

Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane

Civil Rights etc. A Resource for Teachers

6 September 2011 to 15 January 2012



Above: Rita Donagh, *Belfast Boy*, 1973
Oil and photograph on canvas, 25.5 x 50.5 cm
© 2011 Rita Donagh

Welcome

This resource is intended to provide an introduction to the exhibition *Civil Rights etc.* and some of its themes. It offers information, ideas for discussion and activities for visiting teachers to use with their second-level school students. Some of the activities or discussion questions can be used to prepare for the visit and to complement the process of viewing the exhibition itself, while others are more suited for use after the students have visited the gallery. They are designed so that they may be adapted to your individual needs.

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- Background information, discussion questions, and activities
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Introduction

Richard Hamilton was born in 1922 and educated at the Royal Academy Schools and at the Slade School of Art. He was an important member of the Independent Group (1952-1955), an influential collection of artists, architects and writers who met at London's Institution of Contemporary Arts, and played a critical role in the development of Pop Art in Britain in the 1950s. Hamilton's first solo show was held in 1950. Working with a wide range of media, from typography and industrial design to painting and printmaking, he explores themes of consumerism, mass culture, politics and war. Using images generated by the mass media, Hamilton draws attention not only to the brutality and injustices of political conflicts, but also to the manner in which the media depicts them.

Rita Donagh was born in 1939. After studying Fine Art at the University of Newcastle, she went on to teach at the School of Fine Art at Reading University, the Slade School of Art and Goldsmiths in London. In the 1970s Donagh, inspired in part by her Irish ancestry, began exploring the political conflict in Northern Ireland, and the related themes of land and identity. Donagh uses images from mass media to draw attention to social and political conflict, to question the role of the artist in the socio-political realm and to form a critical commentary on the way such subject matter is portrayed in the press and consumed by the public. Donagh's work, like Hamilton's, demonstrates a concern for social injustices and the protection of human rights, and a fascination with the insensitivity of mass media to the content it conveys.

Keywords

Photography, manipulation, appropriation, authorship, consumerism, popular culture, meaning, communication, conflict, violence, power, politics, citizenship, symbolism, identity, tension, control, danger, objectivity

Richard Hamilton, *Kent State 12 stage proofs*, 1970
 Screen-prints, each 67.3 x 87 cm (image); 73 x 102.2 (sheet)
 On loan from artist
 © 2011 Richard Hamilton



Background

Photography plays a crucial role in much of Hamilton's work. Referring to the process of making the *Kent State*, Hamilton said that 'it had been on my mind that there might be a subject staring me in the face, from the TV screen ... I didn't really choose the subject, it offered itself.' Hamilton had spent a week sitting in front of his television 'snapping anything of interest.' *Kent State* developed from a still photograph of BBC news coverage of a series of anti-war protests held on the campus of Kent State University, Ohio in May 1970. Students were protesting against US involvement in Vietnam and Cambodia. In their attempt to subdue the demonstrators, the Ohio National guard killed four students and injured nine others. The student depicted in *Kent State* survived, but suffered severe spinal injuries that resulted in permanent paralysis. Hamilton appropriates this emotive image from the media to remind the viewer that we perceive images of events rather than the events themselves; unless we're its immediate participants, we must experience history through a mediated form.

Discussion

Do you agree with Hamilton's use of this source material for artistic purposes?
 If you were to rename the work, what title would you choose and why?
 Why do you think this image caught Hamilton's interest?

How has Hamilton mythologized this particular moment?
What effect does the repetitive nature of the work produce?
If you didn't know anything about the Kent State protests, how might the image affect you differently?
Has news coverage changed in the 40 years since this work was produced?
What types of images generally populate the news today?
Has the media grown more or less graphic?

Activities

Turn on the television and take a series of pictures of anything you find interesting. Once you're finished, look back at the images you've collected. What do these images have in common?

Choose one image and experiment with different ways of altering it. Try mixing the image with different mediums. Play with repetition, scale and colour. If you are working with a digital camera, explore the use of cropping, altering colour balance and other visual effects to change your photograph. How do your finished images alter the original impact and message?

Richard Hamilton, *The Citizen*, 1981-83
 Oil on canvas, two canvases, each 200 x 100 cm
 On loan from Tate
 © 2011 Richard Hamilton



Background

The Citizen is part of a trilogy of work made between 1981 and 1985. Composed of *The Citizen*, *The State*, and *The Subject*, the series addresses the conflict in Northern Ireland. *The Citizen* exists in five versions, including three studies. The work draws on a composite of stills from a 1980 television programme that documented a protest organized by republican prisoners at the Maze prison in Northern Ireland. Over 400 participants in the 'dirty protest' refused to wash or dress in prison issued clothing, and spread excrement on the walls of their cells. This particular prisoner stands with a noble and dignified bearing, proudly meeting the viewer's gaze despite the squalor of his surroundings. He appears angry and vulnerable, defiant and pained. With his long hair and beard, he bears a decided resemblance to the figure of Christ. The association with the sectarian religious conflict that contributed to the violence in Northern Ireland is unmistakable. Hamilton appropriates and actively alters the material provided by the media, deconstructing the technical means by which it communicates with its mass audience to serve his own artistic ends.

Discussion

Would you consider this a sympathetic portrayal of the prisoner? Why or why not? How might this work compare with the depiction of the protest in the media at the time?

Do you think the work would have an equally powerful effect if you did not know about the socio-political context within which it was produced?

James Joyce functioned as an important influence throughout Hamilton's career. In Joyce's *Ulysses*, 'the Citizen' is an anti-Semitic, xenophobic character who appears in Episode 12 and begins an argument with Leopold Bloom. In Hamilton's first portrayal of the character, completed in the 1949, the artist represented him as Finn MacCool, in allusion to the parody of Celtic mythology in Joyce's novel. In this version, created several decades later, the character is re-envisioned as a contemporary figure. Why do you think Hamilton chose to reference this character of The Citizen in the title of the work? Do you think Hamilton views nationalism positively or negatively?

Activity

Research the 'dirty protest,' and compare the media's account, both visual and textual, with the one Hamilton provides. Create a collage of the images and descriptions you find. Consider how various arrangements produce different layers of meaning.

Richard Hamilton, *The State*, 1993

Oil, enamel and mixed media on cibachrome on canvas, each 200 x 100 cm

On loan from Tate

© 2011 Richard Hamilton



Background

In *The State*, the final image in Hamilton's trilogy addressing the Troubles in Ireland, Hamilton's manipulation of the image moves beyond the digital into the physical realm. His image of a patrolling British soldier in Northern Ireland incorporates real fabric on the pocket of the soldier's uniform, adding a degree of realism and three-dimensionality to the work. The subtlety of his modifications results in an image that feels simultaneously familiar and disquieting. The soldier's face is partially obscured, and his body language is somewhat ambiguous. Though he holds a weapon, his movement feels tentative. No other figures populate the panel on the right. The accompanying panel on the left portrays a damp, lush landscape, entirely devoid of action. The diptych formation juxtaposes the perceived tranquillity of the countryside with the violence of the urban environment. As in *The Citizen*, Hamilton incorporates images from the media representations of the conflict in Ireland to reveal the mythologizing capacity of modern mass media. Hamilton encourages his viewer to consume these representations critically, to negotiate rather than simply consume meaning, and to question the ease with which we accept the media's portrayal of conflict.

Discussion

What words or phrases would you use to describe this work?

How does this work compare with *The Citizen*?

Which work do you prefer? Why?

Why do you think Hamilton decided to use a diptych format for the series?

Activity

Create your own version of Hamilton's trilogy. Find three pairs of images that you feel represent a citizen, the state and a subject.

Rita Donagh, *Belfast Boy*, 1973
 Oil and photograph on canvas, 25.5 x 50.5 cm
 On loan from the artist
 © 2011 Rita Donagh



Background

In *Belfast Boy*, as in much of her work, Donagh explores the mediated and manipulative nature of imagery in the modern age of mass production. In this image of an image, she translates the photographic representation of an event into a painting to heighten the emotional content of the original image, and to blur the boundary between the event and its documentation. The simplicity of Donagh's portrayal allows the emotion of the image to dominate the viewing experience. The original black and white photograph is of a boy, hunched over on the pavement, his face hidden from view. A band of black frames the image on the left, while a band of white frames it on the right, a suitably restrained composition given the weight of the emotional subject. Donagh's use of found imagery raises questions about artistic authorship, as well as the role of the artist. Donagh encourages active engagement rather than passive consumption, and asks the viewer to question their own contribution to political conflict and social inequality. For Donagh viewers, like the consumers of the mass media, are not innocent bystanders, but critical participants in the generation of meaning.

Discussion

Describe the emotions conveyed by the work.

How would the impact of the work change if the boy's face wasn't concealed?

How do you think this artwork would have been originally received?

Do you think the images that populate the media have changed significantly since the 1970s?

Activity

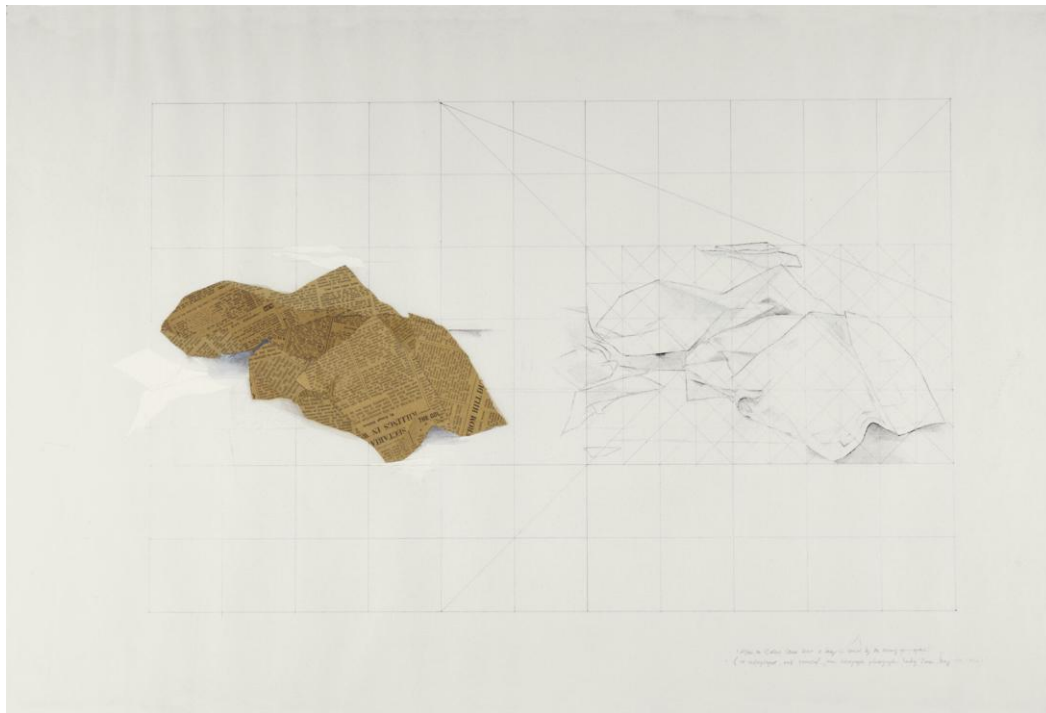
Experiment with the effect of placing different captions on the image. Try using excerpts from actual headlines in the news. Consider how an image's meaning varies according to the text that accompanies it, and the context within which it is viewed.

Rita Donagh, *After the Talbot Street Blast*, 1974

Pencil and collage on paper, 69 x 101 cm

On loan from Huddersfield Art Gallery

© 2011 Rita Donagh



Background

After the Talbot Street Blast is characteristic of Donagh's precise, linear style, her preference for subtle washes of greys and whites, and her use of restrained brushstrokes and colour palette. In pursuit of subtlety rather than sensationalism, Donagh departs from traditional modes of representing violence, offering instead a refined aesthetic and an entirely new perspective. Without trivializing the tragedy, Donagh distances herself from the specificities of the actual event. *After the Talbot Street Blast* features an indistinct outline of a human form enveloped by a newspaper, juxtaposed with a collage of the same image composed of newsprint. The figure depicted is one of the victims of the car bomb explosion that occurred in Talbot Street, Dublin on 1974. On the evening of May 17th, three explosions occurred. The second blast took place in Talbot Street and resulted in fourteen fatalities. Critical of the media's exploitative use of tragedy, Donagh uses an unconventional approach in the representation of a violent event to call attention to the type of society the mass media has produced. She suggests that today's public, inundated with traumatic images, have become indifferent, in part because the press often conceal the true source of tragedy in their pursuit of sensationalism. The newspapers in this work disguise the figure's identity, the news literally and figuratively covering up the devastating effects of the event on the individuals involved. Donagh deliberately leaves the narrative incomplete in an acknowledgement of the difficulty, the impossibility perhaps, of ever adequately representing such tragedy.

Discussion

Do you think the media functions as an objective source of information?

Do you feel that the media is saturated with images of violence?

Do you think people sometimes take voyeuristic pleasure in the news coverage of violence?

To what extent do you think photographers exploit the victims they portray?

Can artists also be guilty of exploitation?

Activities

Look at images of violence in the news. In what ways do they distort the reality they purport to represent? Consider techniques such as framing, lighting, cropping, and editing.

Rita Donagh, *Bystander*, 1977
 Oil and collage on canvas, 152 x 152 cm
 On loan from the artist
 © 2011 Rita Donagh



Background

In *Bystander*, Donagh uses found imagery to portray a victim of violent political protest. In the lower right corner of the painting, Donagh has reproduced an image of a victim of the bombing of Talbot Street, Dublin, in 1974 by the loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force. The dark mass stands out starkly against the pale background. In the upper left corner, she has attached a newspaper image of youths climbing over a wall in Derry directly onto the surface of the canvas. Both images are placed against a backdrop of delicate diagonal lines that cut across the neatly quartered canvas. The senselessness of the victim's death seems even more illogical within the context of Donagh's geometric aesthetic. Donagh heightens the tragedy and randomness of her chosen subject matter through the detail, refinement and precision with which she portrays it.

Discussion

What words first come to mind when you look at the work?

How has Donagh used contrast to enhance the effect of her work?

Compare this painting to *Kent State*. How have Hamilton and Donagh portrayed the victims? In what ways are their portrayals similar? In what ways are they different?

Activity

Explore the difference between abstract and representational art. Create two paintings of the same subject. In one, use shapes, lines, colours and patterns to capture your subject. In the other, try and portray your subject as accurately and realistically as you can. Which style do you prefer working in? Which style of art do you prefer to look at? Why?

Civil Rights etc., A Resource for Teachers, written by Niamh Byrne Rodgers.

Bibliography

Bracewell, Michael. 'Rita Donagh and Richard Hamilton: Joint Declaration.' In *Civil Rights etc.* Dublin: Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, 2011.

McGonagle, Declan. 'Raising the Stakes: Rita Donagh, Richard Hamilton and The Responsibility of The Artist.' In *Civil Rights etc.* Dublin: Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, 2011.

Seamus Heaney has written many poems inspired by the Troubles in Northern Ireland. These include *The Toome Road, Punishment, The Wood Road, Whatever You Say Say Nothing*. Collections of his poems include *North (1975)*.

Planning Your Visit

Guided tours of the collection and temporary exhibitions may be booked for schools and visiting groups with a minimum of two weeks' notice. Tours cost €25 per group up to a maximum of 30 people. For an additional cost, it may also be possible to book a sketching tour, or combined tour and workshop, during your visit.

Lectures and Film Screenings

For details of our public lectures and film screenings exploring the exhibition *Civil Rights etc* Richard Hamilton and Rita Donagh, go to www.hughlane.ie/education

For further information on the Hugh Lane's Education and Research programme, please contact:

Jessica O'Donnell
Curator of Education and Research
e: jodonnell.hughlane@dublincity.ie
t: + 353 1 222 5558

Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane,
Charlemont House,
Parnell Square North
Dublin 1,
Ireland
t: + 353 1 222 5550
f: + 353 1 872 2182
e: info.hughlane@dublincity.ie
www.hughlane.ie

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