

Role reversal

Róisín Kennedy
examines Amelia
Stein's photographic
series capturing
members of the RHA
as subject and sitter,
rather than creator

Amelia Stein: *Photographs RHA 2009* features photographs of fifty artists, all members and associate members of the Royal Hibernian Academy. The striking black and white portraits were taken in the artists' studios, and are accompanied by images of the studio chair, a central, if inconspicuous feature of the space, where the artist works or rests and from which he or she surveys the work in progress. Other photographs focus on intriguing details of the tools, props and other ephemera of the workspace. The photography is the work of fellow RHA member Amelia Stein, who in 2003 became the first photographer to be elected to the Academy (Fig 2). The resulting book, commissioned by the RHA, is funded by the Per Cent for Art Scheme, raised by the new Academy building. It is an original and clever use of this arrangement because, at €30.00, the final artwork in the form of a publication is reasonably available to the wider public as well as being a lasting and rather wonderful record of this particular moment in the Academy's history.



The range of artists in these photographs may be a surprise to some. While familiar academic painters such as Carey Clarke, Brett McEntagart and Stephen McKenna feature, so too do a wider range of artists, young and old, male and female, who work in a variety of media. These include young painters like Diana Copperwhite and Colin Martin and established but unconventional 'new' academics like Abigail O'Brien and Eilís O'Connell. One of the purposes of the book is to highlight the new identity of the Academy which is extremely diverse and inclusive of a wide range of practices. Stein sees it as offering 'a great chance to show the RHA in a contemporary way – for people to see us in modernity'. However, the use of black and white lends the images a classic, timeless quality and is reminiscent of the legacy of the photography of modernist artists such as Alberto Giacometti and Fernand Léger by Cartier Bresson and Robert Doisneau respectively. This connection is made by Stephen McKenna in his short preface to the book. Stein's approach is distinguished by the way in which she foregrounds the artist and the overlooked details of the atelier rather than the art itself.

The beautifully produced book was designed by Steve Averill, one of Ireland's leading graphic designers. Best known for his work on the covers of U2 records and CDs, Averill worked closely with Stein on the painstaking arrangement of the photographs and the ultimate creation of the book. The resulting sequence of images leads the reader through the painters to sculptors and finally to the two architects. Its order is, according to Stein, very significant. It involved a long process of constantly reviewing photographs before the final layout was agreed upon. There is no text, just strong monochrome images that subtly convey the different personalities of the artists

and their very diverse working methods and environments. Gary Coyle, for example, is not photographed in his studio but shown seated on a rock at the Forty Foot, a place that figures prominently in his own work (Fig 7). This simple photograph conveys the physical connection of Coyle to his subject matter – his daily swim as well as the contemplative and intellectual nature of his practice. The deep tones of the gelatin print reveal the detailed structure of the rocks and the seaweed, against which the taut frame of Coyle seems to pitch itself.

Liam Belton is shown seated in his study, rather than his studio, surrounded by the books and objects which feature in his still-life paint-

1 AMELIA STEIN B.1958
DAVID CRONE RHA 2009

2 AMELIA STEIN RHA
SELF-PORTRAIT 2009

3 MARIA SIMONDS-GOODING
ARHA 2009





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4 MICHAEL CULLEN RHA 2009

5 RACHEL JOYNT RHA 2009

6 LIAM BELTON RHA 2009

7 GARY COYLE RHA 2009

8 T P FLANAGAN RHA 2009

ings. Photographs such as this record the care with which artists place their possessions, particularly those that they associate with their work. Stein notes that 'creative people don't just plonk things down', they position and arrange objects. The order which Belton imposes on his vast collection of vases, books and objets d'art lends the space the distinctive air of a carefully catalogued museum, except of course that this is a working repository of personally chosen items (Fig 6). This quality of care is also apparent in Belton's own attention to the spacing and relationship of still-life elements in his painting.

The photography involved about sixty separate visits to studios throughout Dublin and Ireland, with Stein choosing to reshoot a fifth of the original. Stein claims to have approached the daunting task of photographing all these artists in the special and often rather private



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world of their studios in as pragmatic a manner as possible. The most difficult part of the job was pinning the artists down to a day and time and secondly having good clear light available in which to photograph. Stein was determined to keep the project on track as she wanted all the photographs to share the same vision. Her background as a commercial photographer may have helped her to overcome practical obstacles but her forthright methods also produced honest and straightforward images which are not overly posed. Stein's artistic credentials are evident in the incisive compositions of the photographs such as the dramatic image of Maria Simonds-Gooding who stands, like a latter-day constructivist, with her hand holding a drill suspended from the ceiling of her studio (Fig 3). The rows of tubular forms behind her echo the elemental shapes found in the artist's work. Hand on hip with her dusk-mask lying on the bench behind her, Simonds-Gooding comes across as practical and determined.

Such clues to the personality of the artists can be found in all the portraits. For example, in Stein's photograph of T P Flanagan, the artist is seated in front of the dark rectangular spaces of shelves which hold his stretched canvases (Fig 8). But the little jaunty hat hanging from this rack and the portrait of his wife leaning on the wall behind him subtly

SUCH INSIGHTFUL PRESENTATIONS OF THE ARTISTS COME FROM THEIR INTERACTION WITH STEIN WHO ADMITS THAT THE FINAL IMAGES RESULT FROM A COLLISION OF FACTORS

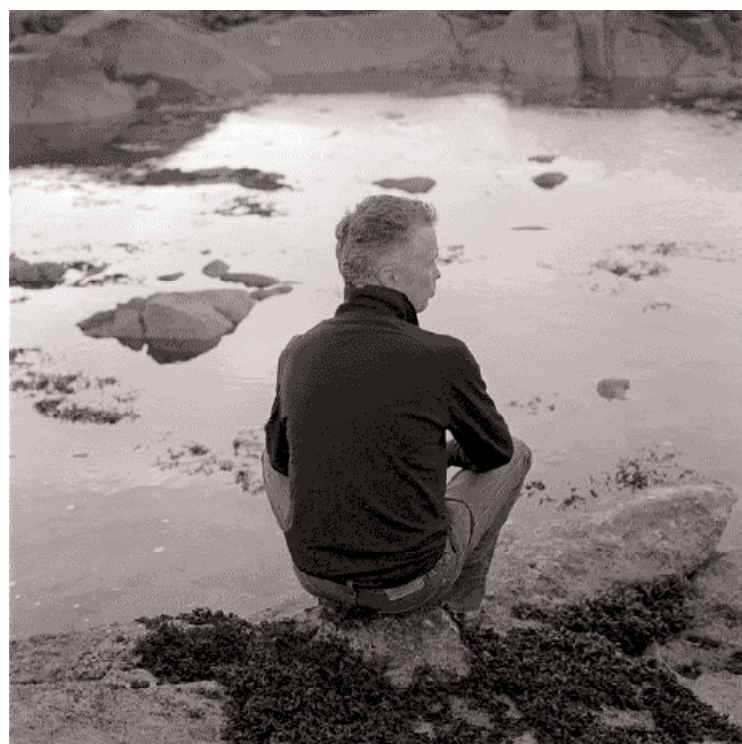
indicate a lighter side to the personality of the man. Other little details such as the errant pieces of masking tape and string reveal an informality which is also seen in the expression and pose of the artist himself.

A different mood is evoked by the portrait of David Crone who dominates the composition of his portrait (Fig 1). The expansive frame of his arms which casually support his head impart the open and candid nature of the artist. By contrast the low viewpoint of Rachel Joynt's portrait evokes the expanse of her impressive studio space but also suggests the physical and psychological strength of the artist (Fig 5). The small chisel which she holds denotes the precision of her work as a sculptor and contrasts with the large scale of the work behind her. It also draws attention to her hands and artists' hands form a major recurring theme in the book. Such insightful presentations of the artists come from their interaction with Stein who admits that the final images result from a collision of factors, such as the quality of the light or the mood of both the sitter and the photographer. Stein believes that the photographer has to deal with a very different set of challenges to that of other artists, particularly painters, whom she maintains 'have it easier' as they can rework their compositions and their images. The process of selection is central to the success of Stein's project. The result is, as she intended, contemporary portraits, immediate and not laboured. But the carefully chosen images of artists and their studios reveal layers of deeper significance that reward close scrutiny. ■

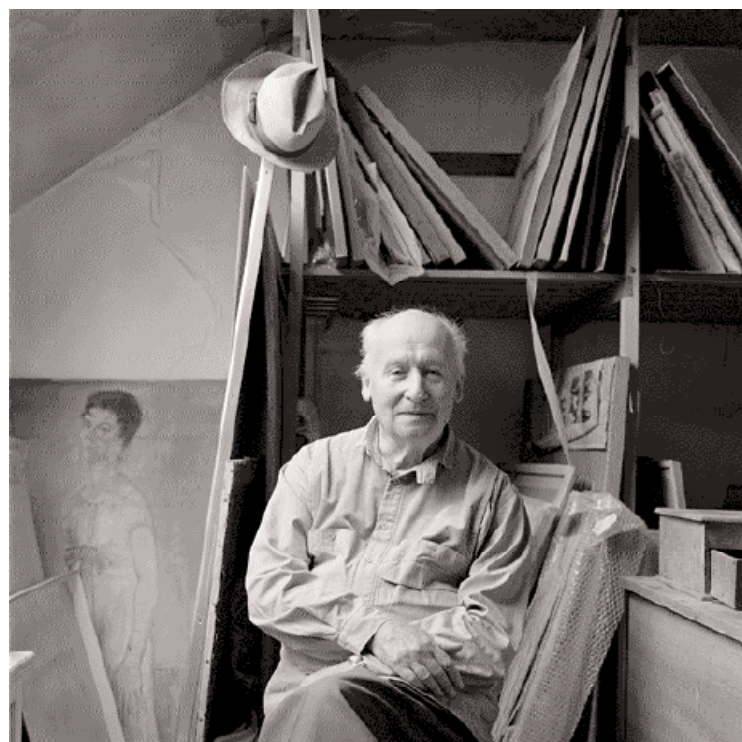
Róisín Kennedy is an art historian. All images ©Amelia Stein.



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