

Swift, Patrick

by Ruth Devine

Swift, Patrick (1927–83), artist and literary editor, was born 12 August 1927 in Dolphins Barn, Dublin, fifth child in a family of seven sons and one daughter of Michael Swift, lorry driver, and Catherine Swift (née Mahon), of Wicklow origin. He was educated to leaving certificate standard at Synge St. CBS, Dublin, where he was known for his intelligence and wit in debating and his promise in art. On leaving school (1946) he worked as a clerk in the Gas Company but, determined to be an artist, he attended evening classes in the National College of Art, Kildare St. (1947–9). Maurice MacGonigal (qv) and Seán Keating (qv) were prominent staff members at that time. The emphasis was on teaching antique, still life, and life drawing courses, with modernism largely ignored. Swift believed in the importance of a thorough grounding in drawing and remained a figurative artist throughout his career. Towards the end of the 1940s he gave up his job in the Gas Company and devoted himself to painting.

He moved to his studio in Baggot St. (October 1950), where he fitted in easily with the artists, poets, and journalists who lived in the area and who frequented the local public houses. He befriended Patrick Kavanagh (qv), Anthony Cronin, Nano Reid (qv), and his future brother-in-law John Ryan (qv). Later Swift moved to a larger studio in Hatch St., where he lived with the American poet Claire McAllister, whom he painted many times. The English artist Lucien Freud often shared his studio on his visits to Dublin, and his influence is apparent in Swift's early paintings. His subject matter remained constant throughout his career: he painted portraits, plants, trees, and still life for the most part, with his friends as willing sitters and the back gardens in Hatch St. and elsewhere providing a constant source of inspiration. He travelled to Paris (1950) where he studied at the Académie Grande Chaumière and took the opportunity to visit the galleries. His first one-man show (Oct. 1952) was held at the Victor Waddington Gallery in South Anne St., Dublin, and received positive reviews. The same year he met Oonagh Ryan, with whom he was to share the rest of his life. On receipt of a government grant (1953/4) Swift traveled with Oonagh to Rome and Positano, where he made several drawings, watercolours, and some oil paintings. An essay on Caravaggio by Swift in the quarterly magazine *Nimbus* (1956), edited by David Wright, gives some insight into Swift's appreciation of that year in Italy.

The Swifts made regular trips to London's Soho, a common feature of the bohemian set in Dublin, but after the birth (March 1956) of their first daughter, Catherine, they moved there permanently, staying initially with the writer Elizabeth Smart. Their second daughter, Juliet, was born in March 1959 in London. They moved in literary and artistic circles, meeting such as the poet George Barker and Francis Bacon (qv). Swift founded the highly acclaimed literary quarterly *X* with the South African

poet David Wright (1959), and Anthony Cronin was a member of the editorial board; the title came from the algebraic symbol representing the unknown quantity. This magazine was to be a forum for practising artists and writers. They were the first to publish Irish writer John McGahern (qv), and gave voice to many new and up-coming poets. Swift wrote under the pseudonym 'James Mahon', his maternal grandfather's name. His articles were largely critical of abstract art, which he described as the new 'official art'. The magazine ran for seven issues. Meanwhile he painted a series of portraits of his poet friends – George Barker, C. H. Sisson, and Brian Higgins, to name a few – and painted trees and plant-life, including 'The Italian Gardens, Hyde Park, London IV' (c.1961), one of a series of four paintings. His style had become looser, more expressionistic.

While on a family holiday in Portugal (1962), the Swifts decided to stay in the then remote Algarve. Swift collaborated with David Wright in writing three excellent guide books on Portuguese regions, including the Algarve (published 1965). While touring the area he found an ideal site and built a house complete with a studio, Torre de Alfanzina. Visitors and friends were always welcome. He had to adjust to the bright light and colour of Portugal but was soon producing light-filled paintings of the local landscape and plant-life. With the Portuguese artist Lima de Freitas, whom he met in 1962, he revived a local pottery, near Porches (1968). A successful enterprise, it has since been made a National Heritage by the Portuguese government. The Swifts' third daughter, Stella, was born in Lisbon (October 1969). Swift held his second one-man show in the Galeria S. Mamede in Lisbon (1974). He painted portraits of the Portuguese prime minister, Francisco Sá Carneiro (d. 1980) many times. In 1980 the Swifts made their last trip to Ireland for their daughter Julie's wedding. He made studies of the Wicklow landscape and preparatory drawings for a portrait of his maternal grandparents. In 1982 Swift, who had been feeling unwell, collapsed in London and was diagnosed with a brain tumour. He died on 19 July 1983 and is buried beside the church of Our Lady of the Incarnation in Porches.

His paintings are largely held in private collections but there is a considerable file on him, including catalogues, in the National Irish Visual Arts Library, Thomas St., Dublin. Two important events mark a revival of interest in his work: an exhibition titled 'PS. . . of course. . . An exhibition of paintings by Patrick Swift' in Sandycove, Co. Dublin (1993), along with the release of a book of the same name edited by Veronica Jane O'Mara; and an exhibition, 'Patrick Swift 1927–1983', held in the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (1993).

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Patrick Swift, 'Some notes on Caravaggio', *Nimbus* (winter 1956), 33–7; John Ryan, *The Irish imagination* (catalogue, 1971); Anthony Cronin, *Dead as doornails* (1976), 166; Brian Fallon, 'The fall and rise of Patrick Swift', *Ir. Times*, 11 June 1992; Veronica Jane O'Mara (ed.), *PS. . . of course: Patrick Swift 1927–1983* (1993); Aidan

Dunne, *Sunday Tribune*, 28 Nov. 1993; Irish Museum of Modern Art, *Patrick Swift* (catalogue of exhibition 2 Dec. 1993–13 Feb. 1994)

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