

the WiRE

Trouble Free

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Friday, 06 March 2009



Northern Ireland printmakers show at UNH

The current exhibit at the University of New Hampshire is a tribute to what happens when people make art, not war.

“Renewal: Printmakers from the New Northern Ireland” features 18 significant printmakers, who present 36 works reflecting the styles and interests of artists in an era of peace after conflict.

Troubles in Northern Ireland started in the late 1960s and continued for about 30 years, killing thousands with violence between the minority, mainly Catholic, nationalists and the mainly Protestant unionist community.

A decade of peace has passed since the conflict settled down in 1998, and the region is now experiencing an economic and cultural transformation. The exhibition highlights the renaissance taking place that mends Northern Ireland’s cultural history with its current art.

The contemporary prints will be on view in the Museum of Art in the Paul Creative Arts Center at UNH through April 8. The museum will be closed on St. Patrick’s Day and during the entire week of spring break, from March 13 through 22.

Works in the exhibit are drawn from two of the region’s most active printmaking workshops for artists, Belfast Print Workshop (the largest in Ireland) and the Seacourt Print Workshop. Both encourage experimental and innovative approaches to printmaking and art that documents change as it happens.

The recent work of Simon McWilliams exemplifies this, pushing the limits of printmaking. The focal point of “Chandelier” happens to be hip in contemporary artwork, but the decadent decoration has a long history. Blood red and other primary colors cut through the darkness of this piece, but even the black

background has a sparkly texture, which is a fun way to illustrate how chandeliers change light.

McWilliams takes the focus outside with “Red Apartments.” There are similar colors, since the red building is covered with yellow scaffolding and green netting. But the impression it gives is the opposite of his other print. It’s a utilitarian structure undergoing necessary work—nothing frivolous here other than bright color.

More modern cityscapes or street art style might be expected from Northern Ireland artists, where much graffiti and many public murals express political views. Instead, these artists tend to focus on the natural or historical beauty of the land or on simply making beautiful art.

Deirdre McCrory overlaps the copied images of real plants in “Cow Parsley,” fading out at the bottom and in the background. There’s a hint of a barbed wire fence across the middle, but rather than giving the piece an edgy look, the spikiness blends in with the flowers and feels rural.

Two landscape prints from Valerie Gianandrea look remarkably realistic from a distance, although the sky beyond “The Moor” and the water below “Cliff II” are in surreal shades of blue. Here, again, the artist shares the rugged, natural beauty of the region, uninhabited and seemingly far from any dispute over whom it belongs to.

A monotype by Cecilia Stephens, called “Ridgeways,” also shows a natural landscape, with earth tones, greens and blues sweeping up to mountain peaks, giving each dimension. Though the titles hint of similar scenery, pieces by John Breakey are more abstract. “The Mountain is Going Away Today” looks more like a scribbled “Dear Johnny” letter than a picture postcard. “Gentle Waves at Keel Point” is full of bubbly movement, but looks like a black and white inkblot test.

The doors in prints by Frances Gordon are man-made, but look as old as the hills. The closed and locked doors are not welcoming, but rather suggest a sense of ownership. A hanging, three-dimensional piece called “2x large doors prints on fabric” appears like an apparition or hallucination in the right light, as though the home is fragile and temporary.

The overwhelming responsibility of housing could be behind Jill McKeown’s “Lease.” The accordion-style book is stretched out to reveal copies of a long, handwritten document, where words overlap each other. It starts dark but fades out near the end. McKeown also created a mixed-media piece called “All That and Those,” which seems like a collection of memories in an old, wooden box. There’s a foggy print of a house, along with vials filled with a page from a book or woolly lint.

A collograph landscape by Ivan Frew called “Arch” is somewhat abstract, but portrays Northern Ireland’s rainy bog land with a watered-down sun. This one does look war-torn, and the arch, which isn’t structural but accidental, looks as if it could have been spray-painted.

Other artists seem to play in color and composition, or skillfully observe and document, rather than make a statement.

The Museum of Art is in the Paul Creative Arts Center at 30 Academic Way on the Durham campus of the University of New Hampshire, 603-862-3712, www.unh.edu/moa.