



# De *Profundis*

The theme of sexuality was often overlooked in Patrick Hennessy's work, but a new exhibition at IMMA marking his centenary offers an opportunity to assess its role in his art, writes [Seán Kissane](#)

In 1939 a young painter returned to Ireland following his education in Scotland. Less than five months later his first solo exhibition in Dublin was opened by the doyenne of Irish Modernism, Mainie Jellett. The show included portraits of figures such as the German Ambassador and his family, and Madame Jammatt of the famous restaurant. The artist was Patrick Hennessy, a man with the apparent ability to immediately identify those who mattered and successfully cultivate them, as by the late 1940s the list of his patrons and portrait sitters is a roll-call of the aristocracy, bourgeoisie and cultural figures alike. Hennessy was a naturally talented painter and had excelled at the Dundee School of Art; he was funny, good-looking and charming when he wanted to be. He was also gay and lived openly with his life-long partner Henry Robertson Craig at a time when this was both unusual and illegal. Hennessy's homosexuality coloured his life and work. It meant that he was excluded socially from some conservative circles but it created a rich seam of imagery for him to explore in terms of the male figure and queer experience. Henry Robertson Craig saw active service in the Second

World War and wrote regularly to Hennessy with accounts of what he saw. Hennessy responded with important works like *Exiles* (1943) which shows a man contemplating a post-apocalyptic landscape. This work has been written about in the context of the Blitz during the War but *Exiles* also references works by William Orpen that described the carnage at Passchendaele in 1917 in which 500,000 people lost their lives, including his father, Sergeant Major John Hennessy. These works are often branded 'Surreal' but that places them within the imaginary when there is nothing dream-like about these scenes. Hennessy represents real events and real lives from both a contemporary and historic perspective. He shows a continuum and universality of experience that addresses the human condition.

Another war-time work is *De Profundis* (1944). Showing Dublin in ruins, the title is extraordinary. It is derived from Psalm 130, 'From the depths I cry to thee O Lord', but more notoriously it is the title of the last work of prose written by Oscar Wilde and addressed to Lord Alfred Douglas. It was highly unusual for an Irish (or British) artist or writer to quote

Wilde in a positive way. Wilde was synonymous with the shame that dare not speak its name and artists distanced themselves from him. Hennessy exhibited this work at the RHA in 1944 and frequently afterwards. It was a direct invitation for the critics and public to read the theme of homosexuality in his work but this was an invitation that, aside from some snide asides, was declined. Allowing his works to speak of these themes transforms and expands their narratives.

*In the Studio* (1944) shows a male figure reflected in a mirror (Fig 6). On the chimneypiece rest a Staffordshire figure and a jam-jar filled with wild flowers. These create an array of textures described in paint, from cold pottery and the softness of petals to the warmth of the skin seen reflected in the glass. The male nude has been a subject for artists since the High Renaissance but more usually as an anatomical life-study. Hennessy breaks with that tradition by sexualising the male figure. He gives us an indirect reflection, a furtive glimpse of a private moment between the artist and another man. It moves beyond allusion into the intimate spaces of lived experience and places the viewer in the uncomfortable position of voyeur. It is comparable to Édouard

1 PATRICK HENNESSY (1915-1980) SELF-PORTRAIT (1936) oil on canvas 53x36cm Private Collection

2 IN THE HAMMAM c.1965 oil on canvas 177.8x147.32cm Private Collection Photo: Denis Mortell

3 KASSIM BY THE SEA 1978 oil on canvas 62.2x87.6cm Private Collection Image Courtesy of Whyte's





Manet's seminal work *Olympia* of 1863, one of the first works to implicate the male viewer of the female nude by granting agency to the model who looks at the viewer in a direct challenge to his gaze. But *Olympia* is posed and ready to be painted, she is 'nude'. Hennessy's figure is different; his slight form is vulnerable in its nakedness. In the 19th century, Manet shocked by giving a woman agency; Hennessy confronts by stripping a man of his – an equally subversive act in the 20th century.

The image of a male figure seen from behind is a motif that Hennessy developed throughout his career. In works like *Lake Island* (c. 1948), Hennessy appropriates the German sublime tradition of the *rüchenfigur* that is familiar from Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the sea of fog* (1818). Hennessy places this figure within the Irish tradition of Paul Henry and Seán Keating. *Lake Island* and *The White Mare* (1968), show young men, seeming to look to nature for answers. We are encouraged to look over his shoulder and see through his eyes;

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to empathise with his thoughts. We see the low hills and lakes of Connemara and Kerry. We see solitary, lonely men lost in their thoughts. Sometimes they have an animal or bird companion but they are isolated from their peers.

Coming from the artist who made *De Profundis* one is invited to read these images as men grappling with the problems of their sexual identity and the anxiety and loneliness they are

experiencing. *Seán Alone* (1977) makes this explicit when we see the protagonist sitting in psychological isolation as his friends play boisterously around him (Fig 4). This is also a comment on social class: 'nice boys' don't swim in the canal, their parents take them to the beach. Social inequality was another theme addressed by Hennessy in this and other works. By addressing these themes Hennessy was ahead of his time. He depicts men at different ages in their lives from adolescence to maturity. They are shown at different stages of their personal development from fear through to acceptance. At a time before the contemporary language around 'coming out of the closet' was in general use, Hennessy was sensitive to the nuances of self-awareness and his characters are shown undergoing a gradual development.

The late 1950s brought some major changes in Hennessy's life as following three bouts of pneumonia his doctor advised him that another winter in Ireland would kill him. He and Craig decided to move to Tangier in Morocco which was tolerant and permissive. This made it attractive to gay men who included Francis Bacon, Cecil Beaton, Truman Capote and Joe Orton among many others. Through his friendship with Elizabeth Bowen and Lady Ursula Vernon, Hennessy had connections to the literary and aristocratic sets in Tangier. Introductions to the artistic community came through Francis Bacon whom he had met with his old friends the Two Roberts, Colquhoun & MacBryde, in Soho.

A clue to Hennessy and Craig's destination can be found in *Man Made Man and Rose* (1965) which shows a typical tromp l'oeil motif of a letter pinned to a board. It is addressed to Hennessy at rue Delacroix, Tangier which is where the Villa el

Muniria is located. The American *Beat* authors Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac lived in El Muniria; and most notoriously it was where William Burroughs wrote *Naked Lunch* (1959).

North Africa affected Hennessy's work in substantial ways. Immediately the sunshine caused his palette to change, becoming lighter and clearer. He travelled along the coast to Essaouira, Fez and the Roman ruins at Volubilis and Lixus where he made works such as *Horseman Pass By* (1964). At times he created works that are a direct record of the land and cityscapes, but the most striking are those that insert the human narrative into these places.

Irish artists like Aloysius O'Kelly had spent time in North Africa and the images they created were Orientalist, depicting the people and places they saw as other and foreign. Hennessy does not orientalize the people he meets; neither does he create images of the souks or mosques. His models wear contemporary dress and usually they are named, like *Kassim by the Sea* (1978) demonstrating his wish to portray an individual and not a type (Fig 3).

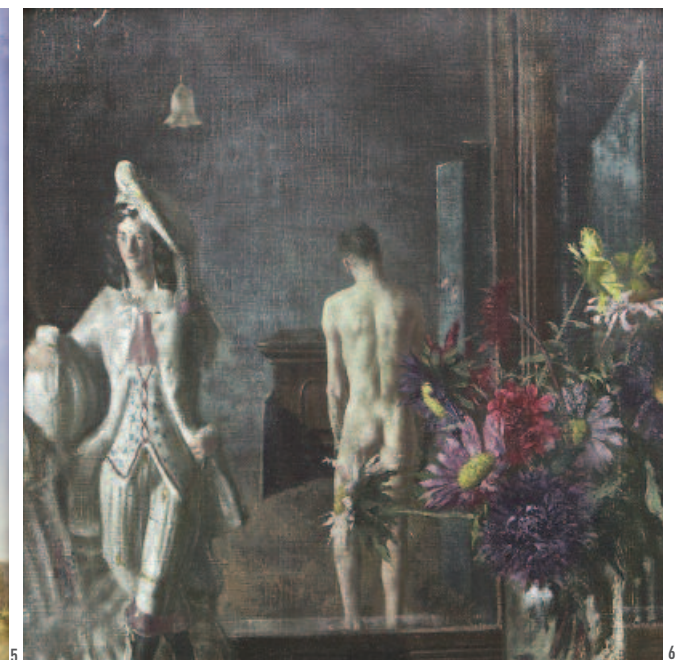
Hennessy's gaze is undeniably sexual. In the mid-1960s he created a series of life-size male nudes one of which, *In the Hammam* (c. 1965), still has the power to disconcert with its forthright depiction of the male body (Fig 2). The hammam had long been a space where men could meet safely, with certain places being known to be more tolerant of sexual activity. Hennessy is depicting a scene that would have been impossible in prudish Ireland. His representation of the lives of gay men places him within a small group of avant-garde artists like Paul Cadmus or to a lesser extent Gerard Dillon. They have few peers, aside from writers such as Kate O'Brien and Brendan Behan, who had literary works banned for their references to homosexuality. It was artworks like these that led the critic Brian O'Doherty to include Hennessy in ROSC '71.

In his essay he said that Hennessy made 'the only frank depiction of the male nude'. But Hennessy's work did not always receive such constructive critical attention. In the same publication Dorothy Walker wrote a particularly nasty entry comparing his virtuosity with that of the pianist Liberace saying that 'he was unsurpassed at painting satin ribbons'. Clearly his realism was not to her taste and she could not see past the style to a subject matter that was novel and extraordinary. Regrettably this was not unique. Writing in the mid-1970s Bruce Arnold found Hennessy's African works actively distasteful saying that the exhibition at the Hendriks gallery, 'was full of pictures of stupid looking young men standing around in their underpants'.

Despite often receiving very positive reviews of his work in the press, Hennessy said he had never had a 'good' review of his work – perhaps meaning that critics never addressed its content. Similarly he never used the word 'surreal' to describe his work, but allowed 'imaginative realism' or 'dynamic realism' in the catalogues that accompanied his exhibitions. None of the work discussed is dream-world Surrealism; it is a visualization of real life based on personal experience. Branding Hennessy's work as 'surreal' offered critics a way to avoid describing what they were seeing. The surreal was easier to deal with than the sexual, particularly when presented by a homosexual man. The exhibition at IMMA is not a retrospective of his entire oeuvre but a look at the more personal aspects of his practice. It highlights his unique perspective in mid-20th-century Ireland and is an opportunity to reassess his work from the very different viewpoint of 2016, a century after his birth. ■

'Patrick Hennessy De Profundis' IMMA, Dublin, 24 March – 24 July 2016. All images ©The Artist's estate.

Seán Kissane is curator of exhibitions at IMMA.



4 SEÁN ALONE  
1977 oil on  
canvas  
38.1x60.96cm  
Private  
Collection  
Image courtesy  
of James Adam  
and Sons Ltd

5 HORSEMAN  
PASS BY 1964 oil  
on canvas  
101.6x127cm  
Private  
Collection  
Image courtesy  
of James Adam  
and Sons Ltd

6 IN THE STUDIO  
1944  
oil on board  
45.5x35.5cm  
Private  
Collection  
Image courtesy  
of James Adam  
and Sons Ltd