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Book Review: Fiona Barber
Art in Ireland since 1910
Reaktion Books, 2013, 318 pages
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Fiona Barber's *Art in Ireland since 1910* is an ambitious study that traces the development of Irish modern art against the backdrop of the tumultuous political, economic and social changes that occurred over the course of the twentieth century. Over the last decade or so, scholars of art history and cultural studies have embarked on a number of research projects to recover and reassess the contributions of the visual arts in Ireland. A number of texts such as *Eire/Ireland Special Issue Visual Arts* (1999), *Third Text: Special Issue Ireland* (2005), the special section on Irish Art Histories of the *Journal of Art Historiography* (2013) account for these activities. Similarly, thematic panels held at the Annual Conference of the Association of Art Historians (UK), including one co-organised by Barber in 2009, as well as a number of other conferences and symposia, provided platforms for scholars engaged with methodological approaches and critical frameworks like historiography, Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, semiotics and postcolonialism in the study of Irish art history.

Art in Ireland since 1910 is a timely publication that accordingly reflects these strategic approaches to the visual arts in Ireland adopting a postcolonial and feminist perspective throughout. Generously illustrated, with 222 of the total 266 illustrations reproduced in colour, it is composed of eleven chronological chapters, each roughly spanning a decade. This book is aimed at both general and academic audiences, providing a broad introduction to visual art in Ireland for the more casual reader, while resonating with those working at the intersections of Irish history, cultural studies and art history. The political chronology of Ireland (1900-2010) provided as a useful reference at the front of the book, pinpoints the major events that frame the development of modern art in Ireland. The motivation for this research is located in the void left by S.B. Kennedy's *Irish Art and Modernism, 1880-1950* (1991) and Dorothy Walker's *Modern Art in Ireland* (1997), which until now have been the two most comprehensive survey texts on the subject. Barber argues for the critical

importance of evaluating the dynamics between nation and modernity in shaping art in twentieth-century Ireland. In doing so, she problematises the established meta-narratives of modern art by focusing on the conflict in Northern Ireland, the role of women artists and the impact of large-scale emigration, contending that modernity reflected in Irish art is 'a distinctive experience of modernity fundamentally different from that lived out within centres of cultural and political power.' Consequently by focusing on the period from 1910 to the end to the economic prosperity of the Celtic Tiger, this text provides a fuller account for the importance of art in relation to the political, economic and social forces that sculpted modern Ireland.

The book firstly addresses how Irish nationalism visualised the relationship between nation and identity, and the effects this had on art production. Barber offers fresh perspectives on the political and cultural activities of certain artists, contending that art production should not be evaluated in isolation, but for the ways in which it broadly mirrors the concerns of a conservative society on the brink of impending change. The brief comparative analysis between Grace Henry's Achill imagery with that of husband Paul's establishes a sense of how representations of the West have been co-opted into the hegemonic, masculine discourse that imagines the Irish nation. This careful attention to gender throughout the book yields new and rich understandings of the significance of these visualisations. Furthermore, alongside the familiar figures of Henry, William Orpen, John Lavery and Sean Keating, are the often-marginalised contributions of Constance Markiewicz, Kathleen Fox, Grace Gifford and Estella Solomons. The tension between centre and margin is revisited throughout the text in subtle but innovative ways, for instance, teasing out the complexities of Mainie Jellett as a pivotal figure for Irish modernism reveals that her avant-garde strategies retained traces of 'self-conscious primitivism' enabling connections with both modern art and the iconography of the West.

This text embarks on the difficult task of providing new aspects the iconography of the West and its relation to modernity, as it is a particularly well-trodden theme that to date has received much critical attention from various scholars. However, by comparing the West to the political divergence between Northern and Southern Ireland, Barber makes a convincing case for plural understandings of modernity by way of geographical location. Accordingly, the political and social situation in Northern Ireland is a major theme throughout the book providing further insight into the multiplicities of modernity and modern art on the island of Ireland.

Barber observes the 'ethics of Protestantism' in the work of some Northern artists in the 1930s though more could be said as to how the specifics of Protestantism translate into the visual sphere. John Hewitt emerges as a pivotal figure for his support of Northern artists, especially his role in aiding the formation of the short-lived Ulster Unit, the aims of which 'were more radical than any other art in Ireland at that time'. The rapid growth in heavy industries due to the outbreak of World War II and the specific event of the Belfast Blitz (1941) had a profound affect on Northern artists. That Colin Middleton and Neville Johnson approached their responses to such events through the visual language of Surrealism demonstrates the range of avant-garde strategies employed by these artists. Meanwhile, through the neutrality and self-imposed isolation of the Irish Free State, Catholicism and modernism were at odds with one another, leading Barber to argue that the 'possibilities for political radicalism, a recurrent feature of European avant-gardism, had also been co-opted by the nationalist hegemony'. The mention of Dairine Vanston, a somewhat elusive artist aligned with the international White Stag Group, is a reminder that Vanston, like others engaged with avant-garde art practices in Ireland, remain firmly on the periphery of dominant narratives of Irish art history.

Diaspora and the cultural production of Irish artists abroad is another key theme that surfaces in this book, though not unsurprisingly as migration was and remains topical in evaluations of shifting dynamics in twentieth-century Ireland. Though the mobility of artists in the earlier part of the century meant that many were travelling abroad to undertake further training, Barber identifies the period from the mid-1940s onward as a time when the movement of artists across borders challenged Dublin and Belfast as the centres of the Irish art world. With this comes a dual articulation or double awareness of 'here' and 'there', represented visually and experienced personally, as feature in the work of a disparate group of artists such as Mary Swanzy, Tony O'Malley, Gerard Dillon, F.E. McWilliam and William Scott. Duality is also simultaneously manifested in what Barber identifies as the contradictions of modern art grounded in a culture steeped in mythic and romantic notions of tradition, one which she persuasively argues complicates what it is to be 'Irish and modern'. A similar tension is revealed when arguing for a nuanced understanding of the complexities of Irish identity with regard to including an artist like Francis Bacon in the narratives that shape the development of Irish art. A comparison of the work of Brian O'Doherty and Louis le Brocquy, both of whom

produced a large body of work outside Ireland, contributes to new understandings of the significance of 'diasporic distance' on their visual production.

Barber's observations on the relationship between visual art and the political and social strife of the period known as the Troubles (1969-1994) are crucial to understanding the seemingly peripheral in Irish art. She insists that the conflict was not mere subject matter, but a lived reality that permeated the everyday existence of artists, as regular bomb scares threatened physical and psychological well being while the actual destruction of galleries and studios by bombs resulted in difficult economic circumstances. In spite of the structure implemented on Northern relations by the Downing Street Declaration (1993) and the Good Friday Agreement (1998), the intersection between power, space and visuality remained an important axis for Northern artists such as Willie Doherty, Victor Sloan, Rita Duffy, Philip Napier and Sandra Johnston.

As with any book that aims to account for specific developments throughout a certain time frame, there are some omissions, for example Nigel Rolfe and Andre Stitt seem particularly striking given that performances like Rolfe's *The Rope that Binds Us Makes Them Free* (1986) and Stitt's destructive *Art is Not a Mirror It's a Fucking Hammer* (1978), amongst other early performance works, embraced avant-garde gestures of 'postmodern' art and subsequently influenced many contemporary Irish performance artists. The use of terms like 'Baudelairean modernity' mentioned in passing several times throughout the book, presume a certain level of theoretical awareness about modernity and its conditions amongst readership, and should be fleshed out for those not familiar with the concept. Those familiar with Barber's scholarship will be aware of the feminist commitment that underpins her work. While a clearer theoretical grounding of her feminist strategies would be most welcome, one can hardly find fault with the integrated gender analysis that is woven throughout the text with particular finesse. Moreover, Barber rightfully raises a number of core issues about the contributions of women to Irish culture over the course of the twentieth century and the focus on women artists in the 1980s and early 1990s is especially strong. Overall Barber's aim of reading the development of modern art as being shaped by and responding to the dynamics of the forces of cultural change in Ireland is largely successful. By considering the relationship between perceived centre and the margins, *Art in Ireland since 1910* troubles presumed certainties in Irish art while

offering richly nuanced insights and opening up further avenues for future investigations.