

# The artist's studio

**Mick O'Dea's study of fellow academician Stephen McKenna, this year's recipient of the Ireland-US Council/Irish Arts Review Portraiture Award, embodies the artistic ideals of both sitter and creator, writes *Angela Griffith***

Mick O'Dea is this year's recipient of the Ireland-US Council/Irish Arts Review Portraiture Award, for his study of the artist Stephen McKenna. The fact that O'Dea has been honoured in this way for a genre with which he is closely associated will not be a surprise to those familiar with his work. Despite the dominance of conceptual and abstracted forms in contemporary art practice, many artists continue to negotiate with the processes of portrait-making and O'Dea's portraits address issues such as the nature of representation and the construction of identities. Mimetic in approach, O'Dea is a persistent investigator of, and interpreter of, nature and the human form. He is a master draughtsman and a painter who relishes in the processes of image-making, the traces of which are visible on his work's surfaces.

As the viewer observes O'Dea's likeness of Stephen McKenna, their gaze is returned emphatically by the subject. The directness of McKenna's engagement with the viewer suggests that he is 'communicating' with them, when in fact the image of McKenna is a visualization of hours of enquiry by the artist and an intense interaction between artist and sitter. However, McKenna appears to be at ease with the situation – the concentration with which O'Dea would have scrutinized his model has not made McKenna uncomfortable – rather McKenna is a 'willing collaborator'<sup>1</sup> in a process that he is very familiar with, as he too is an artist that looks, scrutinizes and re-creates nature.

The painting is more than a faithful representation of a figure. This honorific work celebrates McKenna's role as an artist, someone who has made a significant contribution to Irish visual culture for a number of decades. The portrait also refers to his position as a past president of one of Ireland's leading cultural institutions, the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA). McKenna stands in his studio, yet he is not depicted in the act of painting. Dashing attire with a blazer, bow tie and contrasting pocket square, McKenna's hands-in-pockets pose is relaxed. In the immediate foreground are the tools of a painter's trade, brushes, palette knives, tubes of paint and a

palette with colours which are laid out to be used, all of which are painted by O'Dea in exacting detail. Behind the form of McKenna, somewhat unceremoniously, hangs the robes and chain of office of the RHA president on an artist's easel. The background of the image is dominated by a large painting by McKenna, of a German landscape entitled *Berlin Havelsee* (1984). Above McKenna's work, to the left, another landscape is suggested – whether it is 'real' or a painted scene is unclear. This almost incidental detail underpins the conceptual nature of the work itself, demanding that the viewer question the 'realities' of painting.

The formal conventions of the portrait's presentation, the decorous pose and the figure's primacy in the composition reflect the social reality of McKenna's respected position in Irish cultural circles. O'Dea's descriptive stylistic approach ensures that McKenna's physical appearance allows for immediate identification, freeing the viewer to consider other details such as setting, dress, surrounding artefacts and O'Dea's painterly stylistic treatment, to imbue broader meaning. The work not only represents an individual but it also celebrates the ideals and legacy of the RHA, to which O'Dea also belongs. And while the work includes the public visual symbols of the RHA presidential office, the robe and chain, dominant in the foreground are the tools by which both artists make their contribution to Ireland's cultural heritage.

As a large-scale public work, O'Dea is mindful of the image's continuing agency as time passes. It cannot merely be viewed as a visual document of fixed meaning, in a fixed time and place. The work is, and will be, an instrument to judge the artistic legacy of the RHA, and, McKenna and O'Dea. The portrait, *Stephen McKenna PPRHA* by Mick O'Dea (RHA) serves as a significant visual manifestation of the artistic identities and artistic ideals of the sitter and the creator. ■

<sup>1</sup> 'The 183rd RHA Annual Exhibition', Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin until 17 August 2013.

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<sup>1</sup> Mick O'Dea in conversation with Brian McAvera, 'State of Surveillance' *Irish Arts Review*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Spring 2010), pp. 62-69

MICK O'DEA  
RHA b.1953  
STEPHEN  
MCKENNA  
PPRHA 2013  
oil on linen  
canvas  
114x89cm  
Photo Gillian  
Buckley

MICK O'Lea RHA  
Stephen McKenna PPRHA

