



JOHN BEHAN FAMINE

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Tara Murphy
requests the pleasure of your company
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JOHN BEHAN RHA *FAMINE*

to be opened by
Adrian Frazier, MRIA

on Thursday 6th November 2014
from 6pm to 8pm

at **Solomon Fine Art, Balfe Street, Dublin 2**

The exhibition is dedicated to the memory of Emer MacHale

For further details please telephone +353 (0)86 8142380
or email info@solomonfineart.ie

THE EXHIBITION CONTINUES UNTIL SATURDAY 29th NOVEMBER 2014
OPENING HOURS: Tuesday to Friday 10am - 5.30pm / Saturday 11am - 4pm

Artworks may be viewed prior to the opening by appointment or online at www.solomonfineart.ie

Front cover: FAMINE SHIP PIER, bronze, unique, 48 x 60 x 56 cm

In Search of John Behan

Commentators have often remarked that the Irish relive their history into the present tense. Particular historical episodes, like that of the Famine, have imprinted themselves upon the national psyche, often becoming the common currency of political or journalistic chit-chat, of anti-British sentiment, or of a passionate empathy with the poor and the dispossessed. As we have eddied between Famine times and the present, the Famine Ship, like a lightning rod, has become a symbol: a coagulation of all the thwarted aspirations, hopes and fears of those millions who were forced to sail across the Atlantic in the search for a promised land; a benchmark in our understanding of the darker side of Emigration, the conduits of which were the Coffin Ships, within which human beings, decent ordinary men, women and children, were crushed together as in cattle wagons, deprived of a proper life-sustaining diet of food and water, exposed to the resultant bloom of disease and so, inevitably, the Grim Reaper scythed his way through a harrowing thirty percent of the human cargo.

As thus, it will always be. Capitalism did not need Karl Marx to do anything other than give greed a name. Weren't the Coffin Ships the cheapest form of travel across the ocean? The unscrupulous – the captains and their bosses, the ship-owners – were running a business where profit came before humanity. Weren't they? Dead bodies were often surplus to requirements and so were dumped overboard. Does this sound familiar? Today, everyday, refugees, especially those from Africa, are herded into boats, head for destinations like Italy and, as often as not, fail to survive.

What does a work-of-art do if it tackles a historical subject? We do know the answer. An efficient artist, commercially minded – as with so many Victorian painters – will give a historical episode a golden aura. How picturesque is that squalor, that rosy-cheeked urchin with his torn clothes, his lack of footwear and his sunny personality! How charming that invalid looks, dying of consumption in such a chic bedroom! But the real artist is not interested in insulating us from reality, in gift-wrapping the past to provide a comforting, acceptable, revisionist version. The real artist wants to take the past into the present tense, to make us feel, to engage our empathy. The real artist, even while acknowledging the mechanics of Capitalism, wants to short-circuit them; to take us out of our comfort zone and so to make us think.

John Behan has long been fascinated by boats and ships, by the way in which previous artists, often unknown and working hundreds if not thousands of years ago, have divined the ship or boat as a symbol, be it of the ferryman crossing into the underworld, the Viking aggressor in search of adventure and loot, the frail barque in search of new worlds or the currach with its cargo of monks, carrying Christianity (and the lore and love of learning) to the uninitiated. Archaeology – excavation in three dimensions, cave paintings in two – plumbines us into the past only for the artist (those geniuses of osmosis) to ooze that dark matter back into the present. One might note in passing that as the Behan osmosis oozes closer to the present, the positive undertones and overtones of ships and boats – optimism, exploration, a sense of joyous adventure – have been leached away by the artist.

With his long-running series of Famine Ships, from the huge *National Famine Memorial* in County Mayo (all of 26 x 20 feet) or *Arrival* (21 x 24 feet) sited at the United Nations building in New York, to the smaller 'table' sculptures, Behan has consistently explored the relationship between our Famine history, and our present selves, the connecting factors being not just hope, suffering, pain, malnutrition, disease and despair, but also the inevitability of death. It's an open question as to how far one reads these works as a Christian meditation. For an Ireland imprinted with Catholicism (even if many no longer overtly believe) this is perhaps an inevitable layer. But you do not have to look at these artefacts-to-be (waiting to be discovered by some future-distant archaeologist) to realize that Christianity, as perhaps symbolised by those recurring triple masts equating with the three crosses at Christ's Crucifixion, is only one layer. There is also an umbilical cord which stretches back to the world of the Antique, to Paganism, to the harsh Gods of the North, to a dark and atavistic past where the artist congealed pain and suffering into an icon for the future.

If we look at the current exhibition, consisting entirely of Famine Ships or of works relating to Famine, we have what the artist calls 'a review of where I stand'. It's a kind of summation of attitude and experience, a quarrying into our imprinted past, a tactile exploration bridging the dyke between the conscious and the unconscious. The 'conscious' emerges in the hoovering up of sources as disparate as 19th century engravings and illustrations published in magazines like *The Illustrated London News*; Van Gogh's drawings; Mediterranean - and in particular Sardinian – archaeology; a marine painting by Michelangelo Hayes; and even a novel by Thomas Kenneally. It is also the hard-earned craft of modelling in wax, casting in sections, then assembling the

constituent parts, and patination. Behan doesn't repeat himself. If you look closely at each individual work the shapes of the ships, the articulation of the bodies – his anatomy is not analytical, it's expressive – the degree of Giacomettian extension or of rhythmically expressive distortion, varies from one work to the next, as does the patination. The unconscious is in a dialogue with the conscious, tight-rope walking, a balancing act in search of a destination.

Looking at *Galway Coffin Ship*, its ghostly patination harkens back to a work in the previous Solomon exhibition. Like the Flying Dutchman in an early Hollywood movie, it seems to glide through the fog, doom-laden, with its cargo of human beings (dead? alive? lost souls?) mysteriously transported to become part of the outer armature of the schooner, their bodies elongated like swimming frogs, etiolated, hands and feet spatulate as indeed are the outline geometries of the rigging, the effect being not unlike a ghostly ship and crew which is moving silently underneath the ocean, slowly sinking towards eternity. It is a Dantean vision, especially when one observes the bodies closely, their skeletal aspect recalling the brutal realism of *The Isenheim Altarpiece*, or of early seventeenth century Spanish sculpture carved in wood.

With Famine Ship XX which is a free adaptation of a Mediterranean rather than an English schooner, we are in different territory. The bulky roughcast sails are billowing, the figures are thinner, more elongated, less emaciated, the patination shifts decisively into an orangey rust-to-dark brown range, the whole emphasis being on the urgent sense of speed. Compare this to *Famine Ship V* with its thinner, heavier and taller rigging (like one of the Tall Ships) and its weightier curving figures, the whole communicating a solid, powerful, controlled purposefulness: the human cargo will be shipped...dead or alive.

Changing gear – Coleridge would have called it a flight of fancy – *Famine Shipwreck* blossoms into drama: the triangular wedge of a ship rears up – the impact of a ship driven onto a rock? – and we observe the terror of the bodies, as if being flung from a catapult. Whereas in many of the other *Famine Ship* pieces there is a recessed Christian element (those three sails again), here and in works like *Famine Ship XX*, we have an elemental, pagan, atavistic and almost malevolent energy driving us forwards onto the journey to damnation. *Storm at Sea: Famine Ship* re-imagines the nightmare: the ship is holed, listing, the timbers are buckling under the intense pressure of the currents. It's as if we see, as in a car accident, the event unfolding in slow motion: muscles tense and strain, legs float open.....it is almost surreal.

At times, almost as if to relax from the intensity of the negative aspects, the artist focuses in upon details. He observes blight wilting a potato plant, a woman sturdy as a man digging potatoes, a male potato picker on all fours leaning out to drop a potato into a creel. Then it is back to the dark matter: *Ejected* is a freely modelled family group of a mother with her four children which is loosely based on a *Famine* engraving. It's what the French call an *esquisse* and the Italians called a *modello*, being essentially a sketch which has the possibility of being scaled up. It's not unlike a Carpeaux *modello* (there are a number in the Musée d'Orsay) for one of his Parisian monuments.

Then, just to demonstrate that invention is not flagging, he produces *Famine Pier*, a remarkable variation on the *Famine* theme. Figures stand waiting on a triangular wedge of pier, waiting to board the *Famine Ship*. But the ship itself is a *Marie Celeste*, devoid of people, of sails, of provisions. There's a brutal contrast between the angular geometrical shapes of the outline 'rigging' and the looser geometry of the pier itself, both of which contrast with the organic, slightly amorphous shapes of the emigrants themselves. It's a daring extension of the *Famine* 'conceit', a cool, formal patterning of the demoralised husks of the people with the husk-like shell of the ship. The victims are about to board the ship belonging to an unscrupulous and uncaring capitalist. They are about to pay the ferryman.

In a final gear change the artist drives home the unwelcome fact that the *Famine* is still with us. *African Family Famine*, based on an image from a magazine, is a striking transformation of its source. The elongated central female figure – in one sense it is like a scaled up Giacometti – her hair billowing like a cloak, stands starkly with two children beside her, their distended bellies and stork legs the inevitable logic of a famine. This is what we, human beings, do to each other.

Brian McAvera



SPAILPÍN
bronze, unique
36 x 16 x 16 cm



COFFIN SHIP GALWAY
bronze, unique
85 x 104 x 28 cm



FAMINE SHIPWRECK
bronze, unique
42 x 42 x 33 cm



WOMAN DIGGING POTATOES
bronze, unique
42 x 20 x 36 cm



FAMINE SHIP WESTPORT
bronze, unique
72 x 73 x 36 cm



EJECTED
bronze, unique
23 x 40 x 28 cm



FAMINE SHIP XX
bronze, unique
62 x 60 x 22 cm

JOHN BEHAN RHA

1938	Born in Dublin
1957-60	National College of Art & Design, Dublin
1960-61	Ealing Art College, London
1967	Founder Member of the Project Arts Centre, Dublin
1968	Royal Academy School, Oslo
1970	Co-founded the Dublin Art Foundry
1973	Elected Associate Member, Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin
1973-78	Appointed Member, Arts Council of Ireland
1978	Elected Member of Aosdána
1989	Elected Full Member, Royal Hibernian Academy
1995	Appointed Member, Cultural Relations Committee, Department of Foreign Affairs, Dublin
2000	Appointed Board Member, Irish Museum of Modern Art
2000	Conferred Doctor of Literature, National University of Ireland, Galway

AWARDS

1972	Gold Medal, Oireachtas Exhibition
1990	The Ford Spirit of Art Award (in conjunction with the Sunday Independent)
2005	ESB Silver Medal, Royal Hibernian Academy
2006	Jorgensen Fine Art Award, Royal Hibernian Academy
2008	Ireland-US Council's Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Arts

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1960	Irish Exhibition of Living Art
1960 to date	Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin
1965	Group '65 Rising Ground
1967	Project '67 (with Charlie Cullen, Michael Kane and John Kelly), Project Arts Centre, Dublin
1988	West of Ireland Artists in Australia, Wagner Gallery, Sydney & Canberra
1988	National Museum, Valletta, Malta
1989, 93	Gordon Gallery, Derry
2005	Sculpture & Gardens, Solomon Gallery, Blackrock, Dublin
2008	The Secret Garden, Solomon Gallery at the Iveagh Gardens, Dublin

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1967, 69, 71	Project Arts Centre, Dublin
1974	Sean Desmond Gallery, New York
1977	Octagon Gallery, Belfast
1980	Bell Gallery, Belfast
1973 to date	Kenny Gallery, Galway
1974, 76, 80, 82, 84, 92, 1980, 86, 1983, 85, 87, 89, 91, 94, 96, 2010	Cork Arts Society
1990	Taylor Galleries, Dublin
1991	Gordon Gallery, Derry
1993, 94, 96, 98	Carroll Gallery, Longford
1994	Riverrun Gallery, Dublin
1995	The Irish Club, Eaton Square, London
1995, 98, 2000, 02, 04	Major Retrospective Exhibition, Galway Arts Centre
1996	Major Retrospective Exhibition, Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin
1997	Sligo Art Gallery, Sligo
1997, 2001, 14	Hallward Gallery, Dublin
1999, 2001	Dolmen Gallery, Limerick
2001	Kilcock Gallery, Co. Kildare
2001, 04	Grant Fine Art, Newcastle, Co. Down
2007	Lavit Gallery, Cork
2009	United Arts Club, Dublin
2010	Ashford Gallery, RHA, Dublin
2010, 2013, 2014	AIB Bank, Park Avenue, New York
	Westport Arts Centre, Co Mayo
	McGill Summer School, Co. Donegal
	Gormley's Fine Art, Omagh
	Mullan Gallery, Belfast
	The Silence of History, Hunt Museum, Limerick
	Mullan Gallery, Belfast
	Solomon Fine Art, Dublin

LITERATURE / FILM

1970	'John Behan Poet of Structure', Hayden Murphy, Scepter Publishers Ltd.
1985	Seamus Heaney, 'From the Republic of Conscience', illustrated by John Behan, published by Amnesty International, Dublin
1999	'Famine Ship', documentary film directed by David Shaw-Smith, Parzival Productions

PUBLIC COMMISSIONS

- 1970 Cúchulann Relief Panel, Gresham Hotel, Dublin
(now in DIT, Kevin Street)
- 1972 Wall Panel, IPA, Dublin
- 1975 Aluminium Abstract, Irish Management
Institute, Dublin
The Mariner, North Wall Quay, Dublin
- 1978 Birds, Irish Life Centre, Dublin
- 1980 Celtic Realm, Insurance Corporation of Ireland
- 1982 Megalithic Memories, AIB Bank, Dublin
- 1983 The Turfcutter, Bord na Mona, Baggot St., Dublin
- 1984 Swan Fountain, Cork
- 1987 Flight of Birds, Dr. Tony Ryan, Co. Tipperary
- 1989 Cross, St Michael's Church, Creeslough, Co. Donegal
Religious Sculptures, St. Bridget's, Derry
- 1990 Winged Man, Ennis, Co. Clare
- 1992 Wings of the World, Shenzhen Boa'an Airport,
China
- 1997 Famine Ship, National Famine Commemoration
Sculpture, Murrisk, Co. Mayo, (OPW)
- 1998 The Tree of Liberty, 1798 Memorial, Carlow
- 1999 Twin Spires, National University of Ireland, Galway
Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Mothers Award
- 2000 Arrival – The New Dawn, United Nations Plaza,
New York, (OPW)
- 2000 Millennium Child, Christchurch Place, Dublin
(commissioned by Barnardos)
- 2001 Equality Emerging, Salmon Weir Bridge, Galway
(commissioned by SIPTU Galway)
- 2001 Tree of Hope, CPI, Sandymount
- 2003 Golden Birds, Four Seasons Hotel Dublin
- 2006 Circle of Birds, The Hospice, Harolds Cross, Dublin
- 2007 Flight of the Earls Monument, Rathmullan,
Co. Donegal
- 2013 Spancelled, Strathroy, Co. Tyrone
- Religious Sculptures, Glenties, Co. Donegal
Religious Sculptures, Turloughmore, Co. Galway

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

National Gallery of Ireland
Irish Museum of Modern Art
Dublin City Gallery: The Hugh Lane
Crawford Municipal Gallery of Art, Cork
National Self Portrait Collection of Ireland
United Nations, New York
Ireland's Great Hunger Museum, Connecticut USA
Shenzen Airport, China
University College, Galway
An Chomhairle Ealaíon / Arts Council of Ireland
Arts Council of Northern Ireland
Galway County Council
Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council
The Irish Club, London
AIB Bank
Bank of Ireland
Smurfit Kappa PLC
Four Seasons Hotel, Dublin
The UTV Collection

SELECTED PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

The Former President of Ireland Mary McAleese
The Former President of Ireland Mary Robinson
HM Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands
The Former President of the United States Mr. Bill Clinton
& Hillary Clinton
Former US Ambassador to Ireland Mrs. Jean Kennedy-Smith
Mr. Samuel Beckett
Mr. Charles J. Haughey
Mr. Seamus Heaney
Dr. T. A. Ryan
Ms. Edna O'Brien
Mr. Plácido Domingo
Mr. Maurice Foley
Mr. Pierce Brosnan
Mr. Tom Berenger



FAMINE CART, bronze, unique, 45 x 65 x 16 cm

JOHN BEHAN RHA
FAMINE

7 - 29 November 2014

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