

BUTLER ■ GALLERY

The Collection - by Aiden Dunne

The renowned American geologist, Anita Harris, said once about our ability to interpret the geological record: 'Rocks remember. They are books. They have a different vocabulary, a different alphabet, but you learn how to read them. Rocks are the record of events that took place at the time they were formed.' Geological time is measured in millions and hundreds of millions of years. From a geological perspective, we haven't been on the planet very long at all. But throughout our brief spell here, all human societies have devised forms of cultural expression, the traces of which are often all that eventually remain of transient civilisations. Even on a more modest scale, to see an art collection which has been built up over a long period of time, in human terms, is like doing cultural geology. You can see what was going on, the ideas that were in currency, the world view, how a society regards itself.

You can do this in a documentary way, in the sense that we can learn about fashion in early 19th century France from studying Ingres' portraits, or discover how a subsequently altered landscape once looked, as in Dermot O' Brien's view of 'The Liffey at Ballymore Eustace' (a landscape that is even now, controversially undergoing irrevocable change) in the Kilkenny Art Gallery Society's Collection. But works of art also provide records of a different kind, of imaginative life and of what, in quite a different context, zoologists call the *umwelt*, the self-world. They are glimpses into the self-worlds of the artists who made them.

Just as the geology of a region is the product of any number of events along the way, some violent and sudden, some protracted and uneventful, so an art collection represents a congeries of factors - even if you're John Paul Getty II and your chequebook knows no bounds. There is the character of the individuals who made the collection, the practical questions of economic feasibility and artistic availability, the influence of personal taste, and there is chance. George Pennefather and the other founders of KAGS had a particular conception of what art and an art collection might be. It seems fair to say that their view is reflected in the work that formed the original nucleus of the collection. Inevitably, ideas about art have since changed, and continue to change, and the collection vividly illustrates the dynamics of this evolutionary process.

Though it is, perhaps, a less than obvious example, one of the works that formed part of the original collection, and offers us access to a particular world, is Mildred Anne Butler's watercolour 'A Bit of the Garden.' The modesty and understatement implicit in the title summarise the artist's entire approach. She offers much more than that, more even than the richly textured domestic environment that her painting evokes.

From this one fragment we can intuitively grasp a sense of the wider canvas of her life and the society to which she belonged. She died before KAGS was founded in 1943. To say her work had a domestic focus is not to belittle it, but to emphasise that the heart of the rural, ordered world was in domesticity. That world had already faded by the early 1940s, and it has continued to fade since, but it is an important part of any heterogeneous vision of Ireland.

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To take another, more recent example, the two works in the collection by Michael Farrell tell a radically different story. With a little over a decade between them, they evidence a drastic disparity of approach. In the 1960s he looks to the possibilities of an Hibernian version of an international, formalist style of painting. He has evidently asked himself how he can be a contemporary, outwardlooking artist without jettisoning his cultural identity. Then the trouble erupted in Northern Ireland and, from his uneasy vantage point in France, where he was living (something indicated in various ways, including his use of language), that cultural and national identity became a heavy responsibility. What had been purely formal devices are pressed into service for direct comment on events in 'La Ruche/Presse Irlandais,' made in response to the Dublin and Monaghan car bombings.

Mildred Anne Butler was, so to speak, a part of the local landscape. She had trained and worked elsewhere, but she settled back in Kilmurry. Local work such as hers is rightfully well represented in the collection, but here a particular characteristic of Kilkenny becomes relevant: the way its inhabitants have proved to be exceptionally outward looking, and the region has, through a mixture of circumstance and some indefinable quality, managed to attract an exceptional number of creative people. So on the one hand the sometimes disparaging term 'local artists' incorporates an unusually broad range of talents in any case, and on the other the outward-looking locals have attracted an unusually broad range of talents from elsewhere to get involved in exhibitions at the Butler Gallery.

There are outstanding works by at least some of these artists in the Permanent Collection, including Albert Irvin's glorious 'Caledonia,' David Nash's 'Branch Cube' and 'Family Tree,' James Turrell's suite of aquatints, and a watercolour by the brilliant figurative painter John Bellany. And, by virtue of the fact that they were born, live or lived in the area, 'local' names include the Pennefathers themselves, Tony O'Malley, Barrie Cooke, Marie Foley, Helen Comerford, David Lamber, Moya Bligh, Bernadette Kiely, Paul Mosse, Francis Tansey, George Vaughan and Michael Mulcahy.

As the 1998 exhibition celebrating 25 years of exhibitions at the Butler Gallery associated with the Arts Festival demonstrated, it is not just a question of works of art. The Butler Gallery has excelled on the level of personal contact with the artists whose work it exhibits. Over the years, many of these artists came to Kilkenny and had a wonderful time. I can vouch for that because they said so. Surprisingly, many of them hadn't been to Ireland before, and it is striking that their introduction to the country was not via the centralised workings of the main public galleries and museums, but through the Butler Gallery, which was pursuing a vigorous international programme when such a thing was considered prohibitively difficult and expensive. This was partly achieved on the basis of one simple but compelling idea: don't deal with the commercial apparatus that views the artist purely as a business, deal directly with the artist. It's a principle that has since been fruitfully applied not only in Kilkenny but in many Irish contexts.

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It is more important that the Collection provides its own centre of gravity than that it constantly tests itself against a notional representative status, as in: is it representative of the art of its time? It's centre of gravity is Kilkenny, the context outlined above, and as it happens it is, in large measure representative. That is to say, if you wished you could trace in it an account of what has become the main narrative of Irish art history in the late 19th and 20th century. Such an account would begin in the collection with the varied approach of Walter Osborne, engineer turned farmer-painter Nathaniel Hone, the technically superb Sir John Lavery; like Sir William Orpen, a very successful portrait painter and the literary figure George Russell.

Some of the Free State's foremost 'official' artists, Sean Keating and Charles Lamb, are there, as are two other painters crucial in forming our perceptions of the West, Paul and Grace Henry. Plus of course the greatest Irish mythologiser of them all, and a thorough going individualist, Jack B. Yeats. From there to the Modernist pioneers Mainie Jellett, Evie Hone and Mary Swanzy and the peculiarly home-grown, striking talents of Gerard Dillon and Nano Reid. It's more difficult, perhaps to categorise William Scott, but he always seems at home in an Irish context.

The next part of this story might include Patrick Collins and Camille Souter both painters whose work helped to consolidate our sense of cultural identity in a more oblique, subtle way than the self-consciously nationalistic work of Keating. Their vision is lyrical, romantic but also quite un sentimental. Then there is Patrick Scott, an unflinching upholder of rigorous good taste. Basil Blackshaw and Barrie Cooke share a matter-of-fact feeling for aspects of rural life, while Louis le Brocquy was drawn to ontological questions with his spectral evocations of individual consciousness and embodiment.

Sean McSweeney, Gwen O'Dowd, and Bernadette Keily in their various ways reaffirm the importance of landscape in Irish art. Both Brian Bourke and Jill Dennis, represented here by figurative pieces, are also very good landscape painters. Figurations is absolutely central to Michael Cullen's boldly designed, often autobiographical narrative works, to Brian Maguire's searching psycho-social compositions and, if not always obviously, to David Crone's explorations of city life. The possibilities of abstraction are represented by the work of Roy Johnston, Sam Walsh, Richard Goreman, Joe Hanly and Felim Egan - who is, as it happens, represented here by a rare figurative composition.

Contemporary sculpture is a significant strand in the collection, something that in itself is quite unusual. It's there in considerable richness and diversity, from the finely detailed porcelain and mixed-media work of Marie Foley, who makes exquisite allegories of spiritual quest, to the formidable physical presence of Tom Fitzgerald's 'Apparatus No. 12,' and the hermetic worlds of Graham Gingles' boxes. Eilis O'Connell makes beautifully worked, ambiguous forms and Janet Mullarney is a gifted carver who takes on questions of individual identity in the face of institutional pressures.

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It's noticeable that the artists participating in the Victor Treacy and Tony O'Malley Award schemes have found their way in the Collection, including Una Bryce, T.J. Maher, Michael Canning, Michael Quane, John Gerrard and Catherine Kenny, emphasising that this is an open-ended process. There are many others whose presence adds immeasurably to the collection, including that witty miniaturist, the late Charles Brady, Patrick Ireland's elegant conceptualism, the metaphysically charged work of Rosaleen Davey and Charles Harper's graphic precision. It is important that their work, and the work of all the other artists, is there, a part of the cultural geological record, a record open to endless interpretation, capable of being read on any number of levels, an invaluable and inexhaustible resource.

Aiden Dunne, May 1999