

The north bites back

Print and portraits feature heavily at the RUA's annual show. By *John P O'Sullivan*

There was a time when the contemporary Irish art scene was dominated by artists from Northern Ireland. In the 1960s and later William Scott, Dan O'Neill, Norah McGuinness, George Campbell, Gerard Dillon, Arthur Armstrong and Basil Blackshaw were names familiar to art lovers across the island. But things have gone quiet there, and northern ranks have been thinned further by the recent deaths of Blackshaw and Willie McKeown.

There remain Willie Doherty, twice nominated for the Turner prize, and Colin Davidson, whose portrait of Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, appeared on the cover of Time magazine. Neither is represented at this year's Royal Ulster Academy (RUA) annual showcase, however.

While the absence of any serious commercial galleries in Belfast hardly helps the development of artistic careers, the delay in finding a permanent home for the RUA is a further hindrance. There is a proposed venue in Riddel's Warehouse in Belfast, but no funding for a feasibility study. When you consider the wide range of artistic activities supported by the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA)

The logistics of submission is not the issue, as the initial application requires only an electronic image. Applicants thus avoid the annual Via Dolorosa trodden by artists whose work has been rejected by the RHA, which must be collected in a public way at a circumscribed time.

There was a conscious effort to include more print work in this year's RUA show, so there is a bias towards printmakers among the invited artists. The show leans heavily towards the figurative, with three-quarters of the paintings being portraits or landscapes. While many of the latter fall into the "worthy but unexciting" category, there is more entertainment among the former. These are generally looser in approach than academy portraits often are, although Carol Graham still embraces the old formal



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William Nathans's An Bádóir takes the same formal approach to composition but adds life and character. Elsewhere there is wit and quirkiness: Cristina Bunello's precisely painted Becoming, with its weird child wearing a wonderful patterned blouse; Michael Connolly's haunting Saltwater Bride; and Gareth Reid's large accomplished charcoal work Toppled Head.

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form is Neil Shawcross with his large painterly Envelope, and Graham Gingles's Glass Bird is a further addition to his cabinet of wonders. Elizabeth Magill's Goat Song stood out online. While still a fine piece in the flesh, I was disappointed in the scale, having expected something larger to do justice to this dramatic composition. Angela Hackett contributed the atmospheric L'été à Nice, a work to keep you warm on a winter's night. The style and technique employed by Anya Waterworth in Night Flight (1) suggest she has not been

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In the absence of its own premises, the RUA continues its long and fruitful relationship with the Ulster Museum, which houses its annual exhibition. This is a hugely important event for local artists starved of commercial outlets; it's also an opportunity to take the temperature of the art scene north of the border. Last year was remarkable for the number of artists from the south on show, but this year there are far fewer. Of the 371 exhibits, fewer than 20 are from the Republic.

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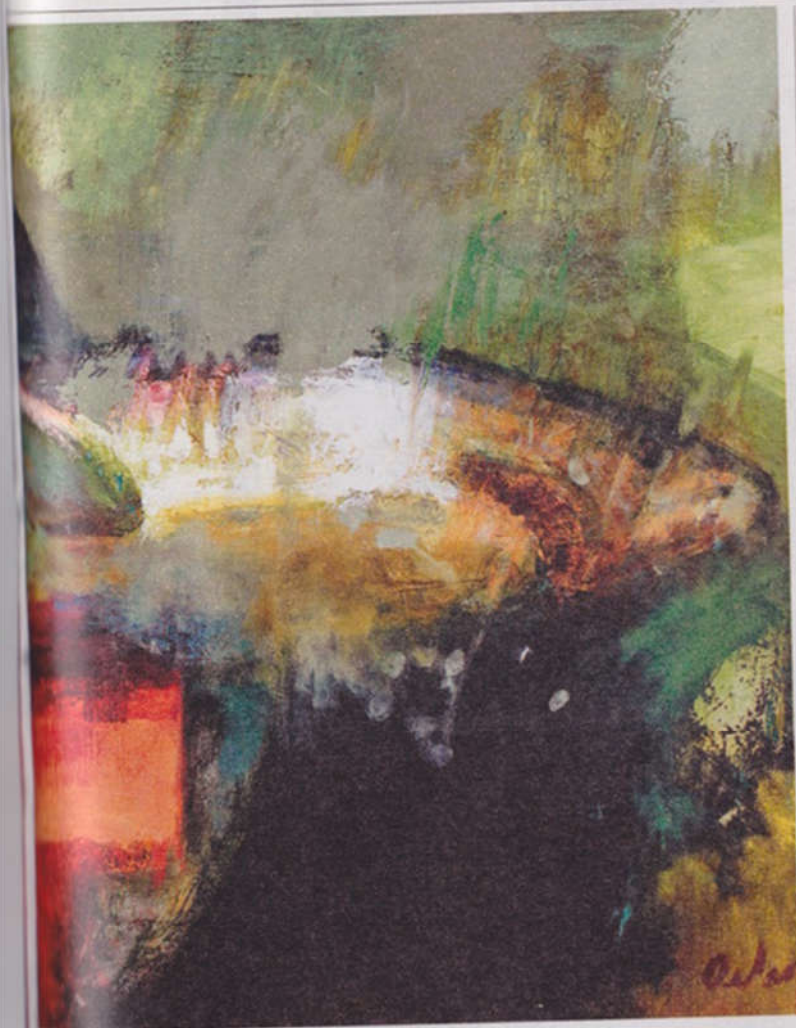
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Some hardy annuals provide solid examples in their immediately recognisable styles. These include Brian Ferran nodding towards Klimt with his gilded abstractions; Sophie Aghajanian with her subtly lit, elegant compositions; Brian Ballard's dark and intense landscapes and still lifes; Michael Wann wielding the charcoal expertly to create his finely detailed trees; and Michael Canning with his portentous plants looming against an elegiac sky.

Keith Wilson surprises us by producing a piece of hard-edged abstraction alongside his customary soft-focus landscape. Another old stager to continue in good

form is Neil Shawcross with his large painterly *Envelope*, and Graham Gingles's *Glass Bird* is a further addition to his cabinet of wonders. Elizabeth Magill's *Goat Song* stood out online. While still a fine piece in the flesh, I was disappointed in the scale, having expected something larger to do justice to this dramatic composition. Angela Hackett contributed the atmospheric *L'été à Nice*, a work to keep you warm on a winter's night. The style and technique employed by Anya Waterworth in *Night Flight (1)* suggest she has not been uninfluenced by her distinguished father, Blackshaw.

You don't expect much in the way of agitprop or politics in this show when Doherty isn't around, but Dermot Seymour can always be relied on for a contentious image. This time his subject is Asahi, reminding us of environmental issues in his adopted Mayo. You won't pass Gavin Lavelle's *Pot of Eyes* without smiling. There is also an unusual work by Mick O'Dea, featuring a pensive figure viewed from the back against a Rousseau-like profusion of trees and bushes. Sculpture and ceramics



make up about 20% of the exhibits and there's plenty of fine-quality work. The first room features Mother and Child, Paddy Campbell's competent but commonplace exercise in Carrara marble. It's a classical subject but lacks the added twist you expect from a contemporary artist. Elizabeth O'Kane's *Flow* is a thing of simple and solid beauty, fashioned from blue Kilkenny limestone. I also admired Martin McClure's *Redoubt*, a formidable construction in stoneware; Jay Battle's *Inner Circle*, an immaculately crafted circle of slate; and Helen Merrigan-Colfer's quirky *Girl with the Birds Nest*.

Print is well represented and Stephen Lawlor, one of Ireland's best printmakers, shows his considerable talents with the exquisite *Was I Awake or Sleeping*. Margo McNulty's stark lithograph *Curragh Camp* also stands

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out. Others to note are Penny Brewill's *Unsuitable Pets*, James McCreary's curious *Night Flying to Portlligat*, and the very elegant *Elegance* by Anne Corry. There are fine examples of the neglected art of batik by Helen Kerr.

Of the photography exhibits, Dominic Turner's spare and poignant *Seasonal Defeat* is the most striking. Others of note are Bruce Marshall's *Portrait 1*, featuring an ominous black bird, and *Saprophyte*, a portrait of grotesque fungi; and *Forest Dream*, a surreal staging by Ross McKelvey.

Crowding the video and animation exhibits into one corner did them no favours, as they contended noisily for your attention. You are distracted from experiencing fully the elegiac flavour of Caroline Wright's *Memorial to the Islanders*. However, distraction was a relief from Vince Ruvolo's tedious video *Step Up*. Notwithstanding the

scenic backdrop – the Giant's Causeway, I suspect – this leaden exercise foundered miserably; its crassness compounded by how pleased the protagonist seemed to be with himself.

In a show of nearly 400 works, there is much that is worthy and predictable. This is not *Frieze* or *Documenta*; we don't expect to experience the shock of the new or, mercifully, to encounter the outer extremes of conceptual claptrap. There's plenty of good-quality, attractive work at reasonable prices, along with the occasional jolt.

David Crone's *Dark Plants* is a striking semi-abstract study – one of the finest paintings in the show. A close contender was Diarmuid Delargy's sinister *Shark Study*. Alison Lowry's *The Home Baby* also gives us pause. It clearly requires a more austere setting, but its disturbing *mise en scène* still suggests dark doings. ■

RUA annual exhibition, Ulster Museum, Belfast, until Jan 7