The Artistic Representation of War and Peace, Politics and the Global Crisis

Old Forms, New Content: Art Dealing with Crises

Par [Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin](#)
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Thème: [History](#)

Contemporary art is often criticised as pointless or overvalued by art market elites. Even the word 'artist' has lost much of its meaning. The many ongoing global socio-political crises seem to make even the idea of art fade into insignificance. Most art either reflects local reality (landscapes, cityscapes, portraits) or internal 'reality' (surrealism, conceptual art). But there are artists (in this case, I will focus on painters) who do not shy away from depicting the difficulties facing ordinary people or the elites who create those difficulties in the first place. Here we will look at particular ways in which painters deal with contemporary reality using old and new forms of art to draw attention to injustices or general social issues.

When we see art that is trying to depict contemporary reality we can easily be drawn into the content of the picture without realising that the very forms used are themselves a result of conflicts of differing styles for formal and ideological reasons arising from within the artistic 'community' itself. While the forms can range from the purely abstract to the hyper-real, most socio-political art tends towards differing degrees of realism.

Nationalism

Historically, nationalist artists concerned with political change resisted modern forms and looked back into their own nation's history for inspiration. For example, the intertwining of nationalism and art in Ireland has led, in many cases, to a very inward-looking identity, a striving for Irishness in Irish art (e.g. Celtic art), a misplaced resistance to centuries of colonisation. However, in Ireland, as James Christen Steward writes:

> "As it has been throughout the century, internationalism in Irish painting can still be seen as emotionally fraught, the adoption of foreign influence as a form of emigration signifying Ireland's colonization (specifically as a colonized woman). Those artists who have resisted internationalism have often sought consciously to invoke links between the individual, the community, and the Irish landscape to assert a sense of distinct identity, and this remains the case for Irish painters working in the landscape idiom." [1]

However, there are examples of nineteenth century Irish artists who used their art and the new style of realism to highlight local social ills, such as James Brennan (1837-1907) as Claudia Kinmonth has noted:

> "It was rare for artists to be able to afford the indulgence of painting precisely

what they wanted to paint, so the blatantly unfashionable images by James Brennan, for example, were facilitated by his salary as head of Cork School of Art. He was further driven to depict the plight of families of farmers or fishermen at home by his altruistic involvement in the setting up of Irish lace schools and his work for the Great Exhibition in London. His careful attention to the minutiae of what was once commonplace, showing cabin interiors furnished with nothing but the barest necessities, provides some of the most useful windows onto social history." [2]

News from America (1875) (James Brennan)

Realism

However, the realist form needed real subjects and they were not always enthused by the new attention and focus on their lives and occupations. Some artists converged on the Claddagh in Galway (in the west of Ireland) in the move towards realism and away from romanticism. These included socially engaged British artists. The international focus of realism on the peasant and working class allowed these artists to leapfrog nationalist concerns and paint outside their own community. The initial suspicions of the local people towards artists suddenly taking an interest in their lives soon changed, as is shown by the experiences of the English painters Goodall and Topham in the Claddagh. While at first perceived to be 'tax-collectors, spies or Protestants', they were eventually accepted by the people and even stayed with them.[3] Despite typical hostility to outsiders, Julian Campbell writes,

> "It was here in the Claddagh and the fish market that a colony of Irish and British artists began to gather in the 1830s and 1840s, the period just before the Great Famine and the arrival of the steam train to Galway. Significantly, this was exactly the same time as the Barbizon School of landscape painters was beginning to form in the forest of Fontainebleau in France. Unlike the earlier groups of painters in county Kerry whose interest had been primarily in landscape, the artists in Galway focused their attention on the everyday lives and activities of the Galway people in a series of genre pictures. [...] The Claddagh provided an authentic fishing village of thatched dwellings to study,

and the fish market much colourful activity to observe." [4]

Cottage Interior, Claddagh, Galway (1845) (Francis William Topham)

Barbizon School

The French Barbizon artists were initially influenced by the English artist, John Constable, to draw their inspiration directly from nature and to leave the formalism of the Classical style in the studio. Soon, however, this idea was developed by Jean-François Millet from painting the landscape to depicting the local people themselves:

> "Millet extended the idea from landscape to figures — peasant figures, scenes of peasant life, and work in the fields. In The Gleaners (1857), for example, Millet portrays three peasant women working at the harvest. Gleaners are poor people who are permitted to gather the remains after the owners of the field complete the main harvest. The owners (portrayed as wealthy) and their laborers are seen in the back of the painting. Millet shifted the focus and the subject matter from the rich and prominent to those at the bottom of the social ladders. To emphasize their anonymity and marginalized position, he hid their faces. The women's bowed bodies represent their everyday hard work."

The Gleaners (1857) (Jean-François Millet)

Ashcan School

As we move into the twentieth century even realism itself became institutionalized, producing reactions such as the Ashcan School in New York. They used a darker, rougher style of realist painting to express the poverty of the working class in the ghettoes. Artists working in this style such as Robert Henri (1865–1929), George Luks (1867–1933), William Glackens (1870–1938), John Sloan (1871–1951), and Everett Shinn (1876–1953) were not a formal group, but:

> "Their unity consisted of a desire to tell certain truths about the city and modern life they felt had been ignored by the suffocating influence of the Genteel Tradition in the visual arts. Robert Henri, in some ways the spiritual father of this school, « wanted art to be akin to journalism… he wanted paint to be as real as mud, as the clods of horse-shit and snow, that froze on Broadway in the winter. »"
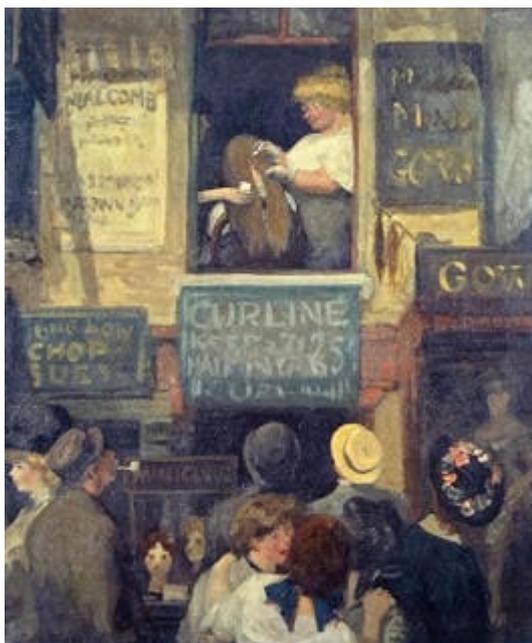
Hairdresser's Window (John Sloan)
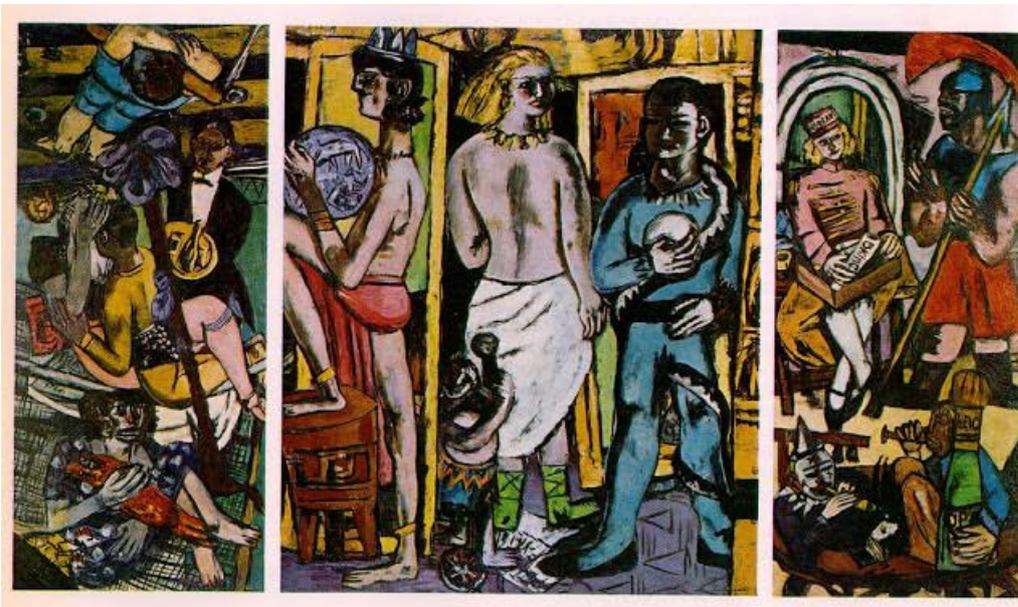
German Expressionism

Back in Europe, during the 1920s and 1930s German Expressionism was at its height and

artists like George Grosz and Max Beckman focused less on the working class and more on decadent society and the rise of the Nazis. German expressionism contrasts with the Ashcan School on a formal level as expressionism presents 'the world solely from a subjective perspective, distorting it radically for emotional effect in order to evoke moods or ideas' unlike realism where the emphasis on objectivity is more important. The use of distortion, caricature and the general aesthetics of ugliness became the formal basis of the art of George Grosz who used this form as an implicit criticism of what he saw around him:

> "In his drawings, usually in pen and ink which he sometimes developed further with watercolor, Grosz did much to create the image most have of Berlin and the Weimar Republic in the 1920s. Corpulent businessmen, wounded soldiers, prostitutes, sex crimes and orgies were his great subjects."

Max Beckman looked back even further into the history of art and mixed expressionism with medieval aesthetics and forms to represent contemporary reality as he saw it:

> "Beckmann reinvented the religious triptych and expanded this archetype of medieval painting into an allegory of contemporary humanity. […] Many of Beckmann's paintings express the agonies of Europe in the first half of the 20th century. Some of his imagery refers to the decadent glamor of the Weimar Republic's cabaret culture, but from the 1930s on, his works often contain mythologized references to the brutalities of the Nazis. Beyond these immediate concerns, his subjects and symbols assume a larger meaning, voicing universal themes of terror, redemption, and the mysteries of eternity and fate."

Departure (1932-5) (Max Beckman)

Contemporary Visions

Contemporary versions of these approaches can be seen in the realist work of the American painterMax Ginsberg and the more expressionist approach of the English painter John Keane. Ginsburg's painting *Foreclosure* has a baroque feel to it. While today baroque is associated with over-the-top exaggeration and opulence, it was rooted much more in realism than romanticism (a reaction to the Age of Enlightenment and the scientific

rationalization of nature). The features of baroque consisted of dramatic tension, heightened realism, illusions of motion, and classical elements used without classical restraint. Ginsburg, like Beckman, is looking back at earlier forms to express contemporary dilemmas.

Foreclosure (Max Ginsberg)

His work is usually straight-up realism but the baroque style of *Foreclosure* allows him to use more dramatic expressions of the crisis in hand. His interest and concern is reflected in his comment on the painting:

> "It is unconscionable that people are being evicted from their homes, especially when banks and corporations are being bailed out. This injustice is not supposed to happen in America. In this painting I wanted to express the anguish and frustration of people in this situation."

Ginsburg's painting War-Pieta shows a similar interest in art history put to contemporary use. He writes:

> "I wanted to bring attention to the horror of war, and in this case the war in Iraq. I thought of a mother losing her son and the Pieta paintings of the Old Masters and of Michelangelo's sculpture, Pieta, showing the Madonna mourning the death of her son. In my painting I sought to symbolically connect, and contrast, the image of a real mother screaming in anguish over the death of her soldier son with the Old Master images of the Madonna mourning the death of her son in a rather unreal, quiet and serene way. The torn fatigues, the mangled soldier's body and the flag symbolize one of the many young Americans who have been killed in this war."

War-Pieta (Max Ginsberg)

The English artist [John Keane](#) uses expressionism as a form for dealing with Tony Blair's 'mercurial' appearance at the Chilcot Inquiry into the Iraq war. While Ginsburg's work depicts ordinary people in sometimes extraordinary situations, Keane has focused on those who caused them. Here we can see realism used as a form to depict the victims of a state agenda and expressionist distortion used to depict one of the executors of that same agenda.
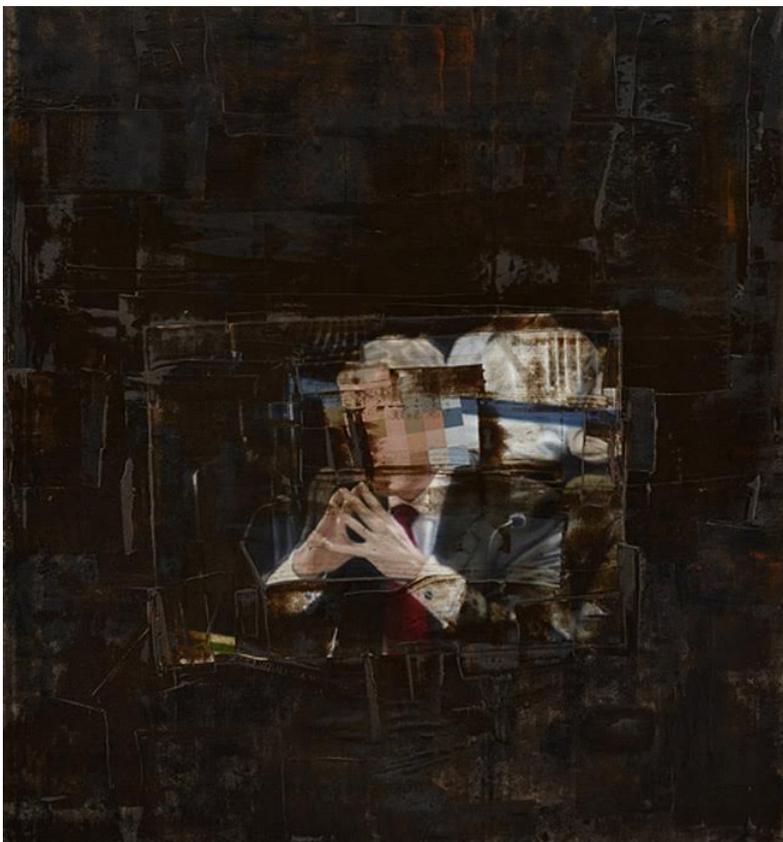

Figure at an Inquiry no 5 (John Keane)

However, the challenge for contemporary artists is not to fall into the trap of constantly portraying people as victims. Art must be inspired and inspiring. As an artist one can draw attention to the difficulties faced by people the world over but it is also important to recognize that everywhere there

are people active in solving problems and trying to change society for the better, both socially and politically. The massive demonstrations against war in Iraq are a case in [point](#):

> "On February 15, 2003, there was a coordinated day of protests across the world in which people in more than 600 cities expressed opposition to the imminent Iraq War. It was part of a series of protests and political events that had begun in 2002 and continued as the war took place. Social movement researchers have described the 15 February protest as « the largest protest event in human history »"

Peace-March (Max Ginsburg)

Ginsburg describes the process of painting an image of many people of all ages and types on the streets [demonstrating](#) noting also influential artists and styles:

> "The differences and individuality of people marching for peace is quite different than the mechanical sameness of soldiers marching. I took many photographs at a Peace March protesting the war in Iraq and selected ten of them that were good for expression and composition to use as reference. Attention was paid to the variation of individuals and the expression of determination. Based on these photographs, I made a compositional sketch for the grouping of figures, perspective and darks and lights. Then, with the aid of a grid, I transferred the drawings to the large canvas to scale. And then I proceeded to paint, in my usual direct alla prima style. I was greatly influenced by Ilya Repin's Religious Processionpainting and Kathe Kollwitz' The Weavers."

Subject / Object

The change in realism over time from Millet's peasants to narrative painting has also seen the move from the depiction of people as oppressed objects to passive subjects to engaged subjects. It seems that the opposite happens with expressionist depictions – a shift from the subject to the object. By objectifying our problems, bad leaders etc a certain distancing is achieved. Images of unity in mass demonstrations counter media strategies of divide and rule while the subjective, up-close, prettified televised images of silver-tongued politicians

need some objectification to put conservative policies and agendas into perspective. Socially and politically conscious artists counteract the controlled images of the state and find new ways of seeing by looking back to images and forms of the past while at the same time searching for new methods of depicting the problems of the present.

Notes:

[1] James Christen Steward *et al*, *When Time Began to Rant and Rage: Figurative Painting from Twentieth-Century Ireland* (London: Merrell Holberton Publishers, 1999) p.22
[2] Crawford Art Gallery, *Whipping the Herring: Survival and Celebration in Ninteenth-Century Irish Art* (Cork: Gandon Editions, 2006) p.37
[3] Crawford Art Gallery, *Whipping the Herring: Survival and Celebration in Nineteenth-Century Irish Art* (Cork: Gandon Editions, 2006) p.28
[4] Crawford Art Gallery, *Whipping the Herring: Survival and Celebration in Nineteenth-Century Irish Art* (Cork: Gandon Editions, 2006) p.27

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