

# Art Changes

## Nothing...Probably

(An abridged version of a spoken word text delivered on opening night)

In preparing for this exhibition I looked at consequences for lives lived in the pursuit of an ideal. Concentrating initially on two fellow Irishmen, 1916 rebel and poet Thomas MacDonagh and arctic explorer Ernest Shackleton, I moved on to explore disillusionment within my own brand of artistic idealism. There followed an admission around a persistent obsession stretching back 30 years, a search to create what I understood was a moment.

The moment is indeed difficult to define but recognisable upon emergence. I experienced a moment while waiting for a night sailing to Dublin. Under harsh light I looked up from reading Raskolnikov's astonishing confession to Sonya from *Crime and Punishment* to watch a fatigued mother and child as if they were the first on earth. The spell lasted and was only broken after a call to board. Present within all art forms this phenomenon is explored and identified more within some cultures than in others. Lorca, the Spanish poet, writes in his essay *Theory and Play Of The Duende*, that every artist struggles "not with an Angel, nor with his Muse but with his duende".

There is a suggestion that inspiration and activity plays only a part and the mystery of a moment is induced by the abandonment of the creator to the greater purpose of the expression. The artist must therefore have sufficient human experience to be in a position to summon "the dark sounds", as Lorca has it, while not ignoring the artistic maturity necessary for its production.

Biopics of artists dwell on an all-consuming desire and relish the ensuing chaos in and around the pursuit. A sincere Kirk Douglas in *Lust for Life* suggests compellingly the intoxicants present in the painter. Director Minnelli intelligently shows how lead paints and absinthe didn't do to him what self-doubt did. In John Maybury's *Love is the Devil* Derek Jacobi as Francis Bacon spends his afternoons drinking in the Colony Room. This contrasts with his diligence the morning after. While Soho sleeps, Bacon is up and at it in the attic. Both painters are susceptible to filmic biography because the viewer knows they will realise their desire. The tension is in how much damage will ensue before, (and indeed after), the artist realises it too.

To explore this relationship between desire and time I have created a biopic about myself. In the future perhaps, the public role alone, as presented by an artist, may be considered equal to any artistic product. For the time being I only use the biopic as cover - an artist pretending to be an artist. My biopic explores the realisation that achieving a long held artistic desire causes more and not less chaos. This revelation led to better understanding the psychology of idealism. This brought me back to my fellow countrymen and their desire. The suggestion that failure may have been the endgame all along coalesced into identification with MacDonagh and Shackleton. In psychoanalytic terms we may of being pursuing a goal we should never, for the sake of our sanities, attain.

The arc of the biopic is an attempt to create a symbolic painting for 2016. I fail of course, wondering after if such a collective gesture is now plausible. The choice of a symbol to define an epoch and by turns a shared identity is ripe for appropriation. For me to consciously abandon the painting seemed symbolic enough of my own attitude to identity and diminishing concern surrounding responsibility.

For 20 years I had believed in an art impacting upon society; perception infiltrating policy, grassroots creative options offering human centred solutions to practical living problems. I should of joined the bank. I see now that power will never incorporate ideas that diminish its status and benign creative agitation will do little to roughen up its mantle. Worst still, in some way, I understand why this has become so.

Until recently my search for a moment was largely left ignored, not quite an affectation but perhaps a luxury. Accepting my ineffectiveness allowed a return to the obsession that had begun it all. I found I had aged along with those moments I admired and age had lent some insight. Raskolnikov's confession, the end of *The Dead*, the mystery wind of Tarkovsky's *Mirror*. All sequences building to unearth a sudden identification with a Pre-Edenic Loss. A sadness that is not yet my fault.

My sense is that in creating a moment an artist must reinterpret the doubt generated by the continued failure of an absent deity to appear. This doubt, galvanised in the absence, somehow resolves to lift expertise to exaltation. The artist must err on the side of this doubt, follow its trajectory and accept its untold failures. Yet when the moment happens the artist is first to experience its euphoric pleasures. Momentary and full

with epiphanic potency, what artist wouldn't do whatever it takes to get there again?

Of course there is a cost. As in all obsessions that put any singular pursuit as the purpose of life, contentment becomes more and more elusive. Production does differentiate art from self-destructive practices, yet motivation and remorse is similar. Why do I spend my days in this ineffable dispute? It is the failure, so unremitting, that keeps me going.

The resonance of a moment may be delayed by a myopic history catching up. Idealism runs risk also of being fetishized by adherence to a central idea which history too has rendered obsolete. This may be true for nationality, identity and responsibility. In *On Doubt*, I make the case that loyalty was inculcated into future leaders by teachers whose adherence to authority was part of their vocation. Today and mainly because of my experience of living outside Ireland, I choose my allegiances. Putting aside now all other concerns, the singular pursuit of a moment is my preferred aim.

*On Doubt* is not yet revealed and my thoughts run to a new one. A calculation upon one's age and the time it takes bring an idea to fruition suggests a finite selection of ideas will make it. I have thought already on the type of painting I can achieve should I reach infirmity. It would be small I imagine and without great gesture. As a result of my preoccupation I have begun to filter my intake of information. To be effective in the ongoing pursuit I feel I must edit out some, but not all, of the imagery feeding daily through television and social media. I turn away particularly from images of needless human suffering. For too long I viewed any inaction on my part as complicit. This plays into a self-conscious criticism, which long hid a useful doubt behind a destructive and harmful doubt of self.

The museums of the world are full of moments because the world is filled with moments. Small, mundane actions are elevated by the focus of one who has attuned their perception to such matters. The sharing of the action, accompanied by the doubt of its relevance, obliterates all differences and all time and only hopes to rest long enough in the mouth for the effect to become emptied unto the open mouth of another fool. Another fool, just like me.

All that I have said and done,  
Now that I am old and ill,  
Turns into a question till  
I lie awake night after night  
And never get the answers right.  
Did that play of mine send out  
Certain men the English shot?  
Did words of mine put too great strain  
On that woman's reeling brain?  
Could my spoken words have checked  
That whereby a house lay wrecked?  
And all seems evil until I  
Sleepless would lie down and die.

You were silly like us; your gift  
survived it all:  
The parish of rich women, physical  
decay,  
Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into  
poetry.  
Now Ireland has her madness and her  
weather still,  
For poetry makes nothing happen: it  
survives  
In the valley of its making where  
executives  
Would never want to tamper, flows on  
south  
From ranches of isolation and the busy  
griefs,  
Raw towns that we believe and die in;  
it survives,  
A way of happening, a mouth.

And were Yeats living at this hour  
It should be in some ruined tower  
not malachited Ballylee  
where he paid out to those below  
one guilt-edged scroll from his pencil  
as though he were part Rapunzel  
and partly Delphic oracle.  
As for his crass rhetorical  
Posturing, "Did that play of mine  
Send out certain men (certain men?)  
The English shot...?  
The answer is "Certainly not"  
If Yeats had saved his pencil lead  
Would certain men have stayed in bed?  
For history's a twisted fruit  
With art its small translucent fruit  
And never the other way around.

In dreams begins responsibilities;  
It was on account of just such an  
allegory  
That Lorca  
Was riddled with bullets  
And lay mouth down  
In the fickle shadow of his own blood.  
As the drunken soldiers of the Gypsy  
Ballads  
Started back for town  
They heard his calling through the  
mist  
"When I die leave the balcony shutters  
open"  
For poetry can make things happen  
Not only can but must

Who is the third who walks always  
beside you?  
When I count, there are only you and I  
together  
But when I look ahead up the white  
road  
There is always another one walking  
beside you  
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle,  
hooded  
I do not know whether a man or a woman  
—But who is that on the other side of  
you?

I have included in my text some  
extracts from poems. In sequence these  
were,

Man and the Echo by William Butler  
Yeats

In Memory of WB Yeats by W H Auden

7 Middagh Street by Paul Muldoon

The Waste Land TS Elliot