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(Lecture de) Art in Ireland since 1910

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(Lecture de) Art in Ireland since 1910

Alexandra Slaby

RÉFÉRENCE

Fionna Barber, *Art in Ireland since 1910*, London, Reaktion Books, 2013, ISBN 978-1-78023-036-8.

- 1 The first history spanning the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st, this richly illustrated (266 ill., 222 in colour), indeed superb volume is a very welcome, long-awaited contribution to Irish art historiography. It is also the first substantial attempt at contextualizing developments in Irish artistic practice against a background of political and social change in relation to issues of nation-building and modernization. So far, Irish art histories had offered either a formalist appreciation of art disconnected from its context, or a contextualized but selective survey; or they stopped mid-century, concentrated on the Republic, or did not take into account the Irish Diaspora. To those first endeavours, Fionna Barber, Principal Lecturer in Contextual Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University, has not only added a few decades of art history, but has also brought her own approach combining pedagogically presented elements of context with an elegant, meticulous yet highly readable style. The result is an illuminating overview which makes the history of Irish art fully intelligible not only by Irish Studies scholars but also by a general readership wishing to familiarize itself better with Irish culture.
- 2 Situating her project within debates arising in art criticism and Irish Studies at the turn of the new millennium and calling on Irish art historiography to further explore the political and social underpinnings of Irish culture, Fionna Barber sets out to analyse the forces informing subject and representational choices in Irish art across the century: nation-building and modernity and their impact on the relationship to time and space, the awakening to body and gender issues, and the experience of emigration.

- 3 She takes us from London artists Paul and Grace Henry's painting holiday on Achill Island in the summer of 1910 through the creation of a new imagery in the independent state combining visual constructions of a archaic ethnicity and attempts at socialist realism *Irish style*, through nostalgic expressionism, the exposure to continental influences during the Emergency, the increasing concern with the urban, down to the neo-expressionist representation of gender politics, the interrogation of the nationalist narrative and the latest postmodernist experimentations of artists in post-Tiger Ireland or hailing from Diasporic shores.
- 4 Throughout her eleven chronological chapters, the author compares visual constructions of identity in the Republic and in Northern Ireland. What form can art take in a conflict-ridden society concerned for the almost the whole century with its mere physical survival? To what extent are artists compelled to represent the conflict and its effects on individuals and communities, or on the contrary are moved to escape with their easels to an idealized arcadia? What differences between North and South in the engagement with modernism? The answers are in this book which can also be read as a visual chronicle of British-Irish relations.
- 5 While readers are initiated to the works of famous and lesser-known artists and taken through epoch-defining exhibitions, they are also constantly reminded of the social issues at work in artistic practice – the differing backgrounds of Anglo-Irish and Irish painters, urbanization and the changing perception of the west, a highly gendered artistic practice and its stylistic repercussions.
- 6 We all wished this book existed, and here it is. It will no doubt encourage further research on the critical power of art in times of moral and political crisis, or the visual politics of commemoration as we enter a decade of historic anniversaries. More work needs to be carried out in the field of sculpture and architecture using Fionna Barber's contextual approach. This book could also provide an opportunity to engage in a comparative study of the way art, music and literature have engaged with modernism and postmodernism in Ireland. For the time being however, as the most important contribution to date to the understanding and appreciation of Irish art, it will no doubt soon find its place among the reference books on the shelves of all Irish Studies scholars.

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