

A footprint in the hall

Moyna Flannigan

Moyna Flannigan's exhibition of new and existing paintings and works on paper is entitled *A footprint in the hall*. Described as an "intervention", she has stated that she wanted to "leave a trace without disturbing the balance of the house". Whilst the word "intervention" has both positive and negative connotations (that of mediation designed to positively influence or modify behaviour or a forced interference in the affairs of another in violation of that person's independence) Flannigan explicitly did not wish to be seen acting like a vandal, tearing old and existing paintings from the walls of Mount Stuart in order to replace them with her own.

One of her interests lie in displaying her art in a non-conventional gallery context, and it is important that Mount Stuart be seen as a home with a family history and not a museum. She wanted to see if she could create a dialogue with the existing paintings and the rooms into which her paintings and drawings are hung. Flannigan's work is influenced by both high and low art and her aim is to leave a small trace of her ideas in a big setting. It has been said that the power of ancient art (art from Antiquity) stems from its ability to embody great acts and communicate their human dimension. The power and mystery of Flannigan's art is that it manages to do the same but with subject matter that derives not from great acts but issues of personal, cultural and political isolation and, ultimately, death. She is not a portrait painter in the traditional sense, as her sitters are entirely imaginary. A duality or note of tragi-comedy runs throughout her work which can perhaps be seen as a satire on human foibles, incorporating conventions of literary and theatrical comedy, in which some of the participants are burlesque figures tinged with a sense of alienation and sadness.

Moyna Flannigan's work in this exhibition suggests an interest in the concept of political dynasties, and of course, the interiors at Mount Stuart reflect exactly that, the collections having been formed at various periods in the Bute family history. The majority of the paintings and the works of art in the house were acquired by the 3rd Earl of Bute (1713 – 1792) and were mostly housed in his Bedfordshire seat at Luton Park, designed by Robert Adam. His was arguably the greatest collection of 17th Century paintings in Britain, and he was certainly the outstanding collector of Dutch 17th century paintings in the second half of the 18th century. He was also a very public figure, albeit a somewhat reluctant one: friend, confidant and personal advisor to George III, who appointed him 1st Lord of the Treasury (Prime Minister). The 3rd Earl was a much reviled man, accused of having an affair with Augusta, Princess Dowager of Wales and mother of George III, he was viciously lampooned in more than four hundred popular prints and broadsheets as "the Jackboot" (John Bute) and she as "The Wanton Widow". He was seen to have too strong an influence on the young king who wrote to him as "My Dearest Friend", and Bishop Warburton perhaps summed up the antipathy towards him best when he said, "Lord Bute is a very unfit man to be Prime Minister of England. First he is a Scotchman; secondly he is the King's friend; and thirdly he is an honest man".

Bute was considered haughty and arrogant and was supposedly excessively fond of his shapely legs to the point that he had Allan Ramsay show them to their best advantage in his full-length portrait of him (in the Dining Room at Mount Stuart). The outstanding series of 18th Century portraits in the Dining Room attest to this very public face of the family. However, the 3rd Earl's collection is now housed in the Victorian Gothic palace of his great-great grandson, the 3rd Marquess (1847 – 1900), who was a completely different man: scholar, historian, archeologist, romantic, mystic and convert to Roman Catholicism. Like his forbear he was one of the greatest patrons of the arts of his day. However, his interests were architectural, and he was sponsor to some sixty building projects and patron to a dozen architects. Unlike his forbear, he was not a very public figure. Flannigan's works form a dialogue between the patronage of these two people whose lives, inspirations and personas appear, at least on the surface, so different. However, they neither bridge the gap nor accentuate the dichotomy between them, they simply address the similarities and differences of the two men and the dynastic nature of their lives.

Flannigan's work is located in four different rooms within the house: the formal Drawing Room, the Marble Staircase, the Henry VIII Bedroom and the Family Bedroom, and covers many different if not entirely unrelated themes. Flannigan was quite specific about the rooms that she wished to use, partially dictated by the difficulty of placing works on the very strong wall colours, and driven by her feeling for particular rooms. The Marble Staircase was a logical place to start, as it is a form of entrée into the house and the location where the superb Sir Thomas Lawrence of Lord Mountstuart hangs, the inspiration for one of her works in the exhibition, *Happy Ending*. Flannigan explains that some of the rooms at Mount Stuart had a "feeling" of family and history, whilst others suggested nothing or seemed somehow "complete". While, for example, the Henry VIII Bedroom, where she has placed the series of paintings *While you were sleeping*, did not for her hold any particular sense of family history, she found the collection of Elizabethan paintings with their primarily black and white tonality, their *vanitas* motifs and pictorial naivety relevant to themes she was working with as well as her experimentation of painting *en grisaille* (in a monochrome or grey technique). The Family Bedroom interested her greatly and Flannigan felt a strong feeling of it having been lived in that gave it an innate sense of narrative. There is an irony of which she was unaware, namely that for most of the 20th century the room, which was fitted out in the late 1880s as the bedroom of the 3rd Marquess of Bute (the creator of the house) and his wife, Gwendolen, had lain bare, latterly used for storage, and it was only recreated to its former splendour in the 1990s with the St. Margaret frieze finally restored and reinstalled in 2000.

Of the artist's work displayed, the only framed ones are the series of drawings in the Family Bedroom, *A Footprint in the hall*. Flannigan deliberately left the other paintings throughout the house unframed, and therefore differentiated from the existing hang of Old Master paintings. She has framed the drawings in the Family Bedroom in oak to

reflect the mother-of-pearl inlaid oak furniture in the room designed and supplied by the Arts and Crafts Byzantinist, Robert Weir Schultz.

There are myriad influences in Flannigan's work. She says that for many years she was fascinated by the light in the paintings of Piero della Francesca, conveying a timeless or dream-like state and the sense of detachment in the protagonists in his compositions. She also cites the influence of Francis Bacon, Edvard Munch, Francisco Goya and Pablo Picasso (in particular Flannigan was recently struck by seeing Goya's *3rd of May* hanging next to Picasso's *Guernica* in Madrid). One cannot help think, when looking at her work, of the harsh candour and biting humour in the paintings and drawings of some of the German artists of the Weimar Republic (1919-1933), notably Otto Dix and George Grosz. The imaginary figures in Flannigan's paintings seem to exist as hybrids between the stock characters in the *commedia dell'arte* ("Comedy of Art": a popular form of improvised theatre in Italy from the 15th Century until the 18th Century, whose humour was often bawdy and coarse) and the burlesque (parody of serious literary or dramatic work). However, Flannigan states that just as she has been influenced by the Old Masters, she has also absorbed much of the work of the characters in the popular comedy television shows of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Frankie Howerd, where slapstick humour was in fact very much a form of social commentary. It is this mixture of highbrow and lowbrow that comes across so strongly in her work and gives it such intensity, and, ultimately, a sense of *gravitas*. Flannigan makes a social critique, but from a comedic angle, which results in it being all the more biting and relevant: we laugh, but we laugh with considerable discomfort.

Some of the work, both in subject matter and technique seems reminiscent of arguably the first great modern artist, Francisco Goya, who wrote of himself that he had three masters: Nature, Velázquez and Rembrandt. Goya's famous epithet in *Los Caprichos*, "The dream of Reason produces monsters" is highly pertinent to Flannigan's work, which at the same time seems to explore what the famous Surrealist, Andre Breton described as "the menace of the subconscious". But, she is at pains to point out that the influence of Goya should not be overstated, and that she has gleaned just as much from other artists and how they paint – for example through reading the interviews given by Francis Bacon to David Sylvester, where Bacon talks about how he achieves a particular concentrated frame of mind in order to paint whereby he draws on many past experiences and raises his subconscious thoughts to the surface.

Jonathan Jones, writing in the Guardian, about Picasso's great masterpiece of 1907, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)*, suggests that he picked the subject matter (a brothel) precisely because it was a cliché, and that "he wanted to show that originality in art does not lie in narrative, or morality, but in formal invention". He goes on to say that "Modernism is an art that wears a mask. It does not say what it means; it is not a window but a wall". This idea of painting being a wall that throws the viewer back on him or herself rather than allowing entry to another world is something that appears to interest Flannigan greatly, although she makes it clear that she is also trying to provoke the viewer to make

a re-interpretation in their own mind, thereby challenging themselves to question pre-conceived ideas and prejudices.

As Flannigan has moved further away from traditional realism in her work, so her technique has changed: there is a new freedom and surety in her brushwork and draftsmanship that is markedly different from some of her earlier, highly finished works from the late 1990s. The paint now seems richer with more saturated textures in the background that are combined with earthy colours and pastel-like shades on which figures are overlaid with deft and economical flicks of paint from the brush in key places. This change of technique is inspired by the desire to make her art less definable and more in the realm of the imagination, memory or subconscious. In *The Offering* (Drawing Room) she uses a very precious colour, Veronese green (there is a painting by the important 16th Century Venetian artist, Paolo Veronese in the same room depicting *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine*) combined with Alizarin crimson to make the wonderful, earthy brown thus giving the painting more restraint. Moyna equates the mood in her art to that in a Federico Fellini film, where we are unsure whether what we see is real or fantasy and at what point one slips into the other.

There are strong *vanitas* themes (from the Latin, meaning vanity) running throughout her paintings and drawings. *Vanitas* paintings were a type of still life most often executed by Northern European artists in Flanders and the Netherlands from the 16th through to the 17th centuries. They were meant as a reminder of the transience of life, the futility of pleasure and the certainty of death, thereby encouraging a sombre and often religious view of the world. Common symbols include skulls (symbolic of death), rotten fruit (decay), bubbles (brevity of life and suddenness of death), smoke, watches and hourglasses (again brevity of life). Some of Flannigan's paintings in the exhibition include piles of small skulls or disheveled and dismembered heads, others depict small manikins or living, squirming beings like voodoo dolls. She says that most of her paintings are, one way or another, about death, or the provocation between life and death throughout our lives, and that these small beings or disembodied heads are meant to be a reflection of that, often parodying the imaginary sitter, as in the portrait drawing of the pin-stripped seated gentleman with a miniature version of himself perched on his knee in the Family Bedroom. They are also partly related to art historical themes of the past, for example that of the mother and child or the Madonna and Christ Child. Flannigan's interest, however, is in making this a universal theme: for example how would one apply the concept of a mother and child in, say, Iraq? Her answer is to remove the idea from being grounded in reality and paint or draw it in a language that allows an open interpretation that is not based in any particular location or time. The dolls, manikins and other small, sometimes disembodied beings in her paintings are a part of this effort. Flannigan deliberately makes some of the children look like miniature adults, and both they and the skull-like figures appear to be taunting to their "grown-up" variants.

Dressing up – literally and metaphorically – is a highly important part of Flannigan’s work, whereby characters reveal their true selves, sometimes unwittingly and almost always ironically, through hiding under wigs, make-up and costumes. Two of the paintings hanging on the Marble Staircase, *Happy Ending* and *The Blind House* hang next to one of the most important and “dressed up” 18th Century portraits at Mount Stuart, Thomas Lawrence’s 1795 portrait of *Lord Mountstuart as a Spanish Grandee, the Escorial in the background*. When this painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy, George III is said to have started back in disgust on seeing it, believing that the sitter had been portrayed in such a way that was beneath his station. Certainly there is an air of false dignity and self-deception about him, and some of this is reflected in Flannigan’s own work with its sense of humour and perception. This tragi-comedic element in her paintings forms a dialogue with many of the family portraits at Mount Stuart, and it is worth pointing out that Lord Mountstuart, despite all his pomp and finery as shown by Lawrence died at the age of 27 after a riding accident.

Although *Happy Ending* was directly inspired by the Lawrence portrait of Lord Mountstuart in terms of light, colour and space, it was, ironically, not one of the works actually created for this exhibition, the artist having seen the painting on a previous trip to the house. From that first viewing, Flannigan was interested how the sitter, Lord Mountstuart seemed to not quite fit in with his painted background, both literally (a Scot in the arid plains of Spain), and metaphorically, simultaneously both posturing and yet looking faintly ludicrous and somewhat melancholic. She even found the tempestuous colouring of the landscape and gathering storm clouds melancholy. The exact meaning of the title of *Happy Ending* is unclear, and Flannigan is loath to try and explain it. (She does not want the titles of her work to point to a narrative, rather to suggest an idea or concept). The painting is a painting within a painting, like Velázquez’s celebrated *Las Meninas* (*The Maids of Honour*, which was coincidentally inventoried at the Palacio Real de Madrid under the title *The family picture*). The 17th Century Neapolitan artist, Luca Giordano, described *Las Meninas* as the “theology of painting”, and Sir Thomas Lawrence, painter of Lord Mountstuart, called it the “philosophy of art”. In Flannigan’s painting, *Happy Ending*, the small figure in the foreground is evocative of a china figurine, holding a paintbrush dripping with paint. Drops of paint also fall from the eyes of the woman in the canvas within the painting, and she too holds a paintbrush in her right hand, whilst pointing to the ground with the other, in much the same manner as Goya’s *Duchess of Alba* indicates an inscription in the earth by her feet which reads, ‘Solo Goya’ (‘Only Goya’), in his celebrated 1797 portrait.

Both the 3rd Earl and the 3rd Marquess had large families and were very family-orientated people. In the so-called Family Bedroom, Flannigan has placed the series of drawings, *A footprint in the hall*, one depicting a grandmother and her grandchild in a cot, the back of which also resembles a tombstone. The grandmother looks forlorn and her gaze appears not to be directed at the infant, who points in a seemingly accusatory way at her, but over the child’s head into the distance, and it is unclear which person is to outlive the other or even if one is already dead. This drawing in particular is a

response to, and memory of, the Robert Weir Schultz crib recently restored to the room, having been missing from it for the best part of half a century. The unifying themes of these drawings is that of family life and yet there seems to be so many secrets, so much pain, anger and regret in the faces of the characters, so many skeletons in the closet, that it is family life pared down to its bare essentials: birth, youth, marriage, procreation, sex, old age and death in a continual reversal or renewal.

In a vitrine in the formal Drawing Room there are two portrait miniatures of an older and a younger man alongside a pocket watch and a document collected by the 4th Marquess of Bute on which there is the signature of Bonnie Prince Charlie (1720 – 1788). The document is signed “Charles P.R.” [Prince Regent] during the '45. With these two miniatures, *Nobody Knows Himself*, Flannigan returns to the theme of political dynasties, this time focusing on the Stuarts, arguably the last great political dynasty in Scotland. Who are the dissolute looking older and younger man, and why is the artist's dissection of them so unflinching? They seem not to represent actual people, and yet we wonder if they are the ghosts of Prince James Francis Edward Stuart (1688 – 1766) ‘The Old Pretender’, or ‘The King over the Water’ and son of the deposed King James VII of Scotland and II of England; and his son, Prince Charles Edward Stuart (1720 – 1788) ‘The Young Pretender’ or ‘Bonnie Prince Charlie’. Or perhaps they simply represent a stage in the theme of time and history, youth turning into old age

It takes courage for Flannigan to execute and develop her practice, with continuing excellence and integrity. It is a knife-edge between success and failure, and putting her head above the parapet time and time again when the psychological content of the work is so great is truly a remarkable thing. Her paintings deal with universal themes that run throughout art history and popular culture, defying categorization.

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