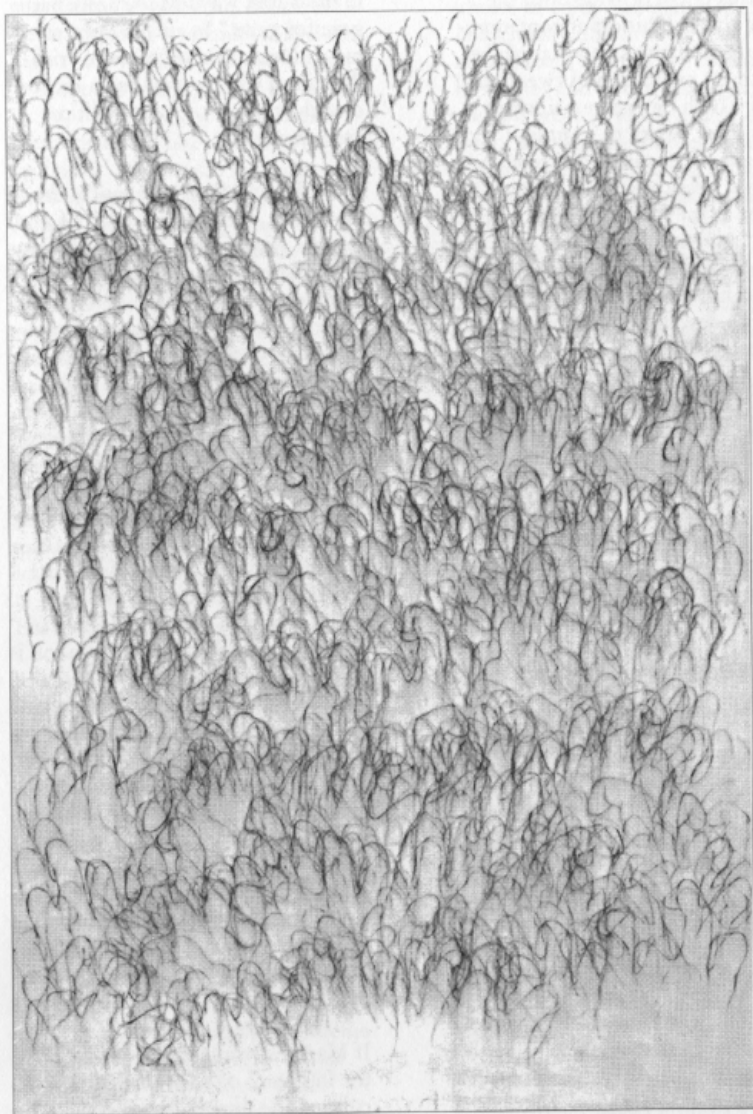


A Measured Quietude:
Contemporary Irish Drawings
MATRIX/Berkeley 178

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Róisín Lewis: *Scríob*, 1997

A Measured Quietude

It is over a century since William Butler Yeats published his stirring fin-de-siècle manifesto, "To Ireland in the Coming Times." It is a poem born of Yeats's patriotic desire to number himself among a cultural and spiritual elite "that sang, to sweeten Ireland's wrong." Lines from this poem provide both the title of this exhibition of contemporary Irish drawings and that of the concurrent exhibition of twentieth-century Irish figurative painting, *When Time Began to Rant and Rage*, which it is intended to complement. From youthful dreamer to senator in the fledgling Irish Free State, "apprentice mage" to "sixty-year old smiling public man," Yeats took to heart more than most Shelley's description of poets as the unacknowledged legislators of the world. The burden of that role fell upon his heirs in Irish literature, whether they chose to shoulder it or shun it. It is one still registered by Irish poets to this day.

Such pressures have less obviously affected the visual arts in Ireland. Unlike Irish writing Irish art has, until recently, rarely been consulted as an index of the temper of the times. Yet profound social and political upheavals since the late sixties, especially those engendered by political unrest in Northern Ireland and by the rise of the women's movement, have produced notable responses from visual artists. These have been articulated most openly within the tradition of representational painting surveyed in *When Time Began to Rant and Rage*, and also in the media of photography, video, and installation. Given the nature of a medium which is generally perceived as more subdued and intimate, it is hardly surprising that much Irish drawing should favor a more oblique and idiosyncratic engagement with the contemporary moment. It may be that the current

climate of renewed economic and political optimism no longer demands the heroics or histrionics of another age. This is not to advocate an apolitical complacency, but merely to suggest that, at times like these, although "elemental creatures" still "hurry from unmeasured mind/To rant and rage in flood and wind," as Yeats put it, "he [or she] who treads in measured ways/May surely barter gaze for gaze." In such a light we may address this selection of Irish drawings, which range from recon-dite abstraction to overt political engagement.

In William McKeown's works the persistent, unchanging motif of a vertical rectangle of pure color may at first appear elusive, deceptively un-giving, allowing little or no purchase. Yet to the attentive viewer these drawings are ultimately engaging rather than rebarbative. The pooling of watercolor at the rectangle's hand-drawn edges, resulting in inevitable, if minuscule irregularities, consistently returns the viewer's gaze to the expanse of color, inviting us to register gradually various nuances and incidentals of shading and tonality. Fergus Martin's diptychs, in which a horizontal rectangle of various shades of brown ink is superimposed asymmetrically on two abutting sheets of white paper of the same size, demand a comparable slowing down of viewing tempo. ("Brown," the film-maker Derek Jarman once noted in a lyrical meditation on the spectrum, "is a slow color. It takes its time.") The thin white fissure at the joining of the paper sheets is reminiscent of the valley between the pages of an open book: a hallowed or treasured text, perhaps, on ceremonial display.

If Martin's works indirectly reflect the influence of a famously bookish culture, the drawings of Róisín Lewis invoke an Irish scriptorial tradition which dates back to the early middle ages. Lewis's obsessive trac-

ings and retracings of the outline of her left hand on a single sheet of paper produce an all but illegible palimpsest. The information overload provided by her literal "hand-writing" results in a replete silence. The indexical link to the authorial hand is no guarantee of the clear communication of subjective intention, a fact underscored in other works by Lewis by the deliberate debasement of a veritable Babel of sign systems. Liadin Cooke's drawings exploit a comparable hermeneutic rupture by juxtaposing fastidiously rendered line drawings of individual bones with brief quotations from the Marquis de Sade's *Juliette*. The presiding trope of the work is synecdoche, whereby a part represents the whole. The effort required to suture image and text suggests a disturbing narrative of disjuncture and dismemberment. We are offered, literally, the bare bones of an artistic vision which we are invited to reconstruct. A trail of pictorial and textual remains leads us through ominous terrain into the skeleton-strewn lair of an unnamed torturer whose victims' fearful cries echo from his dungeons.

The disquietude engendered by Cooke's series of drawings may be contrasted with the more benign territory charted by Richard Gorman. Gorman is an Irish painter in long-term voluntary exile in Italy who spends an ever-increasing amount of time in transit. Yet his work in recent years has become more and more grounded. Unlike other artists of his generation, who draw on the particularities of a native landscape, Gorman's organicism and rootedness is of a more generalized and metaphoric nature. In these works interlocking and overlapping patches of color frequently cling to or rise up from the bottom edge of the paper, suggesting a low horizon line. A tradition of organic abstraction is also one element informing the drawings of Fionnuala Ní Chiosáin,

although there are others. A characteristic dialectical tension in the work is the result of a tendency, as often as not, to brush against the grain of an underlying lyricism. In the past she has repeatedly pitted invocations of nature against intimations of cultural artifice, and alternated abstraction with a ghostly figuration. Though scrupulous in her choice of color and materials, she consciously obscures evidence of the artist's hand at work by composing in washes and pours of acrylic, ink, and watercolor which appear relatively unamenable to precise manipulation, thereby effecting a delicate marriage of flux and stasis, chance and determinism.

Of the artists represented here, Colin Darke is the most manifestly political. His drawings comprise an accumulation of hand-written notes inscribed on cigarette papers joined together and arranged in a grid of regular vertical columns interspersed by a repeated graphic image. The cigarette papers refer to a well-known method among political prisoners in Northern Ireland of passing on secret messages. The image is of a landmark gable wall in the artist's adopted hometown which has survived the ravages and riots of the past thirty years, throughout which it has persistently proclaimed that "You Are Now Entering Free Derry." For some a relic of a bygone era, for others a bulwark against a tide of political amnesia, it gains added resonance in this particular context from the fact that the slogan was originally inspired in 1969 by a similar message, "You Are Now Entering Free Berkeley," which appeared at the height of the Civil Rights Movement.

Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith
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Works in MATRIX:

Liadin Cooke (Born in 1958 in Quin, County Clare, Republic of Ireland; lives in London)

Twelve drawings from the *Juliette* series, 1998, ink on paper, 22 x 14³/₄" each, Lent by the artist

Colin Darke (Born in 1957 in Grimsby, England; lives in Derry, Northern Ireland)

Wages, Price, and Profit, 1998, ink on cigarette papers, 22 x 47¹/₄", Lent by the artist

Richard Gorman (Born in 1956 in Dublin, Republic of Ireland; lives in Milan, Italy)

Twenty-four Untitled drawings, gouache on paper, 7³/₄ x 10¹/₄" each, Courtesy Kerlin Gallery, Dublin

Róisín Lewis (Born in 1966 in Oxford, England; lives in Belfast, Northern Ireland)

Scríob 1-4, 1997, felt marker on paper, 36¹/₄ x 24⁷/₁₆" each, Lent by the artist

Fergus Martin (Born in 1955 in Cork, Republic of Ireland; lives in Dublin)

Six Untitled drawings, 1998, ink on paper, 12 x 32" each, Lent by Jerome O'Drisceoil, Green on Red Gallery, Dublin

William McKeown (Born in 1962 in Tyrone, Northern Ireland; lives in Dublin, Republic of Ireland)

Seven Untitled drawings, 1998, watercolor on paper, 26¹/₈ x 22¹/₂" each, Private Collection, New York

Fionnuala Ní Chiosáin (Born in 1966 in Dublin, Republic of Ireland; lives in Dublin)

Untitled, 1998, acrylic, sumi ink, and watercolor on paper on board, 49¹/₄ x 59¹/₂", Lent by ACC Bank Collection, Ireland

Untitled, 1998, acrylic, sumi ink, and watercolor on paper on board, 49¹/₄ x 59¹/₂", Collection of Maire and Maurice Foley

A Measured Quietude is organized by

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