Vocation and Vision

In his early thirties Patrick Pye converted to Catholicism: here he tells BRIAN McAVERA of the impact this has had on his life's work and his artistic alignment with Italian art before 1500

Brian McAvera: Patrick, like Camille Souter you were born in England in 1929, though of an Irish parent. Do you think that the English aspect had any effect on your temperament or your art, especially when a number of artists who clearly relate to you – I'm thinking of everyone from Palmer and Blake to Eric Gill, Spenser and Sutherland – were English?

Patrick Pye: [Indicates that he wouldn't include Eric Gill, and that these influences are less now] My mother was Irish but with Protestant parents who came over to convert Ireland from its papist ways! My father was English but it was my mother who brought me up. I suppose I'm one of those English people who can't live in England and love Ireland! Although my mother wasn't very religious she was very well read and a highly intelligent woman, so I had a lot of arguments with her. I knew her family had come over in evangelical spirit and I knew that one day I'd have to make up my mind between my granny and my mother about God until eventually I became a Catholic.

My mother was formidable in many ways. It was explained to me that she was an intellectual. When I was three, we came to Dublin. I think England was in my blood. In my adolescence I was very interested in Palmer, Blake, Sutherland and Nash. I never questioned my Irishness but I did discover that I was more English than I particularly wanted to be. Now I find my allegiance to Mediterranean humanism has alienated me from the Northern pantheism.

B McA: When you were in your formative years, Ireland was a very Catholic country, some would say to the point of repressiveness. Now it isn't. Your main patron has been the Catholic Church over the years. What effect, if any, has the decline of the Church had on your art?

P P: It's made me question the culture which wasn't Catholic! It's had that effect. I have found the Church, which I was educated by, to be a sort of second education. Then, I had to read – there were tasks to fulfil – the Bible. I had to form my vision. I discovered things with other Catholics, but I took my time in becoming a Catholic. It was not until my mother was dead that I discovered that I had to be a Catholic. It was the way of growth for me. The decline in faith might have irritated me into a greater opposition to the secular culture! Cardinal Newman remarked that when we look at the evil of the world and the failure of other cultures, it was something of a mystery in itself. There's an awful grandeur in it. So I have come to accept the tension between salvation and non-salvation. But vision is uncannily haunted by meaning and that is why I am a painter.

1 Patrick Pye RHA b.1929 *The Annuciation* (after Domenico Beccafumi) 2004 oil on copper 105 x 95cm

2 Patrick Pye in his studio; photo Amelia Stein, taken from the forthcoming RHA per cent for art commission, to be published spring 2009

3 *The Stonebreaker,* (after drawing by Seurat) oil on board 32 x 40cm

4 *Lucy with bric-a-brac* 1989 oil on gesso board 30 x 40cm

5 *The Crucifixion* (after Veronese) 1990 oil on canvas 98 x 92cm

6 *The Glory Foretold* 1999-2000 oil on linen 218 x 190cm

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B McA: You clearly love the so-called Italian Primitives, who were not primitive at all; and everyone from Bellini to Beata Angelica seems to have left a trace on your art. What is it that you like about them, and how far do you think that remarkable work was often produced because of the tension created between a stable, hierarchical religious framework and the often troubled personalities of the individual artists?

P P: There you are you see – it's not given to us to learn how holy we are! We don't feel particularly holy, but we are holy! This is really a mystery. We have to live with this. When I was a young fellow I was frightened by the tensions in life. I had a nervous breakdown when I fell in love with a certain young lady, but I have learnt that tensions are part of life.

With the Italian Primitives it was their un-naturalism, their naivety that I responded to. If art becomes too technically sophisticated it loses an element of humanity. I don't like the High Renaissance. Michelangelo, Leonardo and Raphael are not my friends though I am impressed by them. There is greater true feeling in the Primitives. I also responded to the kind of colour that they used. One of my favourite paintings is Fiorentino Rosso's *The Deposition* (1521). It's hypnotic, being outside of time and history. He never did anything as good as it.

B McA: If one part of you continually seeks sustenance from the 'Primitives', another part of you seems fascinated with the great Europeans between 1880 and 1930, artists like van Gogh, Gauguin, the Nabis (especially Bonnard), and Munch. It's a counterpoint between controlled surface and expressionistic disruption; between exploration of a theme and decoration. Do you see yourself as yoking these opposites together?

P P: I suppose so. Yes. I do think art is about putting opposites together. Although people have said to me that my work is intellectual, I don't find myself using my intellect to solve problems. It's intuitive, so it takes time. I'm a slow worker.

B McA: Most church architecture, and art, in Ireland is visually unappealing, often in the case of the art being saccharine hand-me-downs of Italian art. What do you aim to bring to a church with your art?

P P: Of course this saccharine art is a deformation of lax cultural standards. The Church is filled with human beings, and often they take the easy way out. It's the way life is, the way human beings are! I hope to counter that because I look to the days when imagery meant something. I try to be true to myself in making images. I was very influenced by T S Eliot as a poet. He spoke a modern tongue and I remember thinking, at school, wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to do for painting what Mr Eliot had done for poetry. Of course I didn't succeed in that until I was halfway though my life.I accept the definition of a sacrament, the outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible life, and so it seems to me that art is deeply linked to religion, to the spiritual, and art is about embodiment. The great cultural image of embodiment, in Europe, is Christ, the Son of the Father.

B McA: Between 1942-45 you were at Saint Columba's College in Dublin where your art teacher was Oisín Kelly. How important was he for your development? Can you give

us a pen-picture of those years; and how far did your interest in sculptural form derive from him?

P P: I don't think it owed much to Oisín, though he was a good teacher and he encouraged me. I kept on seeing him after I left school, and I liked him as a human being. I like his work though it didn't influence me specially. He was a very cultivated eye, and he pointed out the weaknesses in my work which was helpful. The Romanesque influenced me – and him! Both of us were children of the Romanesque, he in his way, me in mine.

B McA: You studied for a while at NCAD. When was that? And can you give us a portrait of that period and of your contemporaries?

P P: Well, it would have been around 1950-53. I was a great friend of Michael Biggs. I owe him the idea that morality and art are not exclusive to each other in any way, as artists who believed in art for art's sake were claiming at the time. The tension between mother and myself was difficult to take so a week after my twenty-first birthday I found cheap lodgings in Upper Mount Street. She said, 'Aren't you a bit precipitous?', and so we parted. I went to see her every few weeks.

I had got lodgings with Patrick Swift. It was a good relationship. We were never real buddies but we did talk and have exchanges on art. He would look at my paintings and me his. I met Frank Morris, the sculptor, who was a great friend. We shared the same veneration for Grunewald and that was lovely. Then, of course, I met his woman! Camille Souter. I enjoyed Camille but didn't like her early work very much. When she went to the Calary Bog, Wicklow, from then on we became good friends. She kept my correspondence apparently, but the great experience of my young days was the art book I discovered in the school library. It was the Phaidon Press *El Greco*. I was totally gobsmacked that art could be revelation. That made me a painter.

B McA: According to one catalogue it was only when you visited Barcelona in the 1950s and saw Catalan sculpture, that you turned your attention to Christian iconography. Is this true?

P P: Yes. It was the humanity, the broad humanity. I think it was the geometry and the language of the gestures that they used – quite hieratic – in combination with the humanity, that affected me deeply. I went back recently and I felt it just as strongly. I was moved in exactly the same way.

B McA: El Greco is often referenced in relation to you, and I can see that the Byzantine edge of his early work, the mystical, spiritual rapture of the later work, and the non-rational space would all appeal to you – indeed you wrote a book on the artist. What strikes me however, are the differences between the two of you – the agitation of his Italian Mannerist elongated figures; the pump-priming emotionalism; the vividness of his colour. It's the mysticism of rapture as opposed to that of contemplation. Would you agree?

P P: I would agree, and I'll tell you a big surprise that happened when I copied an early 'Assumption' by him which also fascinated me as the human beings were on the edge of the world. When I did it, and I looked again at the El Greco, I thought I had turned the El Greco into a Puvis de Chavannes, and that amazed me! My El Greco is printed on the back of my Four Courts Press book on the painter. It's a very peculiar inversion. Always for me, the key to painting (anybody's painting) is the act of transfiguration. The beauty of the representation does not consist of its faithfulness to nature but in the beauty of another world which is somehow more real than the visible world, more charged with meaning; a humanised world in which the 'visible' is illuminated. Perhaps this is as central to my practice as I can get.

B McA: Bruce Arnold considers that your understanding of colour came from Mainie Jellett. Would you accept this point of view?

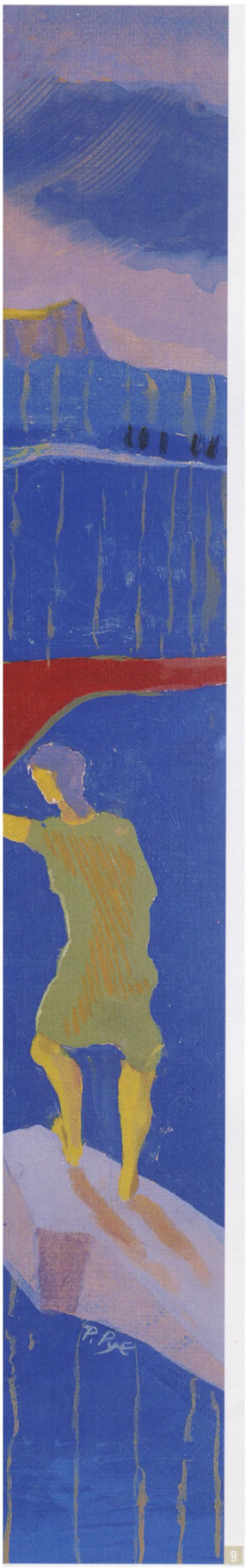
P P: No I wouldn't. Respectfully! Because I'm a figurative artist essentially, I have to relate the colour to the activity of the figures, mainly the dramatic activity. I go to Gauguin and Valloton. I feel my way in colour. I do use colour symbolically, but not in a literal way.

B McA: You paint in tempera as well as in oil on linen or copper. What are the advantages of each? Can you take us through the preparation of a tempera painting?

P P: I use oil colours a lot: an emulsion. Because I build paintings slowly, like the old masters, I build up an image. I often start a painting with this or that biblical subject, with just putting colours side by side to suggest space and then when I feel that I know where the figures are going to be put – the light, the space – then I can start the painting. Tempera is buildingup the colours in glazes and not being naturalistic.With oil on linen (Fig 6) I can also build up my colours, and the emulsion of alkaline and oil in Alkyd colours is not the same as that for tempera. The tempera I used was a French concoction which wasn't a true tempera, though I did start with tempera in its true form. The difference was the French one wasn't an egg tempera. I was misled by the colour merchant! With oil on copper, the copper forces me into a richer palette, a stronger tone and colour

7 *God pitched His Tent among Men* 1997 oil on copper 105 x 92cm Glenstal Abbey

8 *Betrayal of the City* (after El Greco's *Laocoon*) oil on copper 40 x 50cm



Fantasy is personal, it's about 'me' but imagination is archetypal. I've always held that painting is not self-expression. It's about what the painting needs

[points to a work on one of the easels in oil pastel, and also to a *Crucifixion* in copper (Fig 12)]. I suppose that when I get the space and light right, then I know that I'm on the right road: my world is coming together. It's a slow accumulative process but I do have to correct myself at varying degrees.

B McA: You came to printmaking, especially etching, relatively late in your career. What is it about the process, apart from the memento mori aspect, that attracts you?

P P: It's the richness of tone and texture which is satisfying. I like the smoky quality of certain aquatints. Essentially etching is a tonal exercise, but it has a resonance of texture that is often the equivalent to colour. My vision is for homogeneity. I wouldn't be madly interested in techniques. I'm rather conservative really. At school, my English master brought to my attention Coleridge's idea of fantasy and imagination. Fantasy is personal, it's about 'me' but imagination is archetypal. I've always held that painting is not self-expression. It's about what the painting needs.

B McA: You studied the art of stained glass with Albert Troost in Holland. In medieval times, stained glass had a clear pedagogic function. As most of the congregation couldn't read, the stained glass windows were the poor man's bible. In an age of literacy, what function has stained glass today, other than a decorative one?

P P: I think it has the function of moving us, of touching our hearts, of making a world in the window that is very unlike the world we live in. The colours are strong. It's a wonderful medium for expression, but I've given it up now because it's too demanding of time in my old age!

B McA: Apart from religious painting, your other major areas seem to be landscape and still-life, both of which lend themselves to the art of contemplation and tranquillity. What interests you about these genres?

P P: I suppose it's the unconscious, because in still-life bottles are bottles, a jug is a jug and so on, and yet these simple artefacts of our domestic life can take on all sorts of surprising resonances, and that is what really interests me. In relation to landscape, I find it more difficult to return to now because the spaces and the endlessness of it are so close to the sacred, and so when I'm not painting sacred themes, I tend to go for still-life, which is a holiday, and strange and different than, say *The Taking Down from the Cross* and all the other things.

B McA: In 1962 you published a pamphlet called *Has Art Any Meaning?* Does it? And can 'spiritual' content ever reach beyond the converted?

P P: Spiritual content can reach beyond the converted because we don't know what is in us! Undoubtedly it has whatever meaning we wish to give it. For me, it is spiritual. I think abstract art may be spiritual, but it's only flying at half-cock because it doesn't take the artifice of itself back into life. ■

BRIAN McAVERA is an art critic.

9 *Baptism of Christ I*
2004 oil on copper
60 x 80cm

10 *Woman & Cat*
1991 etching
page size:
38 x 47cm
plate size:
20 x 26cm

11 *Piperstown*
(late 1970s) etching
27.94 x 43.18cm

12 Centrepiece of triptych 2008
St Ann's,
Bohernabreena,
Dublin,
oil on copper
53.34 x 30.48cm