

Basic Detail Report



Summer, June 1965

Date

1965

Primary Maker

Brian Bourke

Medium

Oil on canvas

Dimensions

117 x 103 cm

Description

This painting belongs to the 1960s which was a progressive decade for the arts in Ireland. Modernist movements like Pop art and Hard Edge Abstraction swept

in with other outside influences and were taken up and adapted into quirky Irish hybrids by up and coming young artists like Farrell and Ballagh. The Independent Artists who had formed in 1960 were to provide a continuing alternative to the volatility of changing international trends and Brian Bourke joined the Committee shortly after the foundation of the group. In 1967 the first Rosc exhibition happened in Dublin and brought many Irish people their first major direct contact experience of Modern Art. In 1965 Brian Bourke, then aged twenty-nine, held his first one man show in Leo Smith's Dawson Gallery and the exhibition included this painting entitled 'Summer 1965'. In the same year he was chosen to represent Ireland at the Paris Biennale. Bourke's variety of controlled expressionism, which was tinged with Nietzschean hollow laughter and delighted in the contrast between the tragic and the absurd, brought with it an air of waywardness; of wildness and danger, Irish art-goers, who by and large had been used to a more house-trained sort of art, were startled but thrilled. The reviews which accompanied the show acclaimed the new talent for uncertain reasons but with enthusiasm. This painting was purchased for the collection of the Arts Council and in 1976 it was sold to the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art. So, the year 1965 marks the beginning of Bourke's career as an acknowledged artist of some importance and this painting is typical of the series of self-portraits which were done in the sixties. Bourke had been away in the late fifties, living in London, working as a hospital theatre orderly, and sporadically attending life classes at St. Martain's School of Art. Most of all he had been looking at art. This experience enabled him to take a mere side-long glance at Modernist ideas as he matured, and in the 1960s in Ireland he was able to choose his own direction in art, and establish himself as an outsider to the mainstream, rather as was the case with Francis Bacon in England around the same time. The tradition he adopted and continued is late nineteenth century Expressionism and Symbolism. Van Gogh, Gauguin and the brilliantly idiosyncratic palette of Roderic O'Connor had struck home. But where there was continuity there was also change.

Bourke was working from a post mid twentieth century vantage point. His tune has a new, moodier refrain which is off key and unpredictable. The upfront anguish which sears out of a Van Gogh or Munch painting in airy, clashing primary colours changed with Bourke's dark jades and lavenders into a more reflective melancholy; a slower meditation tinged with knowing mockery. This is an expression of the difference between a turn of century outcry at the loneliness of existence felt in the face of the new knowledge of the age - a reflex action to sudden pain - and, in the face of continuing paradox and conundrum, a post war, mid-century distress and uncertainty which became mature and habitual. Bourke's painting entitled 'Decaying Sunflowers' (see Object Number 1251) which is also in the collection of the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery, is a clear comment on the route we have travelled from the time that Van Gogh invented a fresh and vigorous symbol with his sunflowers. How does 'Summer 1965' work? What has Bourke expressed through his use of oil paint on canvas? The edge of the rectangular painting shows a half-inch khaki coloured band inside which a black border bleeds into the field of imagery. This is so understand that a casual glance would not read it. It is the first reference to the nature of what we are looking at: this is a two dimensional canvas surface covered with coloured paint, separated from the rest of reality not only by its wooden frame but by an additional transitional zone of painted framing borders. The painting therefore, has been defined its own terms of reality. The imagery shows a landscape background in which the head and torso of a male figure is seated before a blue rectangle seen in perspective. The figure faces out to the viewer. The deep indigo sky is opaque and solid with no brush strokes visible. On it blackish clouds are infilled with bold vertical stripes of many rich, muted colours in a dark rain of paint. The trees are also painted in bold strokes, but these are diagonal and orientated in both directions. The pink wall is treated as vertical strokes and the foreground consists of horizontal broken lines. The blue rectangle is smudgy, showing layering of tone which gives luminosity. The body of the figure is solid black, showing no form, but the face is painted in an economical naturalistic manner, treated in dabs of colour with light showing on the cheekbones and forehead. For all this diversity of handling the effect is one of overall tight form and structure. The tonal relations revolve around dark lavenders, mauves and indigos and brighter, chalky jade and puce. The blue rectangle is brilliant and jarring. The lower part tilts, almost imperceptibly, towards the seated figure, creating a vague unease and feeling of disequilibrium in the viewer. Within the offbeat harmonies created by the formal visual language of the artist what meanings can be inferred? We know the figure is a self portrait of the artist, we thus assume he is working on painting the landscape he sits in. But is there more? There is a slow, curving, compositional movement from the translucent blue rectangle which holds an infinity of space, across to the artist and out through the artist's gaze to you the viewer. You now occupy the position the artist had when he was in the process of making the painting. So, what price realisation here? Which of these concepts of reality is paramount? The knowledge of the physical existence of oil paint on canvas? The knowledge the viewer has of the past presence, orientation and activity of the artist? The current experience of the viewer gaining knowledge of the potential significance of the imagery? Has the artist, dressed in existential black, thin, vulnerable and fragile, set himself in front of a celestial mirror, which refers to the nature of our experience of reality? Why does he challenge the viewer with that powerful, in-charge eye contact? Is he exerting a controlling influence and therefore setting himself, as an artist, in a position of power over the viewer? Or is he, through that mesmeric stare, forcing an experience of total one-ness like Narcissus falling in love? In many of his paintings which date from this sixties period Bourke shows us alter egos: comical, pathetic, lustful,

powerful and so on. This painting is typical of his vision and ideas in that centres on the exploration of the complexities of self-realisation and how a relationship may be determined with what is understood to exist outside self. From these early self-portraits a clear path can be traced to his series of works based on the Irish medieval legend of mad Sweeney. Guilt-ridden Sweeney can be seen as a metaphor for the artist and the use of this myth a substitute for the self-portrait of the artist. The complex allegory, told through Sweeney's restless, ceaseless journeying through the world as an outcast turns on the awareness of will as the enabling consciousness which fuels the creative drive. 'Summer 1965' is a disquieting, subtle painting from the first mature phase of Bourke's development as an artist. As such it is an important work in the collection. This description was written by Dr Susanne McNab