

Portraiture and Social Context - A Case Study

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PORTRAITURE AND SOCIAL CONTEXT – A CASE STUDY

The exhibition of a portrait of a convicted killer in Dublin in 2003 was held to be offensive by many. Maggie Deignan examines the context and the reactions.

In May 2003 a portrait was displayed at the 173rd exhibition of the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA), Dublin, by artist Mick O'Dea, a member of the Academy. The man portrayed, Brian Meehan, is a prisoner in Portlaoise who was found guilty of the murder of a prominent Irish journalist, Veronica Guerin, and sentenced to life imprisonment. The following exploration does not set out in any way to argue against the extremely serious nature of the crime of the prisoner portrayed. Its objective is to focus attention on an issue highlighted by the case: the offence caused by the social context of the painting. This involved a broad adoption of a singular viewpoint by the media and those members of the public who voiced opinions on the matter.

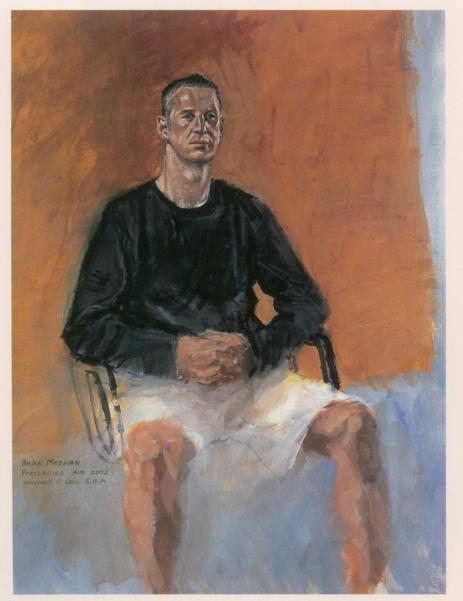
O'Dea has a history of working with prisoners, dating back to 1985. He has worked on the National College of Art and Design art programme in Portlaoise prison, and has occasionally undertaken workshops for the Artists in Prisons scheme. In July 2002, he engaged in one such workshop in Portlaoise with two prisoners who were interested in painting portraits. Over the course of his eight days there, five men volunteered to sit / model for the painters. O'Dea worked alongside the men he was teaching and all three produced paintings which they would later publicly exhibit.

The two prisoners who had participated in the project exhibited their work in a group exhibition of prisoners organised by the VEC in the Town Hall in Portlaoise later that year. The portraits showed very good resemblance of their sitters. There was no adverse public reaction to any of the exhibits.

In May of the following year, O'Dea selected six of his own works to exhibit in that year's RHA show. Although the exhibition is an open-submission show involving a selection process, members such as O'Dea are not subject to this procedure. One of the works he selected was a portrait which he had painted during his prison project. This went on display in May.

The controversy began when retired Garda Detective Inspector Gerry O'Carroll phoned into the live RTÉ Radio One programme *Liveline* on Monday 26 May to express his outrage at the exhibition of the portrait of the prisoner, which he had been informed was on display. He described the sitter as an "evil, evil man," and said that the exhibiting of the portrait was "grossly offensive...at the very least, it is in appalling bad taste. At worst, it's grossly offensive and highly insensitive."

Many people phoned the radio programme to express similar viewpoints. There were calls to have the painting removed from the exhibition. O'Dea was contacted to



Michael O'Dea: Portrait of Brian Meehan, 2002; courtesy the artist

respond, which he did. He defended his painting. On the subject of the identity of his sitter he said, "I don't particularly look into their case myself, I am not a detective."2 He added, "he sat very still. I found him very co-operative of the job being required. He gave me his full attention." On his approach to portraiture he said, "my portraits are not formal portraits. They're not about power or glorification. I try to show the common humanity of all people."3 O'Dea says that although he was aware of the potential of this particular painting to cause controversy, he considered it amongst his best of the year's work. He is also of the opinion that there can





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IT emerged this week that a notorious killer was the sub-

Il emerged this week that a notorious killer was the subject of a portrait painted by a highly respected Irish artist. Brian Meehan is in Portlaoise Prison for the murder of journalist Veronica Guerin. Whilst inside, he effectively medelled for artist, Mick O'Dea, a Clareman who is also a member of the exclusive Royal Fibernian Academy, where he gives art lessons to prisoners. This in itself is a humanitarian gesture from a liberal and liberated artist giving something back to those who have gone the wrong way in life. Unfortunately for Mr. O'Dea, the line Unfortunately for Mr. O'Dea, the line Lufarting was displayed at the Gallagher Gallery in Dublin's Liy Place this week. The painting lisself is pretty ordnary. It shows the typose, hands clasped together, resting on a pair of white shorts he wears while staring into space.

should be considered alongside the thoughts of horror that must have crossed the minds of Veronica Guerin's husband, son and brother. As the family endeavours to allow Veronica Guerin rest in a dignified and private peace, along comes this brutal and public reminder of the man who took away the lynchpin of their family, bealthy, and welcome, there appears to have been a distinct lack of dialogue and discussion with the key players involved.

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Listening to Liveline during the week, the during the week, the during the week, the during the week, the control of the contr

Blair is back on top

IN my first column for the Sunday World, I talked about the physical destruction of Tony Blair (or, as Gerry Adams calls him, "Mr. Blur"). The Gulf War was taking its toll on the youthful and enthusiastic 50-year-old. He was looking gaunt and haunted and there as spending summer in Downing Street.

Crisp







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be a problem for artists of self-censorship in the interests of political correctness, which he wished to avoid.⁴

In the week that followed **Star**, **Daily Mirror**, **Sunday World**, and the **Irish Times** all published articles on the subject. The issue was again discussed on *Liveline*, RTÉ 1, on *The Gerry Ryan Show*, RTÉ 2, and on *Morning Ireland*, RTÉ 1. On the *Morning Ireland* programme, the junior Minister for Defence, Willie O'Dea, spoke vehemently against the inclusion of the portrait in the exhibition.

The RHA members, in response to the furore, held a meeting on Tuesday, 27 May, at which they unanimously decided not to remove the painting. A spokesman for the RHA said,

We have no rule or diktat in this academy about censoring an artist's work. Each member of the academy has an equal standing but the artist Michael O'Dea made the final decision to keep the picture up, backed unanimously by the other members.⁵

The portrait remained on display at the Academy until 28 June.

Portraiture – issues of social context, 'good taste' and sensitivities

Broadly, three issues of concern were highlighted by the controversy.

- 1. What is the commonly perceived nature and function of the portrait?
- 2. What is it about this particular instance that gave rise to the unprecedented level of media attention?
- 3.What preconceptions underlie the terms 'good' or 'bad taste'?

Regarding the first issue, in Aidan Dunne's view, "what emerged from the controversy is a popular view of the portrait as an accolade and an honour." There is ample testimony to this proposition in the art galleries of Europe, and in Ireland's National Gallery where many rooms have walls hung with portraits of landed gentry. This paean to social success and possession has a broad correlation in portraiture today, as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century landlords and the ruling establishment have been gradually replaced by businessmen, politicians and more recent establishment figures.

John Berger treated portraiture contextually by facetiously putting a 'trespassers will be prosecuted' sign on a reproduction of the Gainsborough painting of "a richly attired eighteenth- century couple on their estate." The reason he did this was "just in case we should mistake this for a painting about the beauties of the English countryside...In this way Berger invites us to read the painting as a celebration of possession, of ownership."⁷

Even with the apparent relaxation of rigid social codes today, portraits often contain subtle hints as to the status of the sitter. It is significant that the attire of the prisoner in the RHA portrait was commented on by the media. "It shows the convicted killer in relaxed pose, hands clasped together, resting on a pair of white shorts he wears, while staring into space." Another report observed an additional detail — "shorts and a black jumper."

The homage to success and ownership is not the sole traditional purpose of portraiture. A strong sense of moral purpose was another element of portrayal. An argument in relation of 'sitter to society' was put forward by painter Jonathan Ritchardson in his writings. He said, "Painting gives not only the persons, but the characters of great men. The air of the head, and the mien in general, give strong indications of the mind." Its function, he said, was "partly to improve and instruct us and to excite proper sentiments and reflections" like "a history, a poem, a book of ethics, or divinity."¹⁰

The sense of moral purpose in portraiture has continued to the present day to be commonly desirable or even mandatory, as suggested by the reaction to the RHA portrait. Dunne wrote that O'Dea's portrait "does nothing to either demonise or excuse its subject."11 O'Dea himself has said that "My portraits are...not about power or glorification. I try to show the common denominator of humanity of all people."12 It is this non-judgmental attitude, it would seem, that does not comply with the traditional goal of 'improving and instructing us', and the ordinariness may not give the 'strong indications of the mind' that would correspond with the viewers' notion of a criminal mind. If, as Wilton suggests, it is the case that "a likeness committed to canvas is a public injunction to emulation or abhorrence,"13 perhaps in the prisoner's case, the sitter would have had to appear evil, or tortured by guilt, or in some way disreputable

soners' work on show as eehan portrait row erupts

IRELAND'S most notorious prisoners have staged their own art exhibition in the same week that a portrait of evil murderer Brian Meehan sparked national outrage.

A new prison art row is brewing after Portlaoise inmates put their work on display in one of Ireland's

busiest galleries.

The exhibition at the Crypt in Dublin Castle features video recordings by Real IRA terrorists and a tribute to Border Fox Dessie O'Hare.





SEE RYAN TUBRIDY: PAGE

By DARAGH KEANY



to satisfy this requirement, or at least be firmly shown to be in a prison context instead of the featureless spaces, devoid of social props, that O'Dea uses to focus on the essence of the person.

TEEN ON

Part of page 13 of the Sunday World, 1 June 2003; reproduced with permission

Social context - the RHA

Apart from the identity of the sitter, and the portrait itself, the social context of the portrait seems to have been an even greater cause of grievance. Dunne makes this point when he says the "mere inclusion in the Academy is in some sense a moral endorsement."14

That it may be inclusion in the Academy itself that is an issue is suggested when one examines the history in Ireland of the public exhibition of prisoner portraits, painted by prisoners themselves or by artists, most notably Brian Maguire. Maguire says that his purpose is "to harness the prejudice within society and play it back to the viewer."15 Maguire has painted and displayed paintings of prisoners, occasionally high-profile men, and has done so in locations varying from street poster sites to arts centres to the more traditional venues, notably the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery, without attracting nation-wide media opprobrium.16 However, the theme of these exhibitions was related to prison / prisoners.

Prisoners themselves have made and displayed portraits of each other without attracting excessive media attention. Here again, the context and theme of the exhibits was related to prison.

If the problem the public had with the RHA prisoner exhibit was not solely the portrait itself, it is possible that the particular context of the RHA may point to the cause. Firstly, the portrait was painted by an artist upon whom had been conferred the establishment accolade of Royal Hibernian Artist. O'Dea was described on radio and in newspaper reports as "a highly respected Irish artist." ¹¹⁷

Secondly, the RHA is regarded as a prestigious venue. There are references to it throughout the controversy as "one of the country's top galleries," which has been "promoting arts in Ireland more than 170 years." Another report stated that "the line between humanitarian thoughtfulness and misguided thoughtlessness was blurred when the Meehan portrait was displayed at the Gallagher Gallery in Dublin's Ely place this week." 19

Thirdly, the exhibition did not have a prison theme. In the RHA show, the portrait of the prisoner, *Brian*, *Portlaoise* (no. 330), was juxtaposed with dignitaries such as *The Honourable Mr Ronan Keane*, *Chief Justice* (no. 397), *His Eminence*, *Desmond Cardinal Connell*, *Archbishop* (no. 393), and ex-politician, a bust of Charles J. Haughey (no. 225).

All these factors combined, it appears, led to the consensus of opinion of the section of the public who expressed their views, and of the media, that 'appalling bad taste' was demonstrated by the exhibition of the portrait.

'Good taste / bad taste' - context and content

What constitutes good taste or bad taste, and whose sensitivities are offended by 'bad taste'? Taste in the present context can be seen to be associated with the perception of the artist's credentials and of the venue. The sitter's identity was publicly judged to render the portrait a tasteless exhibit in such a social context.

As already stated, there is no suggestion here of attempting to diminish the severity of the prisoner's crime. However, because the unique combination of elements highlighted real issues that usually only partially surface, it is useful to use this case to explore the popular assumption that taste is a given and fixed entity and that sensitivities stem from a singular viewpoint.

The arbitrary and subjective nature of what constitutes good or bad taste can be highlighted by focusing on the social and political context of certain portraits.

Returning to the National Gallery: it contains an

abundance of portraits of eighteenth-century landed gentry, the majority of whom would have acquired land through allegiance to the Crown, and subsequently through inheritance. This occupation was effected by the subjugation and dispossession of the native Irish people. The new landowners commissioned their portraits to be painted in celebration of their elevated positions in society, to hang in their houses and later, in some instances, in gallery spaces.

Considering their role in the oppression of the native population, should their display be considered a matter of good taste? If taste in portraiture is to be judged by whether it offends sensibilities rather than on the merit of the artwork by aesthetic criteria, maybe opinion would weigh in favour of labelling such portraiture 'tasteless', or maybe not. This judgement would inevitably involve some degree of viewer subjectivity.

A comparison can be made between the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century establishment and today's equivalent, the dignitaries, politicians and businessmen who are honoured or who honour themselves by commissioning their portrait or portrait busts. The rise to high positions in society has, in some cases been controversial, and involved elements of white collar crime. The National Crime Forum Report, 1998, described white collar crime as a type of crime "wrongly perceived as victimless," and continues, "its perpetrators are often well educated, welloff and privileged in the sense that they have ready access to the means to protect themselves from detection and from punishment its perpetrators are often well educated, well off and privileged, aren't prosecuted."20 These crimes, it adds, have necessitated one official tribunal after another. Researcher Paul O'Mahony suggests that these crimes "are so extensive that it is a real possibility that the illegal gains from 'white collar crime' far exceed the gain from the more acknowledged and feared areas of robbery, burglary, and larceny," and that research has "adduced evidence, which suggests that the Irish courts may well discriminate in favour of the socially more advantaged."21

Many people in today's society may not find public homage in the form of portraiture to politically and economically successful personages particularly 'sensitive' and in good taste, if social context rather than aesthetic criteria prevails.

As mentioned, in the RHA exhibition itself there was a portrait bust of ex-politician Charles J. Haughey.

Haughey is a figure who has been embroiled in controversy for decades, and has had a high profile at tribunals, where corruption of an extensive nature throughout the years of his leadership was revealed.

There was another portrait in the RHA exhibition which had the potential to offend the sensibilities of a certain section of the population. This was of Cardinal Desmond Connell, who had also been involved in controversy due to his role relating to the sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests who were under his supervision. It had emerged as a matter of fact that for years the clergy, including Connell, had had reports of the activities of this minority of offending priests, but did very little to stop them, and never informed the Gardaí. The victims of these offences have for years been fighting for justice from Church authorities and for admissions of responsibility in the face of Church denials. It is possible that these victims, and members of the public who sympathise with their experiences, could have sensitivities regarding that particular exhibit, maybe even seeing it as 'grossly offensive', an accusation levelled at O'Dea's portrait.22

O'Dea did not demonise his subject. He shocked, not by setting out to shock, but by allowing a social pariah to symbolically join the ranks of citizens respected by many people. Dunne observed, "When English artist Marcus Harvey exhibited a giant portrait of the convicted murderer Myra Hindley, composed of the hand prints of children, it was calculated to shock...But in O'Dea's case, it is the identity of the anonymouslooking sitter and, apparently, the sheer conventionality of the image that caused controversy." 23

Elizam Escobar has written, "good taste becomes meaningless, merely a euphemistic code fashioned in order to impose an ideology, to prohibit and keep in check any dissent or disruptive intentions." In the case of portraiture, the dominant cultural and economic forces have shaped the perceptions of an artform that is capable of myriad expressions. O'Dea's "crime" is that he is seen to have disregarded the dominant, commonly accepted cultural conventions, giving rise to the irony that a painting that has been described variously as "ordinary," one of "that most staid of painterly genres," and displaying "sheer conventionality" has had the power to invoke such passions.

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¹Declan Fahy, **Daily Mirror**, 27 May, 2003, p. 7

²Eamon Dillon, *Artful dodgers*, **Sunday World**, 26 May, 2003, p. 13

³Jenny McQuaile, *Portrait of Guerin killer stays*, **Star**, 28 May 2003

⁴Mick O'Dea, personal communication

5McQuaile, op. cit..

'Aidan Dunne, Artscape, Irish Times, 31 May, 2003

Robert Witkin, *Art and Ideology*, in **Art and Social Structure**, Polity Press, 1995, p. 90

⁸Ryan Tubridy, *Art's Meehan streak*, **Sunday World**, 1 June, 2003, p. 14

'Fahy, op. cit.

¹⁰quoted in Andrew Wilton, **The Swagger portrait**, Tate Gallery publications, London, 1992, p. 36

11Dunne, op. cit.

12McQuaile, op. cit.

¹³Wilton, op. cit., p. 26

14Dunne, op. cit.

¹⁵ Brian Maguire, Tales from the Big House, Irish Arts Review, Winter 2003, p. 73

¹⁶see also Katherine Thompson, New York: Brian Maguire, Bayview Project, CIRCA 103, Spring 2003, pp 84-86

¹⁷Tubridy, op. cit.

¹⁸Fahy, op. cit., p. 7

19Tubridy, op. cit.

²⁰National Crime Forum Report, 1998, p. 109

²¹Paul O'Mahony, Crime and punishment in Ireland, 1993, p. 234

22Garda O'Carroll, in Fahy, op.cit

23Dunne, op. cit.

²⁴Elizam Escobar, *The Subversive Imagination*, in **The Heuristic power of Art**, ed. Carol Becker, Routledge, New York / London, 1994, p. 45

25Ryan, op. cit.

²⁶Tubridy, op. cit.

²⁷Dunne, op. cit.

²⁸Dunne, op. cit.