

OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

DR NESSA CRONIN on 1 December 2016 in the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Fine Arts *honoris causa*, on **BRIAN BOURKE**

A Sheansailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle,

Brian Bourke's mother said he would never become a doctor, but that he might one day become a surgeon as he would be then be 'Mr' and could dispense with the 'Dr'. How apt then that we are gathered here this evening to honour Mr, Dr, Brian Bourke in the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, in Dublin, his home town and his native place.

Artist, sculptor, musician, puppeteer, theatre-maker and portrait painter, Brian Bourke was born in Dublin in 1936 to a large family, and his mother and his aunt in particular supported his early interests in art. Of these early years Bourke has wryly stated, 'I was dyslexic, asthmatic, eczematic and covered in bandages. I had all the advantages for becoming an artist'. He was constantly drawing as a child, and when his aunt used to visit she would bring colouring pencils to their home - he and his brother would have to show her the worn-down stubs, and their creations, in order to secure future replacements.

Amongst his many early achievements, Bourke represented Ireland at the Paris Biennale and the Lugano Exhibition of Graphics in 1965, won the Arts Council portrait competition the same year, won the Munster and Leinster Bank competition in 1966, and gained first prize in the Irish Exhibition of Living Art in 1967. He was included in the influential Rosc exhibition in Cork in 1980, and in 1981 was one of the first members to be nominated to Aosdána, an honour which he acknowledges as having kept his work alive during some of his leaner years in the past. In 1985 he was named the Sunday Independent Artist of the Year, was artist in residence at the Gate Theatre's Beckett Festival in 1991 and received the prestigious O'Malley Award from the Irish-American Cultural Institute in 1993.

Brian's formal training began at the then conservative National College of Art in Dublin, where an Austrian professor at the College reportedly said, 'there was more liberalism in Vienna during the Nazi regime than there was in the School of Art in Dublin after the war'. In regarding the great span (in terms of time, content, and form) of Brian's work, I'm reminded of the late John Kelleher (a well-known professor of Irish history and literature in Harvard). Kelleher once commented as he reviewed a student folder for university admissions, 'This student is exceptionally well-rounded. But the radius is very narrow'.

The same could not be said of Brian Bourke. Indeed, it seems clear that while the art institutions that he attended provided space, time and materials for him to work, they could not contain his prodigious talent nor the expansive radius of his intellect. And so formative years were spent not only in Dublin, but also later at St Martin's College of Art and Goldsmiths in London. He would also cast the radial line out far and wide, so that its projection would take in extended periods in Paris, New York, Bavaria, Spain and Italy, experiences that continue to shape his life's work.

His work challenges us to rethink old wisdoms, and to remain open to the world of possibility that (in Seamus Heaney's words) 'whatever is given, can always be reimagined, however four-square'. Not only do contemporary artists look to his work as a tuning fork that emits a visual perfect pitch, but in speaking with those artists one also comes to learn about his gentle words of support and acts of kindness that he quietly lends when needed. His landscapes (whether of Connemara, Manhattan, Bavaria or Extremadura) challenge nostalgia and sentiment; they convey a primordial energy, a framing of life in all its confusion, vigour, power and strength. Indeed his work is so visceral one almost wants to go up and feel its texture, as his landscapes are as much about being embodied in place as they are about those places being embodied in us.

Patrick Murphy states that Bourke is not a landscape painter, but is rather a 'portrait maker', where the landscapes are 'dramatis personae'. Indeed, this visual drama is best encapsulated in his work that draws on Irish and European literature, whether it's Sweeney in the trees, Don Quixote's windmills, or Beckett's post-war tramps. Everything in his work speaks in tongues, and across different registers. Indeed, his sketch books are visual conversations across, on, and in the page - you feel the urge to press your ear up to the paper to listen to what they are saying, what truths they have to tell, or more likely as with Máirtín Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille*, to eavesdrop in on their shop-talk, their gossip, their myth-making effusions.

Of his 'Out of the Head' series, Bourke writes that these drawings were 'done with an open mind and a careful hand', and that they are 'already in my head in such quantities that they have to be brought out with care'. His description of his work as 'multiple births' signals his position as mediator, the artist as mid-wife, helping to bring a new being into the world - a being that was already fully formed, miraculously somehow, elsewhere.

This concern, if not obsession, with impermanence and the mutability of life and the human form, is something that Bourke finds echoed in the paintings of Breughel and Velasquez and later in the work of Van Gogh and Bacon, but also in the writings of Cervantes, Blake and Beckett. As he writes, I'm 'trying to record it because intimations of mortality and things impermanent are made more permanent by producing art', and, 'as a human I am moved to make things last longer than I do'.

And so he may draw 'Irish skies' over Manhattan skyscrapers, and he is to be celebrated as an Irish artist, and by that I mean in the best Joycean tradition, in being a citizen of the world. A fellow artist when asked about Brian said, 'he is uncompromising in his work, he is an artist's artist', yes, but he is also our artist, our ollamh, a Doctor of Fine Arts.

His works lends the same level of scrutiny of the body, and attention to the spirit that animates it, as the work of the master physician. His hand registers the fine detail of the line, the curve and the trace, with the same skill of the surgeon, delicately opening up the body to inspection - a necessary, if brutal, act to get to the truth of things. After over six decades of work (and still counting) what remains true is the quality and absolute integrity of his work throughout his extraordinary career.

Brian Bourke stands amongst other great figures that have shaped not only the making of modern Ireland but also contributed to the reinvention of Europe and its traditions. He is undoubtedly an artist of the world, but he is also very much our artist, and it is therefore fitting on behalf of Galway, Dublin and Ireland, that we honour him this evening as one of our own, at the Royal College of Physicians, as a Doctor of Fine Arts of the National University of Ireland.

**PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE
UNIVERSITAS:**

**Praesento vobis hunc meum filium, quem scio tam moribus
quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur,
honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in Artibus Optimis idque
tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.**