Owen Walsh 1933 - 2002: Colour and Light

THE ART OF OWEN WALSH reflects a passionate commitment to painting throughout a life. From the early scenes of Westport to the strong, almost abstract colour harmonies of his later work, Walsh’s career was one of intense attention to the visual world, to questions of representation, to the relationship between the different elements of a work, and to the act of painting itself. One of the most immediately striking aspects of Walsh’s work throughout his career is a commitment to innovation and change, to never remain static or repetitive, and to continually reinvent what his art could be.

His artistic practice ranges from the energetic, short lines of his landscapes and cityscapes in pastel to his heavily impastoed, monumental figures. While Walsh’s work is stylistically diverse, certain preoccupations remain constant throughout his oeuvre – close observation of form and balance, the importance of accomplished draughtsmanship, a strong sense of design, and certain themes – in particular the classical themes of the body and the landscape.

WESTPORT TO DUBLIN

Owen Walsh was born in 1933, into a prominent business family in the town of Westport, Co. Mayo. He grew up on Altamont Street, in a tall, terraced house with curving windows which look on the street. The house sits above the town, stepped back from the road, looking down towards where the road dips towards the Mall and the weir. He enrolled in Blackrock College, Dublin in 1946, where he took part in the school’s strong sporting tradition. It was during this time, and on the sporting field, that he first began to suffer from epilepsy, a condition which was to take a heavy toll on his life. As a young man, his family can recall his spending hours sketching the streets and countryside around the town, and Westport House, with its curious mix of low-slung functionalism and ornate detail. Several undated works from these years, held by his family, reveal a sophisticated sense of composition in their controlled use of colour and tone, and in the massing of forms in ways which show a clear awareness of, and interest in abstraction – the play of colour and form for their own sake, separate from any descriptive purpose.

These early works are marked by an openness to experimentation in colour. In the harbour scene, above, the colours of the sky are boldly separated into free-standing blocks, creating a vibrant sense of the strength of the hues as observed by the artist. Similarly, the light on the stippled water at the base of the boat, again reveal this impressionistic technique, isolating the different colours on the canvas to create a sense of movement and immediacy. (Fig 1).

Plate 5: Owen Walsh, ‘Ringsend Docks’, 1962, oil on board, 45 x 57 cm, (Private Collection).
These early works often feature scenes of work, of boats and rigging, providing the artist with the opportunity to create complex arrangements of diagonal and vertical lines, revealing the draughtsmanship behind this approach. Walsh’s early portraits also reveal an early dexterity in the handling of oil paint, as well as an appreciation for the dark, earthy tones of Northern European art.

OWEN WALSH AT THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART
Walsh enrolled in the National College of Art (NCA) in Dublin in 1950, and studied there for four years. During this period, Séan Keating was the Professor of Painting, Maurice MacGonigal was Assistant Director, and Laurence Campbell was the Professor of Sculpture. The History of Art – which was to remain an important source of inspiration for Walsh – was also introduced in a serious way in the 1950s, with lecturers including important art historians such as Elizabeth Curran and Françoise Henry. The NCA began to create stronger connections with Dublin’s National Gallery, which came under the directorship of the modernist poet and art critic Thomas McGreevy in 1950.

The type of art education which was typical of the college in the 1950s instilled courses, for those wishing to join the school of painting, in drawing from antique casts and from still life, a strong emphasis on life-painting and life-drawing and also anatomy. Students painted en plein air, and also copied works in galleries, and became skilled in the material aspects of their craft, in painting with oils, watercolour, tempera and the preparation of surfaces for painting. Design work, such as the creation of murals, tapestries and posters, was also included – an important aspect of the training for the artists such as Walsh who took up careers in the advertising world following their studies. Interestingly, John Turpin records that a strong Irish language culture existed in the College, in particular in the sculpture school. The important Irish language poet, Máirtín Ó Direáin was the registrar at the NCA, and Mairtin Ó Cadhain, one of the most significant twentieth-century Irish language writers, was one of the teachers at the Irish language classes which had been commenced in 1945/46. No doubt this appealed to Walsh, who was a fluent Irish speaker – Brendan Lynch, in his recollections of Dublin after the war years, describes Walsh and his friend, the writer Liam O’Flaherty walking down the canal banks together, arguing fluently in Irish.

Walsh’s time at the NCA was obviously successful from the beginning. While he was a student, he had a solo exhibition at the Dublin Painter’s Gallery in 1953, which was opened by the Earl of Wicklow. The show was reviewed by G.H.G., (Tony Gray), the art critic for the Irish Times between c.1947 – 1959. Gray’s review was favourable, but was framed in the oppositional language of the academic/avant-garde divide in the visual arts of the 1950s. Gray noted that ‘his touch is sure – surprisingly sure for so inexperienced a painter – his texture is varied, his sense of composition strong. When he manages to shake off some of the influence of his teachers, and cultivates a more subtle feeling for colour, he should be capable of first-rate work.’ However, Walsh evidently did not feel this antipathy towards his tutors or his training, and his mastery of draughtsmanship and composition and understanding of art history, was central to his later, more innovative work. A watercolour study of a Liffey dockyard at Ringsend was singled out as the best work – a subject and an area that Walsh would return to again and again in his career.

Fig. 1: Owen Walsh, Untitled, undated, mixed media, 27 x 43 cm, (Private Collection).

1 John Turpin, A School of Art in Dublin since the Eighteenth Century: A History of the National College of Art and Design, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1995), 331 - 332
2 John Turpin, A School of Art in Dublin since the Eighteenth Century: A History of the National College of Art and Design, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1995), 404
4 I am grateful to Dr. Roisin Kennedy for this information on the identity of G.H.G.
5 G.H.G., ‘Promising Young Painter’, Irish Times, August 7, 1953
While many histories of art in Ireland, which largely privilege the ascendance of modernist form, view the roles of figures such as MacGonigal and Keating in an often negative light, as lacking vision and perpetuating an academic and traditional style of painting, the training in draughtsmanship, composition and techniques of painting underpinned Walsh’s creative and stylistic innovations in his later career. Draughtsmanship was extremely important to Walsh, something he practiced constantly throughout his career: one of the most striking testaments to his skill is a large series of drawings, capturing the Bolshoi Ballet in Dublin in 1988, his expert, quick lines simultaneously capturing the pose, the flowing movement and the tensed, muscular physicality of the dancers. (Fig. 2)

Widely-attended exhibition at the Brown Thomas Little Theatre in November. Among the attendees was Thomas McGreevy. This exhibition was also reviewed by ‘G.H.G.’ While he commented somewhat unfavourably on the figural compositions, he praised Walsh’s ambition in taking on such large-scale religious paintings, and also his smaller, landscapes and street scenes, his ‘flair for capturing mood and an unusually subtle sense of colour’.

For Them A World Of Art Is Opened’, Sunday Independent, October 17, 1954, 9

The Irish Times published a photograph of Walsh appearing to tell McGreevy about the large Deposition scene which was the focal point of the Little Theatre exhibition, Irish Times, November 9, 1954

Walsh graduated from the College of Art in 1954, and was awarded the MacAuley Prize for painting, valued at £500, having already won a £100 prize during his time as a student. The Sunday Independent published an article on the three recipients of the prize that year, Walsh, Nell Murphy and Noirin Ni Chuil, titled ‘For Them A World of Art is Opened’.

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an exhibition of Walsh’s work at Mill’s Hall, Merrion Row, opened by P. J. Little, Director of the Arts Council, noted a painting which ‘dealt with subjects like the Good Friday Procession’ and which ‘expressed the intense quality of the Spanish temperament’, perhaps a similar work to his paintings of the Spanish Holy Week (Plate 3). In conversations with friends of Walsh, they recalled how he likened his artistic practice to that of musician and composer, Seán Ó’Riada, and how Ó’Riada had wanted to transform Irish music from something which had become hackneyed, into a more vibrant and creative endeavour. Walsh recognised this impetus, and it mirrored his own ambition. In particular, Walsh wanted to paint the Irish landscape with the intense, glowing colours of Spain, Italy and Portugal, to infuse his art with the colours of the Mediterranean. His works in oil pastel crayon of the Westport landscape reveal his completely unique treatment of the idea of the West, a constant theme in Irish painting throughout the twentieth century (Fig. 4).

The short, energised notes of colour communicate a sense of vibrancy and life in nature, in the process of looking, and of a sense of delight in transcribing this intense visual experience into a work of art. While these pastels are among his better-known works in landscape, he also produced a number of extremely fine landscape works in a more traditional vein; including one West of Ireland scene in tones of brown, green and blue – the foreground an almost abstract treatment of landscape – earth tones and colours enlivened with flashes of white, perhaps light reflected on water in the boggy soil (Fig. 5).

The MacAuley scholarship led to a period of travel with his new wife, Beryl, whom he had married in the same year, and with whom he had two children, Sharon and Ronan. Walsh travelled to Barcelona and Toledo in Spain, taught and worked in Ravenna and Venice in Italy and went to France, before returning home late in 1956. According to his own report, his time in Spain included a period studying and teaching composition in the Belles Artes in Madrid, during which time he must have visited the breathtaking collection of Old Master paintings in the Prado museum. A report from the Irish Times, on May 16, 1956, of

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2 The title of this work when sold by auction house was ‘Holy Week Seville’, but in conversation with the owners of this work, Walsh stated that he had never been to Seville, and had spent time in Toledo.
3 Author’s conversation with Joe and Shelagh Mulcahy, Trafn, friends of Owen Walsh.
His original interpretation of classical themes in painting was recognised by major collectors at this point, and Walsh's work was included in an exhibition of Derek Hill's personal collection in 1956, again in the Brown Thomas Little Theatre. This exhibition also included works by artists of the highest international renown, Augustus John, Picasso and Constable, and Irish contemporaries Louis le Brocquy, Jack Yeats, Norah McGuinness and Evie Hone.7

**MODERNITY, THE CITY AND DESIGN**

On his return from this ‘Grand Tour’ of sorts, Walsh joined the prestigious McConnell's advertising agency as a senior artist, which had been founded in Dublin almost a century previously. Some of the work which survives – usually in the form of sketches or working drawings – reveal both his NCA training, and a great feeling for effective and attractive design. The work which remains from this period includes fashion illustration, book design, promotional material, and a series of unique, dynamic advertisements for ESSO and British Petroleum.

The series of images created for ESSO are among the most strikingly individual urban paintings produced by an Irish artist in this period – images of construction and speed, electric lights and illuminated cranes over the rooftops which could have been painted in 2004, rather than the mid-century. (Fig. 7)

The image fuses colour – the highlights of white and reflected orange neon light against the night scene – with an incredibly complex design – the thrust of the painting speeding into the distance, balanced by the horizontal emphases of the rooftops, and the diagonal lines of the cranes. This image of speed, modernity and the excitement of the urban visual experience is completely unlike any of the images of the city being produced by his contemporaries. Harry Kernoff’s work, for example, as art historian Kathryn Milligan has discussed in detail, is much more concerned with capturing the social realities of the city for people, rather than this birds-eye view of a futuristic, machine-age reality.8 This ‘Drive to Progress’ series of images created a unique creative opportunity for Owen Walsh. He also worked on a series of designs based on Dublin airport, Desmond Fitzgerald’s icon of Irish modernism, for BP, and a number of working drawings for this survive, providing an insight into the design process. Along with these industrial contracts worked on by Walsh, he produced elegant, spare fashion illustrations for Switzer’s, Creation magazine, and the Irish Woman’s Journal amongst others. (Fig 6) His book jacket design and brochure illustration are marked by elegant draughtsmanship, and a characteristic use of sure, deft, short strokes, a variation of the notes of colour in his colourful works in pastel.

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One of his early mentors was the artist Sean O’Sullivan (1906 – 64), who had also been taught by Keating at the School of Art, and one of the foremost portrait painters of his generation.

Walsh worked as an assistant to O’Sullivan in the early 1960s on several commissions, including a series of paintings for the Medical Missionaries of Mary in Drogheda. In 1966, he was commissioned to create a mural of the Wedding Feast at Cana using friends as models and staying in the convent while he completed the work.

His artistic influences, from Lhote to O’Sullivan, continued to shape his career, which continually challenged the boundaries between the potential of figurative painting and the freedom of abstraction. Tellingly, he cited Matisse as one of his greatest influences, a painter who also continually redrew the possibilities of representation and surface, in colour-soaked canvases which were obviously a guiding light for Walsh. His negotiation of these two extremes is evident in his exploration and interpretation of the nude. Walsh’s treatment of the figure is marked by the stylistic inventiveness which was the hallmark of his work.

Throughout his career, he created flowing figural sketches, impastoed figures which are almost sculptural in nature, and joyful, colour-soaked interpretations of the naked body, the curving lines of the human form resonating as abstract formal harmonies, the sensuousness of the subject reflected in an exuberance of colour.

A nude in tones of pink and blue painted in 1986 combines Walsh’s clarity of line, the form outlined in deft, quick strokes of rich black, and his expressive use of colour. (Fig. 9) In this work, colour is almost abstracted from its descriptive role, the blues and yellows instead communicating a sense of visual pleasure and depth, the notes of blue throughout the body tracking out a curving pathway for the eye, finally forming an echo of the hips and thighs, creating a composition of great formal strength and colour.

A small work on paper in the collection of Mayo County Council has a similar approach to line and colour, the descriptive function of both elements loosened, but not veering into pure abstraction. (Fig. 8) Smaller, more intimate works, explore physical intimacy, the ungainly vulnerability of lovers coming together, reflected in the tremulous and fretted surface, rather than the sleek lines of the individual posed nude. (Fig. 10)
This pale, poised work is a brilliant example of his concern with light streaming through colours which seem to float above the surface of the paper. The nude figure was also the subject of Walsh’s monotypes – one quite unique image among these in his oeuvre, a beautifully-drawn classical draped female in profile, an almost all’antica surface – is another example of this balance between colour and light. Light, which creates colour, floods the canvas, and the colours floating in free, clear light, are allowed to sing. This sense of sculpting form from floating colour is also visible in an oil pastel of the Alexandra Basin, Dublin, from 1972, which captures the constantly-shifting reflections on the water and through the sky (PLATE: Alexandra Basin).

Walsh was among the most individual figural artists from the mid-century, as identified by Susan Stairs in her study of the Irish Figurist painters.

In stark contrast to the flowing, expansive, vibrantly coloured figure studies, several early works by Walsh treat the human figure as an isolated entity, rendered in dense, closed-circuit spiralling lines, more Giacometti or even Henry Moore than Matisse. (Fig. 11)

As in so many aspects of his work, this multiplicity of styles and approaches was carried through his entire career – early examples of these ‘isolated’ figures date from the 1960s, but late works, such as the series of works from 1999, again depart from these fluid images of the human figure, and instead depict the human form as separate, contained within the limits of the body, linear and closed rather than open.

An untitled seated nude, painted in 1974, (top of next page) again demonstrates the creative tension between description and abstraction in Walsh’s work. (Plate 1). Space and form are both described – the chair in which the figure is seated drawn in a shallow perspective. The sense of depth in space in this work is indicated by the lines of the wooden floorboards, while simultaneously being flattened through the emphasis on painterly surface and rich colour.

An undated reclining nude in watercolour, combining delicate descriptive line and washes of colour, reveals a further investigation of the limits of description and the potential of colour. (Fig. 12)
Throughout the 1960s, Walsh continued to show works with the Independent Artists (discussed more fully below) and the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA). A second solo show at the Brown Thomas Little Theatre was mounted in 1962, which was reviewed by James White, then director of the National Gallery of Ireland. In 1967, he moved to Paris with Eileen O’Mara Walsh, with whom he later had a son, Eoghan. She has recalled this time in Paris as a hugely productive time for him, and an opportunity to view again some of the greatest art collections in the world. His entry in the Exhibition Internationale des Arts de Bel Fontaine at Juvissy was extremely well-received, and he was awarded a premium award (gold medal) (PLATE: 10). The prize-winning work, now in a private collection in Mayo, brings together several of the hallmarks of Walsh’s style – the theme of the two lovers, one lying, supported on an arm, and the other sitting, heads turned together, in conversation or kissing. Despite the complicated figural arrangement, the work is marked by the compositional virtuosity and free but skilful handling of paint and colour for which he is best known.

ART GROUPS AND EXHIBITIONS

Walsh was one of the key founders of the Independent Artists group, formed in December 1959, with the object of creating interest ‘in the work of artists in their midst on the part of the Irish public’. The press reported that the first exhibition of the group was held on June 9th, 1960 in the Building Centre, and was to be opened by ‘that very independent Dáil deputy, Dr. Noel Browne, T.D.’16 Walsh exhibited four works at this exhibition, and although it is not credited, the cover image of the catalogue for this initial show is strikingly reminiscent of some of his earlier book cover design.

The foundation of the Independent Artists was founded in order to create an intellectual and artistic space which was removed from the polarised positions of the RHA and the Irish Exhibition of Living Art. This ‘do-it-yourself’ culture was reflected in a long illustrated article, published on the 1st June, 1960, titled ‘Portrait Gallery: Young Irish Artists’, which profiled several of the artists involved in the first Independent Artists exhibition. The artists featured, including Ruth Brandt, James McKenna and Owen Walsh, all highlighted the need to carve out spaces for their work to be seen, by artists and by wider audiences.

As so many commentators from the period have noted, artistic practice was not well-supported by the State, and it was often extremely difficult for artists to make a living. While the Arts Council of Ireland had been founded in the previous decade, there were few support structures for visual artists, and the Independent Artists group was born from the need to found exhibition spaces and arenas for public debate about young art being produced in the country at the time. Walsh continued to show with the Independents throughout the 1960s.

In 1978, Walsh split definitively with the Independent Artists, removing his painting, ‘Reconciliation’ from the annual exhibition which was held at the Hugh Lane. The incident was much reported on, and Walsh took out an advertisement in the Irish Times, which informed the public that ‘Owen Walsh, founder and member of Independent Artists, cordially welcomes members of the public and those invited to the Independent Artists current exhibition to view his paintings, rejected by the present committee, at his studio, 108 Lower Baggot Street’. Walsh’s decision to remove his work and split with the group was supported by the sculptor James McKenna, in a letter to the Irish Times. While the newspapers reported this incident as being of great moment, Walsh responded in a letter, saying that he would have been happy to accommodate the group and remove some paintings if informed before opening night, and ‘what raised my blood pressure was the cavalier disregard by the committee for any of the courtesies of prior notification, explanation or regard for a fellow-artist member, and after all, a founder of the blessed group in the first place’.17 While this incident was not extreme, or controversial in a real sense, it did serve to heighten the artist’s sense of distance from contemporary art movements, and a sense of the necessity for individual endeavour rather than groups, schools or movements. His desire to remain independent from artistic groupings and societies also led him to turn down a membership of the RHA.

Owen Walsh’s reputation as an artist has perhaps been overshadowed by his reputation as a sometimes difficult individual, who battled his own demons with alcohol throughout his life, in large part due to a lifelong struggle with epilepsy. A note which I found in a bundle of papers by the artist reveals his humour, his irreverent attitude, and also the dedication to his artistic vision which sustained him through the lack of financial support or security which many artists of the period lived with: “lives by the occasional pretty portrait, postcard landscape, housepainting and sign-writing mainly, and the odd religious painting in the ‘blood, sweat and dirty loincloth style so beloved of Irish clerics’”.

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16 Susan Stairs, *The Irish figurists and figurative painting in Irish Art. (Dublin: George Gallery Montague, 1990)*, 216

17 ‘An Irishman’s Diary’, *Irish Times*, May 30th, 1960

Letters from Cliodhna Cussen, a member of the Independent Artists, sheds light on this event – apparently, a selection of committee members voted against showing all the works, and the appropriate letter was not sent by the then exhibition secretary, Patrick Hall, in time for it to be received and acted on by Walsh before the exhibition opening. Several letters exist in Walsh’s archive from members of the group, communicating with him on the matter.
While this insecurity was somewhat alleviated for certain artists with the introduction of the Aodána Cnuas, Walsh's application, supported by the artist Noel Sheridan, was unsuccessful. The tales and press coverage of the lively artistic and literary scene around Dublin's Baggot Street and Leeson Street record Walsh's involvement with many of the renowned artistic figures of the area. Indeed, much of the press coverage of later years focuses on personality, rather than artistic achievement. However, this more anecdotal history should not take away from his commitment to painting, and his proper position in the history of Irish art.

Throughout Walsh's career his work was characterised by an idiosyncratic combination of traditional skills and avant-garde techniques and ideas as seen, for example, in a series of monotypes, of the nude female figure (Fig. 15). The compositional balance of these monotypes, the seemingly unconcerned posture of the figure, hands on hips, torso leaning slightly forward, head tilting downwards, elegantly inhabits the space of the work without being stiff or over-composed. The colour harmonies, the chalky greens of the painted frame and the oily blue of the figure's hair, are again balanced by the Walsh's ability to describe the figure so lightly, with such few strokes of colour, both belies and reveals his technical mastery. His ability is seen to full advantage in his sketches for both larger landscape studies, and in more finished studies of figures in classical pose, which highlight the academic discipline at the core of even his most expressive work.

In a biographical note written by the artist himself, he stated that his work was based on the ‘loose, diverse forms of contrasting warm and cool colours, verging on the abstract but with their grounding in the traditional and historical compositions of the Madonna and Child, Pietà and family groups’, positioning himself comfortably, with no sense of tension, between a ‘traditional’ and an ‘avant-garde’ mode of working.

The painter Camille Souter has emphasised the importance of the reinterpretation of the past in Walsh’s work, and of his continual exploration of the limits of this – ‘art is always searching for new interpretations of old themes’.

This absence of any sense of tension or anomaly in Walsh’s statement begs the question of whether this long-held division between academic and modernist ‘camps’ of painting, as it has been portrayed in many key texts on Irish art in the twentieth century, needs to be radically revised from the point of view of the artists themselves, their own working practices and sense of artistic heritage.

Several themes which recur throughout Walsh’s career have roots deep in the European canon of painting – the woman looking in the mirror, a triumvirate of women, grouped together in a dance, a mother and child, the nude figure, the artist’s self-portrait – it is a measure of the ambition of the painter that he tackled these cornerstones of the European tradition of painting, making them his own (Fig. 13).

Walsh’s collection of books reveals his sense of the history of his craft, and of the artists which he admired, or learned from – artists as diverse as Walter Sickert, Egon Schiele, and Eugene Delacroix. Indeed, his sketches, the result of a lifetime sketching life on the street on Basildon Bond blue notepaper pads recall Sickert’s drawings of everyday life, and his complicated figural poses have a certain relationship with Schiele’s tortured, highly-coloured figures. The vivid colour combinations favoured by the Fauve painters are an essential element of Walsh’s style. In an early self-portrait, he has presented himself with the tools of his trade, confronting the viewer, connecting
Throughout much of his later career, Walsh continued to live in the Baggot Street studio, the singular atmosphere of which has been recollected by many friends and admirers of his work – the presence of music, with his upright piano and many recordings, from Tchaikovsky to Stravinsky. He was a frequent visitor to Parson’s Bookshop, run by May Flaherty and Mary King. As Brendan Lynch has chronicled, the bookshop provided both a meeting-place for the artists and writers in the area, and an important source of materials for their work – many of the art books from Walsh’s studio had come from Parson’s – from books on Chinese art the great masters of the Italian Renaissance. In an appreciation of the artist published in the Irish Times 2002, Lynch recalled Walsh’s perfectionism, his propensity to destroy works which did not meet his own standards, but that ‘the works that escaped the fireplace lit up his turps-marinated studio.

Bookshelves listed under the weight of art tomes, and a work in progress always graced the easel inside the tall twin Georgian windows’.

Dublin was an important subject for Walsh, and his works record the now much-changed docklands, Ringsend, Christchurch Cathedral, the banks of the Grand Canal (Fig. 14) and the Liffey, and a beautifully light oil pastel of Newman’s University Church on St. Stephen’s Green.

Walsh’s work can be considered through many different prisms – a painter of nature and of urban life, an avant-garde colourist, a classicist, an abstract painter, a painter dedicated to an ideal of expressionism and intense visual investigation – this essay merely outlines some of the contexts for the exploration of such a prolific artist. In looking at Walsh’s work, one unifying theme through such a stylistically diverse career, is the movement from light to dark, from density and opacity on the canvas to works which seem to be shot through with bright light. At different points in his career, these themes emerge – the dense black oil and shots of colour in his painting of a Spanish holy week celebration (Plate 3), an early work produced in 1959, and the coloured impasto of his nude figures, The monotypes, in particular, facilitate this sense of line and colour almost floating on top of the paper, with successive printings from the monotype giving even greater prominence to lightness, and whiteness, above colour and line.

A beautiful work, which is in the family home in Altamont Street, Westport, depicts a group arranged in a recognisably classical composition, perfectly balances light and colour (PLATE 6). A crucifixion group of three stained glass windows, designed by Walsh for the Roman Catholic church in Killererin near Tuam in Co. Galway, completed in 1967, allowed him to use colour in individual, brilliantly-lit blocks, resulting in a flat, almost collage-like image, in contrast to the soft, rich and swirling line of paint on canvas. The Killererin windows form a beautiful counterpoint to the seated nude of 1974 – similar artistic concerns resolved very differently, both to striking effect, through the use of different media.

Although it is not marked as such, the Walsh family has kindly informed me that this painting represents the visit of the Magi to the Stable at Bethlehem, which was either gifted to the family, or bought by the artist’s mother.

B.L., ‘Owen Walsh’, Irish Times, September 16, 2002

Brendan Lynch’s books on Parson’s bookshop and the Baggot St. area are valuable as a record of many of the events and individuals which populated this area. Brendan Lynch, Parson’s Bookshop: at the heart of Bohemian Dublin, 1949 – 1989, (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2006)
The colour and light of southern Europe also remained a vital source – he spent time in Corfu and in mainland Greece in the early 1970s, and lived for six months in Spoleto, the ancient city in the Italian province of Perugia, resulting in a beautifully-composed series of landscapes in oil pastel. He continued to paint and to exhibit regularly, in both solo and group shows, throughout Ireland, and in Europe and in the USA, in the 1982 exhibition, ‘Contemporary Irish Painters’, in the University Gallery, Northeastern University, Boston, along with the painters Lawson Burch, Clare Cryan, Doreen Dunne, Joseph McWilliams, Patrick Walsh and Susan Webb. This exhibition was accompanied by an essay, written by Brian R. Korligo.

‘While Owen Walsh occasionally presses landscape into service, most of his exuberant images in some way embrace the human figure. His work displays that modern tendency to value paint itself and the emotion potential in colour as at least equal to the objects that they define. In present company, Walsh may appear the iconoclast. Actually his work finds precedent in the approach of Irish painters like Louis le Brocquy (who was born in 1916). Walsh’s influence would also appear to include a number of French artists such as Dufy, Matisse and the Delaunays, artists who expressed a passionate affection for bold colour, bright contrast, and a joyous view of the world.

Walsh’s marked partiality for a particular shade of blue (a deep sky colour), seems to have led him to develop a palette which complements or contrasts it with warmer colours. The prevalence of this blue constitutes a kind of signature; it swirls around his figures like the air they breathe. The artist seems to suggest that the figures represented are too multifaceted to be rendered in any single tone. Instead of features, the artist offers us a jumbled code of colour which we may interpret as we wish.46

A solo exhibition at University College Galway, also held in 1982, was very favourably reviewed by Brian Fallon, who stated that the show of 27 works ‘travels the emotional path of Fauvism, in a virtuoso show of landscapes, figure studies and abstracts’. Fallon described works which he felt were overly sentimental as ‘sweet, and untypical of an artist with such painterly qualities’. He also praised the crayon landscapes, describing them as representative of his ‘highly individual style of gestural divisionism’.47 Moving back to Louisburgh with Eileen O’Mara Walsh as his health deteriorated, he continued to work, and completed, among other works, a self-portrait in greys and blues, a muted palette in contrast to the exuberance of his earlier works, but with all the hallmarks of fine composition and brushwork of his oeuvre.

46 Taken from the pamphlet produced to accompany the exhibition, ‘Contemporary Irish Painters’, held at Northeastern University Art Gallery, November 18 to December 22, 1982. This exhibition was part of the Continuing Exhibition Programme of Art and Architecture, and was co-sponsored by the Irish Studies Committee and the Division of Fine Arts, Northeastern University, and Aer Lingus.
47 Brian Fallon, ‘Reviews: Owen Walsh at UC Galway’, The Irish Times, April 29, 1982, 10

The works included in Owen Walsh 1933 – 2002: Colour and Light reveal a unique creative vision in twentieth century painting, an individual feeling for colour and form, and overall, a great passion for looking, seeing and painting the world.

Fig. 20, Owen Walsh, Untitled, 1964, oil on board, 63 x 76 cm, (Private Collection).