

Gerry Gleason: an introduction

In the late seventies, when travelling from County Down up to Belfast in the early morning, I would often drive past pigeon fanciers, their vans stacked with slatted boxes containing racing pigeons, in the act of preparing for a race. Like any child I'd often wonder at the ability of those pigeons, deposited scores of miles from their homes, to unerringly find their way to their owners.

Artists like Jack Pakenham, one of the key figures in Troubles' painting, were painting long before The Troubles began. They had developed a style of working but were forced to change that style when confronted with the whole new vocabulary of images that were created by The Troubles. In a sense Gerry Gleason was different. Not only was he of a different generation from Jack, but he had only just started painting at the beginning of the eighties and, like a homing pigeon, he zeroed in, unerringly, onto the socio-political.

The majority of artists in Northern Ireland did not produce socio-political work. Unlike Jack, many of the older painters probably felt that they had established their style and content, and so they simply continued doing what they had always done: landscapes, nudes, still-lives and the like. It would have been very easy for Gerry Gleason to take this route as it was obvious, even in the early days of the eighties, that those artists who *were* producing socio-political work, not only did not find a collecting base but were also shunned by the establishment. The Arts Council, the British Council, the Ulster Museum, indeed every major museum in the Republic of Ireland, refused to collect their work, even though, in terms of the disbursement of public monies, they had a duty to reflect what was happening across the arts.

Gerry Gleason is one of the few who bore witness to what was happening in the North, day in, day out, year in, year out. He has produced a quite remarkable body of work which, unlike the wall murals of the Republicans and the Loyalists, is not sectarian. The murals are not, as so many people seem to believe, the 'art' of The Troubles? How could they be? They incited people to murder and mayhem, they breathed out hatred and violence, and they were designed and painted by committee. The real art of The Troubles, the truth of what happened during those long years, resides in the art produced by Gleason, Pakenham, Tom Bevan, Una Walker, Graham Gingles and, often for only a very short time, by up to forty other artists from the North.

You can, often literally, follow Gleason in his work on an almost day-to-day basis as so many of his paintings have coded within them, the numbers of people who died during the time it took for any given work to be painted. Every major development in The Troubles was been itemised by the painter, though not in any literal way. Most of the socio-political artists did not believe in simple-minded propaganda. They realised that the society was complex and they tried to put that complexity into their work, so yes, you do have to spend a little bit of time in learning to 'read' it, but then again, you have to spend a bit of time to learn how to read a Renaissance painting, or for that matter one of Diego Rivera's wall murals of the Mexican Revolution!

Gleason always gives you a way in: glorious colour, an outlined figure. It's like a signpost which lures you in and then you begin to work out what is happening. If you are interested in art history, you'll see evidence of what the artist was looking at, at the time, be it the New York Graffiti artists, or the Germans like Sigmar Polke and company. If you look at early series, like *The Bones* artworks, you'll see the developing Gleason, intelligent, witty, stylish and nailing down the brutality of the

North like a Crucifixion. If you look at magnificent later work like *The Ulster Saga*, you find much more complex meditations upon violence in relation to the history of the North – and it is no accident that Gleason’s paintings are being rediscovered by younger generations of Northern Irish painters who never knew that such work even existed. Like so many of the unsung Northerners, Gleason is appreciated much more abroad than he is at home. He will be the subject of a major chapter in the history of Troubles’ art that will be published at the end of next year (2013), so watch this space! And explore his world.....

Brian McAvera

The Artist would like to thank the Art Critic and Playwright Brian McAvera.

**The Artist would like to thank the IRISH ARTS REVIEW for
Permission to use the following interview.**

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Eyewitness Account

This article was first published in the the summer 2007 edition of the Irish Arts Review, vol 24. No 2.

Eyewitness Account

Gerry Gleason tells BRIAN McAVERA how his use of symbol and metaphor is a visual tactic designed to draw the viewer into an engagement with his painting that transcends the parochial



Brian McAvera: Gerry, like many of the key Northern Irish painters, you were self-trained, and like Matisse, came rather late to painting. Can you tell us about your early circumstances, how you came to take up painting, and how you trained yourself?

Gerry Gleason: It's interesting that you make the point about Matisse. I found that I had a common bond with him through having my appendix removed! The story goes that he was handed a box of colours while recuperating in hospital. Similarly with me: I was quite ill after the operation and after it I wanted to paint. It was like a rebirth for me.

Having been given a box of oil paints a year earlier by my wife Vivien – which I had never touched – I then felt motivated to start the process of becoming a serious artist. After a visit to the British Museum I encountered the Elgin Marbles, and also Turner's late watercolours. So the two sides of my personality were formed from this catalyst of the classical and the romantic.

Within this very important year for me – 1976 – I visited the Burren in Co Clare where the dramatic landscape had a profound effect on me. I also met, while there, the artist, John Lewis from the Byam Shaw School. One night in Lisdoonvarna he gave a slide show which introduced me to the Post-Impressionists: Bonnard, Cézanne and van Gogh amongst others. This was the birth of Modernism for me. They felt very close to my own time and I could begin to see ways of making things.

I realised after seeing John's slide show that one could learn from art history and so it started a long journey of studying in museums in Ireland and Europe. Going back to my studio, I started with landscapes and still-lives, reinterpreting them in the tradition of Cézanne, Morandi, William Scott, Matisse and van Gogh.

I think the next stage was obviously an inward journey, as with artists like Munch, Picasso and the German Expressionists. I started to feel the importance of colour as an emotional experience of the self.

Having done what I felt was an apprenticeship, I came across the work of Jack Pakenham, who had an exhibition at the Caldwell Gallery in Belfast around 1979. There had been major bombing and disruption in the town that night, the gallery was in a basement, and only a few people had turned up for the opening because of the practical difficulties. But Jack was there,

surrounded by a huge series of his 'Puppet' paintings. It had a profound effect on me as I realised that there was a way to express one's feelings about the Troubles, and have a voice. I felt Jack had made the same journey as I myself did, but I wanted to be my own man. And so I began 'The Bones Series', starting basically with *Ribs*, and *Pelvis* – the anatomy of the body – a teach-in for myself as well, as I realised one of those leaps of the imagination: I could use collaged fragments from Old Master black-and-white photographs from the National Gallery in London, and put them into the work where they stood for the victims and for the lives destroyed by violence (Fig 4).

B McA: I don't want to dwell on old wounds, but as we both



know, painting – or art of any kind – which engaged with the Troubles, was cold-shouldered by the authorities. 'Directions Out', which you took part in was shown at the Douglas Hyde in 1987, and the book *Art, Politics and Ireland*, which you were also in, had to be published in Dublin. Can you give us a picture of those times, and the difficulties that had to be endured?

G G: Well, first of all, old wounds take a little time to heal, but I am a positive person who gets over major disappointments. I think that the period around 1984-85, was particularly hard for visual artists in Belfast (Fig 1). Basically the infrastructure of commercial art galleries had all but collapsed, so therefore the patronage of the Arts Councils, albeit on a small budget, became very powerful. You either fitted in with their plans, or you didn't – and obviously I didn't!

I feel that the poets seemed to get even-handed support at a crucial time in their careers, and many of them are now world-renowned. Obviously the tradition of this island, whether oral or written, has been a very portable means of expression (think of the Book of Kells) but the larger scale, ambitious works in the visual arts need support to prosper. The possibilities were there

1 GERRY GLEASON
b.1946
Flying Pontiff 1986
oil on canvas
179 x 137cm

2 Gerry Gleason in
his studio 2007

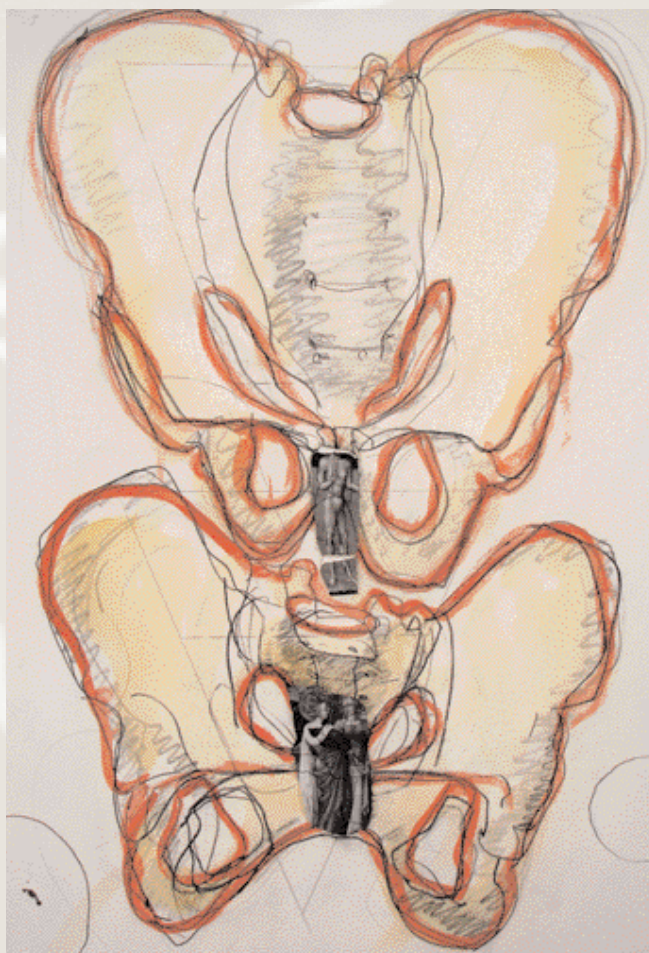
3 *Pond Life* 1995
acrylic on canvas
179 x 221cm

4 *Pelvis* 1983
(Bones series)
mixed media on
paper 76 x 56cm

5 *September Night*
2006 (After
Picasso, 1936)
mixed media on
paper 38 x 28cm

6 *Blue Friday*
1988-89 (Siege
of Derry series)
oil on canvas
188 x 152cm

7 *The Beach Party*
2006 (Eco series)
oil on canvas
185 x 182cm



to create a tradition of larger-scale work of the kind that I was seeing in the South by the likes of Brian Maguire, Michael Cullen and Paddy Graham, all artists I greatly admire. So I felt, in watching them grow, that the support for myself and others would only come from being your own sponsor.

The one positive effect for me was that I decided that, rather than withering, I would go to Poland with the remarkable Richard Demarco. This meant that the closed doors were now open again in my life.

B McA: 'Political Art' has become fashionable post-1994, but do you see a difference between the work that you, Jack Pakenham, Graham Gingles and others produced, for example, and the work produced post-1994?

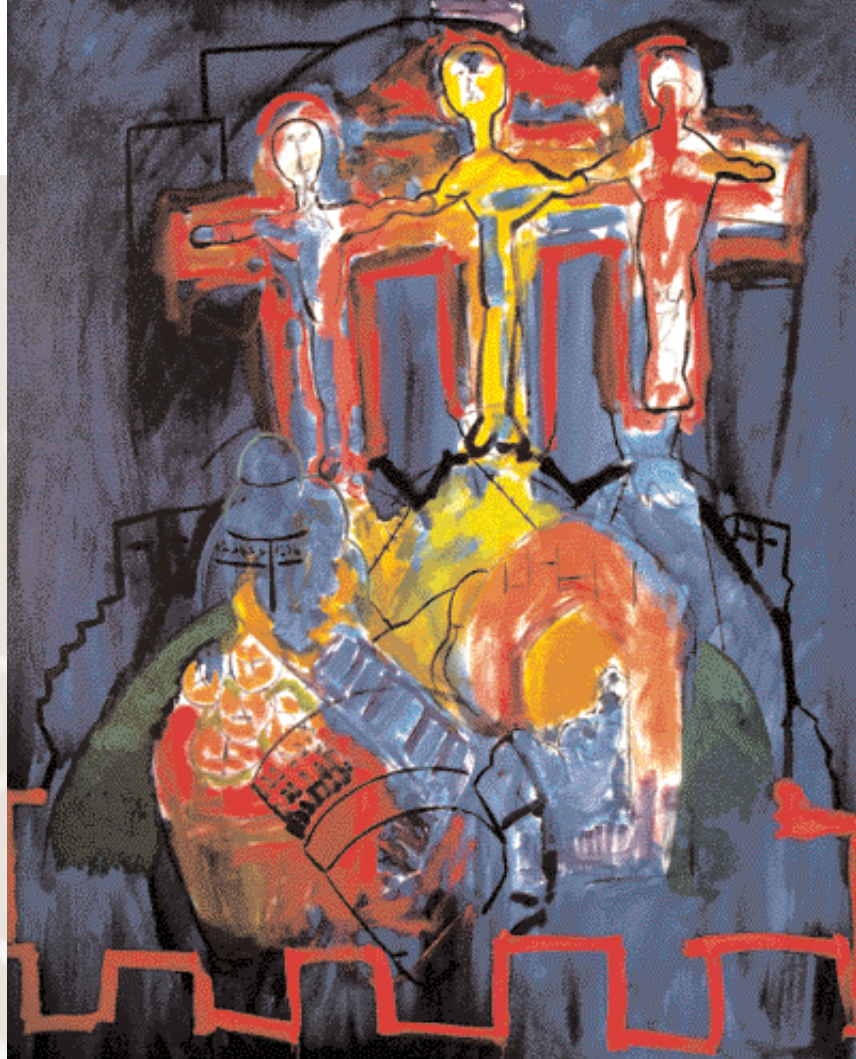
G G: I think there's the lived-in situation which has to be different from that of looking back at something. It's almost like eye-witness accounts. I personally felt that I had made a decision that, if someone got shot in the back of the head in the vicinity my Queen Street studio, if windows were blown in by bombs, then it had to go into the work. Once, for some strange reason, a bomb was left at the weather office. I don't know if the weather had been particularly bad... but I assumed that the bomb was a hoax, so I told my wife and daughter to wait in the car at the front of the studio complex (there are eight flights of steps to the studio), where I knew they would be a safe distance away. I concluded the last twenty minutes on a painting – that's how obsessive I was – the bomb went off – no hoax – and as I was nearer to the bomb than they were, I threw myself on top of the painting, which was on the floor, and only then went outside to find, with huge relief, that my family was okay.

Yes, there were physical risks, even in the creation of the work. Also, I felt that one could push past the restraints of parochial art with its watered down versions of modernism, and take risks – you had nothing to lose (Fig 9). I think it was Longley who said that when you have a spiral of violence, you can also have a counter-spiral of creativity, and I think that occurred during the period.

I do feel that it is important, as people are still dealing with the Holocaust and history that one can learn from history. I read, when in Auschwitz, that those who do not learn from history are liable to repeat it. As long as those in the post-1994 situation respect the fact that three- and a half-thousand lives were lost and God knows how many injured, and that it was and is for serious reasons that the work is produced and not for career moves.

B McA: You once remarked that living in the North meant being 'frozen in time...and we are slowly being forced to search for an identity, which I don't think the place had before...My aim is to make a cathartic art rather than something which would divide and be narrowly nationalistic'. Can you elaborate?

G G: I think that both communities in the North, in Northern Ireland, in the Six Counties – what is the identity? One now has to be politically correct – were given 'histories', not necessarily of our own making. Perhaps a country without a common culture is a country which requires an over-layering of cultures, to produce in the end a shared culture. So I feel that the artists I



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know, perhaps subconsciously, were trying to create a culture of diversity or middle ground by means of their works which, in my case, can be shared by both children from the communities of the future – an inclusive rather than an exclusive art. This is where research is particularly important. We discover our past: like John Gray's history of the dockers' strike – *City in Revolt*, the food riots in the Depression, the Spanish Civil War with recruits from both sides of the community going to fight fascism in Spain. We have more common ground than people recognise.

Joseph Beuys visited Belfast in 1976 and I had seen a documentary on him where he visited the Giant's Causeway. He looked at it and said: 'Unity Through Diversity'. I was puzzled by the remark, so I went and stood at the same location as he did and realised that the hexagonal pieces of stone were all different – variations on a theme which created a path. So I understood Beuys' remark that diversity can be a strength rather than a weakness. I feel that if through art, the people of the country realised that their diversity is a strength, then we would be world-beaters

B McA: In your earlier days – I'm thinking of the 'Bones series' for example, you used to use collage extensively. Why did you stop?

G G: I felt in the end that it had become restrictive. When you had a problem you simply corrected it with another imposed layer. There were also practical reasons of weight and size. When framed under glass, large-scale collaged works became financially prohibitive. I found that after seeing exhibitions of Rothko's large-scale works, and those of Barnett Newman, that one could use large-scale colour fields within the work. I think it was Rothko who said that, as a human being, one feels a physical intimacy when standing in front of a large-scale work. It becomes a human scale. Also the sensuality of using a brush is part of my personality. That is why I deeply admire people who can use a palette knife! But I feel the brush is part of my nerve ends.

B McA: You've said that for an artist to survive in the North, he or she has to go into 'symbol and metaphor' which might explain why your vibrant colour and bold simple forms often appear decorative on the surface but quickly resolve into a series of layered codes, Chinese-box fashion. Why the necessity for symbol and metaphor?

G G: I feel that any artist who remains in a divided society, and there are many examples both from history and the present, is, like W B Yeats' poems dealing with the period, using metaphor and symbol, as the Northern Irish poets do, to draw society in (Figs 3 & 6). As we know situations are never black and white or forty shades of green but rather variations of gray between black and white.

If we look back at history, all major art movements were played out against a backdrop of major change: Degas and the Paris Commune, Turner or Seurat and the Industrial Revolution. Art is always being made against some sort of socio-political backdrop.

B McA: Travel is important for you, particularly in central and eastern Europe, and especially in Poland and Germany. How formative was your experience of these and other counties?

G G: I've been fortunate enough to have been in places where

great change was occurring. I was privileged to meet the Polish avant-garde in Poznan and Krakow, and also to see a performance of Kantor's theatre, *Cricot 2*. I liked the idea of still having an intelligent avant-garde who felt that, in the best sense, they kept alive the heart of the country.

I've usually arrived in Krakow in January or February – cold and snow – so I had a captive audience! They accepted that I was there to learn and I got a great visual education in Poland. The darker side of that journey was my three visits to Auschwitz-Birkenau. When I walked out of the main gate of the camp at Birkenau, I had no tribe any longer, but a common bond with those who had no voice.

On my first visit to Berlin in February 1989 the wall was still there. After a short while, especially at night, wandering around West Berlin was, I felt, oppressive and dreadful. I was completing an exhibition called 'History and Language' for the Orchard Gallery in Derry and I needed a final work to complete the show. I chose the story of a young boy who went over the wall, on a block and tackle and hawser, strung between a high building and the ground on the opposite side of the wall. I called it *Chairlift Berlin-Belfast*.

B McA: What is the point of socio-political art?

G G: I personally call it 'dealing with the human condition'. All art has those elements to some extent – Michelangelo's *David* was turned from Florence towards Rome: aesthetically beautiful but making a point. Goya's *The Disasters of War* and van Gogh's

Potato Eaters are a perfect example: deprivation of the poor is another part of the socio-political aspect of art. Perhaps some people think that socio-political art isn't very interesting, but it is as good as the practitioner that makes it. At its best, when not propaganda based, it is about life.

All the 'isms' that have been created are used by post-modernism as 'content', as techniques for saying something. Perhaps that is the gift they have left us. As we can see in Picasso's *Guernica*, there is a culmination of a long period of experimentation, with Cubism being an aesthetic movement and the Blue Period showing his concern for poverty and deprivation. Both come together in the painting.

B McA: You were born in a Protestant working class area of Belfast. What were the legacies of this upbringing? How does the child emerge in the adult's art?

G G: It's interesting...I was fortunate enough to be brought up in the Lower Ormeau Road, by the Lagan. The area was mixed religiously, both communities probably just scraping by – my mother was a GI bride who was abandoned with two babies, and so had a great struggle to survive.

There was no father in the house, so growing up with my brother meant that we had strong interests, more freedom. We listened to the radio, from Greek tragedies to *Dan Dare*. We were very lucky. Radio is a powerful medium. I know that Francis Bacon always had copies of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*...so therefore the roots for the child to become a man were planted

When I knew that I was going to create the Saga, I decided to put into the pictures the number of people who had lost their lives at the time



in the imagination at that time. *The Ulster Saga* triptych, for example, uses that form of the myth to tell a broken narrative of our contemporary history.

As a child I was a harum-scarum, and myself and Harold (the inventor) were seen on the Lagan, my natural playground, in a six-foot bungalow bath which had washers. My mother's distress, on realising at the corner shop that washers had been bought, created a potential heart attack!

In later life, these small adventures allow one to see one's small world as almost the equivalent of *The African Queen*. My family was aware that I had a talent, especially for colour, and my brother said that I always drew in a more adult way but whereas he was the engineer, I was someone who could never sit down and discipline himself, but now the art has fulfilled that discipline that I need.

B McA: Tell us how the cycle of paintings called *The Ulster Saga*, which has been shown in its entirety in England, but not in Ireland, came about.

G G: Basically, although people think of 1992/93 as being a reasonably quiet period in Northern Ireland, it wasn't. It was horrendous: a wild spiral of energy. And when I knew that I was going to create the *Saga*, I decided to put into the pictures the number of people who had lost their lives at the time.

Whilst working on the painting *The Ghost Dancer* (The *Ulster Saga* Series), 3,062 people had been killed, and by the time I finished it, another twenty lives had disappeared. My wife would ring up to find out the numbers when each worked started and finished. It was my way of making a memorial to those who had lost their lives. As Primo Levi would have said, the drowned and the saved.

B McA: You often work in cycles: not only in *The Ulster Saga* or 'The Bones series' but also in 'The Siege of Derry series'. What is the attraction?

G G: Someone once said to me that I was a lateral thinker, so ideas tend to follow one after the other. Francis Bacon said that ideas were like 'slides dropping into his imagination'. So in some way you feel compelled to exhaust the cycle of images that you find in your imagination, until it gets to the point of exhaustion, and then you move on.

Picasso's Cubism is a good example – you can see it moving from the analytical to the synthetic and then neo-Classicism breaks the cycle. Even though one wraps up one cycle of work, elements can resurface in a new cycle at a later date, though not as dominantly as in their original form.

Recently, I've been interested, especially with mixed-media work in a tribute to Irish writers, though on an imaginary level. These works will be at the John Hewitt School this July (Fig 10). Another sequence, *Ghosts on the March*, is a tribute to the International Brigades and selected writers of the Spanish Civil War. Each cycle of work forces you, through materials and the imagery itself, to rethink modest techniques like pencil or washes: how to be creative with a modest financial outlay. Think of the wonderful Old Master drawings, which I regularly visit in the Chester Beatty Library or the British Museum, or the National Gallery in Dublin.



People underestimate drawing. Rubens was one of the great collectors of drawings – such a learning tool – yet even he could not resist 'correcting' the early Italian 'Primitives'. I've always valued colour, the flesh, the senses. It's a humbling experience to learn from great masters. Just look at Kossof's interpretative drawings in the National Gallery of London. When Giacometti died, people were amazed to find a huge collection of drawings.

B McA: A noticeable difference between yourself and, say, Jack Pakenham or Victor Sloan, is that your work is, loosely speaking, figurative, and has a strong element of narrative. Why?

Someone once said that they just couldn't picture an Irishman as a totally abstract painter. We have this long tradition, as in the Book of Kells, of visual narratives – even the abstraction within these narratives still clings to the narrative!

In my own time, growing up with Orange and Green banners, you were made aware of colour and imagery. What always amazed me was that here was this vivid colour being used for ceremonial purposes, but it didn't seem to filter into fine art! So I felt, why not appropriate this colour into my work (Fig 7), not unlike Barnett Newman saying 'Who's afraid of Red?'

I've always tried, having read Bacon's interviews, not to do a strictly narrative art. That suits some people, but not me. At best I prefer a broken narrative where the words written into the image do not necessarily relate a story about the image. For me, in terms of storytelling in art, the image should always dominate. Perhaps that's why we have poets, writers and playwrights! ■

BRIAN McAVERA is a playwright and an art critic.
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Gerry Gleason 'Mask of Time', John Hewitt Summer School, Market Place Theatre, Armagh 23-27 July.

8 *Doin' Nothin'* 1993-4 (Ulster Saga triptych) Left-hand panel acrylic on canvas 244 x 213cm

9 *Horseman* 1988-89 (Siege of Derry series) oil on canvas 179 x 137cm

10 *Louis MacNeice Radio Troubles* 2004 mixed media on paper 38 x 28cm