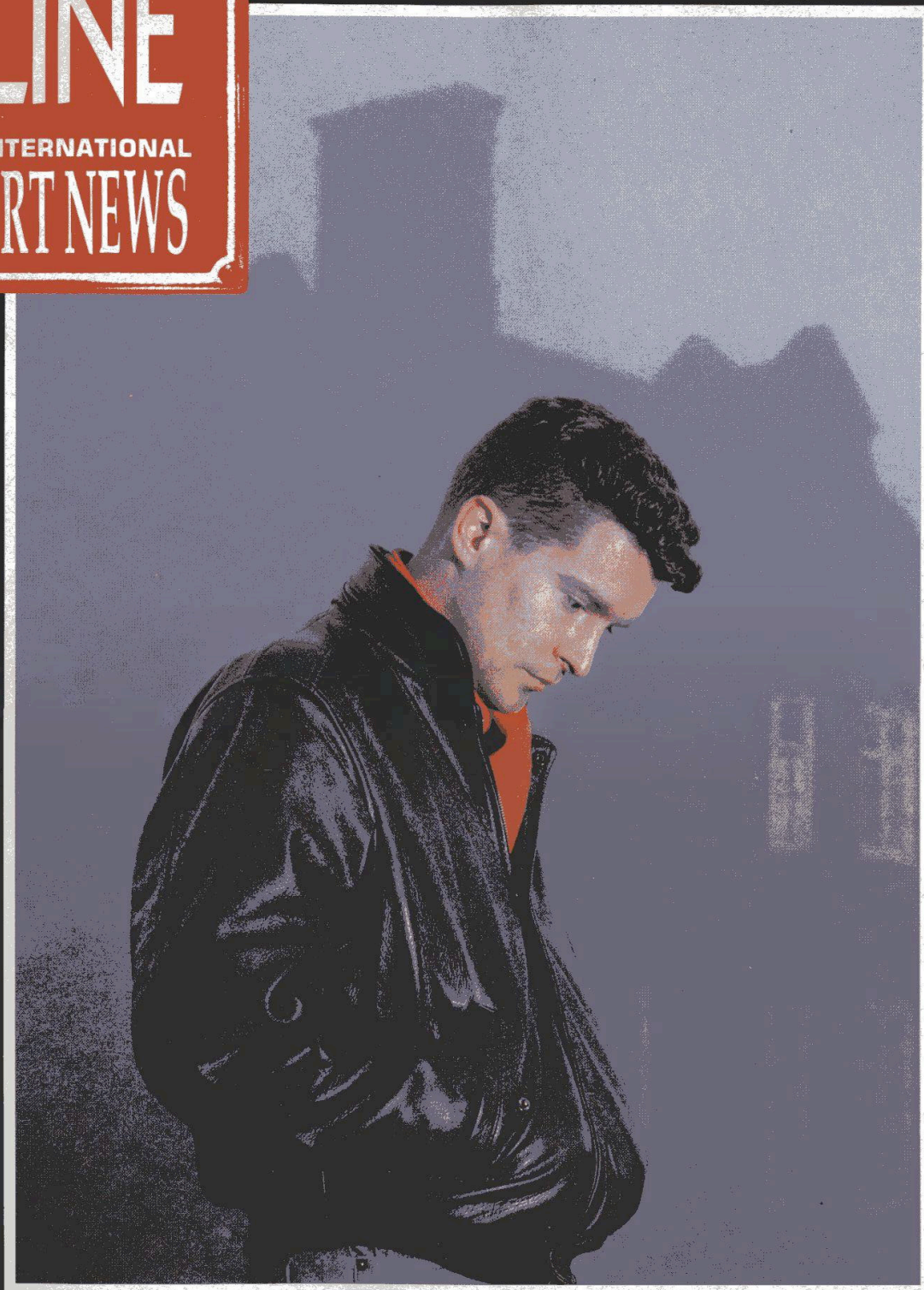


Vol 3 N°6 1986 £1.00

USA: \$2.50 Netherlands: Fl 4.50 France: F10.00 Germany: DM 4.00
Belgium: F75.00 Italy: Lit2500 Switzerland: F3.50



LONDON & REGIONAL REVIEWS

INTERNATIONAL

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POLAND

LOS ANGELES

FRANKFURT

CHICAGO

SYDNEY

IRELAND

ART FAIR REPORT

COLOGNE
LA ICAF

BRITISH ART
AT THE
ROYAL ACADEMY

IAN DARRAGH

Life on the Golden Section

A R T B O O K S P E C I A L I S S U E

IAN DARRAGH

Ian Darragh has attracted a lot of the right sort of attention since leaving the RCA. Not unlike a quality of his painting, Darragh prefers the enigmatic approach to interviews, in fact, friends agree that this stance is one he adopts in private life as well. Born in 1959 in Larne, Ireland, Darragh completed only a foundation course at Belfast Polytechnic before leaving for London. Son of an Assistant Divisional Fire Officer, Darragh experienced some early successes as a Larne Grammar School boy, winning the Texaco Children's Art Competition in 1974 and coming runner-up in 1975 and 1976. The year also saw a prime time TV appearance on Northern Ireland BBC's Scene Around Six as the Mayor of Larne gave an award to the young artist, although his connection with Ireland is carefully distanced.

Although the Mall galleries exhibited some of his earlier work, it is the Nicholas Treadwell Gallery that currently promotes the artist.

What age were you when you left Ireland to live in the UK?

17.

...and you came over...

...from a foundation course which I had done in a place near Belfast.

Do you find there is a lot of difference in attitudes to art teaching between Ireland and England?

No, not really. I have never noticed an attitude.

What period of time are we talking about?

We are talking about 1977 to 1978.

Well past the student revolutions of my day?

Yes, I think they were fondly remembered.

At Hornsey you were doing... what?

It was a BA course. I wanted to be a painter, so I went there and I painted.

Was it as simple as that, did they leave you to your own devices?



It was a very free course, we certainly were left very much to our own devices... are you talking about teaching attitudes?

Did you experience any notable influences — I mean with regards the tutors...

You mean their work?

Their work, their attitudes, their experiences, any of the tutors that particularly impressed you?

I suppose so, it is very difficult to pick out instances.

You said earlier you always wanted to be a painter...

Did I say always?

Had you always wanted to be a painter?

No, I supposed I started taking it what is called seriously when I was about 13 or so. I worked on my own.

The concept of a career as a painter — is it common in Ireland?

I really just drifted into it, I never thought about it actually. When you leave school then I suppose you think: what am I going to do, or what would I like to do, and I never thought of anything else.

For instance, there is no family influence?

No, there is no direct influence; is it often a family concern?

A lot of people tend to have been influenced very young by family visits to galleries...

Yes, well in that way I have been influenced — I have always enjoyed art.

At the Royal College the idea of being a painter becomes synonymous with a career as a painter rather than just making paintings. Did you feel that you had entered a world that you had not expected to, or was this what you always thought it was going to be?

Well I didn't know... I know I was surprised when I went to Art College that people took it less seriously than I thought they might.

Also at Art College you are introduced to the idea of skills, of learning technicalities...

What kind of technicalities?

Glazes, underpainting... a host of things, like how to lay a ground and so on.

I wasn't taught that sort of thing at Art College.

Do you think that this is oversight? How much does this side of painting concern you?

It concerns me more and more but it is something I find out for myself, never having been instructed in these techniques.

How do you find out for yourself?

Through practise and doing things wrong. I read a lot about art. I haven't had the good fortune to come across a very good instructor.

Tell me about the Royal College...

I was at the Royal College from 1981 to 1984.

You were concerned with the student body involving itself in the politics of the place?

No, not particularly, I don't know quite what you mean.

I mean there was a lot of upset about the structure of courses, and the availability of places. Some actual courses were to be closed down? Did that all pass you by?

No, I think what I noticed most was that certain students didn't get grants and that seemed rather unfair to me. I was lucky enough to get mine but student politics, or politics in general, don't hold much interest for me.

What did you involve yourself in?

I remember complaining about the cutting of library hours, which I thought was a bad idea.

They have cut down on the actual course, you were there 3 years and it is now 2.

Yes, I think that is a bad thing.

Yes, but is it a result of the ineptitude of the student body there to stop it being reduced?

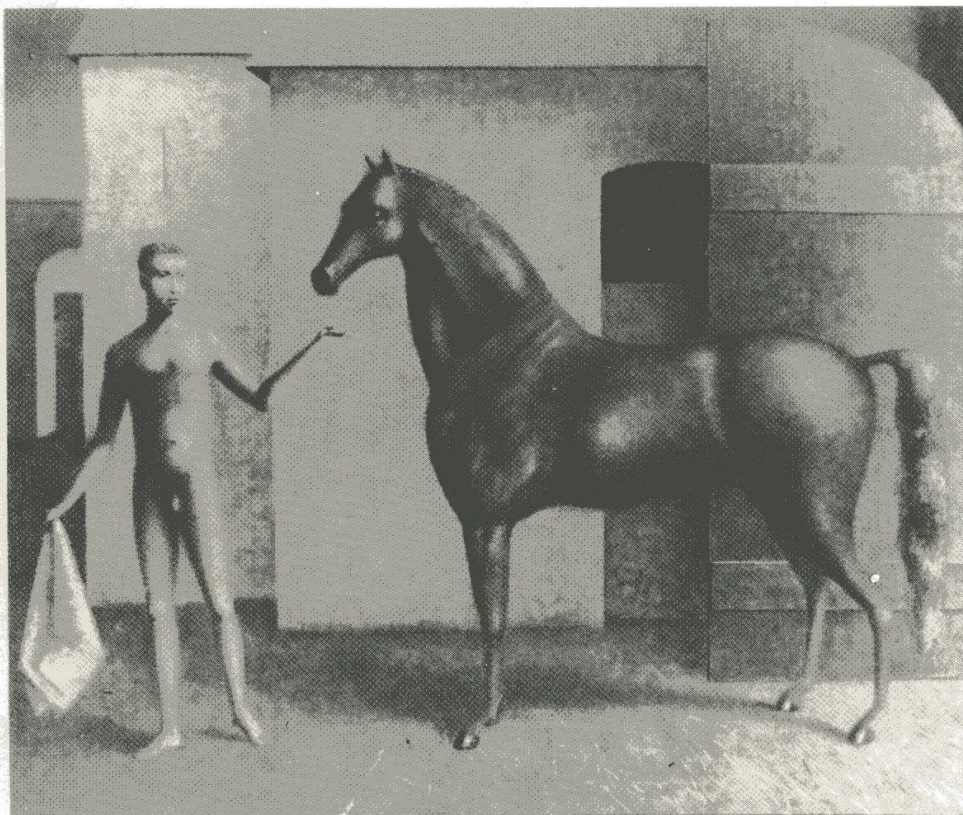
It is a result of the powers of the student bodies to do anything about how education is funded generally!

But the idea of not involving ones self in the politics does ricochet into the future; your generation couldn't be bothered about it and as a result future generations suffer.

No, well I couldn't be bothered about it, I don't know how I might have been bothered about it.

So what benefit do you think doing a post graduate course was to you?

I think it is a benefit being with other students, people are more serious about their work at the Royal College than they are on an ordinary degree course, and there is a lot of interaction.



Youth with Horse 1986

Do you still see people from those days?

Yes, I still have friends who were at College with me, I see them. I guess it gives one a little link.

What is your personal situation now?

I have a little studio, a place called the Diorama, it is the building in Regents Park.

I thought that was to be closed down and turned into up-market apartments, flats or something...

I think for about 8 years it has been 'just about to be closed down', I don't know how long it will continue.

It has been brought to a climax in recent months hasn't it with...

I am also a person who just waits, and in the meantime it is 'business as usual', I just go on.

ART LINE 34

That is a sword that cuts both ways, you benefit from the situation without contributing to it. Is this how you see life?

Yes, I think if you are an artist you have to be more interested in your art. I don't think there is very much one could do about it.

Let's discuss the subject matter of your pictures, how do you go about selecting what you paint?

I just paint images that occur to me.

That just occur out of where?

I don't work from models.

Do you work from preparatory drawings?

Yes, I think my paintings are fairly simple. I get an idea for an image, do drawings for it and if it still intrigues me, or if I have been able to find some compositional structure for it, and there is some formal means of proceeding, then I go ahead and try and paint.

What would you say your paintings were about?

The subject matter is always just people.

But it is more than that isn't. There are people in what seem to be clearly defined and repetitive situations, combined with a similarly clear sense of isolation. There might be two or three people in a single picture but those people seem to be isolated, you don't get the sense of a group...

Most of them are something which is to do with ones visions...

Sure, but there seems to be a common thread, one of which is isolation, the other seems to relate to time.

Time seems to be an important ingredient and stylistically there seems to be a very strong relationship with the Renaissance.

Well you talk about it better than I do.

Well, what are you about? Why do you make paintings at all?

That is a question I often think about and cannot give any reasonable answer to. It has always been a fairly absurd activity. Today it doesn't perform any useful social function which was once a good reason, if you like, for producing art — aside from any question of the artist's personal vision — to provide propaganda for the state or for the church or for a particular patron.

We said earlier that photography was the best thing that happened for painting, it liberated the artist in one respect.

Yes the artist is liberated, but to do what — that is the question — and there is no answer, except that it (painting) answers some personal need.

You must have an individual reaction to the requirement of producing art, you have got to know why you do it. What makes you get out of bed in the morning and go to Regents Park, what do you want out of painting — personal fame or fortune or do you just need to produce?

Yes, because I have a need to do them, if they were for fame and fortune I wouldn't do the kind of paintings I do, I would calculate them.

Sure, but you also go to the length of exhibiting your paintings, there is contained in that the idea of relating to a public of some sort.

I don't know if it is an idea of relating to a general public or relating to the very few people who might share your vision.

But exhibiting in a public gallery is a haphazard way of doing that isn't it?

What is a better way of doing it?

Well (thinks hard), maybe invite people round to see them at your studio.

The more people who see the work the more likely it is to be what is called appreciated.

There are people who have a desire to paint pictures, they don't care if anybody sees them, they stockpile them in their attics; but your career is that of a professional painter and a painter has got to be a communicator of sorts, it doesn't matter if people can't understand your message or method of presenting it.

Well — if I am making a message I don't necessarily know what it is myself. I think they just present a situation or a sort of fictional presence.

For instance, there are a lot of images using single people who are either looking off-stage, or observing something elsewhere not defined for the spectator. There are no clues to that in the picture. What makes you select that situation repeatedly rather than another one?

I find that a very difficult question.

Will you agree that there is a theme running through your pictures?

Yes, I suppose an artist repeats his theme because it realises them, each time one fails to realise the images one would like.

...but what are these themes?

Just a kind of perseverance.

The theme is perseverance, is that a quality of you — the artist?

It may also be the theme of the paintings, I don't know... But is that a theme do you think?

Isolation would appear to be a theme of your paintings *en masse*. The recent ones with a horse motif seem to indicate that you are diverging from this and what have been similar treatments of your previous subject matter. Do you find having to talk about your work difficult or is it that you just don't want to talk about them — which way round is it?

I think talking about painting is difficult. One can talk about circumstances around a painting.

That is what we were hoping to do here. There is no point in describing a painting, which is after all the primary experience, but talking about the process of making that painting is surely relevant. Do you find it hard or is it an unwillingness to...?

I am not unwilling to talk, but I suppose I wouldn't be — talking to you as I am...

It has been arranged by your dealer, so probably it is an obligation to...

Yes, there is that. I suppose it might be easier to talk if everything wasn't being registered by this machine.

What I am doing is trying to get out of you a simple statement... you make paintings, that is a fact. I want to discuss with you what makes you paint, what you feel you are on about.

There is a formal consideration, for instance, composition, colour harmonies, tonal harmonies...

Sure, how do you approach that?

I use or certain amount of surface geometry.

That is the Renaissance sensibility in your work, the Golden Mean? Are you aware of this, do you practise this? My own impression of a Renaissance influence present was accurate then?

Yes, I am much more interested in Renaissance stuff than Modernism.

So you have a primary concern with the aesthetics of spacial harmony...

I think that is a strange way of putting it, because the artists who have been there for a long time are often concerned with religious feelings portrayed in purely formal terms.

Say... like Della Francesca for instance.

Yes, you could talk about him but I hesitate to mention such people because their formal means are far

in excess of any parameters I might impose on myself.

There is a very strong sense in your larger paintings, containing more than one figure, of Piero della Francesca.

Yes, he is an artist I admire enormously, he inspires a great sense of humility in me.

What is it about this artist that makes you feel such an admiration. Is it the way he constructs a painting or the colour schemes, or...?

Well everything, all those formal aspects and also a religious charge itself which goes beyond the subject matter of the painting. The religion and mythology which it conveys is not one which is widely held, I am not a Christian so the paintings don't carry meaning for me in that way; they speak to me in a perhaps an even deeper sense than that, it is very difficult to articulate.

Who else of that period?

I am very fond of many workers of Early Renaissance painting, there is a wonderful clarity and a placidity in the image which appeals to me.

Are these the ingredients you like to try and emulate?

Ultimately I would like to, yes, people like Giotto, Fra Angelico and so on...

About figurative painting...?

History painting is very interesting, issues of contemporary history are... they don't hold reservoirs of meaning.

Do you think this problem is just faced by figurative painters, the abstract painter could face a similar dilemma?

I don't understand abstract painters, how they can... if you don't have images you are not faced with the problem of what the images are; if you decide not to have any subject matter there can't be any crisis of subject matter.

But an abstract painter might argue that he had accepted the technological advances of the visual media and that the future of painting, for him, lies with the considerations of colour, texture, surface quality and so on.

Yes, he would, but I don't think an abstract painting would work magic over me the way certain great figurative works can do.

Let's move back to technique, do you admire the technique of say, Ingres, is technique important to you?

He is someone I admire enormously.

Do you spend a lot of time drawing.

Yes I do.

On the horse picture, which you've called *Ulysses' Horse*, how did that picture come about?

Horses are beautiful things to paint. I did a lot of drawings of horses from various source material and

finally I arrived at a composite horse which satisfied me. The figure in some way interacts with the horse, so I did a lot of drawings and I went on drawing till the figure was incorporated, but it wasn't entirely subservient.

Has the role of the painter changed?

It is probably a question of technical changes and the fact that we can do certain things, but I don't think it is to do with film or video but to do with the change in our whole culture. It has got to do with the decline of religion I think, with less meaning in peoples lives they have certain ways of compensating for it, through a process of distraction.

There was very little religious painting going on in England in the 18th century?

Yes, but they were pointing to the start of the change perhaps, I don't think it is important when it changed but just to realise the state of things now.

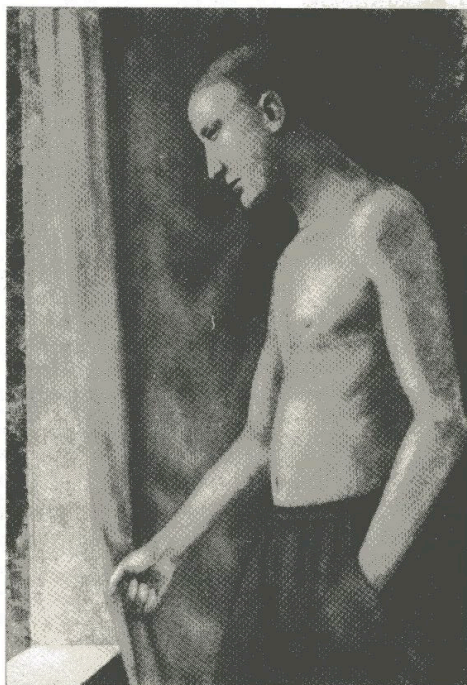


Figure at Curtain 1984

Do you think there are any painters now in 1986 who are relevant to your concept of art?

Yes there are, John Davies is an extremely interesting artist...

When you say you admire these people, how actively do you take note of what they are doing?

I am not someone who just makes art, I love art. I go to see art.

Do you buy pictures.

No, but if I had the money to buy pictures I certainly would.

Do people buy your pictures?

Fortunately they do.

So you live purely on your art?

I don't live purely on my art but I live substantially.