

Painting the World Crisis: Challenging Academic Ideas

Artist as Activist: Representing Global Issues

By [Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin](#)

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Madrid Demonstrations 2012, Oil on canvas, 60cm x 60cm / 23.6 in x 23.6 in

‘What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls a butterfly’. (Richard Bach)

Where does the work of art fit in during times of crisis? How does the internet influence the scope of art? Should the artist be looking at home or abroad? Why are many artists seemingly oblivious to the world collapsing around them? How can one be ‘authentic’ in an endlessly reproduced world? The artist can take on these problems of crisis, and try to understand and deal with them. Or the artist can retreat from the world, into the wilds of natural landscapes, forests and rivers (although with ongoing climate chaos even nature has become less of a stable retreat).

Recent years have seen the closure of many private art galleries in Ireland as the current economic crisis bites deeper and deeper. It has become more and more difficult for artists to survive financially from selling art alone. However, the crisis can free the artist up too in a number of ways. The artist can make art without any market constraints on size, content, medium etc. The artist is also forced into reconsidering what is art, what is the role of art in society and who is the audience for art?



Media Studies, Libya by Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin
Oil on canvas
60cm x 120cm / 23.6 in x 47 in

Challenging academic ideas

The search for authenticity can be seen in the work of the nineteenth century French artist Gustave Courbet who managed to combine landscape painting with a social consciousness that was revolutionary in its challenge to academic ideas about art at that time. He painted the peasants and their harsh living conditions in a lively painterly way that married form and content. The difference with today is that the landscape has not changed as much as the social conditions in that the workers and peasants have been globalised and the extreme conditions are more likely to be seen now in 'third world' countries than at home.

As the 'harsh conditions' of life moved further and further away geographically, the artist became less and less affected by personal experience in the same way as Courbet was. The artist could live and survive in a bubble of wealth and produce whatever art that took their fancy. However, the economic and financial crises of the 21st century have burst that bubble and change at home often came from distant, exotic places we know little about. What has changed the distant murmuring into a loud, sometimes very chaotic, shouting has been the growth of satellite television and the internet. The instant communication of global digital technology can reveal problems on the other side of the world to us and, in turn, things happening here can be seen in previously 'isolated' parts of the globe.



Bangladeshi Factory by Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin
Oil on canvas
60cm x 120cm / 23.6 in x 47 in

While the West has most of the advantages and products of a global market, the negative side of global industrial revolution reveals itself in the ghettos, slums and favelas that have grown up around the major metropolitan centres. Images, video and information about these situations have been uploaded to the internet the world over by travellers, reporters and by the local people themselves. The ability of people to empathise with the socio-political problems of complete strangers has led to the creation of many solidarity movements in the past and can be augmented by easy access to new material.

The growth of tourism has brought many of these problems directly to the attention of others as a knock-on effect of increasingly desperate governments relying on tourism to decrease unemployment. As awareness of the plight of others sparks empathy it also

encourages self-reflexivity as some take up pro-active roles of political activism and education at home. Similarly, the artist today, like Courbet in his time, can highlight both the negative and the positive i.e. oppression and opposition on a global basis.

Can artists use visual art to explore the process of globalization in the same way that writers write about global events? In form there are major differences. Art must encompass many different ideas in one composition. Film and literature have narratives through time whereas a painting has to express many ideas in one moment in time. In this way a painting can distill down all the elements of a narrative to one symbolic representation.

The internet can be used by artists in the same way as the journalist as a basis for research. The writer has to research generally accepted facts from many different sources. So too the artist should be able to research imagery to be used as the basis for his/her art. Just as the writer often has to rely on other people's writings, the artist often depends on other people's images, unless, of course, the writer or artist has the time and the finance to visit the places themselves.

Just as we feel proud when people in distant lands take an interest in our culture (e.g. Riverdance in Japan) they also feel proud when we take an interest in their culture/problems/issues. In some cases the gathering weight of world opinion can make a huge difference in the outcome of a particular situation (e.g. Apartheid). We live in a globalised world and just as there are many people from all over the world in our country there are many of our countrymen and women in their countries. We like to think that they are doing good in those countries and are pleased when we travel to other countries and get a good reception when we mention our country of origin.



Climate Chaos by Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin
Oil on canvas
60cm x 120cm / 23.6 in x 47 in

Social Realism must become Global Realism

As the world is becoming more and more globalised it can be seen that whatever happens in the 21st century will have implications for the whole world in a way that will be deeper and broader than the events of the 20th century. It is very likely that all that was national in the

20th century will become globalised features of the 21st century, e.g. the anti-colonialism of the Irish revolution, the hyperinflation of the German economy, the left/right battles of the Spanish Civil War, the economic depression of the USA or the revolution in Russia. The world is so interconnected now, facilitated by increased international trade, satellite TV and military communications, the internet etc. that a negative triggering of any part of the global financial, political or military systems would rapidly affect the whole world.

In some ways this potential for the local to become global democratizes the cause and effect that was more limited to powerful nations in the past. The economic crisis in Greece is a case in point, as the potential for a default to lead to a complete financial collapse across Europe – and potentially the world – was averted. The rapid spread of the Occupy movement to various countries around the world demonstrated that resistance had also become globalised. Thus, local activity can have global effect and global activity can have local effect. The artist can play a positive role in this global activity as a filter and commentator on many global issues. The artist in Ireland can work in this manner, as can artists elsewhere around the world.



Australia Mining by Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin
Oil on canvas
60cm x 120cm / 23.6 in x 47 in

Painting the world

In recent centuries the history of art has seen movements from the Renaissance to Modernism to Postmodernism. During the Renaissance (14th to the 17th century) form and content came together in an unprecedented way as the combination of Science (linear perspective, human anatomy) and Humanism (emphasizing the value and agency of human beings, critical thinking and evidence) produced new levels of naturalism in representation. This in turn led to the Realism of Dutch and Flemish painters whose themes included still lifes, landscapes and scenes from everyday life and later to the 19th century Realist painters such as Courbet.

The later movement of Modernism saw a breakdown of form as artists experimented with different ways of seeing. However, content in the forms of Science (Impressionism, Cubism), Freudianism (Surrealism), and Marxism (Expressionism) retained its importance as human

endeavour was further explored in visual ways. With Postmodernism we have the return of form but the collapse of content as the Grand Narratives (Hegelianism, Freudianism, Marxism) were seen to have all failed and a new cynicism took hold emphasizing parody, irony and skepticism towards science. More recently, the failure of capitalism and liberal democracy to solve fundamental global problems (the 'end of history' paradigm) has resulted in criticism of and disillusionment with the postmodernist credo.

New Renaissance

Only a global democratic movement encompassing the hopes, desires and aspirations of the majority of the world's population can form the basis of a new renaissance in the arts and sciences. Like during the old Renaissance, a new reorientation of the arts towards science and humanism, emphasizing the ability of people to resolve various problems (from unemployment to poverty to unequal distribution of wealth) will result in a new progressive flowering of all the arts. For example, emphasizing the human means opposition to technology that is benefiting only a few, such as factory robots (destroying working class jobs) or to the development of advanced robotics (the potential to destroy many types of middle class jobs). Artists who bring form back to the modern, and content back to the postmodern will bring art back to a powerful place in society.

The work of the artist reflects the interests of the artist. The paintings of Irish artists John "Jack" Butler Yeats (1871 - 1957), William Conor (1881 - 1968) and Seán Keating (1889 - 1977) are examples of art that reflect the social and political ideas of artists in tune with their time. In fact, Yeats did not like the word 'art' as he was concerned with reality:

"The word 'art' I don't care much for because it doesn't mean anything much to me. ... I believe that all fine pictures, and fine literature too, to be fine must have some of the living ginger of Life in them." [1]

Keating also took a keen interest in the reality of life around him. He stated:

"To endeavour to promote a social conscience in the name of God and at the same time to permit - under the guise of modernism and advancement - the activities of a naked commercialism (which has fallen into disrepute among the very people who created it) is a process of auto-frustration. Unbridled self-interest and reckless exploitation of the moral and physical needs of the human race has brought about the state of things in which collapse is inevitable." [2]



Mexican Border by Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin
Oil on canvas
60cm x 120cm / 23.6 in x 47 in

Artists and the people

In the 21st century the world is the community and connections with other artists around the world will be the new artist's milieu. The artist who takes a broad and open view of the world and the activities and actions of the people contained within it will become part of the forces for change for the better. In the words of the Austrian poet Ernst Fischer (1899-1972):

"In a decaying society, art, if it is truthful, must also reflect decay. And unless it wants to break faith with its social function, art must show the world as changeable. And help to change it." [3]

Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin (@cocroidheain) is a prominent Irish artist who has exhibited widely around Ireland. His work consists of paintings based on cityscapes of Dublin, Irish history and geopolitical themes (<http://gaelart.net/>). His blog of critical writing based on cinema, art and politics along with research on a database of Realist and Social Realist art from around the world can be viewed country by country at <http://gaelart.blogspot.ie/>.

Notes

- [1] Hilary Pyle, Jack B. Yeats: A Biography (London: Andre Deutsch, 1970) p.43
- [2] Éimear O'Connor, Seán Keating in Focus (Limerick: The Hunt Museum, 2009) p.27
- [3] Ernst Fischer, The Necessity of Art, (Middlesex: Penguin, 1959, trans. 1963) p.48

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