



Installation view, 'Dubliners', 6th Biennale of Painting, HDLU, Meštrović Pavilion, Zagreb; all photographs by Juraj Vuglač, courtesy the artists, Pallas Projects and The Croatian Association of Artists (HDLU).

Remembering Zagreb

JAMES MERRIGAN REFLECTS ON 'DUBLINERS' AT THE 6TH BIENNIAL OF PAINTING AND THE ENIGMAS IT PRESENTED.

"WHAT WAS ZAGREB like?" people asked me, after spending four nights in the Croatian capital on the occasion of the 6th Biennial of Painting, which included an exhibition entitled 'Dubliners', curated by Pallas Projects' directors, Mark Cullen and Gavin Murphy. To say Zagreb is like 1990s Dublin is understandable but incorrect. It's a more monumental city. Architecture and history loom large, along with its tall people. I saw only one H&M, no Starbucks or McDonalds, but they are on their way with Ryanair's imminent invasion. For now, Zagreb is as beautiful as a city can get, in that scarred kind of way. On our visit it was experientially marked by a recent earthquake, COVID-19, and a history of successive wars, as recent as 1995 – the final year of the Croatian War of Independence, the aftershocks of which can still be felt in the dusty facades and dark concrete stairwells, like the one that led to the apartment I shared with exhibiting painters, Mark O'Kelly and Colin Martin.

Thinking back, my presence in Zagreb was as an extra. I was there to chair a public conversation with several of the exhibiting artists on the Sunday night before our flight home. I had already fulfilled a commission to write a substantial essay on the subject of painting, which critically explored painting and the painter vis-a-vis 'the city'. The city angle was prompted by the curatorial criteria for the selection of artists for the biennial, which, in its five previous editions, has used the European city as a way to define and demarcate painting practice within a given national art scene. In the act of writing, I discovered something could be philosophically gained from the identification and definition of painters and painting shepherded within a given city and, more specifically Zagreb's Meštrović Pavilion, colloquially known as 'the Mosque' – the site of the biennial.

On the opening night we witnessed the Mosque under lights and the attention of a large audience of Croatian artists, most of whom were participating in the Croatian Association of Visual Artists (HDLU) members' show upstairs in the pavilion. The HDLU – the artist-run organisation

who invited Cullen and Murphy to curate 'Dubliners' – is a mix between Dublin's Pallas Projects and the RHA. Framed by the pavilion's large metal door, the HDLU president, the resident Irish Ambassador, Ruaidhri Dowling, and Mark Cullen gave speeches and acknowledgements. Afterwards, large speakers guarding the door pumped out music. The upbeat atmosphere was incongruous to the strange tone of the pavilion, and the silence of the paintings that lay beyond in the cylindrical galleries.

The Meštrović Pavilion (given back to the HDLU in 1990) has served as a space for exhibitions and art events since 2006. The pavilion is unlike any other exhibition space I have ever experienced. We complain in this country about the design-heavy art centres with their geometric panoply of angles and glass. The Meštrović Pavilion dispenses with angles for evasive curves. 'Dubliners' artist, Sonia Shiel, said something insightful about how the curved walls provoke your body to keep moving rather than stand still.

Upon entering the pavilion's main door, the vestibule is flanked on either side by stone staircases that lead to the HDLU members' exhibition, a dizzying salon-hang of paintings, shoulder-to-shoulder, floor-to-ceiling. 'Dubliners' was set inside the main ground-floor gallery, an open-top cylinder, as wide as it is high, looking up and out at the night sky through a dome of round glass tiles. The space is both physically overwhelming and metaphysically unnerving. Voices bounce from one curve of the room to the other, making you a bad listener or accidental eavesdropper.

Cullen and Murphy's curation was a cousin of their annual Periodical Reviews at Pallas Projects, but on a monumental scale. I questioned, in the commissioned essay, whether they would they leave paintings to fend for themselves on the walls or take a more expansive approach in a space that was first designed for sculpture in the 1930s. The inclusion of Tanad Williams's and Tom Watt's bespoke timber units to display both paintings and artists' books (alongside a copy of James Joyce's *Dubliners*) answered my question. The floor-bound positioning of Orla Whelan's mosaic of interpretative painting-stretcher corner-keys, and Harry Walsh Foreman's freestanding figures, helped to fuse walls with gallery, rather than wall-bound paintings lined up before a Goya firing squad. But there were sacrifices: the paintings that decorated Williams's and Watt's gallery furniture became part of the furniture. When I asked a HDLU member about the previous Leipzig edition of the biennial, he shared that contra-Leipzig, he was excited at how the Dublin contingent had activated the floor.

On the final day, Mark O'Kelly and I visited the Croatian Museum of Modern Art. There, we got a real sense of the Western art influences – from Pop to Conceptualism to Neo-Expressionism – that infiltrated Croatia when freedoms came and went from war to war. It began to make sense why Brian Maguire's crumbling war-torn edifices, Patrick Graham's man vs myth maelstroms, and Mark O'Kelly's strange (for him) sculptural and awkward figuration were at home in the pavilion. O'Kelly remarked that the striking difference between painting in Croatia and Ireland was down to tonal technique. But we can't forget the *tone* that latently pervades the culture of a place, a historical tone that has its own light and shade beneath paint, canvas, stretcher and painter.

That night, during the panel conversation, the subject of the studio crisis that beset Dublin City was discussed, and with that, the practical insecurities of being an artist in the world. As a provocation I kept emphasising the identity of the 'painter' to the panellists, as opposed to the 'artist', in the same way the Zagreb Biennial was exclusively dedicated to painting. I wanted to know what it was *to be* a painter in a Heideggerian sense. The tools, the daily grind, the day in and day out, the isolation, the aloofness, the individualism that defines the painter rather than the social fluidity of the artist. Questions from the floor opened things up, such as: "What was the biggest risk you took for your art?" or "Was the use of painting as a base medium for teaching art the best pedagogical instrument for experiment in other mediums?" But I am still left with unanswered questions regarding what it is *to be* a painter. I don't think painters appreciate the growing enigma they present in a less and less enigmatic world.

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Top and Bottom: Installation view, 'Dubliners', 6th Biennale of Painting, HDLU, Meštrović Pavilion, Zagreb; **Middle [Left]:** Brian Maguire, *Apartments Aleppo*, 2016, acrylic on linen; **[Right]:** Sonia Shiel, *The Narrows' Escape*, 2021, oil on canvas, wood, and cotton flock; all photographs by Juraj Vuglač, courtesy the artists, Pallas Projects and The Croatian Association of Artists (HDLU).