

Renaissance at the RHA

JOHN MULCAHY appraises the redevelopment of the Royal Hibernian Academy on the reopening of the gallery for the 178th Annual Exhibition

Earlier this month, over 1,000 guests attended the official opening of the reconstructed premises of the Royal Hibernian Academy at Ely Place Dublin and so, after 185 years, the RHA finally has got a home that is worthy of its ambitions. Over the past decade, the Academy has enjoyed a remarkable regeneration in all aspects of its operations. But where does it go from here?

1 The Royal Hibernian Academy

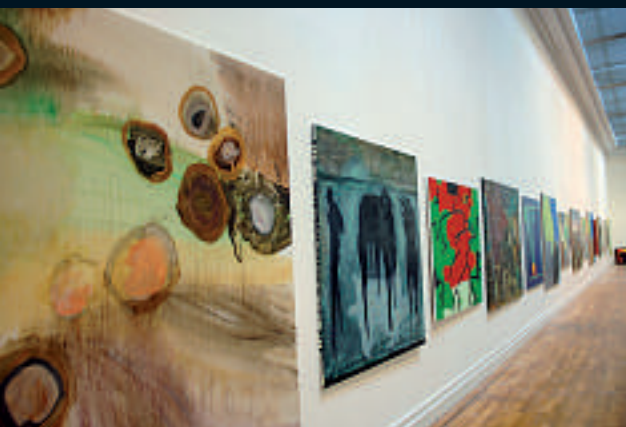
2 AMELIA STEIN RHA
Michael Quane Studio, 2008
Archival photograph
47 x 47cm
Edition of 5

The Academy's first home was designed and built at his own expense by the distinguished architect Francis Johnston who was also President of the Academy in 1824. Unfortunately this fine building on Lower Abbey Street was destroyed during the Easter Rising in 1916 and it wasn't until 1939 that the Academy managed to purchase the site on Ely Place, just off St Stephen's Green, which has been its official base ever since. However, another twenty years had to pass before the

property developer Matt Gallagher agreed to fund a new building on the site and even then this stood as a concrete shell for almost two decades until the building was finally completed in 1987. Happily the recent €7.5m reconstruction has been completed in record time with the Gallery closed for only twelve months (Henry J Lyons Architects, Midland Construction, Builders).

The essential changes in the new building will not be seen by the public. These were the replacement of all the electrical, lighting and temperature control facilities and the addition of new studio spaces for students, storage

and other facilities. But what the public will see is the completely changed circulation system within the gallery. Matt Gallagher's version as conceived by Raymond McGrath PRHA and architected by Arthur Gibney PRHA was based on a north to south flow that was designed to begin in the forecourt of the complex at the end of Ely Place. From there one could proceed, via the large ground-floor



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exhibition space, up some leisurely steps to the foyer and the rather grand staircase which split left and right to provide double access to the main gallery on the first floor.

Unfortunately, in due course the forecourt degenerated into a car park and the public entrance was switched to the east side which meant coming in directly off Ely Place which was perpendicular to the main staircase. The staircase has now gone altogether and the Ely Place entrance is flanked by a coffee shop on one side and a bookshop on the other. The foyer is now a low and rather feature-less area from which one passes into the atrium and a new wall-side staircase to the first-floor galleries. Personally, I feel that the new layout lacks the light and elegance of the former design but with the central staircase gone, the very large first-floor gallery provides an uninterrupted floor space from wall to wall.

Like the Crawford Gallery in Cork, the RHA was originally a



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small organisation whose members were dedicated to education in the arts in addition to exhibiting their own work. It is still a small organisation in that its membership is still limited to only thirty full members although there are now also ten senior members and ten associate members i.e. a total membership of fifty. The Academy is artist-based and artist-orientated and its role in education has had its ups and downs. The RHA schools were closed in 1939 and never fully reopened but, true to its mandate, the RHA now employs an education officer and holds life drawing classes and members' drawing sessions twice a week. Significantly, the RHA does not seek accreditation from the Department of Education and has no wish to so. The Academy is determined to retain control over its curriculum and drawing is the central skill and discipline that the members believe in.

Writing in the *Irish Arts Review* in 2002, Patrick Pye, one of the grand old men of the Academy, said 'I believe that what sep-

arates us from our contemporaries is that we believe that a work of art, a painting, is an artifice. The difficult artificing of art is what protects art from too hasty a consumption, or too carnal or sensation-orientated a consumption by the public. I am not for an Academy of rules and literal procedures. I am for an Academy of values through the practice and appreciation of the ancient arts of painting and sculpture.' So there you have it. In fact the RHA has been broadening its base in recent years, particularly in the area of photography and in its wider interest in the art of architecture. Some new members are practising in a range of approaches not previously associated with the ideology of the Academy including geometric abstraction and abstract sculpture.

The new building includes quite extensive new studio space and facilities for students however with funding of only €20,000 pa available for education from their Albert Fund, it is difficult to

and the RHA Sculpture Prize together worth a total of €27,000. The *Irish Arts Review* is happy to be associated with two other Awards, namely the new €6,000 Photographic Portrait Prize (see page 80) sponsored by the Bank of Scotland (Ireland) and the €5,000 Portraiture Award (see page 78) sponsored by the Ireland-US Council which last year went to Gary Coyle and in 2006 to Maeve McCarthy's portrait of the writer Kevin Kiely. There is the AXA Insurance Prize of €5,000 for Drawing and the Curtin O'Donoghue Photography Prize of the same amount. All the others prizes are in the €1,500 range.

What is really remarkable about the 'new' RHA is the process by which this relatively small group of artists pulled themselves out of the lethargy – and poverty – of the depression years. It coincided with the appointment of a new Director, Patrick Murphy, in 1998 under the Presidency of the late distinguished

3 AMELIA STEIN RHA
Brett McEntagart, Hands 2008
Archival photograph
47 x 47cm
Edition of 5

4 AMELIA STEIN RHA
Rachel Joynt, Hands 2008
Archival photograph
47 x 47cm
Edition of 5

5 AMELIA STEIN RHA
Barbara Warren, Hands 2008
Archival photograph
47 x 47cm
Edition of 5



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see this part of the RHA 'mission' being realised for some time.

Primarily, of course, the RHA is about exhibitions — mostly of the work of their own members. Each member is entitled to exhibit up to six works at the Annual Exhibition and associate members, three. In addition to this, no less than 3,000 works were submitted from invited artists and emerging artists for the current exhibition but only 280 (less than 10%) of these were accepted. By the time the show closes on 15 December, new work valued at around €1.3 million will have changed hands.

A really attractive feature of the Annual Exhibition for emerging artists is the total of twenty-one prizes now on offer. These include the long established Hennessy Craig Scholarship

architect, Arthur Gibney. It continued through a long series of collegiate meetings of this very disparate collection of members which eventually agreed on a dozen top priorities for the Academy which amazingly have been followed through to fruition. To the credit of the complete Academy, and particularly to the officer board of Stephen McKenna, James Hanley, Martin Gale, James English and Mick O'Dea, they have managed to raise the funding for their new building, mostly from private sources, and have their building reconstructed within record time. Who said artists were dreamers? ■

JOHN MULCAHY is Editor of the *Irish Arts Review*.

'178th RHA Annual Exhibition' RHA, Dublin, 11 November – 15 December 2008.

6 PREPARATIONS FOR
THE ROYAL HIBERNIAN
ACADEMY 178TH
ANNUAL EXHIBITION