

Thinking Long

CONTEMPORARY ART IN THE NORTH OF IRELAND

LIAM KELLY

TO THE MEMORY OF MY FATHER, LIAM KELLY

THINKING LONG
CONTEMPORARY ART IN THE NORTH OF IRELAND
by Liam Kelly

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beyond; nothing gets laid down with Delargy. Racial harmony, too, seems blessed by the hovering angels in *Atlantic, to Dream* (1990), as a black swimmer moves easily through the waves alongside his female, white companion, passing an isolated island (a recurring image) – an ironic Isle of the Blessed.

There is a relentless quest for the interrelations of man and woman in nature in Colin McGookin's highly referential paintings. There is a thinking long, a longing to return to the 'indivisible ground of creation'. To fulfil McGookin's quest, a nude male and female couple wander on a continuous out-of-time expulsion from the garden, passing through endless centres of conflict. Works such as *Trouble in the Celtic Twilight* (1987), *Trouble in the Hearan Bands* (1987) and *Trouble in Hy Brazil* (1988) caution that, with the offer of the golden age, there is always the temptation to sell the golden calf. Biblical references abound and intermingle with Indian myth and Celtic art, together with events in Irish history and recent upheavals such as the Gulf war.

Old emblematic Masonic and Orange charts, along with banners painted for the Ulster marching season, have always fascinated the artist. Since the early 1980s, McGookin has painted and constructed a series of banners in which he literally stitches together again emblems and symbols of ideological and religious departures. Examples of these would include *Psalter Arch* (1981), *Rhythm of the Beating* (1982), and the first three-dimensional version, *Sons of the Fathers* (1980). *Mere – Maid / Shroud* (1984) carried images on both sides: an ironic comment on woman as sexual contortionist/beast of burden for man, the measure and imprint of all things.

In 1985, McGookin presented an installation of five banners called *Parade* (1985) at the *Independent Artists 25th Exhibition*, held in Belfast and Dublin. Again these could be read from both sides, reflecting the duality at work in any human situation, but clearly with reference to Northern Ireland. It was the story (parable) of Sheela and Sam, pape and prod, following their love and their eventual fall from grace with an apocalyptic ending. It followed biblical lines, with punning references in which 'Sam son' meets the judges in the temple and 'Napoleon Knows'. It also engaged with the current debate on abortion and the problems of mixed marriages.⁵

Inspired by lines from Patrick Kavanagh's poem 'The Great Hunger', the artist painted *Resolution of the Clays Coup d'Etat* (1989) [45], a triptych recalling Breughel, in which he suggests that the implicit violence of the familiar ground can be counteracted by the creative act, by painting. There is a recognition here that the destructive forces are always there in any human activity, but can be balanced, if not eradicated, by constructive elements.

The hope lies in the fact that something small can have a profound effect. In McGookin's expansive (91 x 823 cm), enveloping, and most ambitious canvas to date, he places a butterfly to illustrate this point, prompted by the hopeful theory of 'the butterfly effect'. The title of the painting reverberates and

echoes to the longevity of the problem it addresses: *Londonderry projected rejected reflected refracted and amended – enough to wake the dead – the flags and emblems act* (1992) [46].

The themes being explored here began with the personal and expand outward to encompass the eternal questions raised by the place and the projection of interpretations – both from inside and outside the place – by people.⁶

There is a cyclic prismatic structure used here to encapsulate the various cultural reverberations of colonial impositions and reactions. In fact, there are three cities in this 'pièce à grand spectacle'. We view it from right to left and back again: London via Belfast to Derry/Londonderry. The young couple stand perplexed at this cosmic projection.

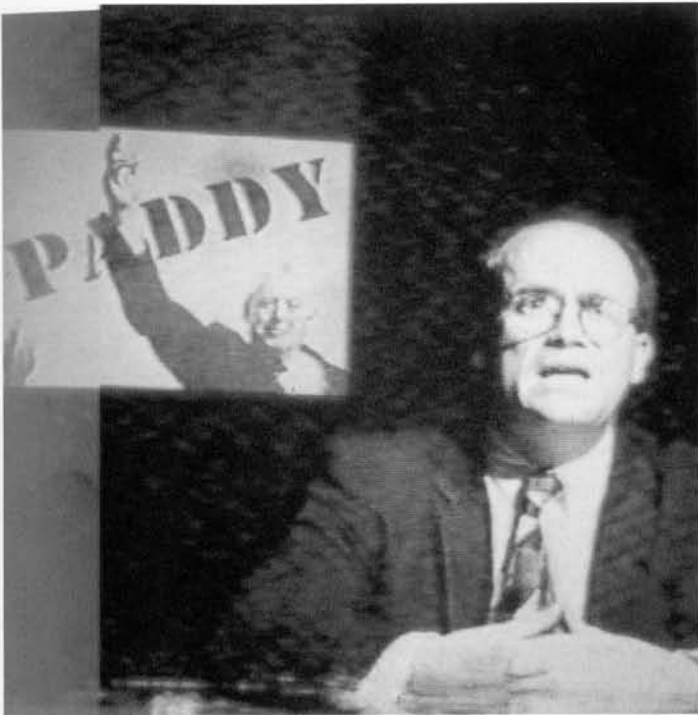
Light has a symbolic role in all McGookin's work, where there is often a kind of eternal dusk in which a sparkling, efflorescent light pervades lush vegetation in an encaustic use of paint. There is something here of AE's (George Russell) fairy-tale world, and perhaps more directly important, the Yeatsian example. There is also the Presbyterian concept of the burning bush that never consumes the earth. Yet McGookin brings us near the atomic brink in his sensual *Indian Summer Dance* series (1989) [44], not to mention the chronic inflammation of the 11th July bonfires in Ulster and the wasteful fires of the Gulf war.

John Carson has always been uncomfortable about the peripheral nature of much gallery-based fine art practice affording little access to non-initiates. The body of work he has produced since leaving college has therefore been an attempt to bridge the gap between the private and the popular audience. His *modus operandi* has consequently been an interactive use of humour, dry wit and irony: playbacks to an audience who best know themselves but need reminding.

To this extent he has deployed a wide range of media, including photography, posters, postcards, video, television and live performance. Work in this category has included storytelling with slide presentation, as in *Off Pat* (1985-87) and *So What* (1990) [47]. They present the absurdity in the everyday little events of the human condition – contradictions in responses to a regional accent, the shenanigans of the local hard man, Billy Liar-like private fantasies of fame. These are very entertaining and droll but are they art? A question often asked of this aspect of Carson's work. Noel Sheridan seems to think it resides in the space between language and image:

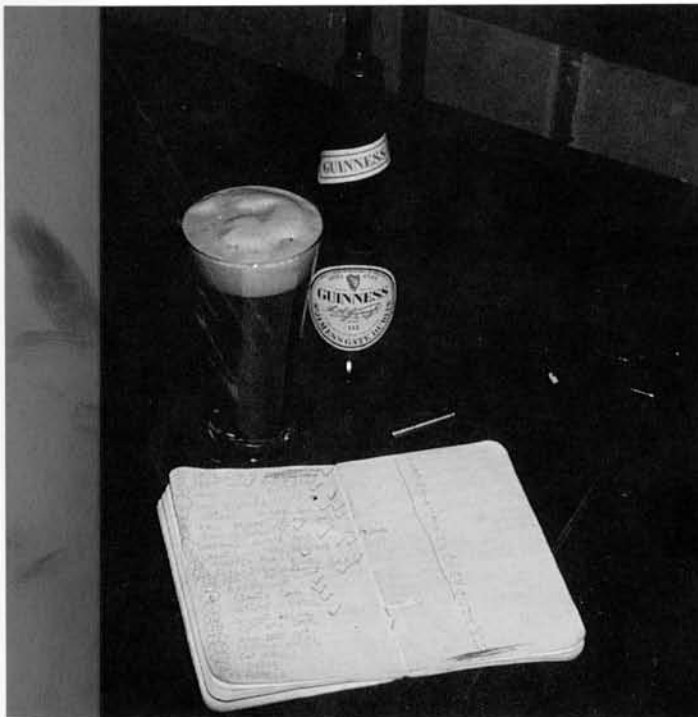
There is an amount of slippage between the narrative and the images and it is the tension and humour generated by conceptually trying to bridge these gaps that surfaces the art analysis and the politics within the work.⁷

Carson himself sees his work like gathering and presenting evidence – not totally disinterested, he puts emphasis here and there – but the audience will make up its own mind. This offering up of evidence has resulted in a serial presentation of images in the artist's work. Different locations, too, are important as they bring unpredictable interactions. In the past, he admired the work of



47
John Carson
So What
 1985-87, photograph of
 performance

48
John Carson
*A Bottle of Stout in every Pub
 in Buncrana*
 1978, notebook on bar table



Richard Long and Irish artist Brian King's interventions with nature, and, while at college, he rejected making art objects for making art journeys. *Friends, Walks, Hills, Invisible Lines and Belfast Lough* (1976-77) is a triangular journey, crossing divides, around the area of his childhood: a cultural embrace.

In 1978, Carson produced two time-based photoworks – *A Bottle Of Stout In Every Pub In Buncrana* [48] and *I'd Walk from Cork To Larne To See the Forty Shades of Green* – both turning romantic and stereotypical images of Ireland into lived experience. In the nineteenth pub of his twenty-two-pub crawl, Carson was almost refused a drink. The situation rescued, the young artist completed the course – dead drunk. Buncrana is not untypical of some Irish towns where it seems every other house is a public house. The ritualised cycle of drinking on Irish terrestrial walkabout contrasts markedly with the Sistine Chapel ceiling, where Noah's condition is noted above, on entrance, and the journey is towards spiritual drying out, at the altar end. Seeking sponsorship from Guinness for his project poster, Carson was forced to explain his intentions:

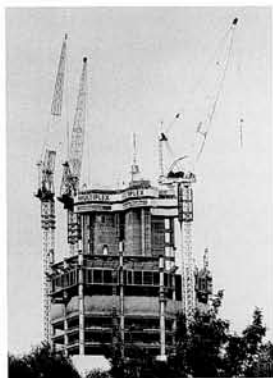
In ritualising the drinking situation and pointing out the effect of too much alcohol and in depicting all the different types of pub in Buncrana, my intention is to get people to focus in on and take a considered look at our traditional Irish drinking habits. It is then up to the viewer of the work to wonder whether the drinking habit is a valuable cultural heritage, a desirable social activity, a futile indulgence, a sinful business or a serious matter for concern.⁸

Guinness were not amused. 'We, as a company, are concerned with moderation and your proposal would not be in keeping with this approach.'⁹ Carson saw it as real hypocrisy, considering how they made their fortune.

The Forty Shades of Green (1978) depicted a 320-mile journey, taking the 'unexperienced' romantic illusion of the Johnny Cash song and recording the reality – green soldiers' uniform, green milk crates, and the 'go' sign of traffic lights. The colour-blindness of the song was deconstructed, the 'on the road' experience offering a more mundane experience.

To complete this trilogy of debunking cultural projection, Carson went on the road again, this time to America and by car. In *American Medley* (1981-84), he visited towns as place-names in songs, such as 'Twenty Four Hours from Tulsa' and 'By the Time I Get to Phoenix'.¹⁰ In Clarksville, Carson spent the morning looking for the train station, mentioned in the song, only to find Clarksville has no station. The seduction of 'otherness', offered in this litany of exciting place-names, resides in our desire for discovery. And the American pop song is a perfect example of how America has colonised our consciousness. Unlike other performance artists who use ritual as a primitive, animistic force, Carson, in *American Medley*, uses it in an existential mode to reflect the culture to itself. Joan Fowler explains his use of ritual:

Carson's interests are therefore in the only kind of ritual which is common to all western culture – and which isn't



DREAMTIME



dreamtime

49
John Carson
Dreamtime
 1991, image and text



THAT'S THE DIFFERENCE



between them and us

50
John Carson
That's the difference between them and us
 1991, image and text

self-conscious or enforced ritual, a contradiction in terms – and in these respects he has used the rituals of pop music as a critique of a particular society which is in the realm of myth within our own.¹¹

Carson has extended this interaction with other cultures with recent visits to Australia, to work and perform. In a series of phototexts, he explores differences, both internal and external, to the country. In *Dreamtime* (1991) [49], the unfinished building boom for one section of the country's population contrasts markedly with the petrified tree, symbolising the aboriginal concept of infinite space/time. But otherwise, to the visitor, Marmite is Vegemite and an electric plug is an electric plug [50].

People do not feature directly in Clement McAleer's landscapes; it is their terrain that interests him – ordered, interfered with, cultivated, systematised. The artist marks, plots, surveys landscape like an engineer, seeking out structure, grids and compositional bench-marks. His aerial surveillance technique allows him to seek enough distance to trace energy movements and frame baroque spaces, in some cases, blown and tossed as if by air currents from a rising helicopter. His sense of space transcends a specific sense of place. Born in lush Co Tyrone, naturally disposed to and aware of the tradition of landscape painting in the province, McAleer's horizons stretch much wider. He has travelled and opened up to vistas in California and Italy, as well as the micro-landscape world of the garden. He shares, nevertheless, with other Northern Irish landscape artists a poetic vision, if less traditionally lyrical in approach and concerns. A close fellow-traveller and immediate forerunner is Basil Blackshaw. The common link is Cézanne and a quest for structure in nature. McAleer, unlike the previous generation, is, perhaps, more restless and not content to examine the same hill too often; his Montaigne Sainte Victoire more anonymous.

Clement McAleer first caught public attention with his large-scale aerial views [51], reminiscent of the lines from Craig Raine's poem, 'Flying into Belfast'.

And then Belfast below, a radio
 with its back ripped off,
 among the agricultural abstract
 of fields. Intricate, neat and orderly.¹²

These works were visual and tactile compounds of memory and fact – camouflage patterns shot through with a network of roads. In 1982, this interest in landscape as journey found a suitable and natural outlet in his *Ulysses* series. Here, conceptually and formally, he could respond to Joyce's multi-layered itinerary.

Light, another constant theme with McAleer, together with a sense of on the road, pervaded his *American Journey; The West Coast* (reconstructed memories of a trip there in 1982). He also experimented in these works with compositional devices – stripped elements within the canvas, layered in series for a more dynamic experience. Around the same time, the artist used a window frame as a means for exploring inner and outer views. This mood for experimentation has resulted in acrylic and pastel