

**Patrick Hennessy****'De Profundis'**

24 March – 24 July 2016, East Wing Galleries, IMMA, Dublin

Patrick Hennessy, *Boy and Seagull*, c. 1954, oil on canvas, 52 x 38 cm; courtesy of IMMA Collection, Gordon Lambert Trust, 1992Patrick Hennessy, *Portrait of the Artist*, 1936, oil on canvas, 53 x 36 cm; private collection

**THE** current Patrick Hennessy exhibition at IMMA is the first in the IMMA Modern Masters series, which, as Director Sarah Glennie explains, aims to “shed light on artists [of the post-war period] who have been critically neglected”. It is a comprehensive survey, offering six rooms plus an alcove of Hennessy’s work, clearly annotated and supported by a thorough and beautifully presented catalogue. Everything the viewer might want to know is there, and yet this exhibition raises questions, from the technical through the theoretical, and, most pertinently, as to why this artist is considered a master in the first place.

Let’s start with the more clear-cut issues. Hennessy’s work demonstrates technical mastery. His rendition of landscape, sky and stonework is at times breathtaking: you see the plasterwork peeling before you; you feel the heat of the sun. He is confident; there are areas on the canvases where the brushwork is minimal, the canvas faintly discernible, and yet the sea glimmers and the flesh seems tangible. But then you are thrown by a skewed perspective. In *Still Life with Newspaper*, is the painter looking at the subject matter from the horizontal plane or from above? How about the hands in *Portrait of a Woman* – is this a nod to Goya, or simply lack of technique? More blatant still in this piece is the rendering of the woman’s shoulders, which are jarringly disproportionate. This surely cannot be other than deliberate?

Yes, Hennessy was homosexual, and so it is not surprising that he painted far more men than women, but still. If you can capture the male anatomy so competently, why should a woman’s shoulders be beyond your skill? The portrait of Elizabeth Bowen suggests that he could paint women well – but then she was a friend. The impression the viewer is left with is that when presented with the personal or the painterly, Hennessy tended to opt for the former.

The catalogue and textual descriptions in the exhibition make it unapologetically clear that Hennessy needed to make a living, and therefore took on commissions. This is a choice many, if not most, artists are faced with, and not up for criticism, but it does have implications for the work. One of the most challenging pieces in this respect is the portrait of Liv Hempel, the daughter of Hitler’s envoy to Ireland. When looked at beside comparable

works (*Portrait of a Girl*, *Portrait of a Young Girl*) the Hempel painting seems less attentive. Was this merely a matter of chronology – it was painted in 1939, the others in 1941 and 1945 respectively – or of Hennessy’s political position, albeit possibly subconscious?

Hennessy could clearly paint landscapes. His self-portraits are arresting. His still lifes are supremely competent. Here and there are hints of other genres: of trompe l’oeil in *Portrait Figures (Self-Portrait)*, of surrealism in *The Parrot*. And yet there is no strong sense of his having chosen a direction, of developing a personal style.

The conclusion you are led to is that Hennessy played it safe, and while you can argue that this was prudent for the times in which he lived, that doesn’t totally hold up. Yes, the subject matter of many of his paintings was controversial, perhaps even dangerously so, but the choice of subject is not the only way in which a painter makes their mark. Over time, you can see the work developing, the technique becoming more confident, the painter exploring their medium as much as their matter. With Hennessy’s work, there is no strongly visible chronology; you often feel that any piece could have been painted before – or after – any other.

Does this matter? For Hennessy, no: he lived, and painted, we assume, as felt right to him. To his collectors, no: if a work appeals, for reasons aesthetic or financial, then the rest is irrelevant. To the visitor to the exhibition, perhaps: ‘De Profundis’ is being offered as the work of a master, and the viewer may wonder why.

That the viewer wonders is perhaps the *raison d’être* of an exhibition such as this. Hennessy’s male gaze on male subjects was not the only provocative element in his work; his images of religious icons in uninviting landscapes are also quietly, but effectively, challenging, in particular when they are ‘read’ for the viewer by curators such as Seán Kissane. To understand Hennessy’s work – as opposed to Hennessy, person or painter – we need institutions such as IMMA, with the expertise and the infrastructure to produce a show of this nature. Whether or not we agree that he is a master is always going to be a personal decision, but seeing ‘De Profundis’ ensures that it is an informed one.

**Mary Catherine Nolan a Dublin-based artist with a background in linguistics.**

**Alex Pentek****'Kindred Spirits'**

Bailick Park, Midleton, County Cork

**DRIVING** on the N25 from Cork to Midleton, it’s possible to see Alex Pentek’s most recent large-scale public artwork, *Kindred Spirits* (2015) on the left through the gaps in the trees. The artwork is made up of a circular arrangement of stainless steel feathers, which reflect the light that dances across its various surfaces. This visually impressive sculpture is perceived at its best from this vantage point on the road, as Pentek’s clever use of scale captures the fineness and delicacy of each frond.

*Kindred Spirits* is one of many public artworks by Pentek, whose formal sculptural language combines metal fabrication with a lightness of touch that turns ephemeral natural forms, such as feathers and flowers, into monumental artworks. Another example is *Make a Wish* (2008), a six metre high bronze dandelion sited outside Omagh community house. This towering flower combines the medium of bronze with optic fibre LED lighting that mimics the fine hairs of the ‘blowball’ or ‘clock’ head of the dandelion. Both of these works exemplify Pentek’s practice, which translates the fragility of natural objects, light enough to be carried on the wind like the dandelion seed and the feather, into permanent and weighty large-scale sculptures.

Viewing *Kindred Spirits* up close reveals it to be much more durable than it appears from the road. Eight large feathers are arranged in a circular formation. Each stands on its quill and bends out and upward, creating a bowl. They rest on a circular concrete base fitted with white lights that provide illumination at night. Pentek has meticulously handcrafted each feather by welding uniform stainless steel square bars to the middle shaft. Traces of the object’s fabrication are obvious as each vain, or hair, of the feather was joined to the structure using six welds. In its entirety the work comprises 20,000 welds and the intense process behind the fabrication of the work is left visible. The forms of each feather have been rolled and tapered at different angles and this gives the hard steel the illusion of softness, while lending each feather its individuality.

There is space to walk between the feathers and to stand inside the bowl. From every angle the viewer can see through and around the feathers into the surrounding views of the Midleton estuary. *Kindred Spirits* is in harmony with the landscape and the feathers are in dialogue with the waterside, which is populated by many different species of birds.

The motif of the feather is not employed specifically to evoke the natural habitat of the site, but rather pays homage to a moving gesture. In 1847, during the Irish Famine, the Choctaw Nation, a Native American tribe, heard of the plight of the

Irish and donated \$170. Although this was a relatively small amount of money, even at the time, the donation remains poignant, as it was made when the Choctaw people were themselves facing huge adversity and persecution. After signing a treaty in 1830 to give their native Mississippi lands to the US government in exchange for lands in the southern section of what is now the US state of Oklahoma, the Choctaw people were forcibly relocated. Thousands of Choctaw were forced to walk the Trail of Tears from their homelands in Mississippi and Louisiana to Oklahoma. More than 2500 Choctaw perished during this journey due to starvation and sickness. Empathising with the suffering of the Irish people during the famine, a group of concerned tribal members rallied around to raise and send these funds from over 4,000 miles away. *Kindred Spirits* remembers this act of kindness.

The shape of the empty bowl makes reference to the famine and to hunger, the most fundamental of human needs. Feathers generally evoke both warmth and flight. In the context of this narrative they signify the warmth of the Choctaw nation and the way that their generous gesture transcended geographical distance, cultural boundaries and the monetary value of the donation itself.

Arguably, the use of feathers as a tribute to the Choctaw is somewhat literal. Feathers have become a motif associated with the stereotyping and appropriation of Native American culture. However, those used in this artwork are based on eagle feathers used in Choctaw ceremonial dress and the gesture feels thoughtful. The sculpture is accessible for a broad audience, while remaining in line with Pentek’s wider practice. The significance of feathers in the ancient culture and traditions of many Native American tribes are inextricably tied to the belief that birds, as spirit guides, walk through different stages of life with a person, teaching, guiding and protecting them. Pentek’s tribute as the Choctaw’s generous gesture teaches us that a little can mean a lot. The title of this work, *Kindred Spirits*, also aligns the generosity of the Choctaws with the charitable spirit of the Irish, who repeatedly score highly in the World Giving Index.

Pentek’s loaded yet empty bowl of feathers memorialises a friendship forged through famine, suffering and tragedy. It is a poignant reminder of both the frailty and fragility of life, embodied by the delicate feather, and the opposite of this frailty: the strength gained through a sense of shared humanity.

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Alex Pentek, *Kindred Spirits*