

Window on life of Pye

The stained-glass artist and painter is given a new perspective but is given too little chance to speak for himself

CRISTIN LEACH HUGHES

PATRICK PYE
Life and Work

by BRIAN McAVERA

Four Courts Press €35 pp144

"I was brought up between two females ... my mother seemed perfectly normal and my granny seemed rather sad and quiet." This is how artist Patrick Pye began an autobiographical talk in a church in Dublin in 2007. "Granny was sad," he said, "because Mother wasn't a believer." Pye is an Irish painter of what are nowadays termed "unfashionable" religious subjects. He can be passionate, funny and informative when he talks about his life and work, but

you wouldn't know it from Brian McAvera's new biography of the artist, now in his late eighties.

McAvera is wary of storytelling. "Almost every creative artist ... is framed within the shapes of their own myths," he writes, before outlining the "problems" associated with writing about artists while they are still alive — "a tendency to the unrevealing anecdote, a lack of critical distance, and an inclination towards being partisan".

He worked with the artist's co-operation, but his laudable determination to produce a serious, detached assessment of Pye's contribution to Irish art is tempered by his decision not to mine the live source for personal insight. McAvera sketches the biographical details and pins down dates, but his main concern is to argue for the artist's overlooked central role in the development of Irish modernism. He claims, rightly, that Pye has been left out of the official history.

He does not dwell on formative influences — Pye attended exhibitions with his mother as a teenager in the 1940s and found his key influence, El Greco, in a

school library book — preferring to concentrate on situating the work within an international contemporary and art-historical context. While the valid list of influences is almost amusingly comprehensive, the book is shorter than one might expect. McAvera focuses on his key thesis: dismissing the critic Dorothy Walker (who "regarded [Pye] as being retrogressive") and the accepted narrative that places artist Mainie Jellett at the centre of Irish modernism, describing her as "a third-generation Cubist ... who produced a considerable quantity of work that can be best described as second-rate".

Pye was born in England of an English father and a Protestant Irish mother. He was brought up by his mother in Ireland and converted to Catholicism at the age of 29, five years after she died in 1958. He exhibited in the Oireachtas art exhibition and with the Dublin Painters while still a teenager. In the 1950s, he showed eight times with the Irish Exhibition of Living Art, at the annual Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) show and in group exhibitions at the leading Dublin galleries.

"In the light of later comments by others that 'Patrick was never fashionable', one is tempted to think that a career which seemed to be taking off splendidly in the 1950s somehow stalled," writes McAvera. Not true, he argues. Pye went on to work successfully in stained glass, with "the powerful Hendriks Gallery as his main dealer", and was a founding member of the Independent Artists group and the Figurative Image exhibition. McAvera restores Figurative Image and the art magazine Introspect — which Pye co-founded in 1975 — from footnotes to a central role in Irish modernism. As editor, Pye chose artist writers for Introspect: "I had the sculptor Michael Biggs, Louis le Brocqy

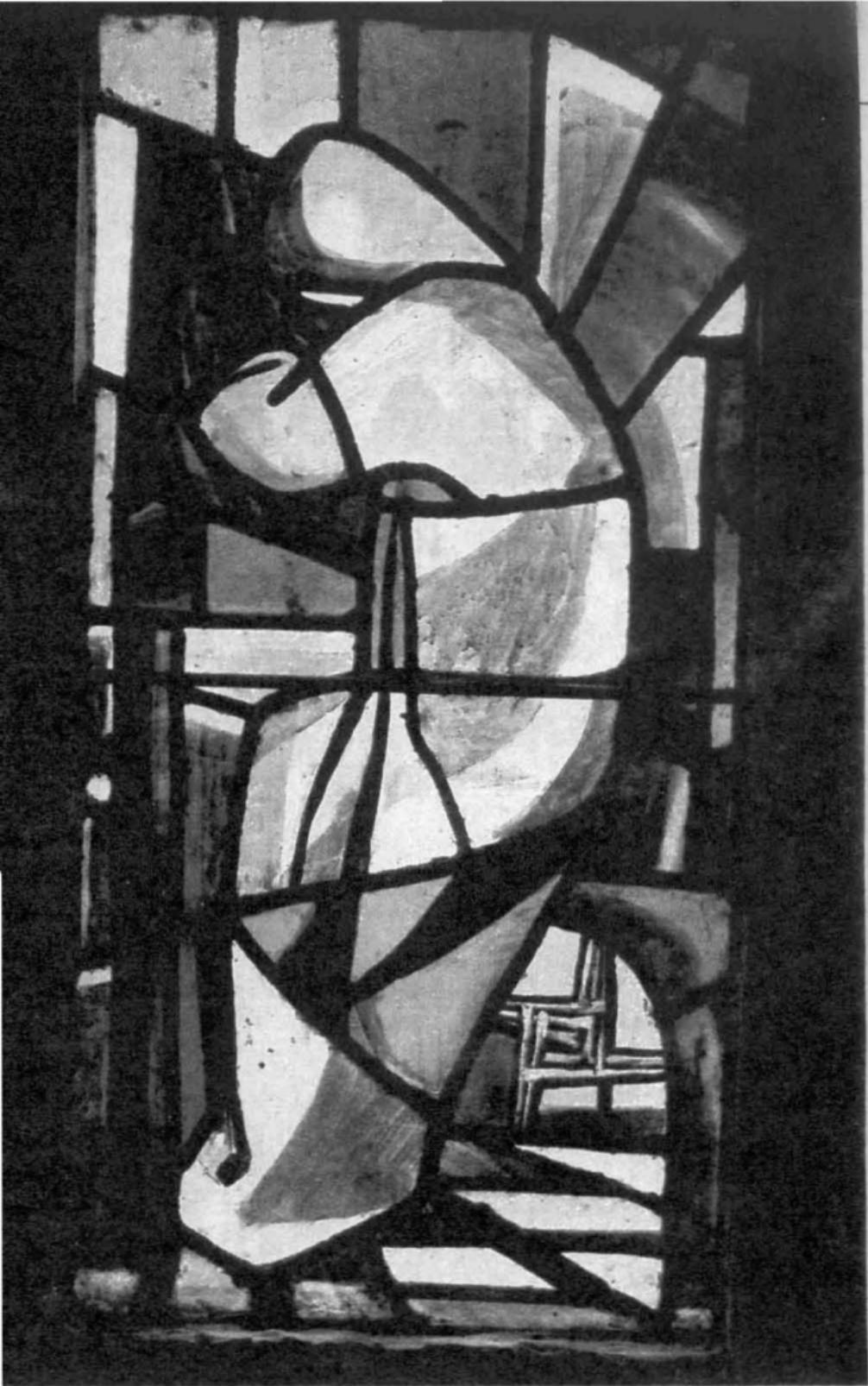


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urful character: Pye worked successfully in stained glass

and Patrick Hickey. I wrote the editorials and I infuriated Dorothy Walker: the neck of me to edit a magazine! We survived for three years, and then being in debt, we closed down."

As the establishment changed, Pye became part of it. He began exhibiting with the RHA in 1982, was later elected a member, and in 1997 he was the subject of a large-scale retrospective there.

The book establishes valuable chronologies. Its central assertions are worthwhile, but many of the descriptions are long-winded and pin down art historical influence and aspects of technique rather than illuminating the work.

When Pye is quoted, it simply demonstrates that more quotes would have made for a more engaging book.

On the Impressionists: "They are loved by everybody but the trouble is the subject matter — picnics and domesticity. It doesn't really deal with my subject matter, which is poor suffering humanity." On Bonnard: "It's the sense of space which is wonderful; making space with colour; and the fact that his women are real women, not

men's dreams. Compare them to all of those classical Venuses." On Matisse: "I love the humanism. I agree with Matisse: a thing should be simple to see. The subject should be absolutely clear. You shouldn't have to think about it."

McAvera argues persuasively that Pye is a history painter rather than a religious artist, because he focuses on "the significance and emotional impact of the stories he chooses to tell".

In all of his art-historical referencing, however, the author seems to have missed the most salient point about Pye. Despite the apparently old-fashioned nature of his subject matter, he is painting what he sees as the essential questions about life itself.

His work continues to be vibrant and alive, fuelled by the palpable energy that ignites when an artist's personal concerns are made universal as art. There's nothing more modern and contemporary than that.

In that 2007 talk, Pye used humour to answer the question that has dogged his career: how can you be both modern and religious? "You can't please everybody all the time," he said.