

Review of Brian Bourke: five decades 1960s-2000s, Lilliput Press, 2010.

Published with images of the artist's work as 'Brian Bourke's Dramatis Personae' in *The Irish Arts Review*, winter 2010, pp. 3-5, and reproduced with kind permission from the IAR.

Brian Bourke's rare and distinctive artistic vision operates through a series of interchangeable themes that span the decades: landscape; still life; literature; myth; portraiture and self-portraiture. Interwoven through his work is an ever-present sense of compelling and portent immediacy that combines to create a visual atmosphere which Bourke himself calls 'suspended animation.' The finely tuned reality is made more real because the artist seeks the essence, or, as Walter Benjamin puts it, the trace, of that which might have been left behind by others, mythological or otherwise. Thus, there is a genuine verisimilitude in the poignant atmosphere in, for example, *The Day of the Eclipse*, one of a series painted in memory of the artist's brother Fergus, and in whose garden the scene is situated. On the other hand, there is a comical imagination at work in *Sweeny Animated* from the *Sweeny Birdman* series, the latter of which were completed at the supposed site of his protagonist's death, St Mullins in County Carlow. If further proof is needed of a keen sense of comedy, examine, for instance, *Don Quixote's Penance Number Two*, from a series based on a translation of Cervantes by Tobias Smollet.

An admirer of Henri Matisse, Bourke's fascination with drama and 'the object' is genuine, thoughtful, exhilarating and transformative. He has said that 'constructing a painting is like putting on a play', and objects are placed for theatrical and often double effect. A hat may add drama to a portrait, or it may be a more-than-useful prop to contain a sitter's personality within the canvas. An animal skull may be given new life, as in *Nature Morte*, *Nature Vivante*, in which the object initially appears as something akin to a magazine model, self-consciously posing in a landscape for the viewer's gaze, the circular inner frame adding to the sense of the bizarre. Bourke's use of a roughly-drawn, child-like, inner frame is peculiarly powerful, serving to visually corral the pent-up energy, and yet forming a flawed window, which, by its bizarre presence, encourages the viewer to look further into the image. Thus, by a process of alteration, which is guided by an artist with a perfect eye for imperfect and ordinary detail, the inner frame becomes another object that animates the work.

Notwithstanding his landscapes and extraordinary portraits of women, almost everything in Bourke's work is made to become an object that is then used to create suspended drama. He has an obvious fascination with the concept of the Herm as a boundary marker. In a series that conjures the atmosphere of a Samuel Becket play, Bourke himself becomes the ultimate object as his self-portrait mutates into that of a Herm, and as a result, he becomes at once a boundary marker and a usurper of the art-historical norm. As an object, the Bourke-Herm is made to say and do far more than a mere self-portrait. These works, like so many others, are raucous but noiseless.

A similar treatment is evident in *Women Giving Birth to Men* in which the subject, that might cause controversy if left as such, is transformed into object, yet not objectified. The females, who are based on magazine covers and other media stereotypes, are motionless as if in meditation. The males, on the other hand, are personifications of raw and pure emotion, akin to that evident in Edvard Munch's *The Scream*.

The theme of drama and the object continues, or perhaps reaches an apotheosis, in Bourke's sculptures, which are three-dimensional manifestations of the ancient, the primal and the tribal in all humankind. It is as if Bourke has taken the African masks that were so important to European modernism and combined them with the concept of the Herm to create a new portrait-type object that acknowledges the fundamental sameness in all of us, the world over. A devout draftsman, infused with a love of Gothic painting, oriental perspective and western colour, there is an artistic alchemy in Brian Bourke's work that is highly distinctive and absolutely unique.

With alchemy in mind, visualise a book of mysterious spells; ancient, restless, the decorative wrap barely containing the potent energy within. Transpose that image to the present, and it well-

describes *Brian Bourke: five decades 1960s-2000s*, recently published by Lilliput. On the bookshelf, the green cover, luxuriant in texture, might initially suggest a decorous fate. But the Beckett-like image of the artist, set squarely in the centre, creates a juxtaposition that subverts expectation. Given his transformative use of the object, one may speculate about the antlers posed atop the artist's head on the cover –the deliberate absurdity is as stimulating as it is provocative - it signals something of the restless imagery that is, just barely, contained within.

Once the cover is turned it is immediately apparent that nothing is how one might expect it to be. Contributions from those that appreciate his rare and extraordinary talents- Patrick T. Murphy, Seamus Heaney, Frankie Gavin, Carlos Garcia-Monzon, Eva Bourke, Frances Ruane, Rosemary Noone, James McKenna, Desmond Egan and Frank McGuinness - are interspersed between high-quality photographs of Bourke's work, but the decades referred to in the title are not in chronological order. Each contribution, whether essay, poem or remark, is as vital as the next. Seamus Heaney, for example, ascribes a particular and distinctive feature to the artist which he calls 'Bourke's mark' and it is this that renders his work so powerful and unusual. Patrick Murphy notes the 'surging dynamism of growth as twisted by life's experience' in his landscapes. Frances Ruane writes that Bourke has 'a comic spirit' and a Beckett-like 'appreciation of the absurd' that is 'rarely found in contemporaries' and which is palpable in the Didi and Gogo, Don Quixote and Sweeny birdman series of works. But it is in the sensitive and insightful interview with Rosemary Noone that the reader will find material, biographical and otherwise, that allows us into the life and imagination of the artist. It is here that you will read about a certain shade of mauve and what it means to the artist; why he does not like to use extraneous detail in portraits that are monumental in their simplicity; his interest in various subjects such as myth, religion and containment; his fascination with the object; why he concentrates on the head while the body becomes secondary; the compulsion to paint women; the importance of the Connemara landscape; his love of Irish traditional music and his desire, even though he does not wish to flatter the viewer, to leave his own 'trace' in the world. When Noone asked about his main visual influences, Bourke's answer reveals something of his restless spirit which may also explain, to some extent, the acrobatic nature of his brushwork: 'I am influenced by anything I ever clapped eyes on...'

From the pages of insightful text and abundant images several significant and related factors emerge, all of which are crucial to Bourke's work: his curiosity about two- and three-dimensional art forms from earlier ages; his attention to multi-perspective composition from the east combined with western-type colour; the use of recognisable art-historical references; a world-view that is wholly individual, challenging, and regularly humorous; a continual desire to image and contain the noise, force, and three-dimensionality of the apparently mundane through a carefully planned use of drama; and above all, a life-long and extraordinary investigative commitment to the transformative and artistically exquisite possibilities of 'the object.'

To use the musical term that could be applied to Frankie Gavin's wonderfully notated contribution called *The Bourke of Art*, this volume, as an object, is a planxty, that is, a Turlough O' Carolan-like homage, about and to a master of visual alchemy. *Brian Bourke: five decades 1960s-2000s* is a well-thought-out, provocative, intellectually engaging and lively testament of the artist's career to date. It is an object that usurps and questions the norm, and in so far as it is at all possible, it is a physical demonstration of the powerful, penetrating and remarkable artistic force that is Brian Bourke. It is expensive and it does not have an index, but it does offer superb contributions alongside details of awards, lists of exhibitions, a bibliography and high-quality reproductions. It is well worth the cost, and once purchased, it will not allow itself to be simply decorous.