

Art Criticism, Censorship, and Political Imagery in Irish Art 1971-83

Censorship enforces a stable image of national identity by excluding dissenting elements. This paper considers the role of criticism when subversive factions that threaten national stability intrude directly into the artwork. After decades of relative peace, the outbreak of political violence in Northern Ireland and the breakdown of modernism challenged the art critic into a more direct confrontation with politically motivated art.

Focusing on the reception of three major paintings, Robert Ballagh *Third of May* (1970, Dublin City Gallery), Michael Farrell *Madonna Irlanda* (1977, Dublin City Gallery) and Richard Hamilton *The Citizen* (1982-83, Tate), the paper examines the interface between art criticism and popular media in the presentation and explication of these potentially divisive works of art. Produced at critical moments in the conflict in Northern Ireland, the reception of these works demonstrate how art criticism can work in tandem with censorship. Ballagh's *Third of May* was made in direct response to the Civil Rights movement which began in Northern Ireland in 1968. The work was first exhibited in Dublin in 1971, at the height of political tension on the island. Farrell's *Madonna Irlanda*, subtitled the 'First Irish Political Painting', was also a response to the Troubles. It articulated the rage and dislocation experienced by the artist in the face of the continuing crisis in Irish life. *The Citizen* derives from an image of a Republican prisoner on blanket protest at the Maze prison which Hamilton gleaned from a television documentary. It was exhibited in the Orchard Gallery in Derry in 1983, in the wake of the 1981 Hunger Strikes when ten republican prisoners starved themselves to death. These were controversial works exhibited in a period when politically motivated art was unfamiliar to established art critics and commentators. Such direct interaction with the public sphere was new and deeply problematic. The paper considers the reception of these works within the context of art criticism and the broader public domain. In neglecting to recognise the political meanings of these works, art criticism was arguably complicit with prevailing ideas of cultural censorship. The paper asks to what extent art criticism disconnects art from the public and why?

Effects of populism, Neo-Nationalism and censorship in art critical practice.

The art critic is at the centre of censorship both historically and in the contemporary moment. By failing to address the populist meanings of works of art, the critic inhibits the potential of art to actively engage in the public sphere.

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