

The RUA's annual show is a fitting tribute to much missed artists, says John P O'Sullivan

The Royal Ulster Academy's annual exhibition usually provides a panoramic view of what's happening in the Northern Ireland art scene, and an opportunity to spot emerging talent. This year the exhibition has an even broader scope, with a large number of selected artists, including some from south of the border. Conversely, a number of the north's more established figures, and RUA members, are missing. It's good to see the RUA casting its net so widely, taking in Karen Hendy from west Cork and Gavin Lavelle from Galway along with Dublin-based contributors.

There's a sombre side to the show: the attractive catalogue contains obituaries of seven members of the academy who died in the past 12 months. Each of the deceased is also remembered via two works in the exhibition. The best known is Basil Blackshaw, who is represented by a fine portrait of his old friend TP Flanagan and by the aptly chosen Big Brown Dog. An animal lover, Blackshaw preferred to talk about his dogs rather than his art. In an interview a few years ago he was more animated about a champion greyhound he once owned than about any of his paintings. The Irish art world is hugely diminished by his passing.

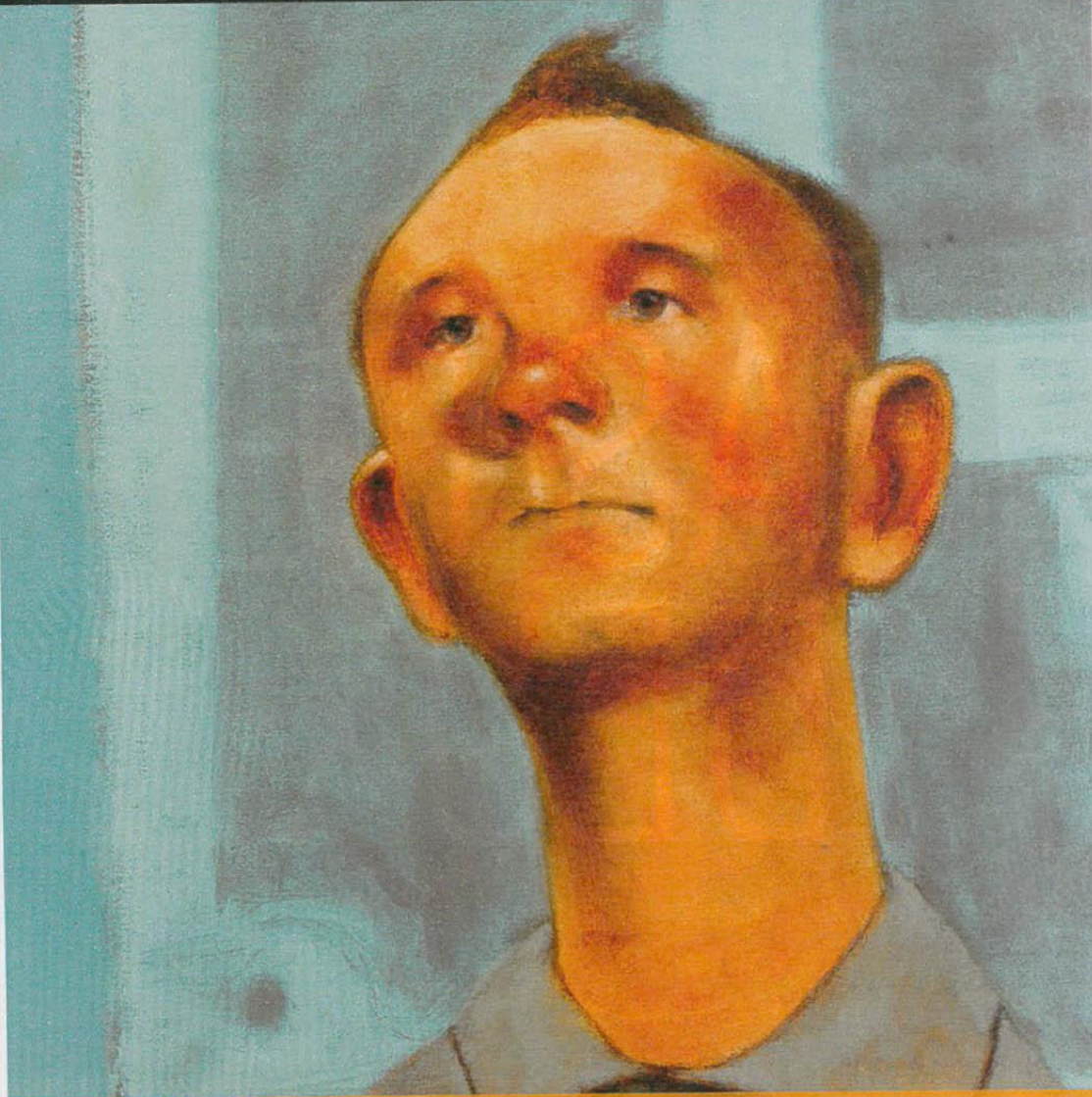
A feature of this year's exhibition is the large number of portraits, portrait busts and generally figurative work. Poets and artists inspire a number of these. There's a bronze bust of a young Seamus Heaney, and a ruddy and romanticised painting of Michael Longley holding a wren in one hand,

some flowers in the other — and looking a tad embarrassed about it all. There's a fine ceramic bust of Austin Clarke by Bob Sloan, and nearby you can find his namesake the 1916 leader Thomas Clarke.

Robert Ballagh contributes an austere painting of Brian O'Doherty (the erstwhile Patrick Ireland), a fellow artist who shares his interest in Irish politics. Hector McDonnell shows Neil Shawcross on a suitably red armchair amid the contents of his studio.

There are plenty of quirky and characterful portraits as well. Michael Connolly's *Intern* is a memorable study in gormlessness; Paul Bell's *Wolf* has a stolid menace; and Emily Scott's *Filippa* exudes character and elegance. There are so many good portraits it seems invidious not to name a few more. So there's David McDowell's skilful pencil drawing *Remember Me*, and Jackie Edwards's burnished old man in *The Heart That Asks*.

THE CRITICS



Fun and funky



Catching the eye Michael Connolly's *Intern*, above; Francis O'Toole's *One for Sorrow*, left

sinuous and troublingly ambiguous nude verily steals the show. O'Toole's meticulous painting devotes as much care and loving attention to the knots on the wooden floor as to the dimples on the subject's back.

Sculpture is very well served, both in terms of quality and quantity. As you walk into the gallery the first piece you encounter is *Furrow* by Eilis O'Connell, a small bronze that demonstrates her characteristic qualities of perfect harmony and subtle suggestiveness.

A few of the artists introduce a little light eroticism, such as Carol Graham's *Iconic Allure of Light* and Kyle Barnes's *Fixation*.

Of the many works relating to the human face or figure, Francis O'Toole's *One for Sorrow* stands out. This splendid, glowing,

Further in there are the powerful *Woodquay Bull* by John Behan and the playful *The Visitor*, a rampant bronze grasshopper by Deborah Brown that won the Mullan Gallery Award for best sculpture. The flag of abstraction is flown by Michael Warren with

Kireji, a blackened bronze slab with fissures; Stephen Deery's *Deliverance*; and Corban Walker's intricate maze-like creation. Ann Butler's surreal white porcelain sewing machine and Peter Meanley's playful stoneware *The Fisherman* also catch the eye.

Paintings of the highest quality include *The Garden Shed*, an accomplished work by Clement McAleer; *Breaking Wave*, a fine brooding seascape by James Allen; *Long Duree* by Jennifer Trouton, which won the Tyrone Guthrie Residency Award; Cormac O'Leary's *Inisheer II*; and Mick O'Dea's dramatic tour de force *Study for the Burning of the RHA*. There are two large lively works by Diarmuid Delargy and an uncharacteristically abstract piece by Neil Shawcross — the title *Jazz* is the clue to this freeform exercise. Quiet woodlands are given their due by Keith Wilson with *Being Here* and Michael Wann's *Woodland Shadow* — the latter in charcoal.

Photography is not well represented. Rory Moore's *Brig Mary Jane, Westport-Baltimore 1847* is an evocation of the Great Famine. It shows a ruined and abandoned cottage against a brooding western sky. Aidan Crawley adds a further sombre note with *Missing I*, a study of the Somme landscape.

In viewing a show with 329 exhibits, it's difficult to do justice to the eight video offerings which require more time to absorb than viewers usually have. In Oona Doherty's *Hard to Be Soft*, the artist demonstrates admirable liteness in an expressive dance.

There's plenty of fun to be had in this entertaining and eclectic show. You don't have to be a dog lover to enjoy Caroline Fellowes' *Obedience IV* (a dog on a chair in a flood), which manages to be both surreal and poignant. And you'll surely smile at Stephen Johnston's photorealist *Cake in a Jar* which earned him the KPMG Young Artist Award. The selection committee has done a good job in purging the show of the worthy landscapes and other stodgy fare that often dominate academy exhibitions. ■

RUA 135th Annual Exhibition, Ulster Museum, Belfast, until Jan 8