



# State of Surveillance

On the topic of his new work Mick O'Dea tells **Brian McAvera** 'The Black and Tans were the Bogeyman and I am looking at what the Bogeyman looked like.'



**Brian McAvera:** When you were a student at NCAD you worked as an artist's model. Did this experience contribute to your approach as an artist?

**Mick O'Dea:** Yes. What it did was to expose me to a lot of different teachers. I saw it as part of my education. It fulfilled the curiosity I had about what it was like for a life model. Obviously I found some approaches were more creative than others, and they were the 'models' that stayed with me when I started to teach. I remember George



Potter's class, highly energetic with an American know-how about it.

One of the reasons I got to draw people relates to Thom McGinty, the street performer known as 'The Dice Man', who was modelling at NCAD at the time. I was fresh up from the country, from Co Clare and he represented artistic freedom for me. I painted him for years. So it was often the relationship I had, as a student, with the individual models that triggered bodies of work. Models that excited me generated exciting work for me. What do I mean by 'excited'? Somebody who creates an impulse or desire in me so that it becomes a necessity to draw or paint them.

**B McA:** Take us through the process of painting a portrait.

**M O'D:** If it's an oil painting, then it's a pre-bought stretched linen canvas with a ground – an oil-based or universal ground. I'll use a standard studio easel. Typically I'll stand. I use Filbert brushes which I hold at arm's length. I like to be able to see the entire surface at all times and I don't use a handwriting technique. Usually the subject is at eye level or above, unlike Freud who likes being above. I work from the general to the particular. The approach is more akin to modelling with clay than drafting and filling in. It goes from mass and volume to detail at the end. I try and work wet on wet. If a portrait is a large one and goes on for weeks, it won't be wet on wet. I need to be fit, mobile. Usually there are no preparatory studies; but if there are, they are finished things in their own right.

I try and penetrate the personality by looking at the geography of the face rather than their psychology. Experience tells me that the characteristics underneath the surface present themselves.

**B McA:** Do you ever use photography as an aide?

**M O'D:** Yes. I have always been interested and inspired by photography. Currently I am working from historical photographs that I have researched for my current work 'The Black and Tan Series' (Figs 1&2).

On landscapes I work *plein air* and for portraits, ninety per cent are from direct contact (Figs 10&12). In the current series I have sourced the images from a variety of publications and photographic archives in addition to contacting researchers and librarians. I don't think there's any virtue in not working from photographs. I try to draw attention to the medium I'm using, keeping it open-ended,

1 Mick O'Dea's studio, Dublin

2 Mick O'Dea RHA



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and at the same time being as accurate as possible to the original source, without comment. Using a music analogy I want the image to be constructed of marks that are melodic, have verve, fluency, tone, cadence, and accuracy all contributing to an emotion that is uplifting.

There will be, I imagine, a certain voyeuristic aspect for the audience with regard to the current exhibition. The Black and Tans were the Bogeyman and I am looking at what the Bogeyman looked like (Figs 5 & 6). I'm presenting the historical period which lasted roughly seven-months, from March 1920 to July 1921 (Figs 3, 4 & 7). Because I'm looking at so many images it's very much from the military as opposed to a guerrilla point of view. I feel that I'm almost in the barracks with the Black and Tans, perhaps even going out on raids. I'm conscious of what Lloyd George said to them – 'Make Ireland a hell for rebels to live in.'

I'm starting to get the feel of the British side of the argument as

they were both in Vienna at that time. It was after all the Vienna of Freud – that had to have an influence on how to proceed with portraiture.

In Dublin, Charles Cullen and Carey Clarke were taught by John Kelly, and Seán Keating was taught by Orpen when he was in the College. I was taught by Clarke, Cullen and Kelly among others, therefore I do feel part of that continuum.

I would also have looked at Grosz and Dix – they had more of an influence. Tuohy and Campbell would be more unconscious. It was central European painting, Austrian and German especially, that excited me. When I was a student, some influential staff in the College and from outside felt that those painters were irrelevant. The war [in College] was won. To be interested in their work was thought to be reactionary and in some way impeding the progress of Modernism.

**B McA:** You attended NCAD from 1976 to 1981, and then taught

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opposed to my education which would have given me the freedom-fighters' side. I like the idea of primary research. I've made connections, and I have identified individual Black and Tans and auxiliaries as they reappear in different photographs and locations.

**B McA:** There would seem to be a natural umbilical cord from Orpen and the Metropolitan School to yourself. One thinks of the animated portraits of Patrick Tuohy, of Christopher Campbell's 1939 *Self-Portrait*, of Leo Whelan and James Sleator, not to mention George Collie, Edward Maguire, John Kelly and Carey Clarke. Gerry Walker also suggested that you have a leaning towards Schiele and Kokoschka. How would you situate yourself between the Irish and the European worlds?

**M O'D:** I got excited by Kokoschka and Schiele when I was a student: the drawing and the attempt to get under the skin. It's no coincidence

there from 1983 to 1999. How useful were these periods to you as an artist?

**M O'D:** Actually I taught from 1981 to 1999 with two years' leave from 1996 to 1998. I also taught at Dún Laoghaire for a year (1985 in Foundation), in The King's Hospital Secondary School (1982-83) and I was a substitute teacher in An Cheathru Rua in 1982 when I reacquainted myself with the sculptor Edward Delaney who I first met there in 1978. I was a teacher too in the prison system, primarily in Portlaoise between 1988 to 2004, and I also taught art classes at St Edmundsbury which is associated with St Patrick's Hospital Dublin, between 1986 and 1990. NCAD had been looking for someone to teach life-drawing at First Year level (Foundation). I had been recommended to Myra Maguire, the Head of Foundation Studies by

3 MICK O'DEA b.1958 *THE ESTABLISHMENT* 2010 charcoal & pencil on paper 68x100cm

4 *THE CAIRO GANG* 2010 mixed media on paper 75x106cm

5 *BLACK & TANS POSING IN DUBLIN* 2009 mixed media on canvas 120x170cm

6 *THREE BLACK & TANS POSING* 2009 mixed media on canvas 100x120cm

7 *BEFORE A DAY'S SKIRMISHING IN THE COUNTRYSIDE* 2009 mixed media on canvas 130x195cm





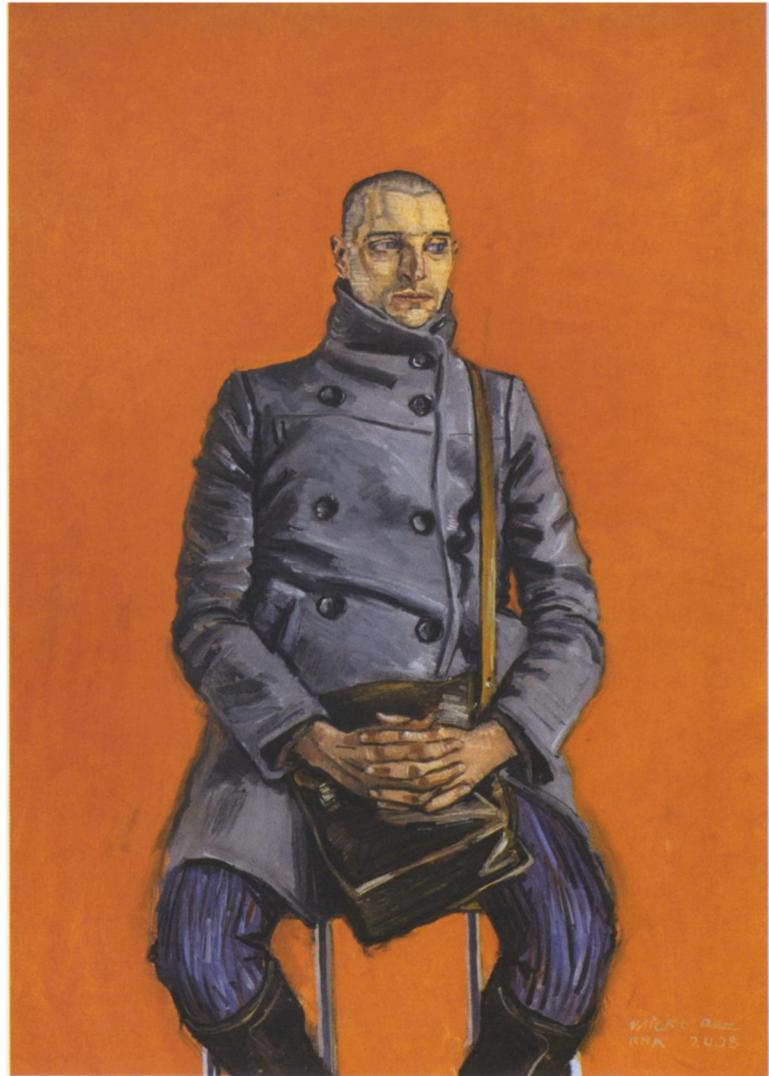
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Professor Campbell Bruce who was the Head of Fine Art at NCAD.

At that time the staff in Foundation Year were very young. My colleagues were from craft, fine art, fashion or textile backgrounds. A lot of what I heard as a student really made sense when I was a teacher: the whole notion of process, notebooks, staying with an idea and moving it along without having your eye on the finished result – emphasizing the journey as opposed to the destination.

Charles Brady impressed me. In First Year I was working late into the night, doing a bad Picassoesque painting, when I felt this presence behind me. It was Charlie. He reminded me of Columbo from the TV series. He had his gabardine on. He looked at the painting, and then at me.

'Are you from the country?' 'Yeah'. 'Is your father a farmer?' 'Yeah.' He looked at the painting, then he looked at me and said, 'Did you ever think about farming?' 'Yeah,' and I laughed: he did too. It was funny, and



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**M O'D:** Not a great deal. I still have Henrietta Street, and Mountjoy Square is a similar type of building, though not quite so old. It was through Charles Cullen that I first visited the Henrietta Street Studios in 1978. There I met the artists Cathy Carman, Eithne Jordan, Paul Funge, Michael Mulcahy, Michael Cullen and Brian Maguire, and it was Charles Cullen who alerted me when his old studio became available in 1987. It was in Henrietta Street that I first witnessed people who lived the life and made the work here. It was not something that only happened elsewhere. Our landlord, Uinseann Mac Eoin was a town-planner, architect, conservationist, Republican, communist, family man and admirer of the Anglo-Irish contribution, as well as being a writer, historian and mountain-climber. He was an extraordinary man. He felt it was his duty as a citizen to let out studios cheaply to artists. It is he who is responsible for Henrietta Street becoming the home and hub of so many artists that it is today. Uinseann

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it was affirming rather than denigrating. After that I felt I could trust him

Gwen O'Dowd, Kathy Prendergast, Tom Shortt, and Brian Palm were in the same year as me, as well as the sculptor Martin Folan and the printmaker Michael Lyons. You make friends for life in college. I also met Donald Teskey in Limerick. The Dice Man (Thom McGinty) had started modelling there, I would hitch down from Dublin and walk into the art school classes and start drawing, and no one would bat an eyelid. I'd spend two weeks there and then hitch back to Dublin.

**B McA:** For a long time you worked in the crumbled splendour of Henrietta Street and then you moved to Mountjoy Square West. What difference has the move made?

died three years ago, but not before he cycled around the Western Isles of Scotland with his friends prior to having a second hip-replacement. He asked me to illustrate his romantic novel *Sybill* and after, at his request, to give him instruction in painting as he wanted to paint like Frank McKelvey. I gave him lessons in my studio over twelve months. He never did learn to paint like McKelvey, but he did learn how to paint!

**B McA:** You work in a wide range of media: charcoal, watercolour, pastels, acrylics, and oils. What do you see as the salient characteristics of each and what are your reasons for using any given medium?

**M O'D:** I see it as a bit like an armoury, each project that I undertake requires the appropriate medium depending on subject matter, location



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and intention. The water-based ones are always good for travel, so when I'm moving abroad or out into Ireland I use pastel, watercolour and acrylic. For instance, in 1986 I had my second show at the Taylor Gallery, Dublin. This show was of portraits and nudes. I used chalk pastel because my subjects were represented in their own homes. Their environment was part of the portrait. Transporting paper and pastels was easy on my bicycle which was my mode of transport at that time. In addition, pastels allowed me to combine my love of drawing with colour.

In 1990 and 1991 I was invited to a watercolour symposium in Latvia. With me were many artists from Eastern Europe and some from the West. I spent a month at a time working exclusively with watercolour. When I returned to oil paint I thinned it in order to let the ground come through using the influence of my watercolour technique. Each medium expands my vocabulary. Every now and then I relish the juiciness of oil paint. A typical week includes making nude studies in acrylic on paper, using a glazing technique. A portrait in oils using a wet on wet technique, mixed media on canvas, cardboard constructions, as well as pen and ink drawings in notebooks. I like to think of myself as someone who could move from the banjo to the bassoon to the guitar. In a recording studio I might do all of the tracks.

**B McA:** In 2003 you exhibited a portrait of Veronica Guerin's killer, Brian Meehan, which provoked a storm of controversy, reminiscent of the 1989 debacle when Brian Maguire exhibited a portrait of the Loyalist killer Michael Stone. This provoked questions of context, accountability, glorification and so forth. At this distance in time, do you think you were right to exhibit the work?

**M O'D:** Before I address the question, it should be made clear that Brian Meehan was not convicted for the murder of Veronica Guerin. I don't think anyone was. Was I right to exhibit it? Yes. The annual RHA show

asks that members show their best work. My best work that year wasn't one of my other portraits. It was that one. Hanging beside the Meehan portrait was a painting of the American writer Kimberly Mack which I painted in Vermont. I also showed four landscapes, six paintings in all. The RHA Annual Exhibition was the context for showing the portrait. There may be a view that only official portraits or family portraits should be shown there. It's a narrow perspective, one that ignores the range and possibilities of portraiture as a relevant and vital art form. I did not take the decision lightly to show the Meehan portrait. I consulted a trusted colleague who looked over the possibilities with me. In the end it was clear that I had no choice other than to show the painting. I was accountable for making that decision.

If to exhibit a portrait of a person is to glorify them, I stand accused. I have exhibited two portraits of prisoners publicly over the fifteen years that I have been involved in working in prisons. I have made at least fifty in that time, many now in the possession of the individuals or their families. What kind of artist would I be if I selected who I painted in order to avoid people's disapproval of what is considered suitable?

**BMCA:** At intervals you have produced work which is strikingly different from your normal output, such as the various 'toy-soldier' exhibitions which punctuated your year in Barcelona (Fig 14). What generated these exhibitions?

**M O'D:** When I think about it, my first excursion into colour and process came from playing with toy soldiers when I was young. Our home was a public house; at times we had staff from the business along with my uncle, mother, father, brother and three sisters living upstairs over the shop and bar. The time alone playing in my room was precious to me. A lot of the time we were on standby to work in the shop or the bar downstairs. In 1988 my sister Clare gave me Mrs Thatcher's Spitting Image mask and she became the basis of a still-life and I had toy soldiers assaulting it like Monte

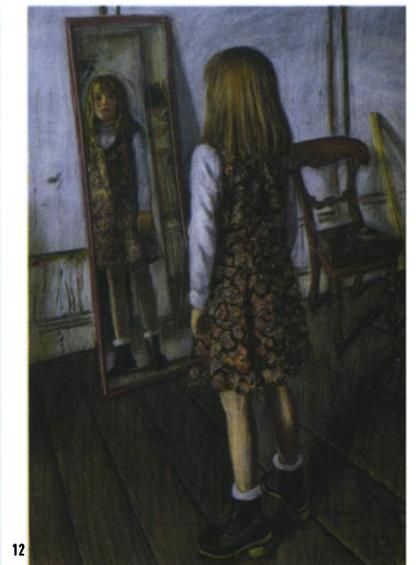
8 HENRY-LOUIS & MARGUERITE BARATIN 2006 oil pastel and pencil 142x100cm Photo@Jacqui McIntosh

9 DAVID 2008 oil on canvas 100x70cm Photo@Gillian Buckley

10 PAULA 2003 acrylic 55.88x76.2 Photo@Gillian Buckley

11 TOM SHORTT 1980 conte and pencil 30.48x20.32cm Photo@Tom Collins

12 SARAH 1992 chalk pastel 108x76cm Photo@ Denis Mortell



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Cassino! I had a great time. Then I pulled out old toy soldiers, bought new ones and made my own sets, combining play, painting, dynamism and composition. I felt that I'd stumbled into something that allowed me to engage totally in painting and drawing. It also allowed me in a loose way to cast a net over my interest in military history. Most of my conversations are on history, religion, politics and sport rather than art.

In 1995 at the Rubicon Gallery in Dublin I held my first show of the 'Plastic Warrior Series'. I was really excited about what I had achieved but it went down like a lead balloon with the art-buying public. Previously I'd had a successful landscape exhibition 'Annaghmakerrig' at the Rubicon in 1992, one that the art-buying audience responded to. However the audience that had supported me in that show could not make the leap with me on this one, as it seemed such a radical change in direction.

It was time for a change so I moved to Barcelona for a year to further pursue the 'Plastic Warrior' theme. I commenced a twelve-month MFA program to do just that. My intention was to make paintings using available props as subject matter. However, once there I couldn't find new props, so I made them from string, cardboard and wood to serve as subject matter for drawing but I ended up 'making' for six months – they became the subject (Fig 16). It brought me back to NCAD in a way. I had gone into sculpture there but changed to painting because at that time the sculpture department was quite cerebral.

13 KAREN 1996 chalk pastel 76x56.5cm

14 MANTLEPIECE SERIES 1994 oil on board 44.7x90.7cm

15 NUDE no 7 (Lyme Academy Sculpture Room) 2001 acrylic 55.88x376.2cm Photo ©Gillian Buckley

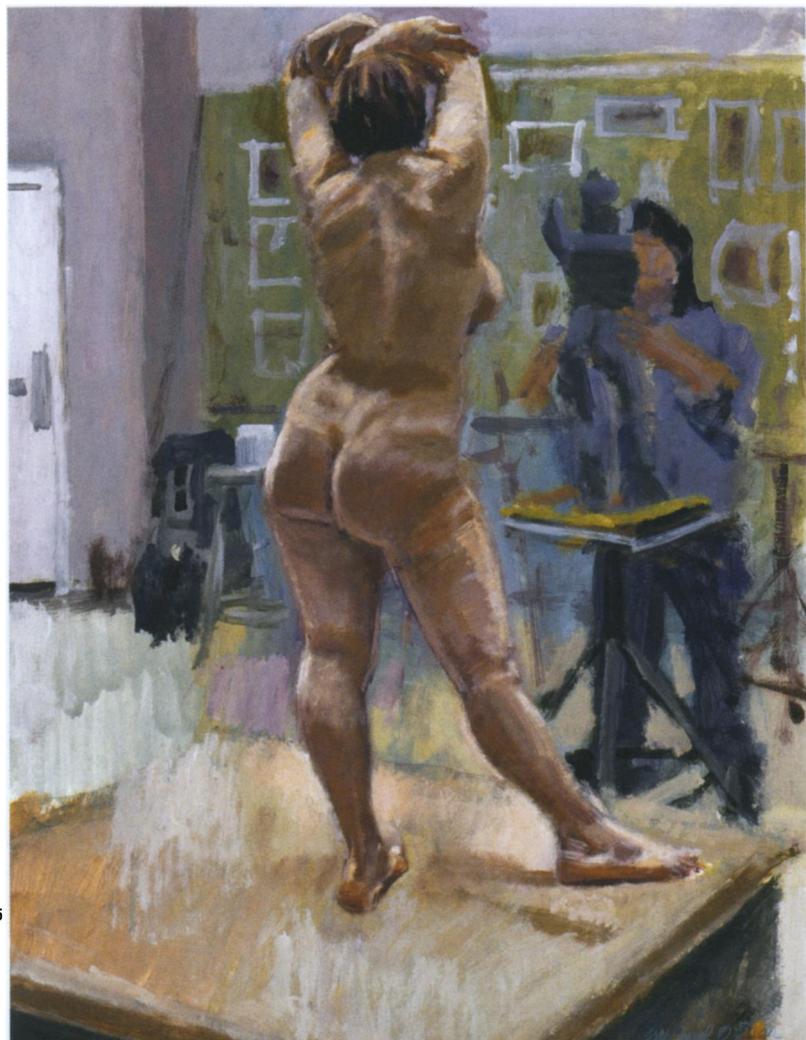
16 Detail from artist's studio, Barcelona 1996

I was playing catch-up in Barcelona. Nobody knew me, I found that liberating. I kept notebooks and started to make paintings. Before I left Barcelona I had an exhibition of the sculptures which I left in the gallery for anyone to take at the end of the show. I also showed my new paintings there and then brought them to Ireland, where Kevin Kavanagh arranged for them to be shown at the Donaghmore Workhouse, as part of the Portlaoise Arts Festival. It was a perfect location for the work given the large scale of the pieces and the resonances of the building. In a room downstairs, under lock and key was graffiti left by Black and Tans stationed there during the War of Independence: triumphal arches with bi-planes flying through them. That stuck in my mind.

**B McA: Photography theoretically made portraiture obsolete. What is the difference from your point of view?**



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**M O'D:** With some notable exceptions, most of the current portraits I prefer are photographic! However you can't stop someone pulling a piece of burnt twig and scratching it on a surface: it's the hand, the mark of the artist, that whole tactile element. It's like saying that a really good synthesizer has made playing the guitar obsolete.

**B McA:** You've done a number of shows which require you to produce a large number of portraits in a very short time— 'Audience' at the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery and 'Un Salon' at the Irish College in Paris for instance. What is the attraction and how do you stop the portraits becoming formulaic?

**M O'D:** In the case of 'Audience' they were formulaic: everyone was in the same chair, facing the same window and in the same light. The idea was to commence and complete a portrait within one sitting. With that

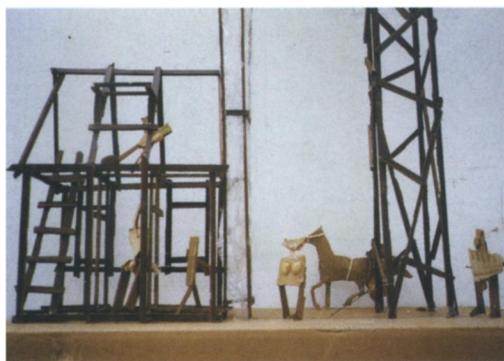
restriction I responded to the personalities. I gave up drink that year, went to bed early. It's like training for a sporting event. I had to have my head clear. I like deadlines, the sense of athleticism required to complete a project like that.

The Paris show had no format. They stood, sat in

edge aspect of the English art scene was very dominant in Ireland. Times have changed. That censorship [in relation to my exhibition] was out of step with the country. It was an anomaly. One of the nudes in question has since been bought by a priest! It was as if someone had been deep-frozen for twenty years and had forgotten that time had moved on.

**B McA:** Portrait painting as a profession, especially from the second half of the 20th century onwards is often viewed as a highly specialised craft. Paintings for the boardroom, the university, or even the husband of a deceased wife require exactitude of likeness, and command good prices. How do you differentiate yourself from this market?

**M O'D:** I have established my identity as a portrait painter by showing portraits of people I have chosen to paint – friends, colleagues or models I've paid. I've shown enough of them to advertise my wares (Fig 9). Therefore, if anybody or any institution wishes to look in my direction, they have a fairly good idea of where I'm coming from. That has the effect of avoiding disappointment – though not always. Usually it's someone looking for a boardroom portrait, though I do boardroom portraits as well – my ones! My ambition is to paint the great and the good and everyone in-between. In a recent slide show that I presented at the RHA I showed portraits of the judiciary, the law, the police and criminals: I'm lucky to have had the opportunity to have met all of them. I am capable of giving a clear-sighted representation of somebody. I would hope that this clarity comes through, as well as my empathy, sympathy and curiosity for people. Having said that, I've been



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their apartments or in the studio. There was no size or medium restriction but I had a deadline: to document people associated with the Centre Culturel Irlandais, Paris, where I was artist-in-residence (Fig 8). Once I had a couple of portraits done to create the momentum, it worked. It's an intense period of concentration which gets the results.

**B McA:** The nude in Irish art is scarcely a major genre area. Why do you think this is so, and how perturbed were you when two nude studies were removed from your 1989 show in County Hall, Portlaoise?

**M O'D:** I've always been into painting the nude (Fig 15). Why so few nudes in Irish art? We are actually Catholic puritans. Catholics only in name and ceremony, but we were fundamentalist puritans who had nothing in common with the Catholics of the Mediterranean. Even fundamentalist cultures have produced more nudes than we have, though I have heard stories that the native Irish thought that the way Viking women presented themselves was very immodest. It's not just from our recent past!

The modern period, since art schools began to fill up from the 1960s onwards, coincided with the decline of working from the nude – for political-stereotyping reasons. During the 1970s in Ireland and England, the nude was visible in gallery spaces when presented in the person of the artists themselves, otherwise one had to work very hard to justify the activity of drawing or painting the naked human. The subject would always be associated with the old academic order. In the 1970s the hard-

warned by many good artists that portraiture is the one area that can compromise the most laudable intentions.

**B McA:** The theatrical edge to many of your portraits suggests performance, role-play, an identity constructed and presented, wittingly or otherwise, for the artist to paint. What do you look for in a sitter?

**M O'D:** I think I do look for a certain amount of theatricality but it is self-awareness that puts me at ease immediately. Someone who is secure in themselves, who presents themselves and lets me get on with it. Some people will follow the progress of the portrait as it proceeds, others won't: that's a decision that I make at the time. For the 'Audience' show I had not met many of the people before they sat for me, but because they had volunteered to come, that was enough. That's why I like drawing actors and other creative people. They let you get on with it and don't take things too personally. 'That's your impression of me' said Professor George Dawson who sat for several portraits back in 1985. I remembered that. Sometimes my picture of someone is not always complete. I need willing collaborators because I've had upsetting scenarios. I didn't set out to become a character assassin, just purely a portrait painter. ■

All work ©The Artist.

Mick O'Dea 'The Black and Tan Series' Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, Dublin  
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Photography © Davey Moor Courtesy Kevin Kavanagh Gallery.

Brian McAvera is an art critic.