

JOHN HOYLAND

Aidan Dunne, Engaged, involved, explosive, The Irish Times, 12 April 2007

Tomorrow 21 years of Macnas

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TheArts



Engaged, involved, explosive



An exhibition of John Hoyland's work presents a vital cross-section of his volcanic and influential output, writes Aidan Dunne

You may not be familiar with his work, but the English artist John Hoyland can justifiably be described as one of the finest painters of the 20th century. It's customary to put abstract in front of the term painter, because from his student work in the 1950s he very quickly moved onto abstraction, though from the mid-1960s he has tended more and more to incorporate motifs that hint at narrative and symbolic content. The exhibition of selected work that opens at Hillsboro Fine Art today marshals a cross-section of his paintings from several decades. You may not get a sense of his appetite for monumental scale, but apart from that you do get a flavour of what he's about.

The exuberant outpourings of graphic forms and incandescent colour typical of more recent pieces are indicative of his volcanic energy and the all-or-nothing level of his commitment. Often volcanoes come literally to mind, as well as exploding stars and other celestial phenomena. Yet it is as well to remember that, despite the pyrotechnics, Hoyland is a canny, immensely experienced artist who draws on a huge reservoir of knowledge when he applies himself to making a painting. No matter what your response, he's been there before

you, and worked through it.

He was born in Sheffield in 1934. An only child, his artistic aspirations were encouraged by his mother, and he attended the Sheffield School of Arts and Crafts. He was keen to move on from the provincialism of Sheffield, however, and managed to gain a place in the Royal Academy (RA) Schools in London. At every stage he seems to have had an exceptional appetite for experiencing new artistic possibilities. A major Nicholas de Stael exhibition at the Whitechapel, for example, which he saw just prior to his starting at the RA, fired his imagination. The chromatic boldness and the physicality of de Stael's paintings, which use blocks of colour as form, clearly made a deep impression on him. Also important was the Tate's show of contemporary American painting around the same time.

He was involved with the Situation group of artists in the early 1960s. Their rationale was to enlarge the vocabulary of painting in Britain, and they reflected various degrees of influence from the United States.

A travelling bursary enabled him to visit New York in 1964, and he formed lasting friendships with Robert Motherwell, Helen Frankenthaler and Barnett New-

man. It was perhaps the example of the post-painterly abstractionists, including Jules Olitski and Kenneth Noland (and later Larry Poons), that was most important, though Hoyland went on to critically expand on what they were doing rather than follow in their wake. Another, earlier painter, Hans Hoffman, is central to the work of Hoyland's maturity.

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In an extensive interview with Mel Gooding, undertaken for a documentary archive and cited in Gooding's monograph, he provides a brilliant, nuanced account of the way he negotiated his way through the maze of influences and possibilities open to him at the time. With real insight, he describes himself as looking like "somebody doing old-fashioned European painting, figure-ground, where they had eliminated figure-ground".

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tion that it could go on forever. It couldn't, of course. It's something that happens in the careers of many artists. With Hoyland, something extraordinary seems to have happened early in the 1970s.

PRIOR TO THAT, HE was making terrific paintings within the general preserve of colour-field, post-painterly abstraction, infused with his own distinctive sensibility. That sensibility entailed upping the ante, testing the limits of each painting with explosive bursts of pigment.

Apart from the dynamics of what he himself appositely defined as the non-figure-ground figure-ground structure, Gooding makes the point that Hoyland differed from most of his contemporaries in the emotional intensity of his work. He was engaged and involved, not cool and distanced.

Then, around 1973, things seem to have soured. He returned to England from the US, and it is as if painting became much more difficult. Each work took longer to complete, layer built up on layer, textures thickened, the pictorial space was furiously contested. Yet the work was, and is, superb. The paintings synthesize myriad influences, negotiate with a host of precursors and contemporaries, and generate something new, distinctive and authoritative. There is that feeling de Kooning re-

ferred to, of being on a winning streak, and the heady notion that it might go on forever.

It didn't go on forever. By the end of the decade, after a retrospective at the Serpentine, Hoyland started to move on, to explore further possibilities. Several exciting, audacious series of paintings ensued, though without quite the classical centrality he'd found for most of the 1970s. While he was highly regarded and rewarded, it is important to put his work in the context of its time.

Internationally, painting was largely eclipsed by Conceptualism and related movements in art during the 1970s. From the late 1970s there was a huge resurgence in figurative, expressive painting, the New Expressionism. Throughout all this time, Hoyland was a deeply committed abstract painter. His work is self-evidently linked to the sensual world and never aspires to a condition of imagined autonomy, but it is certainly abstract.

In a way, despite the level of acclaim accorded him, the full extent of his achievement has not really been acknowledged. The art world is acutely sensitive to fashion and to its credit, he has never tried to be fashionable, only to be himself, as honestly and intelligently as possible. The remarkable audacity and vigour of his most recent work is testament to that.

John Hoyland: Selected Paintings is at Hillsboro Fine Art, 49 Parnell Square West, until May 5, tel: 01-8782242. John Hoyland by Mel Gooding is published by Thames & Hudson €39.53

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