre colours when placed in such a climate of sub-tropical exoticism? His responses which have been many, to his new place are indicative of a love-affair with paint, with colour and with light. He can be quoted as saying:

> In the Bahamas, painting big canvasses outside gave you a very exultant idea of painting. There was actually a "what the hell about it." Colour and birds and light came into it. Cats came in and went out again. That I think was a great joy, living with Jane's family out there and living with the cats and dogs and the birds out in the jungle. 'Twas a different kind of experience.(47)

Earth-Lyre in fact dates from recent holidays spent in Lanzarote, one of the Canary Islands. But this work could have been painted on Paradise Island near Nassau in the Bahamas. It exudes the type of light vibration and tonality which he learned in the Bahamas. The same frequencies of colour are used in Bahamas Dusk, painted in 1981(FIG.41). However the marking-patterns are less intense in Earth-Lyre. the forms however abstract, are diffuse in both and the structure is loose even though there is a hint of a cruciform design in Bahamas Dusk. There is more of a sense of abandon within the brushwork of the later painting, almost suggesting that, having reached a fluency with colour he can now layer at will, allowing the painting to direct itself. However within the more strict panelling of Bahamas Dusk he has concentrated on counteracting tones of the same colour, coming from dark to a top layer of light.

His subtlety in the handling of colour, lies within his placing of panels of complementary colours side by side, thereby creating a constant visual search for the eye of the viewer. There is an overall sense of pulsating excitement to be felt in the panels of this painting and no less than Earth-Lyre it shows O'Malley's mastery of colour and light in all its high frequencies.

Referring once again to Earth-Lyre, the engagement with the surface of the painting, by comparison to the earlier paintings which I have discussed in this section, seems to have demanded more intense energy, however fluent O'Malley may now be with his usage of paint. Through a suggested aerial perspective, we can sense the layers of colour which integrate into a painted surface of magic luminosity. There are many exciting areas which draw the eye inwards and downwards, the most dominant area probably being the strongly conrasting black and green striped image in the lower portion of the painting. Probably referring to the image of the lyre, the 'kernal'(47) of the original experience, this motif is protruding from the quieter but vibrant tones of blue, violet, pink and green. The eye searches, wondering where to begin or end; using his colour layering techniques, many grounds have been laid over one another so that there is no real beginning or end. It is almost like circling within currents of air. But there is the odd strong stopping point; four main ones in fact in the form of the lines of bored holes, the veins of structure which can lead the eye in a defined direction throughout the whole picture.

UNDERTONES.

It is not just the light, the colour or the atmospherics which attract me to a deeper inquiry into Tony O'Malley's Bahamian paintings. It is also the undertone of a preoccupation with superstitions and with the indigenous culture of the native people of these islands. It is debatable as to whether O'Malley is a man of superstition or not. He certainly has a feeling for the 'energies of the countryside' (47) as he calls them himself and unashamedly talks of the 'Pooka'(47) and other entities within an Irish context, almost as if he were acquainted with them.

The melancholic side of him would appreciate superstitions and their sinister content by virtue of the irrational fears they can instill in people. The world of the occult, in the sense of hidden energies can feed the man of melancholia. I am convinced that O'Malley, melancholic or not, acknowledges and confronts the realm of elemental energies thereby exorcising the devils of negativity and despair.

Irishman and artist, living within an Irish context and his having been raised close to his people's traditions, facilitated his linking up, many years later with the superstitions and culture of the Bahamas. He spoke in his interview with me, of the Obeah tradition and rituals of the Bahamas. Obeah is a type of voodoo brought to those islands by the African population and it is closely linked to Catholicism with its ritualistic use of Holy water.

The actual original surface of the board having been distressed by inscribed lines, and a rough granular texture having been added to various areas between the lines, O'Malley has pushed and moulded his paint as a sort of play of harmonics between colour and texture. For example in the detail photograph(of Earth-Lyre,(Fig.61), several diffused sections of the board have been portioned off around a form which could be loosely interpreted as a head or a mask; the inscribed circular shapes in the yellow ochre area suggesting eyes. Above the 'head' form the purple linear motif plus the purple ribbed triangle in which the superimposed red defines the bored holes, could be what O'Malley means by the extension of the 'kernal'(47) from its original centre. These shapes are certainly echoing the green and black shell shape. O'Malley's diffused bird motifs are also appearing again in the feather-like turquoise and red stripes. The decorated holes could be read as the eyes of those same birds.

In his painting Bahamas - Obeah Signs (1985)(FIG.47.) there is a nervousness and a tension implied by the central owl figure with its grasping claws and its gimlet eyes. Another bird-like head penetrates what would otherwise be a pleasant warm sunfilled, yellow surface, and the two masks in each side panel speak as if from the shadows. A tangible scraping or scratching movement is suggested by the claw-like stripes within the blue panel.

However, the presence of distant small birds, has become more of an ominous presence in the painting The Birdlake - Paradise Island, Bahamas (1986)(FIG.32). The actual full bird - forms appear transitorily in this complex world of imagery and bequeath a legacy of eyes, beaks and claws to this busy world of shadows and undergrowth.

There are two partial faces in the bottom left-hand corner and in the right lower corner. These suggest Tony and Jane as observers within this other world of a foreign tradition. It can be deduced that the artist is saying that they both live at ease with the presence of these rituals. They may not fully understand them but they are open to their presence.

The diffused bird - image is very much part of these Bahamian canvasses. Another associate from the St. Ives' days, Patrick Heron, once said of O'Malley's work, there is an absolute unity of feeling informing all his works.'(16) Heron could have extended his statement to saying that there is a unity of identity or association.

Certain images carry through work as early as that done in New Ross, through his time in Cornwall, to the Bahamas and up to the present day.

His bird - motif emerges time and time again. Both as a full expressionist image and as a diffused one of eyes and sharp beaks it infuses Spectral Garden - Bahamas (1985)(FIG.63) with its sinister presence, mainly because of its associations with voodoo In a more unobtrusive way it lurks in the dusk of Samana Cay - Bahamas(1986)(FIG.64), its feathers and claws affirming its territoriality. Its 'foreflyer', the crow sought its own compositional space in an abstract movement of wings in the painting Crow-flight homeward (1983)(FIG.65).

In an economy of colour and image Tony O'Malley excels in his reduction of the bird to speed and directional movement. There is something of the Aboriginal North American in this with its strong contrast of red against black against white and the big grey sky that O'Malley loves. Its dominant shape is reminiscent of a chief's head-dress and particles of beaks design a loose frame around the kernal of feather lines.

Would 'crowscape' be too presumptive a term that could be applied to O'Malley's materialisation of this 'bird of ill-omen'(47). As landscape becomes 'inscape'(47) for him in his tireless quest for the essence beyond the literal, so the crow becomes a special point of departure in the artist's vocabulary.

FIG. 63. *Spectral Garden - Bahamas. (1985)*
Acrylic on Canvas 4' x 6'

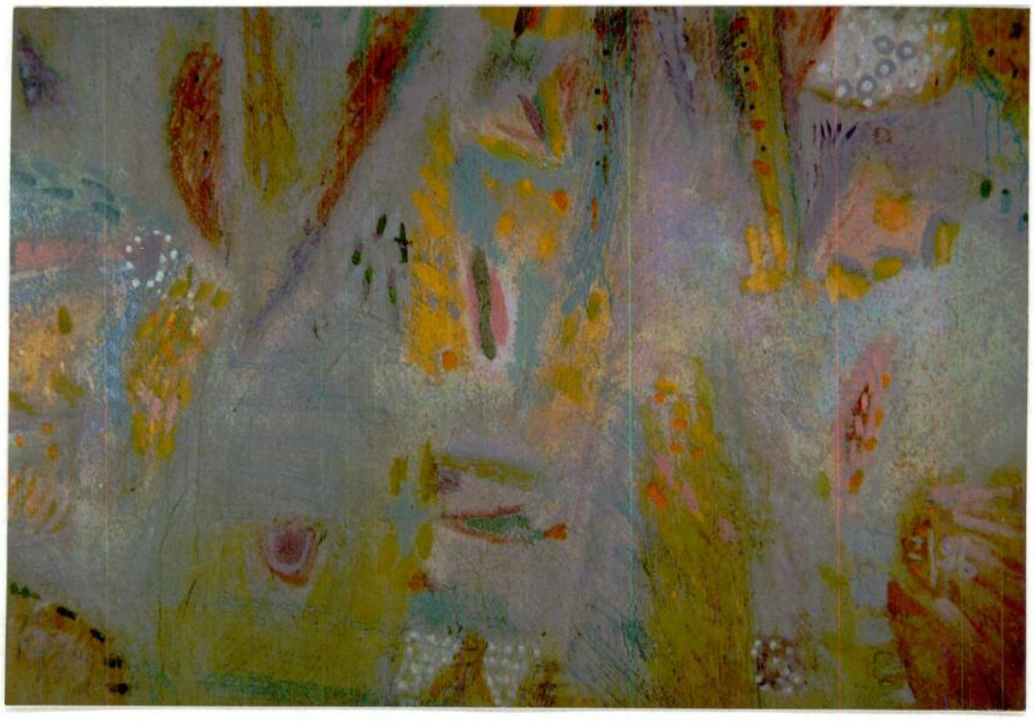


FIG. 64. *Samana Cay - Bahamas. (1986)*

4' x 6' Acrylic on Canvas.

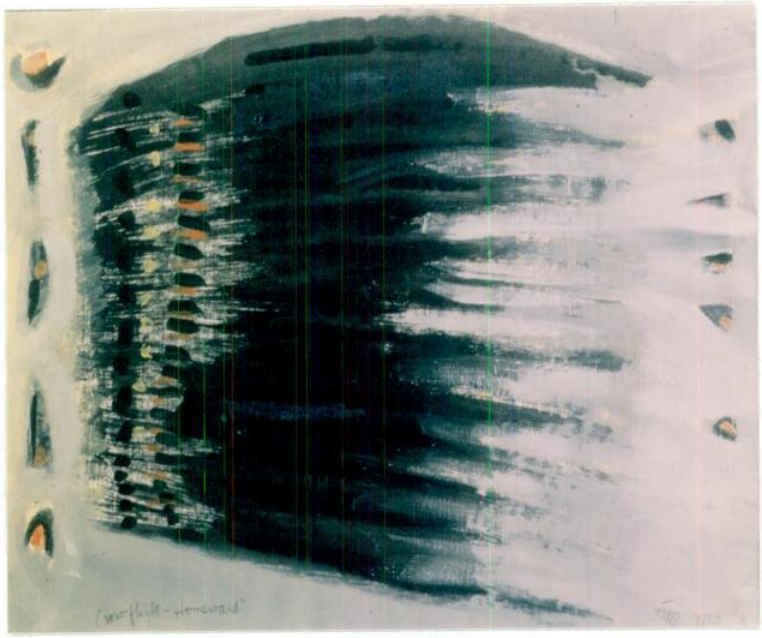


FIG. 65 *Crowflight -Homeward*
(1983)

Oil on paper.
40cm x 50 cm.

His response to this bird is unique in its many variations. Its fragments, be they eyes or feathers, can become a still-life as in Na Cleite agus na Preacaid (Fig.66) (undated) Crow Feathers. (1983)(FIG. 67) or Crowplace (1980)(FIG.68.). Tony O'Malley himself says:

> I hold to abstract from a painting very much and a painting begins in an abstract sense. Say about painting crows in the sky. Sometimes I would think of a crow as three triangles and a beak and an eye. That might be in the form, and the crow might be dissolved all over the board in these forms but the 'crowness' of the crow would'nt change.(47)

As an early oil on paper this painting Na Cleite agus na Preacaid, suggests an almost clinical O'Malley dissecting the bird in a lab, wanting to make sense of it. He has taken flight away from the material reality and he is finding a language with which to express the bird in future paintings. Many years later the crow has found its natural space in the ethereal air of Night Crows and Still Life - Physicianstown.(1986-'87)(FIG.34). The humble grey crow of Callan is now endowed with a borrowed light. In shades of twilight it asserts itself in visual acrobatics filling the board with triangles and arrows, at times shooting through space from opposing angles.

Brian Fallon speaks of O'Malley's treatment of this bird:

> A simple crow's feather picked up in a field, has led to a series of striking still lifes. Sometimes the black and angular shapes of the birds convey something sinister, almost akin to a Witches'sabbath; and then one remembers the sinister side of the crow's character and legend - as a carrion bird picking corpses, a predator, a messenger of evil omen, even a harbinger of man and death.14

FIG. 66. *Na Cleite agus na Preacaid (Undated).*

Oil on paper 45cm x 50cm

FIG. 67. *Crow Feather.* (1983).

Gouache $11\frac{1}{2}$x$16\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

CROW FEATHERS 8/83

11½" X 10½"
Gouache.

FIG. 68. *Crowplace (July 1980).*

Gouache on paper.
24cm x 34cm

The crow as just one of O'Malley's elemental images has been nurtured, developed and perfected. it translates with much facility into images of other birds in O'Malley's world outside of Ireland.

INTEGRATING THE IDIOM.

Some of O'Malley's most recent work has been done in Lanzarote, one of the less commercialised islands in the Canaries. True to his essential handling of place, abstracting its essence and creating canvasses rich in light and atmosphere, his treatment of the Lanzarote landscape and environment bears witness to his visual knowledge of the place.

There is a barrenness and starkness in this island, but there is a warmth there too. Much of its black and red clay soil as well as its rocky terrain are a result of volcanic activity. Whereas his paintings, abstracted from the Irish landscape, reflect his relationship to the land and its history, his paintings from the Bahamas echo the exotic. In other words many of his Irish paintings are painted in stoney, cool low tones, while his Bahamian works' reflect the fertility of Paradise island in their richness of high -key colours.

Tony O'Malley's paintings done in relation to his experiences of Lanzarote could almost be seen as an integrated working ground where elements of his other places of painting meet. It was interesting to note in the November 1991 Exhibition, that many of the watercolour paintings which increasingly use collage, are in fact rendered in a palette close to that used in some of his early St. Ives' gouaches, except that there is an added richness by his use of Burnt Sienna.

The red clay of Lanzarote cannot but reveal itself in paintings of essence.See the painting Sirocco - Lsla de Gracioso(1991)(FIG.69)as an example ofthis visual reference to the red clay of the island. In those recent paintings he is also more interested in the textured surface of the paper before applying airy translucent layers of paint. His concern with surface continues to be an evolving one.

One painting I particularly like from this exhibition is Lanzarote Collage (1989)(FIG.70). It is a painting of delicate surface with a brushed over upper layer of grey white. One might be tempted to call it a dark painting because of its lack of colour and its monotones of brown black and white, but the essential O'Malley glow is there, highlighted all the more by the sharp edged geometric black shapes.

The surface in Listen Put on Morning to W.S. Graham's Poem and in his Memory.(1986)(FIG.71) has the added interest of curiously worked vignettes of concentrated scoring. See detail of this painting and notice how he extends the incised line and bored hole technique into this added dimension. There is almost a surface painting in a surface painting within this roughly squared-off area, a little lower of centre of the detail picture.

O'Malley has very much preserved two idioms in his career as a painter. He has nurtured and developed his language of the non-figurative while still continuing to build a store of direct representational drawings and paintings.

FIG. 69. *Sirocco - Isla de Gracioso.* *(1991)*

Oil / Board 36x48 inches

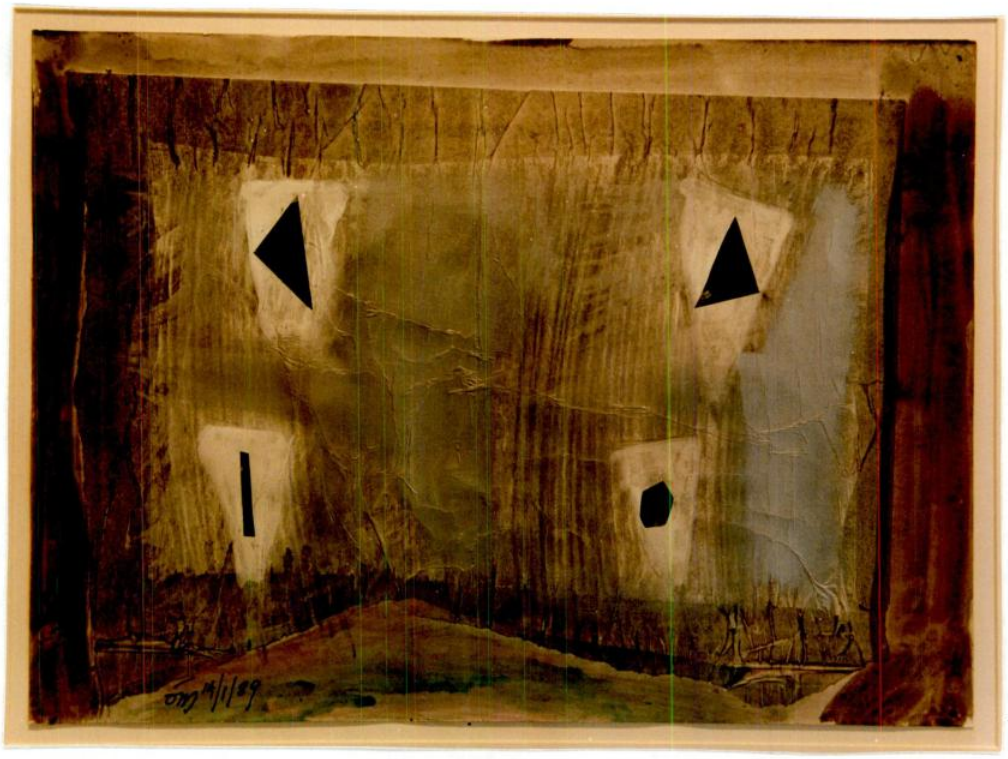


FIG. 70. *Lanzarote Collage (1989).*

Acrylic & Collage on paper.
$11\frac{1}{2}$x$16\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

21.

Lanzarote - Collage

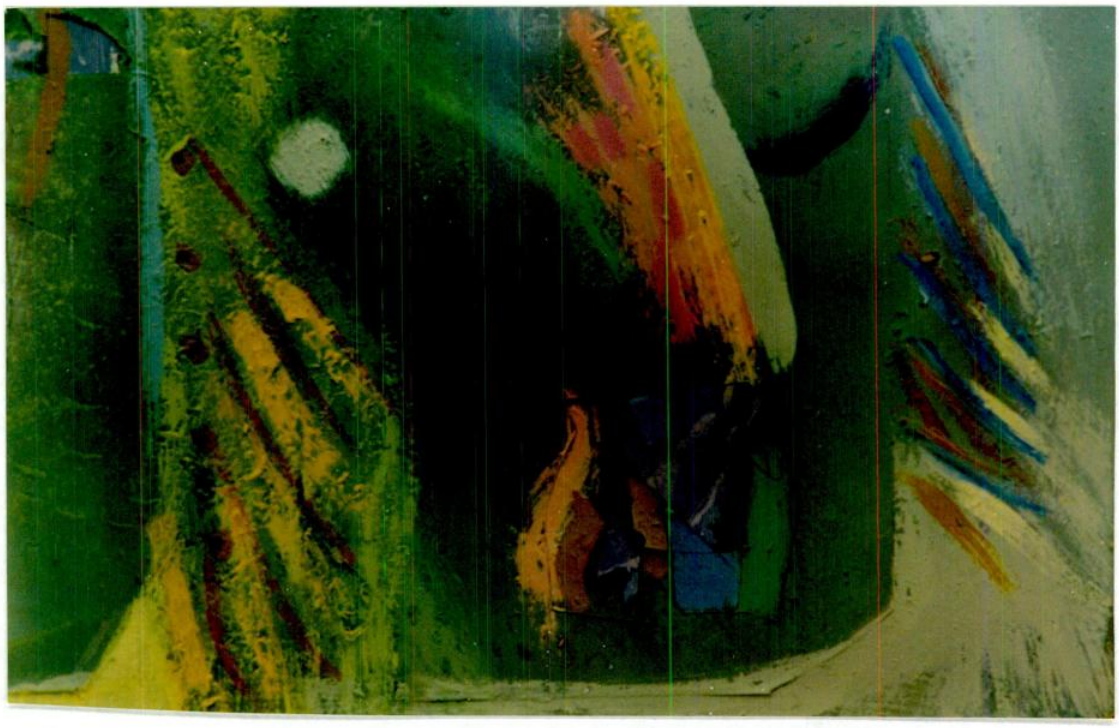


FIG. 71. *Listen put on Morning to W.S. Graham's poem and in his memory (1986).*

Oil on board. 24x18 inches.

(84)

37.

Cottage Lanzarote

1988

In a painting such as Arrieta (1988)(FIG.72) there is a feeling of integration between the two idioms. On a ground of tissue collage on watercolour paper he has created a painting with distinct motifs that refer to some of his sketches. Even though line as such is not evident , the main shape is adequately defined as to suggest a crow, and in the lower left hand corner a bunch of tulips is easily identifiable. He is being informative here in a more strict manner to that employed in the larger oil or acrylic paintings which exude ligh and atmosphere. If we read this painting as 'crowscape' we can see the wings of the 'bird' as it falls earthwards from the sky in a hint of Icaran fantasy. There is something sinister in this bird, something akin to the hidden essence' of his celtic pictures. However, the play of red and blue heighten the mood somewhat of this picture. In this painting diffusion is not of the essence as much as in works such as Island Light-Isla de Graciosa (1989)(FIG.73). The alternative O'Malley is in his most playful element here. He indulges himself on a surface which is neither smooth, nor flat. On a modulated ground which bears the resemblance to a well lived - in face he plays the duality of his idiom, between figuration and abstraction. He leads us from the defined primitive flute shape, laterally through panels of alternating colour layers.

FIG. 72. *Arrieta* *1988*

Acrylic & Collage on paper.
16x11½ inches.

Arrieta 1988:

FIG. 73.

"Island Light - Isla de Gracioso". 1989.

Oil / Board 48x36 inches.

FIG.73. Detail 1.

FIG. 73. Detail 2.

Island Light.

By studying this painting for a while, we can come to an even greater understanding of O'Malley, the man who creates atmosphere and light with his persistent working of the surface. He can never be accused of just manufacturing light and atmosphere. Their vibrancy lives not on the surface of the painting but within the very pigment that he uses and in the manner in which he applies the paint. Look at Detail 1, right-hand panel. Here he creates mottled light by having the underground of yellow weather through the overlayer of violet. In Detail 2 of this painting it is evident that he has carried through, his incised line and bored hole technique gleaned from his days around Jerpoint Abbey in County Kilkenny

In terms of colour, this painting is also a unifying ground for the bright colours of his Bahamian days as well as the black shadows from his native side. The presence of black or near - black, to my mind, hints back again and again to his many meetings with illness and melancholia and in his Bahamian as well as in his Lanzarote paintings its presence reflects the sinister, more occult nature of life. However, in work from these two places, by virtue of its being nearly always contrasted now by exotic colour, black can exist not as a negative colour but as an accentuating quiet presence. One of my favourite balances in this painting is that which exists between the slightly weathered sunlit surface of the upper left-hand corner and the cool violet of the lower right-hand corner.

The light is the light of another place, of the Bahamas or of Lanzarote but certainly not that of Ireland or of Cornwall. If we compare the light in Island Light - Isla de Graciosa (1989)(FIG.73) with the light in Winter Landscape New Ross (1957)(FIG.28) Hill Farm in Winter (1965)(FIG.58) or even in Interior(1961)(1933) we can almost feel the difference in temperature. Between the years 1957 and 1961 his handling of palette hasn't changed very much; neither has his response to light. It is rather reflected in played-down tones which lack the luminosity of the most recent paintings. But then does geographical location not dominate one's response to atmosphere?

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have looked at Tony O'Malley's journey towards a mastery of his craft and the developement of a personal philosophy of his art. This is a journey that has progressed in theme, attitude and technique.

Nature, landscape and place have been regular departure - points for O'Malley, both in his life as an amateur and as a mature painter. It is obvious from studying his oeuvre that he has grown in his treatment of themes coming from these departure - points, and his earlier style of semi-representation has matured into a style of loosely rendered but intense abstraction.

O'Malley will always paint that which is close to him; the intimate details of a life, no matter where he may be. He paints place in a manner which extracts its essence. Atmosphere, light and the visual recall of an experience dominate his canvasses. He is as much at ease with painting the wings of a moth or the fragments of a bird, through his now familiar device of diffusion as he is with capturing the 'placeness' (47) of a Lanzarote locale.

This artist's attitude can on the one hand, be that of practicality where crafting is of initial importance in the process of creativity. However, he has grown to experience and accept the input of the subconsciously 'given' (47).

In his life as a mature painter he has evolved a personal philosophy where his experience of painting carries him beyond the material or the obtical into a realisation of the 'beyond'(47). His method of response has become one of 'seeing through sensing'(47), and with the passage of years, spent both at home in Ireland, in Cornwall and abroad in the exotic islands of the Bahamas and Lanzarote, he has developed an acute sensitivity to colour and to light.

A painter of intuition, O'Malley carries his vision through a strongly developed and convincing technique of distressed surfaces, a calligraphy which has been carefully studied and manipulated and above all through his control of colour and form in diffusion.

Tony O'Malley's work is a testimony to many things; to place and his experience of event; to time and what it has afforded him in terms of this experience; and above all it is a testimony to a commitment to a very personalised form of image-making.

FIG. 74. *Tony and Jane O'Malley in their outdoor studio in Paradise Island, the Bahamas.*

CHAPTER 3

AN ART OF COUNTERPOINT.

Introduction.

> It's odd, I'm quite capable of being six or seven persons - perhaps because the real one is locked in a private anguish somewhere and is only manifest in paint - perhaps'.(7)

These words were written by Peter Lanyon, friend and associate of Tony O'Malley in St. Ives, during the late 'fifties and early 'sixties. They are words which could very well reflect the character of Tony O'Malley. Brian Fallon in his own words said of the artist:

> His life has been a very private one. Humorous, often exuberant, highly volatile and emotional at times, O'Malley is also solitary, meditative and withdrawn - the positive and negative so to speak, of the national temperament.(14)

For people who have only begun to familiarise themselves with O'Malley's work in recent years, it is understandable that their first impressions may be, that his work is the creation of a joyful and integrated person. His paintings of the last decade or so are, for the most part, creations of colour and light intensity, revealing the caracter of man who appears to live life to the fullest.(FIG.75)

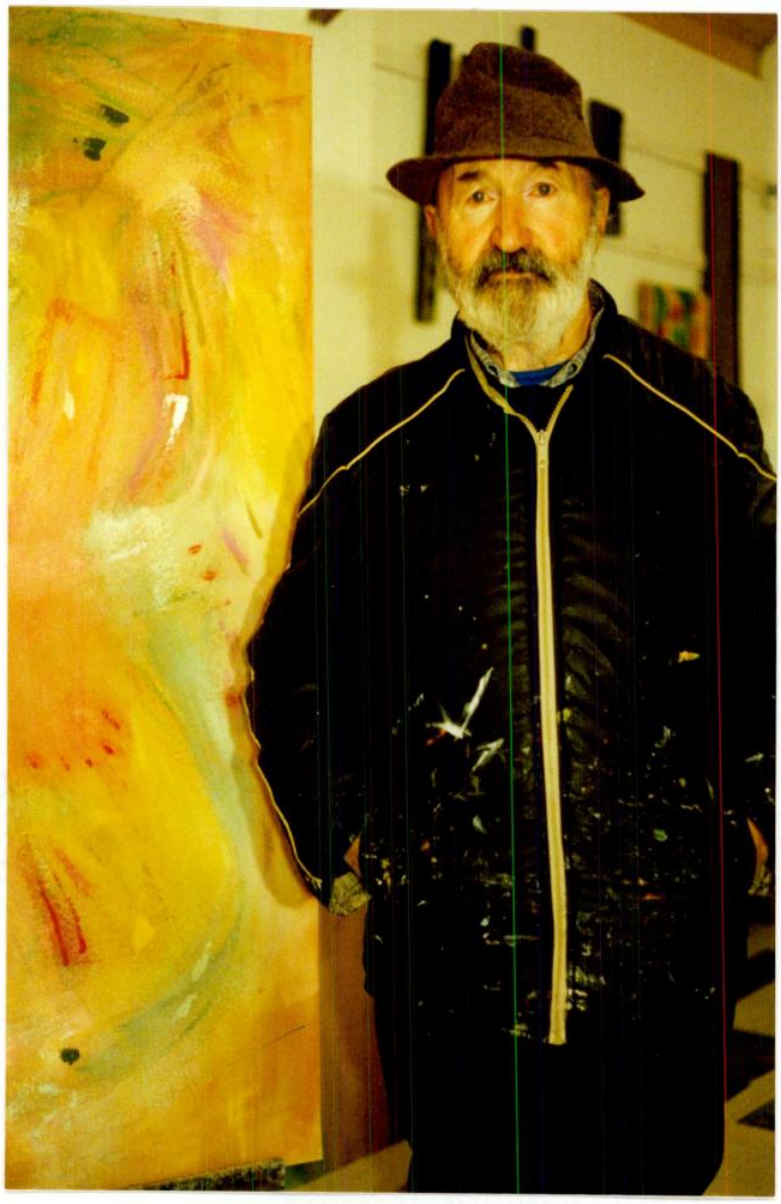


FIG. 75. *Tony O'Malley beside a work in progress. Taken by the author in his studio, Physicianstown, Callan, Co. Kilkenny. February 1992.*

And what has prompted and sharpened this intensity of response to what, in restrospect, must have been a relatively grey world of pain and struggle?

It is my intention, in this chapter to examine what may be suspected as a tendency to melancholia in an artist of such apparent joy, because I personally believe that joy.

In relation to Tony O'Malley and his art-making, I would like to inquire into the nature of his melancholia and to examine how he counterbalances this aspect of his personality, which he perceives as a preconceived condition, saying, 'Artists are morbid kinds of people'. It cannot be concluded in a generalised way that melancholia is an inherent part of every artist's psyche but Tony O'Malley himself sees it as a preconceived condition saysing 'Artists are morbid kinds of people'(47)

IN THE SHADOWLANDS.

> Melancholia is part of me, same as part of my father and most Irish people. We're not all lit up; we don't even have the kind of sense of humour that the English have - what they call the music-hall sense of humour. We are more introspective. (Tony O'Malley) (47)

In considering Tony O'Malley as a potential melancholic, many questions present themselves. He confesses to be smitten with this national characteristic which by definition would be a tendency towards severe introspection, associated with intense feelings of sadness, despair and inadequacy.

What may be the reasons for this inclination towards depression in a man such as O'Malley; a pragmatist and at the same time a romantic?

O'Malley was born in 1913, his mother being a Kilkenny woman and his father from Clare Island. Of these he says:

> My Clare Island inheritance which is more psychic and sea-orientated is mixed therefore with the more introverted and land based Norman Celtic heritage of County Kilkenny.

And later 'my father's people, they were all the same. Yet they had their own wild sides but they were very grounded in reality.(9)

So, he was the son of a practical people who for generations had been close to the land and the elements; a people who like so many others, depended their livelihood on hard work and practicality.

On a wider scale, Ireland of the first half of the twentieth century was a country of conservatism and by setting oneself apart in however small' a way as an artist, one placed oneself as the focus of derision. O'Malley worked for many years as a bank-clerk and developed his art in his spare time. His sensitivity to reaction and to public response made him realise that the climate in Ireland was a philistine one which dismissed the arts as suspect. It was a society where the Church was omnipotent and not sympathetic to the aesthetic values of some of its people. He says 'The Church in Ireland was philistine and aggravated people like artists and poets. They thought that they had the forms of redemption and penance. There was no need for artists ... to confess anything.'(47)

The GAA on the other hand catered for the leisure and corporeal health of the nation. O'Malley was a reluctant resident in a world of national melancholia where response to repression and innuendo was expressed by only the bravest. He mentions Sean O Faolain and Frank O'Connor as the two writers who were originally ostracised for their candidness of opinion, in portraying the state of society as it was then. He continues:

> I found that Ireland was heavily weighted with academicism; people were afraid to step out and you couldn't really tell each person what they were.(47)

He talks about the 'weight of dogma'(47) imposed on people by the Church and the underlying need for freedom which was part of the character of the more aware.

In a country which he calls an 'ex-colony',(47) there were many prblems to be surmounted.

On a more personal level O'Malley is a man of intense sensitivity who would sense the ingrained moods of a place and of its people. National Characteristics of underlying depression translate into a memory such as:

> I remember going up to Mullinahone with my brother Mattie, about thirty five years ago. I had just gone back to work and had a car. We drove up to Mullinahone on a wet Sunday in November, a profoundly depressing day. There was a galvanised gate somewhere, painted red and, as an artist, that struck me - the red gate brought the whole thing alive. Mullinahone itself was buried inside in the pubs talking and muttering to itself. It was this intensity of response which would later translate into paintings of 'placeness' and essence.'(9)

O'Malley was acquainted with the modern painters like Nano Reid, Nora McGuiness and Patrick Collins but prior to his exhibiting for the first time with Living Art and the Oireachtas Exhibition in 1951, he saw himself as a countryman, distanced by virtue of his social background. He relates to Patick Collins through their being 'the same kinds of people'(47) and not through their painting. They would have been part of the contemporary movement, however obscured in its beginnings, which was moving away from the academicism and the formalist style of Anglo-Irish painting which had been dominant up until then.

Beginning an artistic life as a provincial had its advantages and its drawbacks.

O'Malley recognised his mind as being too primitive in that he could never assimilate learned knowledge in such a way that would help him reach academic heights. He says:

> My mind is quite primitive in the sense that I could only be carried on in education so far. After that I'd reject the whole thing. I could never become a doctor or a bachelor or something like that. I can't assimilate. I am self-centred enough only to be interested in the things that interest me or make me interested.(47)

O'Malley knew that he would never paint like the German Expressionists because he hadn't come to maturity in a climate of political disturbance which characterised the art of the Bauhaus and its painters. He admits that he had very little knowledge in fact of the Bauhaus. 'I was a countryman and I envied the well-known Anglo-Irish painters who would have had the advantage of going to Paris or London.'(47) His acceptance of being a provincial, non-academic, non-intellectual (as he perceived himself) was the beginning of formulating his own particular vision, narrow to begin with, but a vision which has expanded into the universal language of painting.

Compounded with this belonging within a national heritage of dark and brooding melancholia is O'Malley's personal tendency to depression. He has suffered many periods of illness in his life with both T.B. and heart problems. Spending long periods of time in hospital is certainly not conducive to joymaking. On the contrary, on being pitted against one's mortality, one is likely to be drawn inwards.

Brian Fallon says of O'Malley 'he is by nature an introspective man, solitary and meditative behind an outward gregariousness, but he is also a man who had faced death a number of times, and had been an invalid or semi-invalid for a goodly percentage of his life.'(14) Walking that fine line between life and death nurtures the kind of introspection that can destroy some people. However it was during periods like these that O'Malley forged what can now be considered to be a good constructive logic by which he assured a survival for himself. Of this he said:

> Being away from society for a long time, being thrown on your own and to find yourself painting - that was a good thing to be able to find, apart from reading. To be able to paint and draw, even as stumblingly as I did, was something. I lived for the next day so that I could continue at it... put the book under the bed in the sanitorium. I drew a lot in the hospital.(47)

Risking reprimands from hospital authorities he drew everything and anything that interested him. Art as a panacea for depression he explains in his own terms:

> I myself used to get very severe depression and especially with T.B. years ago. But then as regards painting or drawing which I was doing at that time - it was very important to do so. You needed to get yourself outside yourself. You were in a cave and you needed to get out. A tree out there with birds in it, you'd try and draw them ... try and draw their whistling or their singing or whatever they were doing... smoke coming out of a chimney ... you'd draw it and not sort of think about it.(47)

Brian Fallon cites these drawings in ink, crayon and washes, as the 'obverse side of this dark interlude'(14) and they 'celebrate the return to life and the advent of Spring.'(14)

AN ART OF CONFRONTATION

In his personal collection of paintings which he has done over the past fifty or so years, Tony O'Malley has several ink and crayon drawings and paintings,done during his periods in hospital. He spoke about one of these to me. It was a small painting with an atmosphere of depression and confinement, impressionist in style. I quote him in relation to this painting:

> That's the sanitoruim ... when I was in the sanitoruim in Kilkenny ... 1950 ... that's forty one years ago. I was in that hut in that grey garden. Shortly after that I came out of the sanitoruim and went back to work. That was done on a grey bleak November day. That's what art is, it is a kind of testimony.(47)

In an overall view of Tony O'Malley's work, I don't think that melancholia as a negative presence ever becomes an all-invasive element.

Brian Fallon in his discussion of the essence of Tony O'Malley's output says:

> I have heard good and unbiased judges, when faced with an O'Malley exhibition involving work in several media, admit their puzzlement at the apparent inconsistency in styles and the strong contrasts which are straightaway evident in his output. Lyrical gouaches may be hung beside or jux-aposed with a large dark - toned, rather gnomic oil painting, and in between may be a sequence of pencil or conte-crayon drawings - say from his much loved Clare Island - which represents a very different facet of his temperament. The bright tonality of the Bahamian pictures creates an extra complication since they seem and in fact are, a new and unexpected departure.(14)

In the context of melancholia, I would see clear categories of paintings. Some contain aspects of confrontation with, and recognition of this inherent condition. Whether consciously or unconsciously, much of his earlier work which is characterised by semi - representational, verging on Impressionistic imagery and form, there is an underlying yet not overstated presence of darkness. His extensive use of brown and low key colours hint at a lurking, sombre reality yet, he very often offsets the darks with light areas, thereby allowing a balance. Even in paintings which have an overall covering of dark surface, he admits that he was working with light. 'Even though that's dark there now, (pointing to a particular painting) it's about light. But it's not gloom, to me it's dark light not gloom'.(47) Van Gogh Winter. (from a dream)(1961)FIG.76) and Hawk and Quarry in Winter(1964)(FIG.77) are paintings of confrontation where he connects with this darker side of reality.

As regards his use of black, a colour associated with the shadows of melancholia, he admits that it is a colour with him. But he never uses black pigment. Instead he mixes Burnt Umber and Ultramarine. 'Actual blackness is not of interest to me in a painting at all. I like atmosphere in painting but don't have a moral thing about black paintings'.(47) By this, I presume he means that he is not emotionally affected by blackness in painting. Behind its apparent negativity he finds a brighter force.

By this analogy he perhaps can see through and beyond the darkness of melancholia also.

Losing Peter Lanyon as a friend associate and mentor in 1964 after a flying accident, no doubt left its scars of depression and sadness. His painting to Lanyon's memory, Hawk and Quarry in Winter (1964) (FIG.77) leaves us with no doubt as to O'Malley's ability to transform the negative energies of melancholia into something positive and sensitive.

It is painted in a simple range of colours; in actual fact he has used tones of white and black, which is a mixed black. In spite of an initial impression of starkness, there is still a warmth in the overall tonality; a warmth reflective most likely of his affection for a friend. Any sense of melancholia and doom, is more likely to be read in the forms of this painting, and their relationship to one another. Between the downward scoop of the powerful hawk, symbolising Peter Lanyon, and the gaping abyss of the black area central to the painting, we can read daring and impending doom, death and a sense of being cut off. This sense is accentuated by the fence which is no mere decoration. Its greater significance lies probably in its being a dividing line between two friends - O'Malley still living on the near side.

To O'Malley, paintings which were done in his earliest days are as contemporary as his most recent work. Regardless of time and the progression of style, he values them as the work of the same hand which created them all, the same mind with its inherent sensibilities.

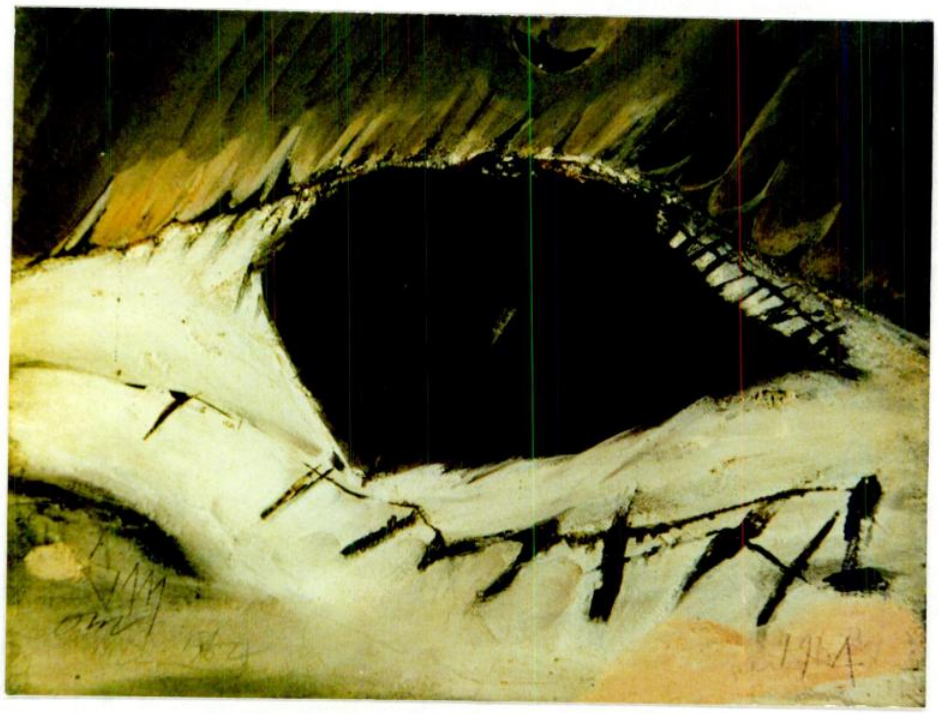


FIG. 77. *Hawk and Quarry in Winter (1964).*

Oil / Board. 53x72 cms.

One painting from 1961 which I find particularly intriguing, in relation to O'Malley and melancholia is Van Gogh Winter.(from a dream)(1961) Has he chosen Van Gogh as the personification of melancholia and manic depression within himself? It is a painting of simple sparse imagery, painted again with the limited early O'Malley palette. The spacing is interesting in that there are several enclosures. The eye is led from the head of Van Gogh (a head which in fact echoes in later self-portraits of O'Malley) towards a distant brightly-lit horizon, through a somewhat exaggerated perspective. The dividing lines can possibly be interpreted as the enclosing shadows of fears and moods. Brian Fallon says that O'Malley 'feels a special affinity with Van Gogh and is particularly moved by the self-portraits.'(14) He sees him as 'one of the saints and Holy Fools of art, a vulnerable, suffering and even tragic figure who was sustained - at least before the very end - by a disciplined devotion to his craft'.(14)

Considering O'Malley's self - portraits within this context of extreme introspection gives us an interesting view of the artist's visual image of himself. Brian Fallon refers to these paintings as having the 'nature of self-communing, and as being reflective of periods of introspection.'(14)

FIG. 76. *Van Gogh. Winter.* *(1961)*
(from a dream)

Oil / Board 60x69 inches.

The 'sixties for O'Malley, seems to have been a time of reckoning what with recurrent illness and the death of Peter Lanyon in 1964.

The earliest of these self-portraits is dated 1963.(FIG.78) Painted by O'Malley while living in Trevaylor, near St. Ives, it is a painting with almost demonic undertones suggested by staring white eyes and the gouged-out teeth. The palette is of black, brown, grey and white and it has an overall muddy appearance. Painted spontaneously, I would say, it is not however, one of O'Malley most finely created works but, possesses an honesty which one cannot argue with. Apart from the preoccupation with the planes within the face, the image powerfully overtakes the picture plane and is almost larger than life. By comparison the 1967 portrait (FIG.79) has a three-quarter profile again, almost filling the frame. The serene pensive expression and the raising of the palette suggest more ease, whereas if we look for a sense of emotion in the 1968 linear representation (FIG.80), we find a direct almost strident statement of emptiness. This is certainly not a happy picture with the pinched frown and the concentration of sharp line and white gouache. He presents himself here as bereft and bare. There's an almost self-accusatory look in the eyes. In what might be termed as a counter-handling of self-portraiture, paintings from 1974 and 1983 show a somewhat happier self-image.(FIG.81 AND 82 RESPECTIVELY) In the first frame he playfully paints his reflection in a mirror.

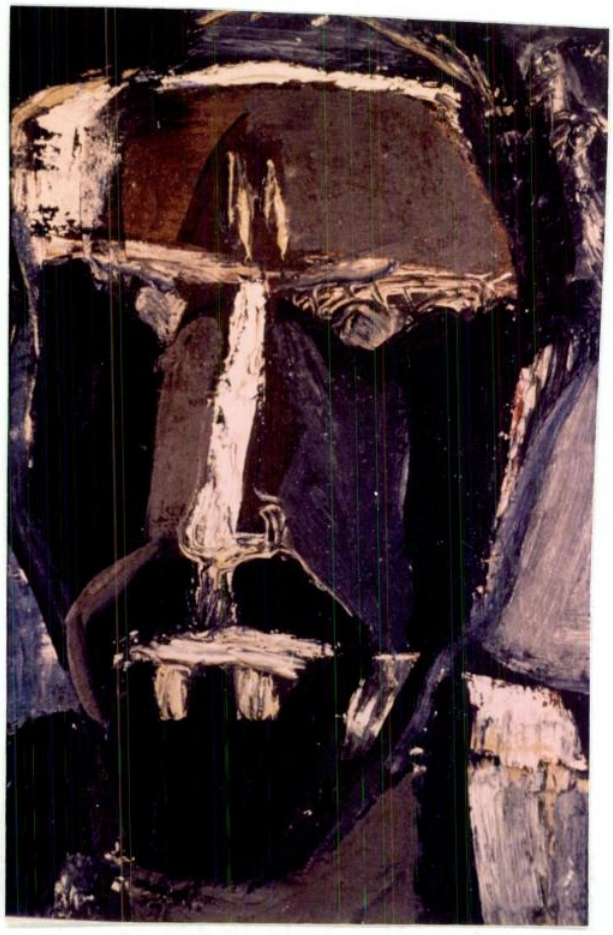


FIG. 78. *Self - Potrait*
1963

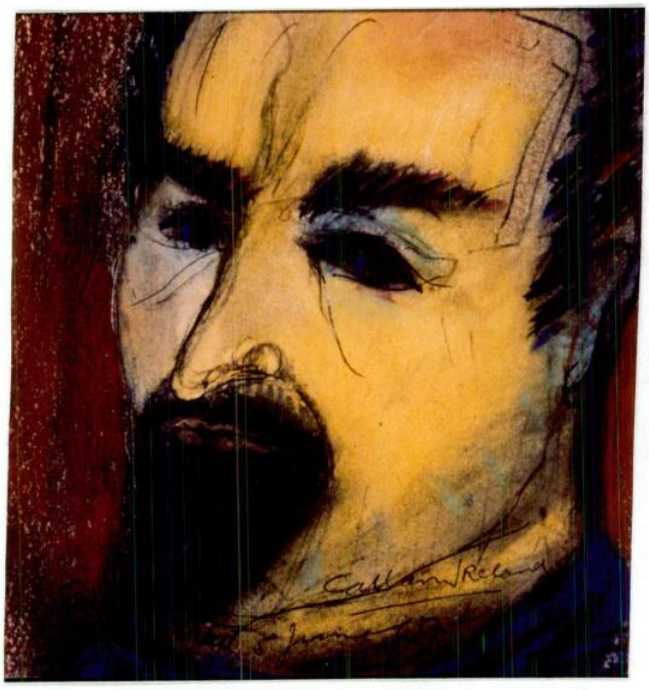


FIG. 79. *1967*
Self - Potrait

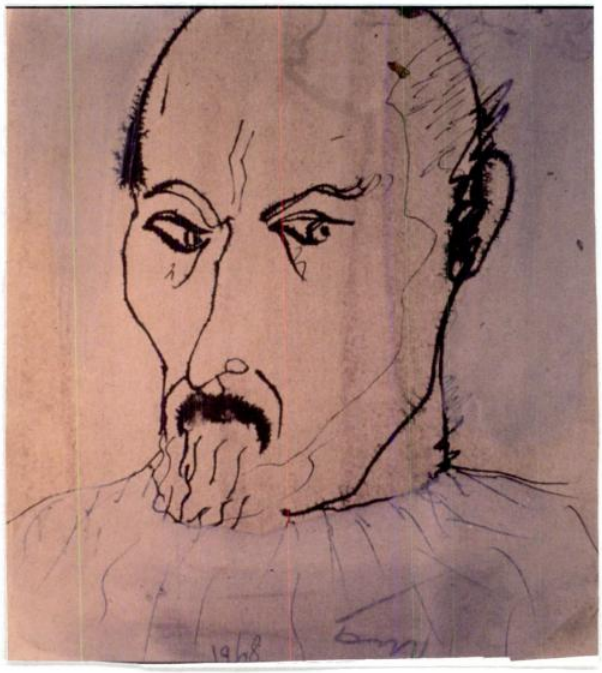


FIG. 80. *1968*
Self - Potrait

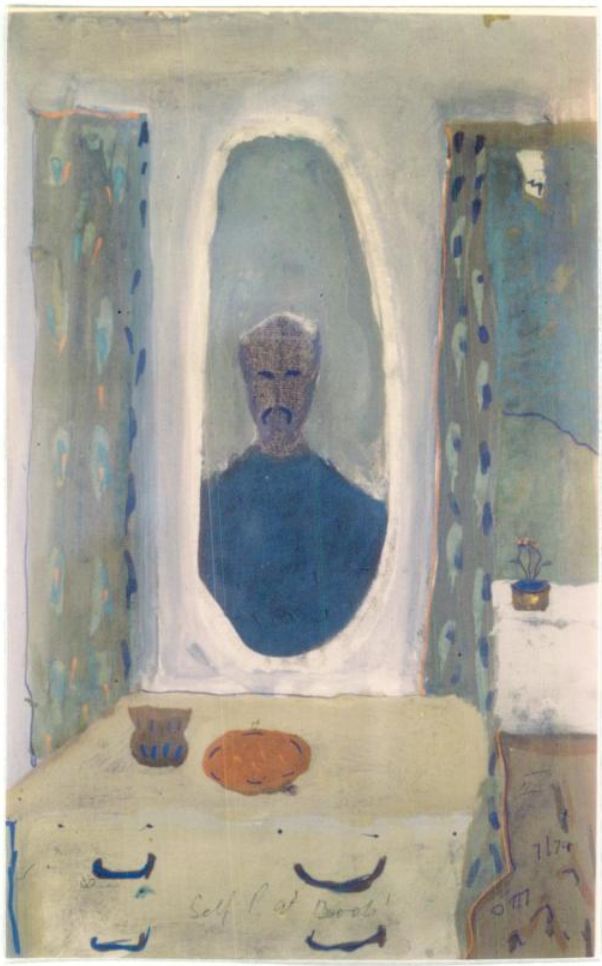


FIG. 81 *(1974).*

Self - Potrait

FIG. 82. *Self - Portrait (1983).*

There is more of a sense of balance in these two portraits with their warm flesh tones and the cool blues. There is certainly a move away in these, from the brooding self-obsession of the portraits of the 'sixties. Instead of the feeling of being drawn into the 'black hole of depression'(47) there is a sense of re-emerging into colour and harmony.

Though not intended to be strict self-portraits, the two paintings Outdoor Studio -Morning Bahamas (1983)(FIG.10) and Janie and Self(1984)(FIG.83) show us images of O'Malley as a more colourful presence who is not isolated as in the previously mentioned pictures. He is rather, a presence, who in the company of his wife Jane is now an elemental part of his environment, diminished somewhat by the surroundings. Self obsession and introspection have conceded to a less threatening world outside, perhaps.

In all, O'Malley's self-portraits, autobiographical in essence, give a fairly clear insight into particular times in his life, whether grim or happy. There is a bravery to be admired in this visual journal style of painting. Even though there are psychological over - tones to be reckoned with 'OMalley's aim ultimately has always been picture - making, not psychoanalysis or self - therapy'(14). He is loathe to talk himself into a psychoanalytic discussion of his work. He just paints.

FIG. 83.

Janie and Self. (1984)

OUT OF THE SHADOWS.

If many of O'Malley's paintings fit into the category of an art of confrontation with melancholia, many more will surely, answer to the term 'an art of counterpoint' where he balances the dark side of his nature with light and colour.

Michael Canney in an essay on Peter Lanyon says 'Art schools seldom seem to explain that good painting only comes as the result of periods of despair and suffering'.(7) To my mind Tony O'Malley certainly grapples with the ever present melancholic side of being and has increasingly succeeded in creating an art ofjoy and lightness, especially in the past ten years, or so. But, where one might be tempted to imply that he has resolved this condition through a facility with light and colour one must realise that his art is, and always will be an art of duality. On one hand, he is very much in touch with his shadow-side, commanding a control an 'Irish control' as he would term it.'(47) By this he means that his Irish groundedness facilitates him in handling the dark illusions and fears in a practical manner. This control gives him mastery over images that stem from the darker side.

The crow motif, for example, appears time after time. In its essence, it would seem to be symbolic of the ever attendant nature of melancholia. In reference to the painting Crows(August (1980)(FIG.84), which in essence bears resemblance to the sinister echoes of Van Gogh's Wheatfield with Crows (1890).(FIG.85)

FIG. 84. *Crows (August 1980)*

FIG. 85. *Wheatfield with Crows Vincent Van Gogh (1890)*

19x39½ inches.

As in many of O'Malley's other crow - paintings, the bird is diffused, the black ominous fragments asserting a dominant disturbance. It is interesting how the black brush-marks are on the top layer of the paper surface. Loosely and directly executed in a spontaneous style with multidirectional marks, it is not a picture where one can find peace. The eye of the viewer is distracted from one area to another. The movement within the frame is also too frenetic. But, interspersed with the distorted black marks, are areas of bright warm yellows and a more distant cool blue. O'Malley would appear to be dealing, on the surface, with the crow in the sky but after being drawn into the visual web of contorted imagery, we feel disorientated and disconnected. This is certainly a painting of confrontation with a disorientation within, powerful in its capture of not just the essence of a bird, but of the essence of a personality in despair.

His repetition and varied treatment of this 'bird of ill - omen'(47) would appear to be O'Malley's continuing personal dialogue with the dark world within.

However dark the dark side may present itself, in visual imagery, its counterpoint is to be seen and felt in the large body of high - key paintings created in the wake of his first going to the Bahamas in ?. Not suggesting that bright colours mean happiness and a resolution to melancholia, however, I see this phase of painting as a reflection of his having found a facility within which to work away from darkness.

Overlapping with his later years in St. Ives, his holidays spent on Paradise Island became an essential period of experience for the artist in the evolving process of his work as a colourist. The valuable earlier years, spent in the company of like-minded kindred spirits in St. Ives, could be considered to be his transition from his time as an unknown provincial, Irish artist to being an artist of maturity. It could also be seen to be a transition out of relative frustration and depression; a time when he found a good sense of self esteem and self confidence. It was a time of finding joy among people who understood him.

Moving to a new experience of painting in the Bahamas marked the introduction of an abandon which might not have come easily had he remained in Ireland or Cornwall. Brian Fallon says:

> Obviously the O'Malley who paints a Cornish landscape in blackest Winter will be different from the O'Malley who bathes in the tropical light of Nassau, and the O'Malley who paints the luminous sea-light of the Scillies in spring is different from the one who paints a still life, in his studio. To a great extent, a painter's style is conditioned by the demands of his subject matter and by the physical environment and local light in which he happens to be working at a given time.(14)

Having for the greater part of his career used landscape as a source of inspiration, he was suddenly , in the Bahamas, launched into a new interpretation of place and atmosphere.

Because it was difficult to find 'ground'(47) in Paradise Island due to the rich and thick cover of semitropical foliage, O'Malley was obliged to abandon his palette of earth colours and to paint with colours of a higher key. Even though this period had been 'a long experience of painting that had become extremely introspective,'(47) he had reached a new point of abandon. The painting Bahamas Dusk(1981)(FIG.46) is indicative of this abandon. He is testing the higher register of colour here with lavishly applied pinks, yellows, greens and blues. In a way, there is almost a childlike enjoyment in the application of the many layers and marks that fill this canvas.

O'Malley said in reference to his earlier life in Ireland:

> The thing about this latitude and our culture, and in my time it was rather a joyless culture, painting was always governed by atmosphere in your psychological make-up and you didn't think in terms of bright paintings. The more you painted, the more you realised that painting was colour?'

However, he eventually found the balance to the sombreness and melancholia in his' forties.

Conclusion.

'In a country town where everybody knows you and your family, or at least about you; every death or birth is a kind of communal event, and there is a certain sense of an enveloping cocoon of fatalism, of a preordained round ending in the local churchyard.'

Tony O'Malley made a very definite decision to distance himself in 1961 from the traditions and claustraphobic attitudes of the many small towns in Ireland in which he had worked as a bank-clerk. It was a sensible decision for a man with his talent for the visual. Through his many periods of illness which confined him in a basically physical way he had come to know the meaning of depression and darkness of the type that can smother the ambition born of that same talent. He understands what melancholia is because he has lived melancholia and confronted it in its darkest shadows. He understands painting because he has struggled for years, very often through adverse conditions caused by personal loss and sickness, to find a visual language with which to, both express pain and to expiate it. The something given in O'Malley's life as an artist is his ability to balance the everpresent elements of his tendency to melancholia with a language of counterpoint; a language which raises him above his own shadows, a language of light and colour.

Endnote:1 Many of the hitherto unseen paintings of the 'sixties period will be on exhibition in June 1992 at Kilkenny Castle. No doubt they will cause much puzzlement to a public who may be familiar only with the wide-spectrum colours of the paintings of the past decade or so. They vary considerably in their overall tonality of browns, greys whites and limited stony colours.

Endnote:2 Ref. - Fig. 86 as another example of self-portraiture from the 'eighties.

FIG. 86. *Self - Portrait (1982).*
Charcoal.

Conclusion to Thesis: Tony O'Malley.

Contemporary Irish Artist.

'Painting is not fully elucidated for me, that's why I continue to paint'

Tony O'Malley

At seventy eight years of age, Tony O'Malley could be called a man of many places. Beginning his life in Callan, County Kilkenny in 1913, he has returned home after travelling through may foreign places. In a geographical sense he has spent his life identifying with islands and the sea. Transitting from his paternal background of Clare Island in the West Coast of Ireland, he spent twenty five odd years on the Penwith Peninsula in the South West of England, visiting and working in the neighbouring Scilly Isles on numerous occasions. From the mid 'seventies onwards he spent holidays on Paradise Island in the Bahamas and in recent years he has found new energies in Lanzarote, one of the Canary Islands.

In an artistic sense, he could be portrayed as a journeyman of images and essences, stopping by in many locations in which to find stimuli for his amazing sense of visual curiosity. He has painted alone in an Irish context, he has worked among some of the great names of modernism in Cornwall and he has achieved the reputation of being one of Ireland's finest colourists, an artist apart who is not easily definable in relation to any of his contemporaries.

The essence of O'Malley's artistic mentality is to be found in his distinctive language of 'placeness' and fragmented image; his immediate environment both indoors and outside having provided him with all the necessary stimuli. This essence shines through the window motifs of his St. Ives gouaches; behind the masks and faces which emerge through the foliage of a Bahamian canvas but most of all it is evident in his very individual treatment of one of the more homely and familiar elements of his life in Ireland; the crow. Master of diffusion, he is explicable through his sense of visual recall of events in his life. He has formulated what could be called a personal language of imagery through his surface techniques, his personal calligraphy of linear net works and his manipulation of colour and light on the surface. He has reached beyond the material, practical dimension and has reached a level of added reality; a reality which he himself would explain as the 'beyond-thing'. His fusion of a practical earthiness with a highly intuitive impulse has produced an art of difference.

A man of many gifts, he is endowed most of all with a facility of communication. Having experienced many traumas and illnesses in his life, he can reach people with a particular language, with which they can identify. It may be through his paintings of muted tones which reflect the more introspective sombre side of his personality and experiences, or it may be through his paintings of later years which are so evocative of joy and integration that his viewers will find an explanation for their own sense of being.

Aidan Dunne concisely summarieses Tony O'Malley's work with the words:

> Each peice is approached with the deliberation of a final statement. Such harping is no exaggeration. With his history of illnesses survived, O'Malley is acutely aware of the luzury of time, the chance it affords to reflection, give testimony of and it is to be hoped, enrich existence. At its best his works easily manages, all three.

Tony O'Malley's art as a contemporary Irish painter, is indeed a testimony to time and life as experience in the visual.

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O'Malley

My own idea of painting is not really a spontaneous one it is just a painting demanding something from me, so it continues to exist and demand until the day I take it down and put it away.

Walshe

How do you know when the moment is to take is down?

O'Malley

It has to do with the feeling of the organic in a painting. The surface itself has to have a visual interest, the actual surface apart from the subject matter and the lines and all that. It's technical, it has to do with paint on paint.

Walshe

When you are beginning a painting like this do you actually start off with sketches and drawings?

O'Malley

Sometimes I wouldn't start with all those sketches. A lot of sketches grew out of the ones I've put down already. That's what I mean by the organic sense of painting. I wasn't even going to paint a picture of that colouring, I wasn't even thinking about it.

The forms that I put down might have been these forms in the middle for a while and then that would be the kind of kernel and from that then, I extended it into the whole board and then it became a problem and I like the idea of a problem in a painting.

A painting can take many forms. There is no final form sought at the beginning. You live through the painting and you get disappointment in it and there are times when you get the feeling that the painting is coming on alright, but the end of the painting is not in sight until you go on to the next painting and you feel that you have done all that you can to this and you just put it away. Often the problem is one of colour. This is one (referrring to a painting done in Lanzarote) with a valley running through it; all the oranges are very vital to the grey-green. It takes ages to get to that point. I didn't really set out to do that, that was another kind of painting, one time.

Walshe

What kind was it?

O'Malley

Well originally someone wanted to buy it but I knew it was only the beginning. A painting just reveals your own character a great deal. I could have left it the way it was. I was quite happy with it but because I came down one morning to paint, I just continued painting that - so everything changed and that's the way it goes. This one is fairly immediate.

Walshe

What's your first concern when you look at a blank canvas or board?

O'Malley

It doesn't matter how many years you have been painting - it's always very daunting to start. The first thing I do is to muck up the surface a bit because a very immaculate canvas primed by a factory overwhelms me. I have to do something to it so I can tread on it or intrude on it.

Walshe

Or put your own presence in it?

O'Malley

It demands a rather fearful kind of approach and I like to just swipe at it straight away. It may end up in a very severe manner but the first thing is a swipe to start. It's like pushing a boat out on a pond.

Walshe

So you actually feel the fear too?

O'Malley

Yes, it's the type of thing you talk about if you paint an awful lot. You have to paint all the time, not be too critical of it and to overcome the fear of starting and also overcome the fear of asking yourself "What am I going to say?". Better if you said "I'm not going to say anything, I'm just going to paint that board" to over come your inhibitions. The attitude has to be "What the hell,life is short" and you find where you have nothing to say, what you're really saying is a painting. You disappear out of it and it remains a painting after that. Your ego is the thing that says"What am I going to say?" Initially you think what you have to say must be important; it need not be important at all.

So you disappear, having served or been absorbed by the painting for a long time; you then come away from it on to the next painting. So that's why I always say that painters should paint all the time and overcome the thing of the initial statement of a painting - that's the way I approach it.

Walshe

What inspired this painting? (referring to a particular painting which seemed to have been about atmosphere)

O'Malley

I did two or three. It was about the month of November. November is in it too. I don't fear dark paintings or bright paintings, as long as they are interesting. I haven't a moral thing about black paintings. Sometimes I swing from form which was related to Nature and to a place like this one, like Lanzarote and I swing back into a complete and minimal statement in painting like that one there - a square. I'm as much interested in this one as I would be in that. That was arrived at very slowly. I didn't just paint it black. In fact it's not a black painting at all. It's a grey painting. It's tonal - almost like a sculpture.

Walshe

I was wondering about the difference between the colour palette of your Celtic paintings and the Bahaman paintings. Is that a direct response to the atmosphere?

O'Malley

Yes, the thing about this latitude and our culture, and in my time it was rather a joyless culture, painting was always governed by atmosphere in your psychological make-up and you didn't think in terms of bright paintings. The more you painted the more you realised that painting was colour.

So black is a colour with me; at the same time I don't ever us black pigment. I use Burnt Umber and Ultramarine. Acutal blackness is not of interest to me in a painting at all. I like atmosphere in painting but I don't really have a moral thing about black paintings.

Some of the greats like Van Gogh's last paintings are black and they're tremendous works. They're works of great morbidity too. Artists are morbid kinds of people. They're not always scintillating with life. There is a morbidity and melancholia in the Irish character particularly, which is creative. Edgar Allan Peo had it. He was melancholic and yet his poetry - you can read it and enjoy this kind of misery.

Walshe

Do you think that the Bahamas lifted the melancholia for you?

O'Malley

No, melancholia is part of me same as part of my father and most Irish people. We're not all lit up; we don't even have the kind of sense of humour that the English have - what they call music hall sense of humour. We are more introspective. We are really laughing in company but inside that, we're on our own. The Irish are enclosed. We have a considerable melancholic inheritance. If an artist has to switch onto the outside or onto the circumference or surface, that's not a true thing - the truth would be in the depths ....'de profundis' if you like. I'm not really as solemn as that. I have a sense of humour about painting.

Walshe

You talked earlier to me about painting being a mystery; can you explain that?

O'Malley

Yes, I do hold that view. Painting is not really fully ellucidated for me, that's why I continue to paint. The mystery of painting is a long invisible line in my own spirit where I can see.

I did that drawing of a couple of figures a few years ago in Cornwall. That to me it is as contemporary and as alive as any of these things here on the easels.

Walshe

Do you think there is a timelessness in your paintings?

O'Malley

Yes. Philosophically I don't really believe in the business of time. I believe in the transience of time; time running out. I believe that there is an eternal time and that the only thing we have been able to do is to give witness to time such as with painting, poetry and if you are a theologian you write about theology and if you are a philosopher, philosophy, an archictect - buildings or plans for buildings. I believe that time is taken from you and you can't do it anymore, that's why I paint a lot, because there isn't time; the kind of physical time which is a disability such as I run with now.

This is the first time I've ever felt robbed of something (at that time he was suffering from a minor ailment which prevented him working on a regular daily basis.

It was only of temporary duration) because I wanted to come down and work, not to paint pictures but just to work, make collages out of wood, glue and stick things together with nails - but not for the sake of doing that as much as seeking a form that would satisfy my own inward need of form that needn't be like anything, as long as it worked for me - that's nice - if it's nailed together and seems to have some structural sense that satisfies me - the 'beyond thing' in it.

Walshe

Do you identify with the progression in your work from the beginning?

O'Malley

I do but not progress. When I say progress I don't mean towards a perfection. My very earliest paintings, I have them there, I'll show them to you, are quite accomplished from an ignorant point of view because even then I was tussling with the problem of drawing, but, I was drawing towards something - pastels and watercolours...
so they are really statements in themselves of forty five years ago. Yet I wouldn't part with any of them. I see my beginning in them and I also see the virtues I had and my deficiencies as well are there.

There's one over on the wall there now - that's the sanitorium - when I was in the sanitorium in Kilkenny - 1950 that's forty one years ago now. I was in that hut in that grey garden, I was in that, that time. Shortly after that, I came out of the sanitorium and went back to work. That was done on a grey, bleak November day. That's what art is, it is a kind of testimony. It has to be like writing. It can become decoration too and it can be philosophical like Matisse's last paintings which were about light and my own paintings which were about light and my own paintings tend towards colour and light.
Even though that's dark there now (pointing to a particular painting) it's about light. But it's not gloom, to me it's dark light not gloom. I haven't finished it yet. But it's the problem of colour. There's no black in it... Paynes' grey and Terre Verte are the two colours in it.
I haven't got to realise it yet.
I'll just show the one underneath that now, Noreen. It's really the part of a Four Seasons thing ...

Walshe

These are Bahamas inspired as well?

O'Malley

Yes, yes - that's another, you see.

Walshe

There's a beautiful sense of vibrancy in the pinks and yellows.

O'Malley

I think the older an artist gets ... the more ... you don't consciously go away from the subject matter such as, say the human condition and all. I'm concerned with the human condition but I'm not going to be able to rectify it in my paintings, as the paintings of a socially aware painter. I have painted people like old people who were poor and not in the prime of life. I didn't care whether they were rich or poor. They were the people in my time and I was interested in them and they were my social statements. and then as I went into painting and saw that it was light and colour and shape and form and the job of doing it.

Walshe

So really it's an all-engrossment to actually get into a painting for you?

O'Malley

It is, yes

Walshe

I want to ask you about these inscribed lines. This is specifically your technique?

O'Malley

Yes.

Walshe

And when did you start working with this technique?

O'Malley

I started with those many years ago ... I started, I think, when I went to Cornwall. But they do come out of, not directly I can't say, early drawings I did down in Jerpoint Abbey .... of these old sculptures, incised lines and carved, you know. I admire their skill. They were men of supreme skill. I thought they carried the vision in stone very well too, you know.

Walshe

And these little holes - they come from the same place?

O'Malley

Yes .... I have a sense of music in painting. So I have the sense of construction. These five go across that way and they go up that way and this and this (pointing out the bizarre patterns that the holes follow) so that there is a big 'H'.

Secretly - I didn't draw that as a design but I found that and I held on to it, so that your eye catches it and it goes down to this, passing against this, goes across and up there again; and then around here so your eye travels around in the painting. But it is not consciously worked in that way. You find it, in the doing.

Walshe

So it is a working of the subconscious?

O'Mallley

It is, yes. If you paint a lot, you'll discover that your painting will surprise you the next day. Go away from it, don't make any great changes. Go away and come back in the morning and look at it. The corrections - I never use 'correction' in relation to painting, but it might come down and this is the flexibility of painting .... abstract painting .... I regard myself as an abstract painter .... now. Now, I might decide that that green, I might leave that green. I might put in some very bright yellows there. Then I would have the problem of all these again. So the key of the picture is already established. It's like a key of the music. So if you change the key, you have to change the whole thing.

Walshe

Do you play music?

O'Malley

Yes I do, but I don't know music notation or anything like that.

Walshe

But you know the feeling of music and that translates into the painting.

O'Malley

Painting and music with me, go together. What I mean is, I'm ignorant of music in an academic or scholastic sense but I know music, so I feel music as much as I feel painting. There is music in Nature all the time. Sometimes I make a landscape with the caw of a crow of something in it because the crows are over in the wood there now, and I love that sound so I might paint a painting out of that and make it visual. I've often painted what I call a 'tumble of crows' .... the squalling and the squawking and the crows tumbling out of one another - I get great humour out of that.

Walshe

Your use of birds in the abstract or semi-abstract interests me. Do you have a superstition about birds?

O'Malley

Yes .... I regard birds as the epitome of nature - they live in trees.

There's a wood over there now - Bower's wood or Kyladoher and it is full of crows and they're very busy now .... they're very busy now in the sky .... brawling. I love that. I get visual ideas from that. I love the big grey sky that they occupy at this time of the year. To me it is kind of poetry. I don't associate it with being in art school .... it has to do with being close to Nature. Everything is included in that, fields, the woods, and the farms - I'm sensing it, and the mountains in the distance.

Walshe

What would you find permanent and enduring in landscape .... what things would you identify with most?

O'Malley

My idea of a landscape is a landscape of an older time, of my generation. So I'm quite shocked when I come along to an old part of country that I knew so well and find that I can't find my way through it on the new roads. I don't want to do anything about that in art; this is me now, being old-fashioned, trying to find my way to an 'old place' that I found on my bicycle and find I can't find it. There's a fly-over on the road .... this was in Cornwall as well.

That would be a new landscape .... or maybe the pub painted a bright yellow or something would shock me. These are the conservative sides of Nature because I am quite conservative inside, you know.
The enduring part of the landscape would be the landscape of the woods and the mountains and if the country is flat it is alright that it is flat. There are badgers and foxes and all that running round it.

Walshe

You use the fox as one of the animals in your paintings?

O'Malley

Yes .... I think I did .... yes, but I don't really paint or draw foxes. Sometimes things of Nature come into paintings. They come, because I regard them as kind of 'given' now; who gives them I don't know.
A painting is an all embracing thing. It seems to have a singleness of purpose .... a painting..... but an awful lot can come crowding in around it; that's good, because it's part of the energy of painting.

Walshe

Do you aim towards simplicity when you're actually planning a composition?

O'Malley

I might start off in a very involved way, involuted and all that but end up sometimes, with a very simple painting and sometimes, if I start off with a simple painting, it becomes more complex and more involved.There's a canvas up there now, that I started and I haven't gone near it yet now; I've left it; because it was a windy day - I left it like that. I'll probably leave it like that now. If I were to rationalise that, now, I'd probably kill the movement in it. I would stifle it. But I do aim at stillness in painting. I often call a painting 'silence'; which is an approach to painting .... you arrive at it through a long engagement with painting. What happens in the painting is you, and the painting becomes another thing, existing outside of you. Sometimes I start paintings and then I leave them. If I went back and started to rationalise them I'd kill the movement in them. I leave it at that then. It seems to have some presence. It's difficult to know. You paint as if you were swimming, as if you were trying to get to the other bank; you come up gulping and gasping and nearly drowning, then suddenly the painting is presented to you.

Walshe

Do you have any idea when you start out as to what kind of palette you're going to be using?

O'Malley

My palette is a very simple one. I don't like what I call colours. I like only four or five pigments. There might be a Payne's Grey, a Burnt Umber, a Burnt Sienna, a Windsor Blue, a red, a good strong red. I never think about actual colour, I never think about it really. Degrees of colours only confuse me. Sometimes I buy a lot of colours and I never use them.

Walshe

So really once you start into a canvas it is an evolving process?

O'Malley

Yes - Another thing about colour too, is, for a long time I used powder colours; I ground my own paints so I became used to ivory black powder and Umbers and earth colours so I'm inclined to touch .... except in the Bahamas I couldn't get any earth colours. They weren't aware of them there. The ground didn't seem to exist very much, it was all small islands and coral islands so you didn't think of earth. 'Twas trees and semi-tropical growth.

Apart from squeezing out a few colours I like creating a ground all the time in a painting. I'd be dangerous if I went near that, at the moment (pointing to an unfinished painting on an easel nearby). I'd be quite capable of coming in, in the morning and painting another ground of yellow over it. Then I'd say, "To what purpose did you do that because it wasn't necessary"?
Painting is full of things like that. I'm not a spontaneous painter, I begin fairly spontaneously and then I slow up.

Walshe

Does the rational side of you come in at that stage?

O'Malley

Well, it's the side of form that comes in at that stage, the form that's kind of not working in the painting. It's an abstract approach to painting. I hold to abstract from a painting very much and a painting begins in an abstract sense. Say about painting crows in the sky. Sometimes I would think of a crow as three triangles and a beak and an eye. That might be in the form. And the crow might be dissolved all over the board in these forms but the 'crowness' of the crow wouldn't change.

Walshe

The essence of the crow in some of your pictures is very strong. It's very overwhelming.

O'Malley

They're regarded as a bird of ill - omen too, though i've always liked them. I used to live near a rookery and I couldn't go asleep at night or in the evening. The racket was terrible. They'd all come back in a big sinister flock and rooster down for the night. I've always liked them .... rooks.

Walshe

How about supersition in the Bahamas .... would it have been something you would have linked up to?

O'Malley

The American influence in the Bahamas is very strong and the black people in the Bahamas are the African slaves who went over to the States about one hundred and fifty years ago, or more as cotton slaves and later transferred to the Bahamas and they still have their own form of voodoo, but it is not public. They have a milder form of it in the Bahamas, not as strong as Haiti because Haiti voodoo is allied to Catholicism so it has much more important rituals, including our own holy water and everything like that.

In the Bahamas it's the African sorcery and it is called 'Obeah'. It's only superstition too and they have their own kind of leprechauns called 'chicharners'. They're all energies of the countryside just like our 'Pooka'. I would be old enough to remember all these spirits in Ireland in the countryside too. I never saw them but I felt them.

Walshe

And you believe in them?

O'Malley

I do believe. There's the pantheistic side of me that makes me believe in things like that. Although I have a pantheistic belief not in a religious sense but in a painting sense, I equate it with the beginnings of all religions .... and devils and all these creatures .... and they're also inside in ourselves. I don't regard painting as a psychology - it may reach an element of philosophy in the painter himself. A philosophy of painting may arrive because you can't all the time paint like a young fellow and the energies are of a gesture made there which your mind has symbolised.

Walshe

What about your choice of language, images and motives between Ireland, St. Ives and the Bahamas? Would you be very conscious of a great difference between them or would they overlap?

O'Malley

They would overlap. With me now, places are only an experience and some places I may not like at all but I will respond in the same way usually to them. I may not even like them. I may remember a small thing in a place; it might be just the window sill or something very, very simple and that might seed itself in my mind or it might disappear altogether. That's why I do drawings in these places. I often think, if you were a composer or poet, you might write down a phrase. That's the way I look at it. I don't regard it as a sketch - there's a sketch and there's a note - several of them on the one page, it doesn't matter.

Although I'm not a really great electronic man or computer man, I believe that the human brain is a computer and if you don't feed it, because through your eyes you have this piece of information, this old floor or that thing there or the window. By putting just an note down you feed the computer of the brain and you draw on it from the unconscious.

Walshe

So therefore you are constantly drawing sketches and notes?

O'Malley

Yes, and I never look at them again. I did several of those figures on the table two years ago and I never looked at them again until I'd frame something for an exhibition. I would certainly remember the sensation of them. I think the main thing about seeing is sensing because if you can see through sensing, the painting becomes a sensory thing; it has a kind of presence in it then. It's away from the painter whose ego is no longer in it and has diminished and the painting is there as an object with a presence of its own. But you cannot actually presume to do that with a painting. You arrive at it with an awful lot of painting and drawing. It doesn't matter if it's accurate or not, as long as you are registering something visually.

After many years of that, the otical world itself begins to disappear. The world of marvel disappears as you get older - then it gets better or more potent as you get older. This is the way that you look at small things now .... sit and look at that window there in the Autumn. I hope to do , not a painting of it but I'll sit and look at it. I wouldn't want to go outside that window. It's your mind really that's working through it, in the colour. The time of year has a lot do do with it.

Walshe

What place do you think provided the most ideas for you?

O'Malley

I think painting in the Bahamas was an experience of painting that I never had before. I began painting outdoors when I started painting years ago, in a small and modest way. I was a lodger in digs and I had to be very careful, of the smell of paint in a house. Even at that time it would be an outrage. In the Bahamas painting big canvases outside gave you a very exultant idea of painting. There was actually a "what the hell about it?"

Walshe

So it gave you freedom.

O'Malley

Colour and birds and light came into it. Cats came in an went out again. That I think was a great joy, living with Jane's family out there and living with the cats and dogs and the birds out in the jungle. 'Twas a different kind of experience.

Walshe

Where exactly were you, on what island?

O'Malley

Paradise Island, off Nassau.

Walshe

It sounds idyllic.

O'Malley

Well Paradise Island was an American name for it. 'Twas really 'Hog Island' in the old days .... 'twas Hog Island but it was a wonderful island. Then it gradually underwent development andthey had to go away - Jane's sister and family went away.

Walshe

So you haven't been there in a few years?

O'Malley

No we haven't been back there since 1987.

Walshe

Do you miss it?

O'Malley

They're gone now. The children are maried and that. That was a long experience of painting that had become extremely introspective. We all are introspective but people don't admit to being introspective and it's introspection that creates art as long as it doesn't become like a black hole in the head - that's the danger. You have to know you reach a point where self-awareness is very important in painting but not your ego.

If you can disassociate yourself from everything except painting and say "I can paint that picture I know about painting, something may come into it" - You have to trust yourself in painting.

Walshe

You have to trust yourself and whatever is given to you.

O'Malley

Something may be given to you and also the fact is that you're painting and you know about it and you know about the materials and the pigment. You can after that shut your ears to everything else and then rely just purely on your own sensibility and on nobody else's.

But severe introspective painting is interesting, provided it is creative and not a complete block. You can go into introspection and get so completely blocked up that you can't get out of it and depression and the whole lot is dangerous then. As long as you can have a sense of the outside as jumping-off ground then you can go into the darkness if you like because you've been out in the light and you can go back out into the light again. "Tis dangerous, but then the greatest paintings have been introspective.

Walshe

Is it a question of balance really?

O'Malley

The artist is an introspective animal and introverted. They're not really born what you'd call extroverts. Some are severely introverted and they go into the kind of world .... Beckett's world, we'll say, of nothing - nihilism; at the same time there's still something laughable about it. It could have been a dustbin or something, because we put ourselves in our own dustbins, you know. We have to read them as parables that way.

I myself used to get very severe depression and especially with T.B. years ago. But then as regards painting or drawing which I was doing at that time - it was very important to do so. You needed to get yourself outside yourself. You were in a cave and you needed to get out .... A tree out there with birds in it you'd try and draw them .... try and draw their whistling or their singing or whatever they were doing .... smoke coming out of a chimney .... you'd draw it and not to sort of think about it. Then when the painting comes along later, what you might call the more advanced thing in painting, these things all remain but are invisible. Yet they're present in the painting. They remain as a knd of potency in the painting - even everything like grief and all that, it all comes into a painting.

My concrete world would be the world of intuition, freedom of spirit, awareness of the world around you, nature .... and if something comes into it you'd say, "Well that is the something that is given in it".

Nothing can be given if you are going to say that "I can paint three triangles and that's all that exists .... and a rectangle ....".

Walshe

So really it's entering within yourself?

O'Malley

Yes, and it is not self-centred so much as I really do believe in the life of the mind - the conscious life. If the mind is the life of .... you're here and I'm here ....I'm conscious of that and I'm conscious of how I came down and all that. And then there's the other side of the mind - the unconscious side of the mind which is not really thinking. I wouldn't touch on things like the soul but I do believe in the soul and I think that the soul is made through these processes and a soul-less person is someone who consciously denies their own inner-most being. 'Tis their spirits they deny and they really don't create anything; they're kind of bottled up. Even philosophers have remained intellectual idiots because they deny their inner self, and it's all part of painting, art, poetry, music .....

The flow of what I was trying to describe as the flow of ideas can be anything you can touch on then. You can be feeling down and out .... acutally I do it myself .... although I'm not a practising religious man or anything like that, but I do feel, myself, that all painting and art is a kind of redemption as well. The contemplative side of painting is something to be reached. You reach it and it's kind of like prayer.

It's contemplative and it is about the world outside even though you may be narrow in your view of the world outside and of yourself as well.

Walshe

You are ultimately widening that view?

O'Malley

Yes - you also have what I call 'inscapes'. Hopkins the poet was the first to use the word 'inscape'. It is a very good word because it is the inscape of the thing that is the reality of the thing because it is that out there and you.

....Now that was in the sanitorium (pointing to a small grey toned oil painting on a board) in 1950. That was a dismal place - it looks dismal. The only bright things there were the nurses but they never had anything to do with us, because we were tubercular you see - so they had their own social life and when they'd come in in the morning to take your temperature, they'd be talking about the dance the night before and all; you didn't belong to that. You couldn't belong to that.

.... Now that's Clare Island. That's a good many years ago, I did that.

Walshe

Is that gouache?

Walshe

You have a lot of moving triangular shapes.

O'Malley

Yes, I like movement sometimes - triangles arrows and things like that;sometimes they are symbols of something caught.

I painted this (showing a small oil painting of an interior) when I was in New Ross - I was working in the bank at that time, 1995 - That was my old flat there, I had an appartment over a pub.

Walshe

Is that one of the ones that would have been influenced by Braque?

O'Malley

No, it wasn't. No, that was my own coming to terms with the actual visible. That was my mess of a kitchen and I said "I'll paint that".

Walshe

It's an interesting looking mess.

O'Malley

That's what painting does to it.

Walshe

That's very sensitive light area.

O'Malley

Yes, there were old grey walls and an old pan. I like things that have been used. They're not pristine or fresh.

.... and that's an old mill at home in Callan, I did years ago - an old mill down by the river .... that's gone now. My first still-life painting - 1945. My beginning was .... because it wasn't art .... describing things .... it existed there and I was outside it and I had to be fair to it. I couldn't impose my own kind of ego on it. That was 1945. It's one of my favourite paintings, I reckon.

Walshe

It's so different to what you're doing now.

O'Malley

How I arrived at that really was a whole lot of scribbly drawings in books .... going out the country and drawing an old farmhouse by the roadside.

That's an early pastel of mine when I was in Callan many years ago .... road outside Callan in the Autumn.

Walshe

That has got the beginnings of movement that you now use in your Bahaman ones .... and the light ....

O'Malley

That's right .... and the movement of wind. I meant that to convey the idea of wind or movement.

That was a river down below the town down to the mill. I used to fish there as a boy .... so therefore my contact with it was not just art itself it was experience. Many people go through the business of trying to paint .... myself sometimes, experience of some place or thing .... That's another, that's the old mill again.

Walshe

You painted on a coloured ground?

O'Malley

Yes, I did, yes. My brother framed those for me. He liked painting.

Walshe

Did he paint as well?

O'Malley

He did yes.

.... I painted that in 1953. I was out of the sanitorium two years then. I was working in the bank. I'd paint in the evenings. That was a big snowfall .... you can see in that now that although the forms are descriptive they're really underlying abstract forms.

Walshe

You're beginning abstraction here, aren't you?

O'Malley

Yes .... Now this is one I painted of my mother. I'm not really a portrait painter. I painted some of these pictures looking at the things being painted and a point came in the painting that I wasn't aware of being there, even. That's very good to reach, that - but you must go away on your own to do it.

This is an old drawing - book of mine ... pen and ink .... Courtown Harbour .... There are some friends of mine that time ....that was a nude. I went up to a friend of mind in Dublin, he was an artist and he had a life class.

In my earlier drawings, I was just trying to deal with landscape itself, never mind how I felt about it.

There's an old portrait that I did of an old travelling woman. That kind of woman you wouldn't see anymore. That's the real old decent tinker woman.

Walshe

Did you actually do that from memory?

O'Malley

Well I knew her so well that I did ... she had that kind of smile you know.

That's another one outside Enniscorthy. what made me paint that was the red door and the barn.

.... and that's myself in New Ross at the time .... a self-portrait.

Walshe

The palette in the painting from Enniscorthy and New Ross are very dark.

O'Malley

They are yes .... That was an old one I did in St. Ives. I first went to St. Ives in 1955 .... on my first painting course.

Walshe

Who did you work with at St. Ives?

O'Malley

I worked in a studio in St. Peter's loft. I worked with Peter Lanyon and the great Bill Redgrave.
.... I dealt with all the aspects of the landscape which became inscape.

Walshe

Were you looking at a lot of painters at that stage .... 1958?

O'Malley

I wasn't - no - (referringto all the paintings he had been showing). It's part of what you call the journey or pathway.

Walshe

It's fascinating to look at the early ones and see where you are now. It's very much a pathway.

....Continuation of interview on the following day....

O'Malley

This man, a severe rationalist asked me once, "Do you think when you paint, you put something into it?" Well, I thought that would happen with the painter, that you'd put something into it; now, what would be the something I don't know; the pinch of salt or pepper or something like that or maybe a rat or a mouse.

He said that you don't really, that it's an illusion. It's illusory to think that you put something into it. I said "Well what did all the other painters of the past do?" They did jobs, commissions and painted Lords, the snuffbox and things like that. I said "I'm talking about the modern time. I couldn't paint a big businessman, he'd be highly insulted if I painted him or his wife."

Walshe

Would you be into painting computers?

O'Malley

No, what interests me about painting, poetry even is the beyond - the beyond what I don't know .... digging the grave out of it - beyond all this. I feel all the time that there is a beyond thing, yet I'm common-sensible enough to know that the cats are in the chair.

I've painted them and I look at them when I draw them, because they're phenomena around me.

There's no such thing as an art theory. It's just a painter saying something they believe in .... what operates for them or not what operates for them.

I would even be a heretical priest if I was a priest. I'd be preaching heresies. My mind is quite primitive in the sense that I could only be carried on in education so far - after that I'd reject the whole thing. I could never become a batchelor or a doctor of something like that. I can't assimilate. I am self-centred enough only to be interested in the things that interest me or make me interested.

If somebody said to me "I'm going to introduce you to binomial theorems or quaternians or something" .... no, not for me, but they're part of the scientific world and the structures are in painting as well; painting is close to all these.

You venture so far with science, religion and with art. Art is all the time more adventurous, because it really doesn't cost anything to be an artist. You can be a number one idiot and paint away and believe in what you are doing because a scientist has to be exact. Exact, is part of it. The best of these are intuitive animals too. Einstein was a highly intuitive genius. He could also play the fiddle. There's a certain overall cloak of common sense on it.

If you read poets, some are magicians, others say Alexander Pope, are man of absolute fact and a very sharp eye on society, and his poems ended in rhyming couplets with good clout in them.
In other poets for example Walter De la Mare who is a kind of magician. They're all related, all would agree with one another; not agree about poetry, but agree because the mental side of one poet was the complemental side of another. Painters know as well.

Walshe
Would you call yourself a colour magician?

O'Malley
I wouldn't no, but I do think myself that for me a point in painting is conjuring up, outside of rationality. If I don't reach that irrational and the painting doesn't ask me something I am disappointed. I leave it there then because it has its own time. It's like a whiskey that has only been half distilled. That's my own Irish kind of common sense because you really don't get what you want immediately. It can be a process of a long time and then I always get the sense of having no time.
First of all, I don't really believe in time, my own life was like periods of experience, not calender time. I would expect the sun to come up in the morning and to go down in the evening but there's another time of experiences such as when you look back and you say "How could I have endured all that?, how could I have stuck it?" Older more pious people would say "God was with you and helped you." Maybe they're right.

'Twas also your own kind of ignorance and innocence as constructive things.

Intellectualism, just as fashionable intellectualism is sterile, it brings you up to there and then it drops you and these people end up not being able to carry on in their work and yet they're tremendously intellectual and destructive, destructive of others as well. Ignorance and innocence wouldn't mean unread or unlettered. The mind has to be left kind of innocent. You still have to have a mind like a child that's trusting. And all the time you can be fooled; you can be like an idiot, clever people can tie knots around you but that doesn't matter - you'll endure all that. You'll find because you're young that you want to know the reason why you endure things. You'll find that certain things that were intolerable to you, you couldn't even speak about them but you will endure them. You'll see them in retrospect afterwards.You won't forget them and it's not necessary to forget them - they don't take away from you; they add to you. It is the same in painting. Failure in painting - as long as a painter keeps on painting he is not failing, but when they throw down thebrushes and say "I'm not Van Gogh; I'm not Cezanne; I'm not Picasso." they've had it. That's a person of vain glory .... you should be great. If you're painting and you know how to make simply, images as a child, you can be more selective and sophisticated in your images, you can engage in great subtleties in painting. That's the same thing - it's all the same.

The brush of a very sophisticated artist or an angry artist or a disillusioned artist is not even the equal of the subtle touch of an artist. But it is forceful if that man is a painter. The subtlety of art is the strenght of art the same as the subtlety of hurling or a tennis match, the same as the subtelety of running or jumping over the high jump. The whole person is engaged in it. All are chastened or humble in what they do by their defeats.

..... When asked to talk about Cezanne and European painting Tony O'Malley continued ..

The awareness of European painting had no depth in it, it was shallow knowledge .... newspaper articles and things like that. When I first saw Cezanne it was a print and a Van Gogh landscape - it was a print again and the excitment in these for me was the kind of light I was waiting for even though I had been painting the kind of painting I showed you yesterday.
The German Expressionist paintings and middle European paintings are what I regarded as coming from the politically disturbed mind and tensions with the coming of Hitler and even pre-Hitler. I didn't really know about the Bauhaus or people like that. I really didn't know, I had no scholarly knowledge like that at all. I knew about the Russians. I knew about Malerich. Other critics can drop names galore and I don't know half of them because it didn't seem to matter to me because of my lack of academic and non - school background.

For myself I went away to meet kind of kindered spirits and I found them in Conwall. Kindered spirits who recognised psychological feeling. I found that Ireland was heavily weighted with academicism; people were afraid to step out and you couldn't really tell each person what they really were. You're a 'grow' on your own .... grow like a plant out of their own ground, they didn't understand that because of the weight of dogma that had been stuffed into them since they were children.
I discovered that the unconscious need of freedom was there all the time. There was trying me up or throwing me into cells or anything. I never spoke my views but I felt these things. It was comparatively a country turned an ex-colony. It was trying to find itself and there were many kinds of stumbles.
Painting in my time was ... well known Anglo Irish painters who would have had the advantage of going to Paris or London. I was a countryman and I envied them. I knew Paddy Collins years ago and he was far more firmly established then .... Jack Yeats of course .... Later I met people like Nano Reid. They were real Moderns, they remained so and are even more modern that a lot of people now.

Walshe

How do you see the work of Patrick Collins in relation to your own?

O'Malley

I see him as a purely Irish painter but of international flavour too. Everything he does is painting. I would relate to him not in my painting. He and I would be the same kind of people.

Walshe

So if someone called you European how do you see yourself under that term?

O'Malley

I'd look on it as a compliment. Having been away so long in a place where art and painting was more sophisticated; there were very sophisticated artists like Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth. I understood myself in relation to them and they were Europeans too. I never met Gabo. The Americans contributed too. The Americans were riding on the flood of the big success of abstract expressionism. They didn't effect me either because I couldn't become an abstract expressionist as I didn't have the big urban background of disquiet and all. I didn't have any kind of theories. I had no intellectual ideas. I had purely my own needs interiorly in paintig and how to form them .... that was it.

I had a kind of thing that would be Irish - a control in painting - a control not just extravagance slashing around. Painting had to have meaning and an intellectual background to it as well.

Other European painters I met accepted as one of them; Italian painters, Spanish painters and the English painters. They saw me as an Irish painter but not just as a provincial. It was a time too when painting was being regarded as the search for primitives because of the sophistication of the city painters. Mexican Indian painters were coming to the fore and they were people who were painting their own tribal rituals - but we had descended into a phase of non-belief and we had no rituals. So the South American Indians' paintings seemed to have a tremendous force such as an Australian Aboriginal because of their intensity of tradition, feeling and belief. We had lost that as Europeans.After the war there had been a collapse in the faith - The art schools were taking up all these forms and enthusing about them. They didn't touch me at all because I had released myself from here into St. Ives and just in a rather solitary way kept painting all the time.

Walsh

Was it very exciting at the very beginning when you went over?

O'Malley

There was great enery in the painting then which came from the Moderns who had settled in St. Ives.

Also there was the tremendous weight of the old Impressionists as well and their knowledge and treatment of the subject matter when the Moderns arrived, say, like Gabo and other painters coming up after the war like Peter Lanyon and all those - they were all young then and confused. They started in a traditional way but gradually they became modern. The word 'modern' was treated with contempt in Ireland but I always understood it as that once you deal with in relation to appearances and description, you then feel that the painting has to speak in an inward way. It has to have a subjectivity that can still be seen and looked at - the invisible.
I thought that painting couldn't be achieved but then you had to meet people who believed that same thing, you couldn't talk about it to the local doctor. The subjective would be suspect but it is the subjective side of our nature; we are distilling the image.

Walshe

Would you see yourself as a Romantic?

O'Malley

I'm a very imaginative man but I'm not a man of fantasy - it's a different thing. I regard the romantic tradition as a great tradition in art and poetry as well, with Keats and Shelley. They all broke the prosaic moulds that were all locking people in. To a certain extent I suppose by nature I would be a Romantic.

There'd be a good deal of native superstition in me still but not a wild romance. It's very hard to explain the sensation of being away from society for a long time, being thrown on your own and find yourself painting, so that was a good thing to be able to find, apart from reading. To be able to paint and draw even as stumbling as I did was something. I lived for the next day so that I could continue at it .... put the book under the bed in the sanitorium. I drew a lot in the hospital.

Walshe

Were the hospital authorities aware of the painting?

O'Malley

You had to be careful about it. They would intrude on you out of pure curiosity. I did an awful lot of drawings in Cornwall when I was in hospital after a heart attack .... in a book with a black pen.

By our nature we are Romantic. Now it's the term of reduction. I can't see how they can reduce it because the word still remains potent in relaiton to French and German poetry and the philosophers who came up at that time who were also Romantics. They were thinkers and breakers-through-sometimes they got bunged out on the pile. That's what was romantic. Shelley was romantic, Jack was romantic; but yet at the same time, along with the romantic mind grows the realist mind; the mind that you have to do this thing and carry it out and you're outside it in a certain way. You're a servant at it.

Your ego and all is in abeyance in a thing like that.

Walshe

Where do you think painting is going within the next twenty or thirty years? Everything seems to have been done, everything seems to have been tried.

O'Malley

Everything has been done. My own philosopy is that I am a believer in the cycles but nothing is going anywhere. This isn't a nihilist thing. It is that painting and the visual arts are all the time beginning and coming around. Someone will find cubism again. We'll be all told about cubism and I'll say "Well I know about cubism. I never studied it but I know about it".Someone else will tell you about suprematism and you'll say "I know about that". Young people will discover these but only when they feel that painting has meaning for them.

In the Rosc exhibition a few years ago I saw some Malevich paintings and I thought that they were profound paintings. I saw the Russian mind in them - not the surface.

I don't think painting is going anywhere nor is music. All painting and writing go up to a certain pitch or point or experiment which becomes almost incoherent. After Joyce now and language there is nothing.

You can't write a Finnegans Wake now but then Joyce was an extraordinary writer. He began as we began with sketch books. Joyce reached a point where language to him was art and the expression of the most profound side of himself and of an analysis of society as well and he couldn't have done that here. He would have been like a Beckett character, like in a room, just sitting there, drinking. He wouldn't have anyone even to talk to. He was away from his own natural field when he was in Europe and listening to the voices here. They were all boring to a man like him, so he had to go away and it was necessary to go away, I think - very necessary. In language alone, language came to a point of development and far beyond the ordinary comprehension of people and yet I can go in turn, open a page of Finnegans Wake and enjoy it. I couldn't exactly know the meaning of it. I love Ulysses.I love Joyce's early poetry. I see the same hand in all of it. In music Schoenberg achieved a big experiment in sound - the twelve-tone scale. Not anybody uses it. It came to that pinnacle and then they fall back from it. A student at school says "Well I'm not into that I'm into something else. I love Messeian or some-body else of a French painter or a French composer of another time.
Art is all the time repetitive through other artists. I don't think there's any single pinnacle that pulls art into a new form or on to a new level.

Somebody always discovers .... somebody in the art school even, in Dublin even some students saying "Well I love Paul Klee - to study Paul Klee's writings even and his philosophies". Somebody might say "Well I like Soutine or I like Modigliani". So therefore painting is all the time digesting itself through young people. Then it's fiercely new and sometimes, now that we're coming to the end of this Post-Modernist thing, somebody will break out into triangles again and people find that it has been done before - but it doesn't matter. The theme has been tapped again by a new mind.

Walshe

There is almost an aversion in some peoples' mind to using or to borrowing from what has already existed.

O'Malley

The cult of originality, the cult of "doing your thing" which was a later kind of post-hippy thing - well, if the thing is interesting and if the person is honest about where they got the 'thing' - it's interesting but it's just doing your thing - like digging a hole in the kitchen floor and doing an event - that's nothing.

There was a time in the sixties when people went to parties to see the kitchen floor being dug up - because everyone was jaded - they looked for sensations. To a certain extent they were performing artists. They wanted to break and make people aware again that action and laughter were all part of art. And in music you had Schoenberg. The twelve-tone scale was neglected except by students in the schools of music in the big cities. And then you had electronic sound, electronic music.
The most interesting painters are the painters who were satisfied with the experience of painting of old; the genuine experience of it with no daffodils or fields or flowers or anything. It can be done - done by a certain good painter who does it and gives it powerful potency. Then it's called abstract. In general I think that people don't like abstract paintings. They can't understand it. It's an eternal problem. People won't understand it no matter what you do. Your own knowledge of the language of painting is really the one that makes you read an abstract painting.

Walshe

When you paint as an abstractionist you're painting for a very elitist group?

O'Malley

Yes, also abstract art can have many marvellous manifestations. It can too be severely geometrical. It can also be non-figurative.

Walshe

If you were what contribution you had given to Irish art, would you respond to that?

O'Malley

I wouldn't make any response. I'm not aware of anything like that.

Walshe

In the context of other Irish artists you certainly have a different language.

O'Malley

Yes. I suppose I have.
My view of my own self is a very subjective one. I don't see it in relation to anything outside. That's not a self-obsession. My mind is private. I think if somebody told me about my own painting .... I find it hard to digest what others say about my painting the exteriorisation of it.

Walshe

Does that bother you?

O'Malley

It doesn't bother me, no. It's like the singer. You sing a song and you know how truthfully you sang it. That's really the thing about it. It's your own honesty that's central to you. I think Irish Art, because of its closeness to another neighbour, like England, it will never be English art. It'll have the flavour of Irish art always - same as French painting or Italian painting. The Italian mind, the French mind and the Irish mind are all different. They make different paintings .... and the German mind ....

Then there were the days of the Free state when it was just forming, and it was forming on top of a terrible nineteenth century, after the Famine. Think of someone of my age. I saw the war here against the British and then I saw the civil War amongst ourselves. I saw the people carrying on their work, the bravery of people. People weren't arguing about politics even during that time. This thing was happening and it was inevitable after the 1916 Rising and the attempt to crush the new parliament - the first Dail. But then after that it settled down into a pietistic kind of state. The Church got power in it. I must add most writers and artists of my time and of an earlier time were nearly all banned. People like Sean O' Faolain and Frank O'Connor, they were a breath of fresh air to us. They established magazines that were condemned and censored.

Films were censored, so you felt this heavy hand .... to endure that; that was part of the endurance. Also the endurance was having to keep a shut mouth. You kind of suffocated with wanting to talk.

Then to discover painting for me it was an accidental thing by the way, was a release, a wonderful release. But then you were brought into the dogmatic of silent painting again. You showed nothing to anybody; the only answer was to go up to Dublin and put something into a big mix exhibition and have it shown. I used to tell that to people and "So what" they'd say. I used to say "I've three paintings in the Living Art and they never heard of it. So therefore you weren't a vacuum but you were something that had to reach out to some place. In the end I went away to Cornwall having already visited a previous time.

Walshe

You settled there in 1960?

O'Malley

Yes I went there in 1955 and I went in 1957. You experienced yourself when you went there. You can have so much freedom that you can do nothing with it. You don't have any kind of nail in your shoe whereas here you could have a pedal in your shoe - from your own family as well. But then Irish writers have engaged in writing about that the whole time, to the point of being almost a bore because the world outside has endured worse and gone further away.

Walshe

The Irish mind has taken a massive shift over the last fifty years.

O'Malley

Yes that's right .... and one of the biggest of all was Vatican 11 and Pope John the XX111. That shook them out of it. It shook them out of their siege - the mentality of being besieged. They didn't know what they were being besieged about actually. They didn't bring out any real perspective on themselves at all. The Council of Trent was several hundred years ago and it was the Conter-Reformation. Meanwhile in that five hundred years, the reformation had won several points over the Chuch and the Church had absorbed it. The new Church, and the Church had absorbed it. The new Church, the new Philosophers and theologians were beginning to accept the German new theologies .... the liberation theology. That was a revolution in Ireland. Also the Church in Ireland was philistine and aggravated people like artists and poets. They thought that they had the forms of redemption and penance. There was no need for artists .... to confess anything. They did it .... and saved your soul as well. So what else would you do only sit down and eat a big feast of spuds and drink the pints. You were absolved. You had achieved forgiveness except maybe for sexual sin .... that was a tough one. It could be achieved with other things, like symbols.
They all spoke about Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle's philosophy but nobody ever said what it was.

But it bound the Church together and gave it even more authority to mention Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, not some of the mad poets like St. John of the Cross and those. They would be avoided.

Walshe

So really intellectualism was quite repressed?

O'Malley

Well it was sneered at. The Catholic intellectuals of Ireland relied considerably on French intelletuals. They never spoke out. They never said anything. There might be some precious magazine that hardly anyone read, only themselves; it wasn't sidespread. You excaped a lot of that Noreen. We didn't know how to form the words for that type of feeling that I'm trying to describe now.

Walshe

It's very interesting for me trying to sense what existed before I was born. It seems like an alien society, even though in the fifties - I was born in '53 .... there was still a remnant of that sort of life in existence, right into the beginning of the sixties.

O'Malley

You were born in '53. I was forty. In '51 I had left the sanitorium and gone back into the bank to work, absolutely broke. Many other thousands of people like myself were in the same position of trying to pick up pieces and the pieces that were left were nothing -

an old suit in a wardrobe or something like that .... nothing in the digs.

We didn't have houses of our own, we didn't have the money. Nobody built a house in my time.

Walshe

It's incredible really that life has changed so much.

O'Malley

When I went back to work in 1951 I bought myself a whole set of paints. I bought myself an easel. I got them from Dublin, from Easons then. They were suppliers .... to the Department of Education as well .... and brushes. When I was installed in work again and I had to work every day, very hard and my pay became eight pounds a week .... big money. On a half-holiday I used to bring my easel, wrap it up. I didn't want anyone to see it and go and paint outside Enniscorthy .... because of the fear of scorn at that time. That wouldn't be so now .... artists all over the place. At that time you were just a bank clerk who liked to paint. If you were a rugby player you'd be greatly elevated everywhere .... or a hurler. So, that was part of the journey. How to survive the negation of that, that was difficult.

Walshe

What did you exhibit in that?

O'Malley

I had these paintings in it. I think some of them are still around. Some people have them.

One was of a hawk, another was of an old hilltop in Enniscorthy that I knew, very windblown with an old house on it .... something like that. The other was an Old Abbey down in South Wexford. That gave me a great lift-up. It was the Oireachtas and everyone was .... The Oireachtas that time was run by a real old Gaelic following .... suits .... I was sympathetic to that being a nationalist at that time. And the other great lift-up I got was from the Living Art .... that gave you a feeling of confidence. The audience was outside. Later they'd all come around to adhere sometime.

Walshe

How does it feel facing into a big exhibition like the one that's coming off?

O'Malley

The same kind of fear about it. I have no real jauntiness about things like that at all. From my own knowledge of history, I never know the feeling of triumph or triumphalism. I never over-expect anything from myself. It's a very sober kind of mind.

Walshe

It keeps you grounded to think like that?

O'Malley

Oh, very grounded. I think I find it when I meet some of my own. My father's people, they were all the same. Yet they had their own wild sides but were very grounded in reality.

Walshe

Is the work in the coming exhibition all recent work?

O'Malley

A good lot of recent work, there is yes. I think it is necessary to have an exhibition so that you are renewed from it .... even if it fails. You have to steel yourself to that. It's necessary to keep on working. A big rebuff in an exhibition .... any other artist would be the same .... they wouldn't stop painting because of it. They just don't retire from it. They know that if the work has been done honestly and well, it will still retain it's merit. 'Tis difficult when you're a certain age, like me; I don't mind about anything .... I just like to go out and see it. I'm always surprised when I see an exhibition.

Walshe

Why?

O'Malley

Well I haven't seen Jane's one. I wasn't able to go up there then and I'd love to see it. Having seen the work being done, I like to see the culmination.

Walshe

When did you start working on collage?

O'Malley

For years and years I've done it. Over thirty years ago, I suppose. I was interested in it in St. Ives. There was an amount of interesting wood washed up on the beach knowing I could use it for an image; There's one in there in the room. It's hanging on the wall as you go in - a dark one. Now that's all made from wood washed up on Portmeor Beach. I like doing that. I feel an intimacy with the fact that these are old timbers from boats. If they were all new timbers I wouldn't be interested in them.

Collage also gets you away from the eternal business of painting and the word 'paint'. Although I can't refrain from painting.

When the sycamore was sawed down here I missed it so much that Jane saved a lot of the top wood and I made that out of it. I called it "Srynx"

The ideas that come out of nature ....that would be my love of the old sycamore tree. I'm saving the rest of it. I did it to be very, very simple and modest. I think it is just making do with whatever you have.

Walshe

Jane was showing me some slates that you had in the last exhibition.

O'Malley

I had yes. I haven't been doing those very much now. I like the paint on the slate too. It's very fragile though. You have to be careful with it.
The triangular piece in there, that was in an exhibition of Cornish sea-painting. There were lots of very good ones, other than that one there. There were tremendous collages there from wreckage. There would have been a lot of wreckage in that area. It has grounded a good many ships in pieces .... around Land's End. And there were some lively colours in them .... rusty reds and blues.
I'm still very interested in collage .... always will be I think, even with paper. I like paper cuttings. I'm not an expert with it or anything.

Walshe

It takes you away from the flatness of painting.

O'Malley

Yes it helps to create a space again in another way. A piece of paper can create space.

Walshe

Have you ever sculpted?

O'Malley

I haven't. I don't know the feeling about sculpture actually. I don't really get terribly interested in the third dimension at all. It's two dimensional for me.

Walshe

You're more interested in colour?

O'Malley

Yes, colour and space.

The big one in the room there now, the big greyish one. I did that in the Bahamas. That is to achieve some of the sensation of light that was there. There was a grey warm light with a sequin of cool, sometimes by day, early morning, say. I wanted to paint that. I put two of them in there in there. Jane put them in. Every bit of it is painted so then it vibrates light. It wouldn't have done any good to have just painted that big greyish green thing. That wouldn't have worked. You'd have to experience it inch by inch ....particularly the suggestion of a shadow here and there.

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