



RHA PRIZEWINNERS 2004

MARIANNE O'KANE reviews the work of two very different artists, Sonia Shiel and Maeve McCarthy, who share a proven track record of accomplishment at the RHA

The Royal Hibernian Academy is committed to being an artist-orientated institution with its programming policy consistently informed by the drive to profile the best of traditional and innovative practice. Thus the academy presents painting, first and foremost, alongside sculpture, printmaking, photography, drawing and architectural models. The RHA began hosting an annual exhibition in 1826 and this tradition has flourished since with the 174th exhibition this year. In a showcase of just under five hundred works, the exhibition continues to be the biggest annual profile of contemporary Irish art and one that is anticipated with interest by artists, critics and collectors alike. It is the country's only opportunity for painters to exhibit work on this scale.

There were fourteen awards and scholarships presented at this year's show to the exhibiting artists. Maeve McCarthy and Sonia Shiel, both Dublin-based, were respective recipients of the Don Niccolo D'Ardia Caracciolo RHA Medal and Award and the Hennessy Craig Scholarship. Both artists share an affinity in terms of demonstrating a fidelity to painting as developmental

exploration and the variety of their output renders them resistant to classification. They are thoroughly self-conscious practitioners in the medium of paint, constantly questioning method and approach, to invest their practice with a level of freshness and variation. It is noteworthy that Shiel and McCarthy have proved themselves in these particular awards previously. Shiel was nominated for the Hennessy Craig Scholarship in 2002 and McCarthy received the Don Niccolo D'Ardia Caracciolo RHA Medal and Award in 1995. Each artist blends the academy's acknowledged 'tradition and innovation' in terms of process and product individually in their work.

Maeve McCarthy's Don Niccolo D'Ardia Caracciolo RHA Medal and Award is in honour of the artist of the same name who died in 1989 and is awarded by Jorgensen Fine Art. McCarthy's *Self-Portrait* won the award this year, with her approach capturing the essence of Caracciolo's painting (Fig 1). McCarthy was born in Dublin in 1964 and studied at the National College of Art and Design. Her first solo exhibitions were in Colorado (1995) and Utah (1996). The quality of her portraiture has already been

recognised; she was awarded the Arnott's National Portrait Award in 1989 and 1999. McCarthy's field of influence is extensive, ranging from early Renaissance fresco painters to American artists of the 1930s, particularly Edward Hopper.

It is the Renaissance influence, however, and most markedly the Flemish tradition that is evident in *Self-Portrait*. This painting has a magnetic force and is more realist in approach than McCarthy's preceding portraits. While conceived on a small scale, the impact is dramatic, with the observer almost captured in the artist's gaze; yet not quite, McCarthy looks beyond us. The direct gaze and interaction with the self in this study is not complete, which lends a mysterious and enigmatic power to the painting. The distinctive colour and composition shares an affinity with the portraiture of Hans Holbien and has the appearance of an innovative revision of works by the artist such as *Sir Thomas More* in terms of composition, and *The Ambassadors* in relation to colour combination. According to Radu Bourneanu, Holbien's portraits reflected 'a minute observation of reality and of the individual features, a balance of shapes and a geometric structure of the composition...' This interpretation of Holbien could apply equally to McCarthy and indeed the exacting compositional structure merged with limited yet lush colours is what renders this small piece so magical.

McCarthy is an experienced portraitist who appreciates the freedom of constructing self-portraits. She explains: 'The self-portrait is a useful way of exploring the human face, without the constraints of models, sitters and the pressures that are part of commissioned portraits.'² This confessed liberty is evident in *Self-Portrait*, where her depth of character is captured. This painting is of the artist at the age of forty, and she admits that she constructs a self-portrait approximately every five years to capture different stages in her life and her developing approach to the genre.

The Hennessy Craig Scholarship, in memory of two academicians, H Robertson Craig and Patrick Hennessy, is by far the academy's most substantial prize in the annual exhibition. The award of €10,000 is designed to enable the winner (under the age of thirty-five) to pursue further study in Ireland or abroad. As recipient, Sonia Sheil plans to undertake a residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts, Alberta, Canada and further experiment in terms of her practice. Sheil studied painting at the National College of Art and Design. She has had solo exhibitions in the Appleloft Gallery Sligo, Ashford Gallery and Cross Gallery in Dublin.

Over the past five years, the artist has embarked upon an ongoing investigation of technique through the process of painting, a preoccupation that, if maintained, will ensure that her work will never be formulaic. She consistently forges a union of opposites in her practice, allowing constraint and indulgence, austerity and opulence to emerge or disappear depending on the demand of the particular work. There is a deliberate censure and quest for perfection that leaves its legacy on the surface. Sheil notes that 'Tears, cuts and lines constantly revise and realign the edges of emerging forms and figures, scribbled over and under like circuits of self-correction.'³ This dynamic yet paradoxical method of indulgence and denial allows the process to reflect an inner psychological struggle which is resolved on the canvas. The Award winning work *Part Candy* was painted towards the end of prepa-

ration for her recent solo exhibition at the Cross Gallery, entitled *Eider on Candy* (Fig 2). Shiel remarks on its conception: 'What predominates in *Part Candy* is the seductive wounds on the canvas...its surface is bruised, with the colour black-blue dominating, like a wounded self-consciousness. Out of the scarring lines I have divided the composition into trees and space, a balance which recurs in my work whatever visual reference I use and its placement.'⁴ Shiel sees painting as a necessary indulgence in today's art world and this is reflected in her playful use of candy pink in the work. Shiel's reductive analytical approach emphasises her devotion to process and technique. Textile artists such as Ghada Amer and two masters of form and composition, Hughie O'Donoghue and Camille Souter, have inspired Shiel. Her work also echoes the approach of George Campbell, distressing and scratching the painting's surface to capture the essence of the Irish landscape. *Part Candy*'s surface has a tangible quality of warmth akin to that of tapestry, and although rigid compositional divisions accentuate the flat surface, there is also an intriguing depth provided by the layered trees. The colour employed, scale of the painting and overall concise conception, mark the strength of Shiel's expression and her worthiness of this prestigious scholarship. ■

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1 MAEVE MCCARTHY
Self-Portrait
oil on panel
38.1 x 38.1cm

2 SONIA SHIEL
Part Candy
oil on canvas
157.48 x 152.4cm

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