

# Reclaiming

Maeve McCarthy is the recipient of the inaugural Ireland–US Council Portrait Award, a prize



The onslaught of images of Samuel Beckett's unmistakable face that heralded the Beckett Centenary Festival this spring, is a powerful reminder of the degree to which our concept of an individual's identity is invested in their appearance. Although the most famous portraits of Beckett are the iconic photographs by the likes of John Minihan and John Haynes, it is perhaps Avigdor Arikha's sketches and etchings of his close friend that most powerfully portray the personality of their subject.<sup>1</sup> Although the camera may never lie, it is more often through the portrait painter's prolonged engagement with the sitter that the front with which we face the world is eroded to reveal the authentic appearance of the individual.

While the photograph captures an instance, the painted or drawn portrait evolves through time, and unlike film, is capable of telescoping many perceived moments, movements, expressions and emotions into a single image that seems to invoke the presence of its subject. Perhaps this is the power of portraiture that has allowed it to survive as a genre despite the predictions of doom brought by the advent of photography. Although the traditional role of the portrait painter was certainly challenged by the invention of the camera, arguably photography has freed the portraitist from the primary role of recording the appearance of the upper classes and allowed a much more diverse and democratic portraiture than could have been imagined by artists such as Gainsborough, or even our own William Orpen and John Lavery, both favourites of the British aristocracy.

Despite the success that our portraitists have achieved abroad, in Ireland portraiture has long been overshadowed by the national obsession with landscape painting. Yet, as Fintan Cullen has suggested in his recent catalogue and exhibition *The Irish Face* held at the National Portrait Gallery, London, portraiture has played a fundamental role in the construction of national identity in Ireland.<sup>2</sup> While, as Cullen points out, the social and artistic role of the portrait was obviously far greater in the 18th and 19th centuries than it is today,<sup>3</sup> the continued popularity of national portrait collections in Dublin, London and beyond, suggests that portraiture still has an important role to play in contemporary society.

Lords and Ladies do not feature among the portraits in this year's RHA. Instead the subjects are largely ordinary people: friends, family or fellow artists, often closely connected to the portraitist. While portraiture has always been strongly represented in

# Portraiture



that underlines our fascination with this compelling genre, writes RIANN COULTER

the Academy and many portraitists have been honoured in the RHA's annual prize list, this year, for the first time, portraits will also be considered separately for a new prize launched by the Ireland-US Council for Commerce and Industry in conjunction with the *Irish Arts Review*. Along with two other new prizes, one for sculpture, the other photography, awarded in this, the RHA's 176th year, the €5,000 portrait prize aims to both recognise and encourage excellence in the arts in Ireland.

With these new awards, the value of the RHA's eighteen strong prize list is raised to over €58,000. Such awards are especially important to younger artists for whom pursuing a career in art, and portraiture in particular, is often a 'Catch 22' situation where commissions only go to established artists and becoming established is impossible without commissions. As part of their new programme to support arts education in Ireland, the

Blaise Smith's *Orla Kelly and Sparky Kelly (In Scart, in the 'New Home')* and Maeve McCarthy's *Portrait of Kevin Kiely, Writer*, (Fig 1) reveal the quality and diversity of contemporary portraiture in Ireland. While each of these paintings, plus a number of others in this year's RHA, would have been a deserving recipient of the inaugural Ireland-US Council portrait award, the Dublin-based artist Maeve McCarthy (Fig 2) was announced as the winner.

McCarthy's portrait of her husband, the writer Kevin Kiely, shares the intimacy of her arresting self-portrait that was nominated for the BP Portrait Award in 2004 and won the Don Niccolo D'Ardia Caracciolo RHA Medal and Award in the same year. Like this prize-winning portrait, many of McCarthy's other portraits, in both pastel and paint, are of writers. While artists often choose to explore their own identity and those of their fellow artists through portraiture, the difficulties of visually representing members of a

1 MAEVE MCCARTHY  
ARHA, *Portrait of  
Kevin Kiely, writer*  
oil on canvas,  
121 x 84.5cm

2 Maeve McCarthy

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Ireland-US Council has stipulated that this prize should be awarded to a 'promising Irish artist in portraiture'.<sup>4</sup> That RHA Council Members are not eligible also rules out competition from a number of our best known portrait painters including James Hanley and Mick O'Dea. Thus, like the hugely popular BP Portrait Award, held annually at the National Portrait Gallery, London since 1979 and open to international artists aged between eighteen and forty, the Ireland-US Council award has the potential to both launch and consolidate the careers of future generations of portrait painters.

That three of the portraits exhibited in this year's RHA have previously been selected for the BP Portrait Award not only proves the international standard of these works, but also highlights the need for this prize and the encouragement and recognition it will provide. Those works; Patrick Redmond's *Raymond*,

profession more used to expressing themselves through the written word can create a tension between artist and subject that is evident in both this award winning work and McCarthy's powerful portrait of Francis Stuart from 1999.

The success that McCarthy achieved at both the RHA and in London in 2004, brought her the public recognition that led to a major commission to paint a portrait of another writer, Maeve Binchy, for the portrait collection of the National Gallery of Ireland. Winning the inaugural Ireland-US portrait award consolidates her achievements to date and suggests that, although still only in her early forties, Maeve McCarthy is well on her way to becoming one of the most celebrated portraitists in Ireland. ■

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The 176th RHA Annual Exhibition, until 8 July RHA, Dublin.

1 Avigdor Arikha's etching, 'Samuel Beckett Seated' is in the collection of the National Gallery of Ireland.

2 Cullen, Fintan, *The Irish Face: Redefining the*

*Irish Portrait*, exh. cat. National Portrait Gallery, London, 2004.

3 Ibid, p.225.

4 Press Release, 'Council Launches New Program

to Support Arts Education in Ireland in Conjunction with Irish Arts Review', Ireland-US Council for Commerce & Industry, 17 February, 2006.