

# John Behan RHA

*Shifting Ground* | October 8 – November 10, 2021



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**October 8 - November 10** | John Behan RHA *Shifting Ground*

**Shifting Ground** is an outstanding new collection of sculpture in bronze from renowned Irish artist **John Behan**. The exhibition, which will open at the Kenny Gallery, Galway in October will include works touching on the artist's experience through the Pandemic, a fleshing out his previous 'Emigrants' work including striking new versions of his iconic Famine Ship and examples of the origins of that theme in his Brighter Boat and Oar Boat series. Contemporary refugee imagery features too and there will also be some new works based on images suggested by the poetry of Seamus Heaney. The sculpture will be supported by a series of related paintings and drawings in mixed media.

**The exhibition will be officially launched by RTÉ's BRYAN DOBSON at 6.00pm on Friday the 8th October at Kenny's Liosbán Gallery in Galway.**

The launch is free to attend, but with limited numbers admitted due to pandemic restrictions - patrons may register for the official opening on Eventbrite: <https://www.eventbrite.ie/e/john-behan-rha-shifting-ground-new-works-in-bronze-tickets-178795721817>

**After the opening, the exhibition will run Monday to Saturday, 9:00-17:00 until the 10<sup>th</sup> November - booking is not required. Admission is free and all welcome.**



Bryan Dobson, RTÉ, pictured at Kennys Bookshop





John Behan, Bantry Famine Ship IV (2021), Bronze, Unique, 28x27x8in

*"My art is related to ancient culture as well as to modern technique... in Irish art, we have had a gap between the Middle Ages and the 20th Century when no visual art was produced. So I had to go back: the future was in the past, if you like..."* JOHN BEHAN

An artist intimately attuned to early Irish culture, John Behan has actively sought inspiration for his work in the imagery of a previous era. Centuries of outside domination, ironically at a time when the Renaissance flourished in Europe, saw little further indigenous visual cultural development in Ireland through the early modern period.

Behan has taken up his visual cue from the early treasures of Irish Art - the Broighter Boat, the Corleck Head, the illustration of the Book of Kells. Harnessing these forms and tropes of ancient art to create his own work, Behan has developed his own visual language, an almost quasi-primitivism, but imbued with an authenticity of precedent, building a symbolic bridge to the past. In the early period of his work the artist used this developed style to pick up where Irish art had left off, boats and bulls are to the fore, but later the artist was free to backfill a visual gap to parallel a verbal literary tradition in his reimagining of Irish mythological themes. We see heroes of legend, outside of the Táin ink drawings of Louis le Brocquy, not before presented in a form which could have been lifted from the 4th century.

Perhaps the most significant breakthrough in the artist's work, however, may be in his talismanic memorialisation of the image of the infamous 'coffin' ships of the Irish Famine period of the 1840s - an imagery first realised in the 1990s, which coincided with the 150th anniversary of that calamity. Here Behan presents painful commentary, utilising his now fluent

personal expression to make iconic what he now rebranded his 'Famine Ship'. Skeletal souls for sails, and with maritime form, this was to become - along with his great Táin bulls - signature Behan.

If the Famineship of the 1990s spoke to the historic, albeit painful folk memory of the Irish Famine, then perhaps the most important recent development in the work of John Behan must be in his exploration of the current chilling echo of the Irish migrant crisis of the 19th century - that of the plight of African and Middle Eastern refugees coming to Europe through the past number of years.

The artist's wider thematic interest developed parallel to the introduction of increasing early European imagery to augment his Irish visual basis. Artist visits throughout Europe and further afield explain the emergence of Etruscan, Greek and African informed work.

Teetering precariously, a visual echo of the Brighter Boat but without the comfort of oars, Behan's contemporary Refugee Boats bring right up to date the artist's thematic consideration, in keeping with both the sentiment and structure of his Famine Ship work, but perhaps drawing even more direct inspiration, through that very identifiable Behan style, from a source of inspiration in early Irish art.

The Famine Ship is hugely significant in his work, indeed it forms the basis of a Irish National Famine Memorial at Murrisk Co. Mayo (1997). However, in some ways this new 'migrant' work has perhaps more contemporary significance. It is more roundly and directly realised - it is not retrospective - it has presence and urgency.

On his many journeys to Greece and Cyprus, in particular, the artist has encountered refugees as they flee Africa and the Middle-East. This couldn't but have come into the expression of this sensitive and receptive artist.

DEAN KELLY, The Kenny Gallery, Galway



John Behan, The Outlaw (2021), Bronze Unique, 11x20x7in



John Behan, Mosul (2021), Bronze, Unique, 19x8x13in



John Behan at The Kenny Gallery, Galway 2021



KENNY  
GALLERY

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