

SEÁN KEATING: Contemporary Contexts

Image: Sean Keating PRHA (1889-1977) *Sacred and Profane Love* (1937). Painting © The Keating Estate, Photograph © John Searle



July 13 – October 27, 2012

Admission Free

Curator's Talk: Thursday 12 July, 6pm by Dr Éimear O'Connor.

Opening: Thursday 12 July, 7pm with Jimmy Deenihan T.D.

Minister of Arts, Heritage & The Gaeltacht

This summer the Crawford Art Gallery will present a major exhibition of the work of Irish artist Seán Keating (1889-1977) which will open to the public on Friday 13 July 2012.

Entitled '**Seán Keating: Contemporary Contexts**', and curated by Dr Éimear O'Connor HRHA, in collaboration with Crawford Art Gallery, the exhibition aims to encourage a re-evaluation of the artist's contribution to Irish life as an artist, and as a cultural commentator in the difficult post-Treaty years, and later as Ireland sought a new national and international identity.

To commemorate Keating's achievements, and to acknowledge the post-colonial circumstances in which he worked, the paintings on exhibition in **Seán Keating: Contemporary Contexts** are mainly those of the artist, but shown alongside work by several of his contemporaries most of whom used a different style, or strategy, to respond to the social contexts that engaged Keating at one time or another in his career. The exhibition features many of Keating's better-known paintings alongside several little-known examples, and a few, such as *Portrait of President Cosgrave* (1923), that had been written about when they were first shown, but were then lost to art history.

The central theme that emerges is that Keating was, throughout his life, a political painter. Allied to this, his use of modern equipment: the epidiascope, camera, and from the 1930s onwards, the cine-camera, indicate his interest in modernity. By virtue of his project to continually paint emerging history and his politicised response to many aspects of Irish life in the post-colonial era, Keating's work and circumstances epitomise the tension between tradition and modernity that is now understood to have been absolutely necessary in the quest for a national identity. His project to create an Irish school of art, often featuring models with a personal history of political identity, and his activism through articles, broadcasts and various controversies, demonstrate that he was a painter of modern life who, far from being right-thinking and conservative, actually made a major contribution to Ireland's cultural identity at home, and abroad. Keating's work, particularly the images that offer critiques of the governing classes, and the socio-economic conditions, have a resounding relevance in the twenty-first century, when economic distress, and emigration have once again returned to remove families from their traditional roots.

The multi-media exhibition will feature broadcasts, paintings and multi-media from the Keating Papers, private collections and National Cultural Institutions within Ireland.

Notes to Editors

Seán Keating: Contemporary Contexts at Crawford Art Gallery, Cork **Curated by Dr Éimear O'Connor HRHA in collaboration with the Crawford Gallery**

Twentieth-century appraisal of Seán Keating (1889-1977) PPRHA, HRA, HRSA, has served to inscribe him as a right-thinking academic painter whose work was aligned with de Valera's naive cultural view of Ireland. To some extent this view has remained in place. In the light of the advancement of theoretical approaches to the creation of nation states, and to the discussion about necessity of the tension between tradition and modernity to the post-colonial search for identity, the circumstances of the twenty-first century suggest that a re-appraisal of Keating's work as an artist and cultural commentator is overdue.

Born in Limerick, and destined to train at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art with, among others, William Orpen, Keating focused his attention on the overtly political situation in Ireland from 1915 until 1924. After the end of the Civil War, Keating continued his project to paint emerging contemporary history, and throughout his life, as the work in **Seán Keating: Contemporary Contexts** demonstrates, he was a political painter, with a keen interest in the importance of the role of the artist in society.

The most striking element of **Seán Keating: Contemporary Contexts** is that the work on exhibition illuminates the reality that the artist was a painter of people. Whether by commission, or otherwise, his curiosity was aroused by the character and personality of his models, and throughout his career he tended to chose people to fulfil his specific and sometimes rebellious vision. The second factor that emerges is that Keating was a political painter, whether he was imaging war heroes, characters from literature or sport, feats of engineering or the story of mass emigration from Ireland in the 1940s and 50s. He was fearlessly opinionated, and never sat on the fence about anything that interested him. Between 1924 and the 1950s he published and broadcast articles that were deeply critical of the attitude of the certain groups of the public to Irish culture in general and the visual arts in particular. This attitude is evident in many of Keating's paintings; he produced several allegorical works that, when understood in their context, were visual critiques of the social conditions that prevailed in the New Irish Free State. As a result, the work he produced throughout his life cannot be seen in splendid isolation, but must be understood in terms of the tumultuous contexts of his time. His artistic output, allied with his continual use of photography, and later cine-film, which had the effect of producing the truth of the circumstances he focused on, places Keating as a painter of modern life, even though he was academically trained. His contribution to Irish culture epitomises the tension between tradition and modernity that was absolutely necessary for the new Irish Free State to find a post-colonial identity. Keating's work, particularly the images that offer critiques of the governing classes, and the socio-economic conditions, have a resounding relevance in the twenty-first century, when economic distress, and emigration have once again returned to remove families from their traditional roots.

In the knowledge that Keating's work was essentially political, and that his early nationalist paintings featured a Cork flying column, it is entirely appropriate that **Seán Keating: Contemporary Contexts** should take place in the Crawford Gallery; as a celebration of the artists life and work, and in the hope that the focus on the modernity of his project might encourage new conversations about his work, and his complex contexts¹.

A further exhibition also curated by Dr Éimear O'Connor HRHA, **Seán Keating and the ESB: Enlightenment and Legacy @ the RHA**, a celebration of the artist's work on the 'Shannon Scheme' in the 1920s, and Poulaphouca in the 1940s, will open at the RHA Dublin (6 September – 21 December, 2012).

¹ Text from Éimear O'Connor 'Celebrating Modern Life. Seán Keating: Contemporary Contexts' catalogue essay to accompany 'Seán Keating: Contemporary Contexts' at Crawford Art Gallery (June 13-October 27, 2012)

Dr Éimear O'Connor HRHA is an art historian and is a Research Associate with TRIARC-Irish Art Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin. Her art-historical research interests are wide-ranging. She is particularly interested in the complex national and international contexts pertaining to the construction of Irish visual identity in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. O'Connor's research also encompasses the development of European and American modernism in the twentieth century. She has published articles and reviews on Irish art and artists and is author of *Seán Keating in Context: Responses to culture and politics in post-civil war Ireland* (Dublin 2009), and editor of *Irish Women Artists 1800-2009: familiar but unknown* (Dublin 2010). Her monograph on Keating, titled *Seán Keating: Art, Politics and Building the Nation*, will be published by Irish Academic Press in 2013.

Publication

Seán Keating: Contemporary Contexts by Dr Éimear O'Connor HRHA
published by Crawford Art Gallery
ISBN: 978-1-874756-15-6 RRP: €10

This richly illustrated publication, with an accompanying essay by Dr Éimear O'Connor HRHA, outlines and expands the themes in the exhibition, and reiterates that Keating was, throughout his life, a political artist, with a keen interest in modern Irish life

Lecture Series

- **Robert Ballagh *Painting the Left***
Thursday 13 September (6pm)
- **Dr Éimear O'Connor HRHA *Culture Night Lectures and Tours***
Friday 21 September (1pm, 6pm, 8pm)
- **Mick O'Dea *Imaging the Troubles***
Thursday 27 September (6pm)
- **Dr Róisín Kennedy *Dissenting Images: Social Critique in post-Civil War Irish Art***
Friday 5 October (1pm)
- **Dr Emmet O'Connor *Ireland and the Spanish Civil War***
Friday 19 October (1pm)
All welcome. Free admission.

Education

The exhibition is supported by an Education Information Pack:
www.crawfordartgallery.com/education.html

Guided Tours for Schools and Groups contact the Education Team:
emmaklemencic@crawfordartgallery.ie / anneboddaert@crawfordartgallery.ie

Press

For press information /images contact: exhibitions@crawfordartgallery.ie

Dates and opening hours:

Free Admission
Wheelchair Access

Preview: Thursday 12 July, 2012 (7:30 pm – 9 pm)

Open to public: Friday 13 July- Saturday 27 October, 2012

Daily: 10am – 5 pm, Thursday 8pm

Last admission: 4:45 pm (Thursday 7:45 pm)

Emmet Place, Cork, Ireland
www.crawfordartgallery.ie

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