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Brian Fallon writes about Séan McSweeney, whose retrospective exhibition opens at the RHA Gallagher Gallery today

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A landscapist in the Irish romantic tradition

By vocation and choice, Séan Mc Sweeney is almost exclusively a landscape painter. That in itself distinguishes him from the other Irish artists with whom he has something in common: Patrick Collins, Nano Reid, Tony O'Malley, Camille Souter. All these have painted the figure and still-life subjects, as well as landscape, while he has scarcely varied his subject matter over thirty years. And yet, how much contrast and variety there is in his work, what a range of mood, and what a consistent line of evolution.

Very broadly speaking, he belongs to the more "romantic" Irish tradition which stems mainly from Jack Yeats, and which includes Collins, Reid, Daniel O'Neil, among others. These are essentially colourists, generally free in their brushwork, sensuous and lyrical, relying more on "organic" rhythms than on architectural form or symmetry. Where McSweeney breaks with the tradition is in his Dublin birth and upbringing- although his mother came from Sligo, where Collins was born and where Jack Yeats spent most of his childhood.

There is a certain logic in the fact that he now lives and works in the old schoolhouse where his mother went as a child. Ben Bulbin and Knocknarea are not far away, and the Atlantic is close- so close, in fact, that the winter gales sometimes carry salt on to his garden nearby. Between him and the Atlantic are abandoned turf cuttings, often filled with water which is partly salt, and the blue of these frequently appears in his recent pictures, with stabs of yellow to indicate the bog iris.

Mc Sweeney's father was a talented amateur painter (I have seen some of his works in his son's house) and he himself painted from an early age. He began to find himself as an artist in his twenties, when he and some fellow-spirits regularly hiked into rural Wicklow and often spent their weekends painting or drawing the local landscape. Later, after his marriage, he settled in that county and lived and worked there until his move to Sligo in 1984. During the 1960s he began to show in the Dawson Gallery in Dublin, run by late Leo Smith, an astute dealer with an eye for coming talent. Since then, his presence has been constant in Irish art; he has been included in many group shows, at home and abroad, and exhibits regularly at the Taylor Galleries, successor to the Dawson. He now occupies an unassailable position in the middle generation of Irish painters: neither a conservative nor an avant-gardist, but a man for all seasons who has developed his own angle of vision with a quiet tenacity.

McSweeney's broad, energetic way of working does suggest a premier-coup painter sitting hunched before his easel in a field or wood or on a river-bank, slashing down his impressions with vehemence and speed. In fact, he usually does his paintings indoors and his sketches from nature - in pastel, watercolour or charcoal; the paintings are a distillation, not an immediate response. He has filled many sketchbooks in his

time, and the drawings he has exhibited over the years are only a fraction of his output. He is, certainly, a prolific painter, but that is a matter of disciplined professional industry and not the product of working fast. His working methods are in fact methodical and painstaking: he works on carefully prepared boards (more rarely, on canvas too) and he is choosy about what paints he uses, and careful in the layout and organization of his studio. In short, he is a man who “knows what he’s at”, a methodical craftsman before he is anything else (it is one of the factors which has made him a good and patient teacher of the young).

McSweeney has wrestled hard to bring genuine form and clarity into his pictures, a struggle which goes back more than twenty years when he was still coming to terms with the lush, eventful Wicklow landscapes of trees, hills and valleys, with a wide range of contrasts. In those days, the exuberance of the colour and the rich surfaces tended to overpower the underlying forms, so that the subject often vanished under the vitality of the surface.

The fingerprints of the born painter were there, but they did not seem to be matched as yet by any equivalent thinking or organising power. A Dublin painter who has always liked and followed his work, once told me in confidence that Séan had taken to heart the strictures of some critics (I was one of them, I remember) who complained that his pictures lacked “bone”. If this is true, then he must have gone through a period of relative uncertainty until he (literally) worked himself out of it. Gradually the draughtsman and the exuberant handler of paint merged together more and more, until they became one and indivisible. He may often “draw with the brush”, rather than with line, but there is no feeling of problems being evaded or slurred over with dabs and slashes of paint. The “marks” still have their autonomous life, but they are not simply an end in themselves.

The slow, dogged conquest McSweeney had made of the Wicklow landscape had to be abandoned when he moved to Sligo. In Wicklow, in his own words, the model “stands up”, while in Sligo he felt that he would have to be “a bird flying over it” to capture its essence. In Wicklow he learned to paint panoramically and in broad masses – though of course many of the pictures he did there are also intimate and small-scale - but the Sligo boglands often needed a more close-up treatment. In fact, they led him at times virtually to dispense with a horizon line, which can enhance the abstract power of a painting but can also create a claustrophobic effect- the spectator may feel that he is faced by wall of paint.

His most recent work, however, generally allows a vista - however small- of sky, or the blue of the sea. Gradually he has come to terms with the open spaces of the Western seaboard and the sea itself has become a stronger and stronger presence in his pictures.

He is also, of course, a great painter of trees - for evidence of this, see “Trees, Hollywood”, or “Trees in the Wind”, “Bogland Trees” etc. For everybody except the most hardened formalist, trees offer a range of colours, shapes and lines, whether at rest or in movement, singly or in the mass. They can be the measuring rod of a landscape, or they can dissolve into a tonal symphony of the most generalised kind. In McSweeney’s work you can identify the dark, opaque pinewoods of the Wicklow uplands, or the lush, rounded, deciduous trees of its parklands. In Sligo, his immediate

environment is virtually treeless, but he often paints the woods of Lissadell, celebrated by Yeats (the poet, not the painter).

As a colourist he is in the Yeats tradition, though Yeat's flamelike reds are not part of his palette. Often he builds his contrasts and/or harmonies around combinations of yellow, green and blue, and he is not afraid of effects which other painters would consider too obvious or too sweet. He can also blend tones skilfully, or obtain flecked, Impressionist effects, but mostly he uses colours pure, which heightens the emotional directness. He also has subtle feeling for light, something for which he is rarely given the credit: the wet, livid, almost sinister quality of the bogland lights has become very characteristic of his recent pictures, and is an element which prevents them from becoming cloying. He also understands the range and variety of greens, particularly the moist, fierce green of the Irish grasslands.

He very rarely paints the human figure; in fact, the picture "Lovers" is the only case of it I have seen in his output –though in his very early work he seems to have painted everything and anything he saw. Neither is he much interested in still life, though in the last two years he has painted some fine flower pieces, a rare indoors theme for him. (See one example, "Flowers in the Studio"). All this cut him off from the Pop and New Realist trends (essentially urban ones, in any case), making him look a rather isolated figure to some eyes. There is still a school of thought which regards landscape painting as outmoded and nostalgic. Why so, in fact, any more than still life or the nude, those cornerstones of art over the centuries? McSweeney is not a man in flight from the Great Urban Reality, that fashionable half-myth, nor is he a cowed preservationist huddling under the assaults of the Machine Age. He simply paints those aspects of reality which he likes best, in which he lives and works, and to which he is naturally and temperamentally drawn.

The renewed consciousness of nature and what it means to us, the feelings that we are now the custodians of the natural world and should cease being merely its exploiters, surely gives landscape art a current validity, but does it need this anyway? There does seem to be a new interest in landscape painting *per se*, and one trend I have noted in several large recent exhibitions of an international kind is the reappearance of a type of abstraction, or quasi-abstraction, which has a basis in nature and in natural forms. Sooner or later, the wheel always turns - though never backward; it observes a certain cycle.