

Cecil King: Present in Time Future

Hugh Lane Gallery, 11 May – 28 November 2021

Cecil King (1921–1986) had a close association with the Hugh Lane Gallery. His first retrospective was held here in 1981, and he was Vice Chairman of the Rosc exhibition's Executive Committee when the gallery hosted Rosc '77. It is therefore with great pleasure that we present this display of King's work to mark the 100th anniversary of his birth, and to celebrate his achievements as one of Ireland's most significant modern artists.

Many of King's early works evolved from walking and drawing around Poolbeg in Dublin, and response to particular places remained an ongoing concern. The circus then emerged as a theme in his work, and the tension of line and space associated with the trapeze is retained in later abstract works. For a time he explored expressionist and organic forms but by the late 1960s, King had developed the distinctive style for which he is best known, with clean lines and areas of strong colour.

James Johnson Sweeney, former Director of the Guggenheim Museum, New York, observed, "Intensity is the key to the quality of Cecil King's work". He saw "elegance, meticulousness and conviction, combined with sensibility and modesty" as the essence of King's art, qualities evident in these works from the gallery's collection.

King was born in Rathdrum, Co. Wicklow in February 1921. He initially began a career in business and became a Director of the Dundalk-based printer W&S Magowan. He took initial instruction in painting from Barbara Warren and Nevill Johnson, but was largely self-taught. He held his first solo exhibition at the Ritchie Hendriks Gallery, Dublin, in 1959 and became a full-time artist in 1964.

King was also an avid collector of contemporary art and was actively involved in the management of arts organisations. He was a founding member of the Contemporary Irish Art Society in 1962, and from 1967 was a committee member of the groundbreaking Rosc exhibitions of international contemporary art. He was included posthumously in the final Rosc exhibition in 1988, to which the Gallery lent *Pendulum* (1985). The architect Michael Scott then paid tribute to the artist: "Cecil's passion for the whole concept was immense and combined with his quiet charm, vast knowledge and capacity for hard work helped greatly to secure the success and continuation of Rosc."

"Looking back at Cecil King's work, it is unique in 20th Century Irish art practice. Eschewing figuration, the pastoral and the poetic, his work fearlessly defends the independence and beauty of colour and line. Varying from the slight to the robust, these lines swing against and cut through intense depths of colour creating geometric forms teetering on the edge of implosion. But pitch perfect, the taut and rigorous compositions deny any suggestion of impending chaos or collapse." – Barbara Dawson, Director

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The Hugh Lane Gallery's fine collection of Cecil King's work begins with *November* (1960), with its animated brushstrokes, and *Dawn Image* (1962), evoking the early morning light. While more loosely painted than the later works, the combination of delicate line with large areas of colour is consistent throughout, as is King's use of colour to evoke moods.

Berlin Suite (1970) was inspired by a visit to the city, which was then divided between West and East Germany. Narrow peripheral bands create tension against expanses of flat colour. The curator of the Hugh Lane Gallery at the time, Ethna Waldron, wrote of the prints: "The colour variations introduce the city's subtle changes of mood and emphasis while the basic tensions remain taut and keyed-up to fever pitch."

Berlin Suite and the *Threshold* and *Intrusion* prints (1974) were published by Editions Alecto. This prestigious English publishing house created prints with many eminent artists during the 1960s and 1970s, including David Hockney, Richard Hamilton and Eduardo Paolozzi. These are screen-prints, a technique in which ink is passed through a stencilled mesh screen to produce the image. Used in graphic design and commercial printing, screen-printing became popular as an artistic medium in the 1960s and was King's preferred method of printmaking.

Nexus (1973) is a striking painting from the same period, in which slivers of black punctuate a solid block of red. It featured on the cover of the catalogue to King's first major retrospective exhibition, held at the Hugh Lane Gallery in 1981.

King effectively distilled his experience of places and his connection to different cities is often explicit in the titles – Berlin, Harlem (New York), Baggot Street (Dublin) and Saarbrücken, a city in Germany close to the French border. *Saarbrücken Suite* (1975) was published by Edition Monika Beck, a German publisher with whom King often worked. Their collaborations include an edition of *Glanmore Sonnets* by Seamus Heaney with images by Cecil King.

Hugh Lane Gallery commissioned a tapestry from the artist in 1982. It was woven in the French town of Aubusson, which has been celebrated for the quality of its weaving for centuries.

King's later paintings in the collection, such as *Link 3* and *Intrusion 2* (1985), are realised in more muted colours than the works from the 1970s. Surface was important to the artist; to achieve the particular quality of these paintings he built up colour in layers using both brushes and foam.

Present in Time Future presents a collection of works, produced over a twenty-five year period, that reveal an artist of great sensitivity and quiet intensity.