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The *Juxtaposing Visions* Exhibition and Lectures: An Arts Event in Galway

Galway's longstanding reputation as a city that cherishes the arts is due primarily to two hugely successful and popular annual festivals, the Galway Arts Festival and the Cúirt International Festival of Literature. In Galway, however, the "arts" in "arts festival" usually means drama, music, and literature; typically, the visual arts are given a half a page or so at the back of the fifteen-page festival program. Compared to other Irish cities of similar size, Galway has the fewest visual art spaces for nonprofit, commercial, and educational art groups and artists. Limerick and Sligo can boast valuable art collections housed in municipal galleries with continued investment in collecting twentieth-century Irish art. Recently, rumors of both a possible municipal gallery and a new museum space for Galway have floated through the city. With neither of these in place in the year 2000, the fact is that the Galway community has been starved for interaction with the visual arts.

From September to November, 2000, the National University of Ireland, Galway, hosted *An Introduction to Contemporary Irish Art*, a series of free public lectures. In conjunction with the series, the university's Art Gallery housed from September 7 to October 12 an exhibition of selected Irish artworks from the Irish Museum of Modern Art titled *Juxtaposing Visions*. Attendance astounded the organizers, and crowds at the evening lecture series ranged from one to two hundred people, proving an immense interest.

The National University of Ireland, Galway, does not have a particularly active history of involvement in the visual arts. Although the art gallery has long existed, normally it is loaned out to area artists or to local groups to hang exhibitions; the university only rarely hosts and funds exhibitions. The gallery's location in the basement of the Quadrangle —the oldest, yet most beautiful building on campus—may also contribute to its low profile. Some of the more impressive contemporary art spaces in Ireland are housed in older colonial constructs; the Irish Museum of Modern Art itself has transformed the former Kilmainham Hospital for convalescing British soldiers, the Model Arts Center in Sligo has recently revamped the former model school built in 1831, and Galway's own Arts Centre has renovated Lady Gregory's former city residence. Visitors to university's Art Gallery must leave behind the Victorian, faux-Gothic of the

campus for the authentically Gothic ambience of the basement. Yet the subterranean experience proved to be an asset to the *Juxtaposing Visions* exhibition, by allowing for a more intimate viewing of these museum pieces, normally exhibited in large white rooms. In fact, visiting the university's gallery felt more like going to an alternative art space in a hip, run-down area of an American city. This affect worked well to accentuate one of the purposes of the exhibition suggested in its title : to undermine a singular and established perception of contemporary Irish art.

Lacking an art history or a fine arts department, the university's autumn visual arts initiative stemmed from its newly appointed arts officer, a post filled by Emily Cullen. Cullen's duties are to organize extracurricular arts events, including drama, music, literary, and visual arts, for the student body and for the wider Galway community. Visual art is not Cullen's area of specialty, but she had seen an article that I recently published in *Éire-Ireland* on the Irish artist Kathy Prendergast. She approached me, as an informed critic of contemporary Irish art on campus and asked me to give a series of lectures on the topic. I was thrilled to participate.

Once serious planning began during the summer, the design of the program kept expanding. What had started as a lecture series turned into a visual arts event. Fueled by enthusiasm, Emily and I kept adding such components as the art exhibition and the addition of guest speakers. Outside experts were brought in from three different arenas; art making, art criticism, and art history; artist Dorothy Cross, art critic Dorothy Walker, and art scholar Gavin Murphy were asked to speak as part of the series. We also felt that we needed a platform from which the lecture series might spring, and so approached the Irish Museum of Modern Art—the preeminent collector of contemporary Irish art—for a loan of art.

Several factors boosted the popularity of the lecture series and exhibition. First, by bringing artworks over from Dublin and speakers from around Ireland, Galwegians felt the need to take advantage of an opportunity that had rarely presented itself in the past. One visitor to the exhibition told me that she never had the time to go up to Dublin and spend a day visiting museums; she really enjoyed having the works travel to Galway instead. Likewise, when Dorothy Cross spoke, the large lecture hall was filled. In her element in front of a crowd, Cross could not believe the turn-out and declared that she was certain she could not draw a comparable crowd in Dublin. The high turn-out demonstrates that people in the West are indeed interested in art, and especially in Irish art, but it also proves the power of publicity. This was the second element in the program's popularity. Edward Said once wrote that every good intellectual movement needs a better "PR" firm; if no one knows about a move-

ment, it is hardly going to be effective. A healthy “buzz” about the exhibition and series was created in Galway through press releases, advertisements, plastering posters, and by handing out flyers. The arts program was publicized as if it were a theater performance. Ultimately, the best thing possible happened – news of the event spread by word of mouth. I attended an opening in October at the Arts Centre when a young woman I did not know asked me if I was at the Dorothy Walker talk. Going to one of the lectures became “the thing to do.”

Of course, the contents of the exhibition and topics of the lectures provided a major reason for the success of the program. The artworks from the IMMA collection made good on the promise of the title: they truly did present juxtaposing visions. The chosen art objects demonstrate a varied, and at times opposing, expression of Irish visual culture. They represent a marked move away from the singular, traditional vision of Irish art as leisure landscape painting, and a move into an era of more concept-based and experimental art. Artworks made from a range of media gave a fuller illustration of contemporary movements, including sculpture, painting, drawing, photography, video, and a New York City taxi door. Several overlapping themes manifested themselves. The body— both the personal and the social body—was a major artistic concern. Landscape, territory, and location, mixed with the desire to transgress the boundaries of place, domesticity, and nationality and converge in some imaginary locale, dominated many of the pieces.

To give each of the powerful works adequate space to be viewed and to accommodate the various media, only eight works were chosen for the exhibition. Dorothy Cross’s 1985 work *Pink Halls* sat strategically in the center of the main gallery. The piece consists of a gray wooden castle or church-like structure precariously poised upon its base. Windows and hallways painted pink pass through the structure so that one can see through it. This castle-like form wittily represents the nation—perhaps with a mocking tone— as a structure that lacks firm foundation owing to being politically young and culturally unsure of its traditional constructs. On the shorter walls of the gallery hung *The Ark of Dreaming* by Patrick Graham and *The Navigator* by Mick Mulcahy. On the other two walls of the gallery were hung *Body Map Series* by Kathy Prendergast and *Blood of the Beast* by Nigel Rolfe. Two other sculptures included in the exhibition were Janet Mullarney’s *Domestic Gods II*, which rested upon a common kitchen table in one of the corners of the gallery and John Kindness’s taxi door *Scraping the Surface*, which hung in the other corner. What was normally the reception room was converted into a viewing area for *Forty Below*, a DVD installation by Clare Langan (b. 1965), the youngest artist in the exhibition.

The first lecture I gave in the series discussed the art in the exhibition and the relationship each work had with the artists’ entire oeuvre, and also explored

how the works exhibited related to each other. This talk paved the way for Dorothy Cross's visit two weeks later. Cross explained her ever changing use of creative media, such as her move from working primarily with cowhides and udders to using snakeskins in her sculptures. This aided viewers in comprehending the underlying meaning in her sometimes elusive art. She also talked about the beauty of outdoor handball alleys as sculpture; these structures are common in rural Ireland, and in one, in Spiddal, County Galway, Cross recently staged a performance. Dorothy Walker, author of *Modern Art in Ireland*, spoke on recent developments in contemporary Irish painting from more current works by such established painters as Tony O'Malley and Hughie O'Donoghue to more recent artists like Brian Bourke and Elizabeth Magill. My next lecture took quite a detour, as it explored conceptual art that uses language as a tool for expression in the artwork. Half of the lecture focused on art in relation to Northern Ireland by Willie Doherty, John Kindness, and Shane Cullen; the other half examined language in art from the Republic, particularly artworks employing Irish and Ogham script. In my last lecture, I discussed the success of Irish women artists in the last two decades, focusing on the *oeuvres* of figure-heads Kathy Prendergast, Alice Maher, and Rita Duffy. Gavin Murphy, from the Art History Department at the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, gave the last lecture in the series, in which he analyzed representations of martyrdom in painting on Northern Ireland.

Series attendees were asked to fill out a survey, and their comments—ranging from, “At last visual art” to “Would definitely be interested in any similar future projects”—have proven to be a great reward and an inspiration for those of us associated with this project. The response of the public to *Juxtaposing Visions* and the lectures lead us to hope that Galway arts organizations, the National University of Ireland, Galway, and eventually all of Irish academia will continue to support investment in the Irish visual arts.

☞ THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND, GALWAY