

The romantic tradition in European painting, from Courbet and Corot to the early twentieth century, has been a regenerative source for painters of place and landscape. The local tradition in these islands, from Constable and Turner to Hone and Paul Henry, reached a distinct fracturing stage with Patrick Collins. The influence of abstraction, both from Paris and later New York, seemed to articulate the finest achievement of myth and place through the images of the later Jack B. Yeats.

It is in this tradition that Pierce Hackett has explored the lyrical aspects of Irish landscape with a strong sense of its antecedents from the nineteenth century. The poetic utterances of high romantic flamboyance have brought us to the narrow pathways of Patrick Kavanagh and ultimately to a sense of place, which echoes the universal in its introspective localness.

The academic landscapes of Hackett's formal work fulfil a sense of acknowledgement to the past, while articulating an honest pleasure in the texture, elasticity and character of his material, paint. There has been an occasional expression of pure abstraction in what is anyway an abstract association of shapes on a two-dimensional surface, even when this illusion requires no immediate effort from the viewer. This parallel painterly exploration of abstraction is naturally associated with Hackett's embracing knowledge of the St. Ives School of Art, which similarly enhanced the outlook and sensibilities of Tony O'Malley. The recurring abstract motifs and application of paint on surface, particularly in the 'Umber Bridge' series, invoke an international language of visual art more often associated with abstract expressionism - that late manifestation of utopian modernism - than with their obvious Hone affinity.

In the 'Umber Bridge' series, the abstract gestural romantic expressionism of the small early versions where the tonal considerations defy any narrative image contrasts with the more formal character of the larger pictures. There is almost an evocation of water, rocks, vegetation and a strong vertical structure to the larger works, which dilutes the tincture of abstract cohesiveness in the original miniatures. This seminal crossover work in the development of Hackett's painting has incorporated a mature sense of space and internal vision with the more formal characteristics of his better-known landscape works.

There have been earlier precursors of this direction and the small picture 'Monument', exhibited at Iontas 1998, has the hallucinatory elements of surrealism, with the palette knife abandon of Jack B. Yeats. This small work gives a valuable insight into his development; the compositional placement of expressive figures reappears in the Flamenco Series. The Pissarro-like greys and blues and the wet street feel of impressionistic tonal colouration contrast with the elongated figures, which have a very Spanish character. A small abstraction, 'Sitting Bull', with its precise horizontal division of space and a languid almost dismissive application of paint, which achieves an eloquence of gesture in the depiction of the bull, is distinctly Iberian.

The more dramatic painterly work entitled 'The Eye of the Storm' accentuates the tonal conversation with its forceful colouration and interpreted circular cohesion. The thematic landscape structure is enriched with an interplay of large brush strokes and unabashed expressiveness. This large painting develops the continuous dialogue between emotive experience and gestural response and is in my opinion an important achievement for this artist.

*by Ciaran Bennett*