



Fig. 1: Louis le Brocqy, *A Family* (detail), 1951
Oil on canvas, 147 x 185 cm
Collection National Gallery of Ireland © the artist



¹ Medb Ruane, 'Le Brocqy's, *The Family*', *Irish Arts Review*, 19, 1 (2002), 22–23, 23.

Ambivalent Homecomings: Louis le Brocqy, Francis Bacon and the Mechanics of Canonization

Lucy Cotter

In 2001 two significant homecomings were celebrated in the Irish art world. The first surrounded the public opening of Francis Bacon's studio in Dublin, the city of the artist's birth. Following a donation by Bacon's sole heir, John Edwards, the entire studio was dismantled at its location at Reece Mews in London, transported, and painstakingly reconstructed at the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art (now Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane). The second homecoming was the donation of Louis le Brocqy's *A Family* (1951), a painting that had been central to

historic debates on modernism in the Irish context, to the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin. When le Brocquy represented Ireland at the Venice Biennale in 1956, the painting had been awarded the prestigious Nestlé-endowed Premio Aquisitato prize and had hung in the company's Milan offices until 2001, when it was acquired by an Irish businessman for donation to the National Gallery. Medb Ruane described the homecoming of le Brocquy's *Family* as 'an honouring of the prophet in his own land'.¹ In contrast, the relocation of Bacon's studio to the city of his birth might aptly be dubbed the return of the prodigal son, given that Bacon was sent out of the country in disgrace at the age of sixteen when his father had the first inklings of his homosexuality.

The coincidence of the homecomings was a fortuitous tribute to a lifelong friendship that was forged between these two Irish-born artists in London in 1951 at a time when they were considered two of the most significant up-and-coming 'British' painters. Their friendship was not surprising, given that the two artists were raised in Ireland in similar Anglo-Irish upper-middle-class circles; they were both self-taught painters and they shared a love for the Spanish masters. While their contemporary framing and reputations hardly allows them to be discussed in a shared framework, le Brocquy and Bacon were then counted among a relatively small group of artists in London who worked figuratively in a period dominated by abstraction.² Art historian Dorothy Walker recalled: 'The period of the fifties, not only in London but all over the Western world, was a period of abstract painting, of saturation *tachisme* or abstract expressionism when figurative painting was totally out of fashion.' Hence, Walker suggests, le Brocquy and Bacon could share their 'continued isolation as figurative painters in an abstract world'.³

Le Brocquy and Bacon were, to be precise, among a small, loosely affiliated circle of artists working with the figure in London in the mid-1950s, which included

Keith Vaughan, Robert MacBryde, Robert Colquhoun, Josef Herman, John Minton, Graham Sutherland and Lucian Freud. The tension between abstraction and figuration haunted them all. Most were influenced by Pablo Picasso's legacy of abstracted figuration, which many had become familiar with thanks to Jankel Adler, a Jewish Polish artist who moved to London during the war. Writing about le Brocquy's solo exhibition at the Leicester Galleries in 1948, critic Maurice Collis refers to the artist as a leading exponent of 'a school closely allied to the group of French painters who, inspired by Picasso's *Guernica*, seek to express the portentous fatality of the times'.⁴ Although they appear rather different in retrospect, the works that consolidated Bacon's and le Brocquy's positions in post-war Britain — *Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944) and *A Family* (1951), respectively — would then have been seen to share these qualities.

From the time they met, Bacon is said to have seldom missed one of le Brocquy's regular exhibitions at Gimpel Fils gallery. He later expressed this interest in personal correspondence and through his writing of a catalogue essay for le Brocquy in 1976, an uncharacteristic gesture for Bacon. Le Brocquy showed his admiration for Bacon through an extensive series of portraits painted in 1979 as part of his *Portrait Heads* series.⁵ Today, the two are rarely addressed in relation to one another, not least because their works have been taken up in different national canons. Bacon has been canonized as one of the most significant British painters of the twentieth century, while le Brocquy is often referred to as 'Ireland's greatest artist'. Le Brocquy's role in post-war British art history is no better known than Bacon's birth and upbringing in Ireland. The occasion of the two homecomings offered an opportunity to redress this situation. In doing so, it raised wider questions about the mechanics and politics of national canons and, crucially, about their impact on the aesthetic reception of the work in question.

- 2 For an overview of British art in the post-war period, see David Mellor, 'Existentialism and Post-War British Art', in F. Morris, ed., *Paris Post-War: Art and Existentialism, 1945–55* (London, 1993), 53–56, and Margaret Garlake, *New Art New World: British Art in Postwar Society* (London, 1998). See also Martin Harrison, ed., *Transition: The London Art Scene in the Fifties* (London, 2002), for a specific analysis of figurative artists.
- 3 Dorothy Walker, *Modern Art in Ireland* (Dublin, 1997), 45.
- 4 Maurice Collis, *Time and Tide* (1948), cited on le Brocquy's official website at <http://www.anne-madden.com/LeBPages/chronology8.html> (accessed 1 September 2011).
- 5 Some of Bacon's comments from letters and exhibitions are recorded in Anne Madden and Louis le Brocquy, *Louis le Brocquy: A Painter Seeing His Way* (Dublin, 1994). See *Louis le Brocquy: Portrait Heads, A Celebration of the Artist's Ninetieth Birthday* (Dublin, 2006), for reproductions of a number of the Bacon portraits.

- 6 Róisín Kennedy, 'Made in England: The Critical Reception of Louis le Brocquy's *A Family*', *Third Text*, 19, 5 (2005), 475–86.
- 7 In my formulation, I draw on Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London, 2009), 50.

Despite the scale of the two acquisitions, these surrounding issues were rarely addressed at the time of the homecomings.

In an isolated article published in 2005, art historian Róisín Kennedy recuperated the story behind the early British reception of *A Family*.⁶ She recalled that le Brocquy was based in London when he painted the work, having been recruited by two London gallerists as an emerging artist in Ireland. Bringing artists from Ireland was one of the few ways to broaden the scope of British art at a time when travel to mainland Europe was out of the question. Cecil Phillips of the Leicester Galleries and Charles Gimpel of the newly established Gimpel Fils gallery made a trip to Dublin looking for new artists to supplement their gallery programmes. They visited the Irish Exhibition of Living Art (a *salon refusé* for work that had been rejected by the annual Royal Hibernian Academy exhibition) and singled out le Brocquy's work, inviting him to move to London to be represented by their galleries; an offer that le Brocquy gladly accepted. During the immediate post-war period, an active promotion of British art was under way, supported by the government drive to celebrate Britishness to boost the morale of the depleted post-war nation. In the ten years following his departure, le Brocquy went from being perceived as an Irish artist to being perceived as a British artist and then back to being an Irish artist again, thanks to an active process of curatorial framing and reframing. Kennedy's essay traces the early instability of the artist's national identity and raises questions about the long-term effects of his recuperation as an Irish artist, following his selection for the Irish pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 1956, after which his success in Britain declined.

Bacon's place in the British canon would appear to stem both from his English parentage as well as his role in the British art world. Yet, given that Bacon was born and raised in Ireland, there are reasonable grounds to suggest that Bacon was Anglo-Irish, and by extension Irish. The relocation

of Bacon's London studio to Dublin thus raises the question of Bacon's eventual re-canonization as an Irish artist. Despite the scale of the studio acquisition, the Irish art world at large was remarkably silent about this possibility. Yet the issue of identity seemed to occupy people's thoughts nonetheless. At the launch of *Francis Bacon's Studio* (2005), a book celebrating the studio acquisition, writer Conor Cruise O'Brien introduced Bacon as 'one of the horsing people, a people divided by the Irish Sea', a covert Anglo-Irish referent that almost seemed designed to foreclose issues regarding national identity. Hugh Merrell, the publisher, opened his speech with the observation: 'Bacon was, above all, an *international artist*.'

The gulf that separates le Brocquy and Bacon in art discourse today is partly the result of the mechanics of canonization, which were established in the nineteenth century in the context of nascent nationalisms in Europe. Canons thus have a fundamentally singular national nature. This goes against artists' typical locatedness in different places at different times in their artistic development, as well as the complexity of many individuals' cultural and artistic affiliations. Because related spheres of reference coexist and intermingle in artworks themselves, the process of canonization often becomes a symbolic battlefield over values that are both aesthetic and social. Elements in an artist's work that have been underplayed or overshadowed to secure the investments of one canon will be highlighted in relation to another and vice versa.⁷ Changes in perception of an artist's national belonging thus inevitably bring about new ways of looking at his or her work, as I will examine in relation to le Brocquy and Bacon.

Le Brocquy and Bacon's histories show the need for a more relational approach to national canons. The creation of a new set of terms to describe the range of identities that long-term colonization and high density migration have forged would help in enabling a more nuanced discussion of

belonging. However, the creation of terms to define various forms of relationality would not be enough to democratize the process of canonization. There remains a historically constructed structural bias towards the canons of dominant nations, which would need to be recognized and addressed. It is therefore necessary to pay attention to the effects of nations' relatively uneven levels of cultural and symbolic capital, whose exchange rate is informed by the particularity of post-colonial relationships, among other factors. This matters because artistic success is partly achieved through the accumulation of such capital. To date, the undoing of artistic myths at a canonical level is only likely if this endeavour will increase the prestige of the artist in question. The occasion of the two homecomings was confrontational in this respect. It suggested the vulnerability of le Brocquy's status as an Irish artist and raised the uneasy question of whether the Irish art world could make a canonical claim regarding a world-famous artist like Bacon against the authority of British discourse.

The question of belonging I raise here relates to countless other examples, such as competing claims from the French and Dutch art worlds to Vincent Van Gogh.⁸ Yet, even if Van Gogh is seen to 'belong to' the French canon, he remains a Dutch artist within it. The security of his Dutch nationality is not threatened. We will see that, in the case of a post-colonial country like Ireland, national identity is more vulnerable to subsumption, being so narrowly differentiated from the culture of its former colonizer. Moreover, the formerly colonized nation lacks the authority to make competing claims on an equal cultural and symbolic level. I wish to address the questions of who has the cultural authority to decide on artists' assimilation in national canons and how changing economic and political developments affect such claims to authority.

In order to understand why the question of national identity, which appears to be

of political interest only, might affect the aesthetic reception of work by le Brocquy and Bacon, we can best consider the wider role of national canons in the day-to-day reception of artworks. Taking a sociological view of the art world, Pierre Bourdieu explains:

Adequate reception of works — which, like Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* or Klein's monochrome paintings, owe their formal properties and their value only to the structure of the field and thus to its history — is a differential and diacritical perception: in other words, *it is attentive to deviations from other works, both contemporary and past*. The result is that, like production, the consumption of works which are a product of a long history of breaks of history, with tradition, tends to become historical through and through, and yet more and more dehistoricized. In fact, the history that deciphering and appreciation put into play is gradually reduced to a pure history of forms, completely eclipsing the social history of the struggles for forms which is the life and movement of the artistic field.⁹

The need to be attentive to deviations from contemporary and historical works demands locatedness within a given art discourse or canon. The national origins of this discourse may no longer be acknowledged in the present. In fact, the longer established the art world, the more autonomous it appears, its political origins and affiliations becoming increasingly invisible.¹⁰ Yet the discourse remains the product of a particular located art history. Let us see how this process unfolds in the early reception of le Brocquy and Bacon in London and observe its subsequent effect on their career success around the time they met in the mid-1950s.

- 8 For a discussion of Van Gogh's canonization, see Rachel Esner and Margriet Schavemaker, eds., *Vincent Everywhere: Van Gogh's (Inter)national Identities* (Amsterdam, 2011).
- 9 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (Cambridge and Oxford, 1993), 266; emphasis added.
- 10 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. Debevoise (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 101.

- 11 Cited on le Brocquy's official website at <http://www.anne-madden.com/LeBPages/lebrocquy.html> (accessed 1 September 2011).
- 12 Ruane, 'Le Brocquy's, *The Family*', 22–23.
- 13 Cited by Kennedy, 'Made in England', 479.
- 14 This School was the legacy of the young painters of the immediate post-Independence period. See Ciarán Benson, 'Modernism and Ireland's Selves', *Circa*, 61 (1992), 18–23, 19.

The Canon as Viewing Filter: le Brocquy

Let me take an initial example of le Brocquy's *A Family* (Fig. 1), the painting at the centre of the homecoming, to see how its visibility is affected by nationally framed regimes of perception and intelligibility. *A Family* is a monumental oil painting, almost two metres long, depicting a mother, father and child, all nude, inhabiting a grey windowless space lit by a single overhead lamp. The mother reclines on a sparsely delineated bed, propped up on one elbow to face the viewer with a stare that both asserts her matriarchal power and suggests her troubled thoughts. A white cat stares out from under the creased white sheets that half-cover the mother's nakedness. The mother's legs are spread and a child stands at the end of the bed, echoing a post-partum scenario. The father sits depressed at the end of the other side of the bed, his back stooped and his head hung low. The figures are all painted in a post-cubist style, their bodies sculpted and almost architectonic, and their flesh tones dulled down to echo the greyness of a bunker-like interior.

The painting envisages the stripping back of life to the bare essentials needed to start again. This was interpreted in Britain as reflecting the psychological intensity of the post-war period. The existential despair evident in the man's stooped posture and the woman's facial expression were taken to relate to the atomic threat and the hopeless predicament it posed for humanity. This reading helped to position le Brocquy as an artist engaged with the wider social climate of Britain. Critic John Russell recalls: 'In the early 1950s, above all, [le Brocquy] came before us as a man who was looking for the image that would compound all other images. Anyone who was around at the time and concerned with what was called "post-war British art" will remember the painting called *A Family*.'¹¹ Yet the same perceived interest in social concerns evoked different associations in the Dublin context, where le Brocquy continued to exhibit following his relocation to London.

In terms of subject matter, *A Family* was taken to be a commentary on the rejection of the Mother and Child Scheme. This welfare scheme for mothers in need had been set aside amidst much controversy because it was seen to take over from tasks properly belonging to the Church. The closure of his mother's soup kitchen in Dublin following similar complaints by an archbishop, made it likely that le Brocquy would have been deeply disturbed by the Mother and Child Scheme controversy.¹² Le Brocquy had engaged with comparable social concerns in the early 1940s in particular, evident in such drawings as *Starved Children: Dublin Poor, Keening a Dead Baby, Woman in Grief* and *Dublin Slum Children*, as well as in paintings like *Belfast Refugees at Mespil Road, Dublin* (1941) and *Condemned Man* (1945).

A Family became the centrepiece of a solo exhibition at the Waddington Galleries, Dublin, in December 1951, following its exhibition at the Gimpel Fils gallery in June of that year. Critic J. Ryan noted in his review of the exhibition that the generally positive response to le Brocquy's work indicated growing national interest in the avant-garde.¹³ However, when a group of art enthusiasts proposed to purchase the work as an anonymous donation for the permanent collection of the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art in Dublin, the artists on the museum's Art Advisory Committee voted against acceptance. No reasons for the rejection were recorded. This outcome created a scandal, which turned into a national debate about art values in the national press. Divided opinions reflected two poles of opinion in the Irish art world at that time — those representing a group of independent artists, associated with the *Irish Exhibition of Living Art*, who embraced European modernism, and National School artists who looked to Irish art as a medium of expression for the new nation, mainly in the form of academic realist works depicting overtly Irish personages and scenes.¹⁴

In theory it should be possible in art discourse for both readings of the work to coexist. Although different, they are in fact not incompatible, each providing a different socio-cultural interpretation of the psychological intensity palpable in the familial image at hand. Yet, as I have mentioned, canons are by their very nature singular. When we consider that one definition of a canonical artist is that the history of a period cannot be read without their work, it is almost inevitable that the reading associated with the national canon in question will be highlighted, obscuring other referents. We can observe a symbolic struggle of this kind in the reception of le Brocquy's work as he climbs the ladder of the British art world in his early career.

Kennedy recounts that in the initial two years of le Brocquy's time in London, his Irishness was considered an important aspect of his painting. In his first Gimpel Fils exhibition catalogue in 1947, Denys Sutton stated that le Brocquy 'has been stirred by the passion and the originality of his native Ireland' and that 'his reward is to keep alive the legends, the myths and the mysteries that tend to grow cold and become forgotten when their explanation is too constantly sought'.¹⁵ Le Brocquy was seen as an inheritor of the legacy of W. B. Yeats's revitalization of Irish myth and legend. His *Tinker* series, portraying travellers, Ireland's indigenous gypsies, was likened to J. M. Synge's literary engagement in *The Tinker's Wedding* (1907). Contemporary British critics thus tended to overlook the work's social engagement and invoke the inevitable literary referents (Yeats, Synge). In so doing, they both drew on the high cultural standing of Irish literature and emphasized le Brocquy's cultural difference at a time when the British art world's own scope of reference was particularly narrow.¹⁶ No reference was made to formal similarities between le Brocquy's work and that of his peers in Britain; this obscured his role and position as a member of that particular artistic generation. Moreover, no stylistic references

to Picasso or to other international artistic influences were made, nor was any mention made of le Brocquy's quotation of French and Spanish masters, so evident in the pose of the woman in *A Family*.

We can recall Bourdieu's observation that adequate reception of artworks is based on differential and diacritical perception whose formal properties and value relates to the structure of the field and thus to its history. For this reason the citational practices of contemporary artists are central to their accumulation of prestige and, in turn, they produce cultural capital retroactively for the national canon in question. Lacking a canon of recognized great Irish art, this canon is initially supplanted in le Brocquy's case by Irish literature. His relative exoticism during the early post-war period permitted such an exception. Yet it was clear that if le Brocquy was to increase his success, it had to be demonstrated that his work had the potential for art-historical significance. Within two years of his move to London, critics were talking about the 'meteoric' rise of his reputation there, culminating in the warm reception of his so-called Grey paintings in a solo exhibition at Gimpel Fils in 1951. This increasing success prompted critics to recontextualize le Brocquy in relation to British canon. Le Brocquy was now referred to almost exclusively as an English or British artist by leading critics of the day, such as John Berger.¹⁷

This reframing of the artist's identity had an immediate effect on what would be seen within the work. Critical reception now focused almost entirely on readings of the work that reflected the British post-war situation. The curators and critics in question were of course only following the demands of their profession — underplaying the less widely appealing Irish referents and emphasizing those aspects that would make the work important in the British context. Career success followed for le Brocquy in the form of inclusion in *40 Years of Modern Art* (1948) at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London,

15 Denys Sutton quoted in Kennedy, 'Made in England', 477.

16 Irish critics of the time made no such literary allusions. Writing in the *Horizon* in 1946, Earnán O'Malley discusses le Brocquy's work in mostly formal stylistic terms, combined with some contextual explanations about works like the *Tinker* series and comments on the artist's non-sentimental attachment to the Irish landscape. He writes of the early influence of Édouard Manet, Diego Velázquez, Francisco Goya, Edgar Degas, James Abbott McNeill Whistler and the 'Oriental line', and the mature le Brocquy's 'learned economy of means'. See 'Louis le Brocquy', *Horizon*, vol. 14, 79 (July 1946), 32–37, 32.

17 In a 1951 article entitled 'Two British Painters', John Berger described le Brocquy as 'one of the most interesting British painters of his generation'; cited in Kennedy, 'Made in England', 477. Elsewhere Berger writes: '[Le Brocquy's] decorative tapestry of a goat is the best I have seen produced by an English artist'; cited on le Brocquy's official website at <http://www.anne-madden.com/LeBPages/lebrocquy.html> (accessed September 1 2011).

Fig. 2: Louis le Brocqy, *Condemned Man*, 1945
Oil on gesso-primed
hardboard, 91 x 69 cm
Private collection © the artist



18 The artist had made a painting of Belfast refugees in Dublin in 1941 just before embarking on the series, which suggests that he made this link.

and *Twelve British Painters* (1948–49), an internationally touring exhibition by the British Council, as well as in group exhibitions at the Arts Council, the Leicester Galleries and the Tate.

In terms of visual content, the sudden silence regarding le Brocqy's Irish nationality might be said to have come about because his new Grey paintings marked a transition from recognizably Irish subject

matter, seen in the *Tinker* series, to more 'universal' subject matter in images such as *A Family*. Yet le Brocqy's paintings with Irish subject matter had always been 'universal' in their significance. His *Tinker* series was an engagement with an Irish counterpoint to the dispossessed people of Europe and, by extension, a reflection on the conditions of human life on the fringes of any society.¹⁸ When Charles Gimpel first saw *Condemned*

Man (Fig. 2), a painting engaging with the situation in Irish prisons, the painting's value as a comment on suffering in a more global sense was evident to him. John Russell likewise saw 'an echo of the existential interior' in the work, 'the bare cell in which the patterns of the future of the world were decided during World War II and its aftermath'.¹⁹ Yet, once British readings had been made and taken to be universal, Irish referents were inevitably set aside.

In a later reflection on le Brocquy's artistic development in *A Letter to a Young Painter* (1962), Herbert Read was explicit about the need to eliminate Irish referents in order for the work to 'become' universal:

This painter from Joyce's Dublin did seem when I first met him in 1944 to have some qualities of Celtic origin. His images might have been found in a crock of gold, and both Yeats the poet and his brother the painter might have been among his ancestors. But since then le Brocquy's art has become emancipated from provincial myth and is now both independent and universal.²⁰

The reductive nature of Read's comments — not least his reference to the crock of gold — suggests the difficulty of establishing equal authority for Irish cultural referents in the British context. They suggest the relative lower value associated with Irish culture in the British context, which is informed by the dynamics of the two nations' uneven post-colonial relationship.

Le Brocquy does not appear to have protested against his critical reframing as a British artist, or against the negative associations made with his Irish background following his success. This can be seen as opportunism or simply as pragmatism. Artistic success partly lies in knowing how to draw lucratively on such hybrid resources in response to the logic of the art world. Yet in the case of artists from formerly colonized countries and/or from countries with low cultural capital in art-historical terms, there are likely to be

other factors at play. These can include a series of other cultural and psychological motivations that are not even conscious, such as inner alienation from one's culture, a sense of being inauthentic and a sense of what Werner Hamacher refers to as 'culture's shame for perhaps not being sufficiently culture'.²¹ What can be gleaned of le Brocquy's relationship to his national identity in existing interviews suggests the presence of such factors. Notably, he constantly avoids addressing the subject of nationality throughout his long career. Only once, in an interview that took place in 1981, did he breach this silence and it became apparent that he had struggled with a sense of 'inauthentic' identity in his native country. This was partly because le Brocquy's great-grandfather was Belgian, a heritage evident in his name. Significantly, his origins in an upper-middle-class Irish family could have led to him being seen as Anglo-Irish — a condition which, in accord with definitions of Irishness in the Treaty of Independence, and in many other contexts, could be regarded as 'inauthentically' Irish. Le Brocquy had frequently been dubbed a 'West Brit' in his youth — a derogatory term describing a native Irishman or Irishwoman whose sympathies lie with England. He recounted:

Although I was born in Dublin in the year of the 1916 rebellion and brought up entirely in Ireland, I do not remember feeling particularly Irish. When I was a young man (with the derisory term *West-British* in mind) I occasionally referred to myself ironically as a 'West-Belgian'. No one seemed to me less manifestly Irish than that small family whose name I bore.²²

This was not to change until le Brocquy was twenty-two and went to mainland Europe to tour the art museums and develop his painting. Reflecting on Irish culture from this distance and experiencing himself in a new context, he was able to identify with being Irish:

19 Russell quoted in Madden and le Brocquy, *A Painter Seeing His Way*, 115.

20 Herbert Read, *A Letter to a Young Painter* (1962), quoted in Madden and le Brocquy, *A Painter Seeing His Way*, 80.

21 Werner Hamacher, 'One 2 Many Multiculturalisms', in Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, eds., *Violence, Identity, and Self-Determination* (Stanford, CA, 1997), 284–325, 284.

22 Louis le Brocquy, 'A Painter's Notes on His Irishness', in Paddy Logue, ed., *Being Irish: Personal Reflections on Irish Identity Today* (Dublin, 2000), 118–20, 119.

- 23 le Brocquy, 'A Painter's Notes on His Irishness', 119.
- 24 Le Brocquy, 'A Painter's Notes on His Irishness', 119; original emphasis.
- 25 Cyril Barrett later commented that 'even if at first the Irish modernists did not appeal to the masses, they at least earned international recognition'. His view reflects a subsequent shift in critical focus from the lost opportunity of Irish art engaging Irish culture with modernism, to the production of individual artists like le Brocquy, who remained unable to resolve the task of acknowledging readings of their works specific to the Irish context and having relevance for international discourse. See Barrett, 'Irish Art and Nationalism II: 1900–1970', *Studies*, 91, 363 (2002), 223–38.
- 26 Herbert Read, *Contemporary British Art* (London, 1951), 40.

[O]ne day in my twenty-second year, I precipitously sailed from Dublin into a new life as a painter studying in the museums of London, Paris, Venice and Geneva ... Alone among the great artists of the past, in these strange related cities I became vividly aware for the first time of my Irish identity, to which I have remained attached all my life.²³

Even this belated sense of identification with Irishness was soon to be troubled. On his return to Ireland two years later, his recent work was rejected by the Royal Hibernian Academy, now governed by a cultural-nationalist agenda that promoted explicitly nationally engaged work. This new-found conservatism shocked le Brocquy, whose earlier work had always been prized by the institution. He responded by co-founding the Irish Exhibition of Living Art (1943) with like-minded artists, who were mostly of similarly privileged Anglo-Irish backgrounds and trained in Europe.

Le Brocquy seems to have remained insecure about the possibility of being both an Irish and a 'universal' artist. In the same interview from 1981 he observed:

Yet within this vital inner discovery [of my Irish identity] lay the peril of insularity. Art begets art, however, and my imagination was full of the paintings of Rembrandt, of Manet, of the great Spaniards — each simultaneously himself, his race and *universal*. From the very beginning, their transcendent universality helped to protect this incipient painter from self-conscious nationalism, inducing picturesque images, perhaps, of Irish country folk dressed in the clothes of a preceding generation, or of thatched cottages arranged like dominoes under convenient hills; images no more respectable in themselves than the sterile Nazi *Kultur*, or the ordained Stalinist aesthetic of 'social reality' with its invariably happy peasants.²⁴

Given, on the one hand, the instability of his early identification with Irishness and, on the other, his negative associations with cultural nationalism, it is not surprising that le Brocquy did not protest against critical and curatorial framings and reframings of his work as Irish, English or British. A wider anti-national sentiment informed the Irish art world at large following the failures of the National School. When art institutions that had been run by these culturally nationalist artists were later taken over by le Brocquy's modernist (and often Anglo-Irish) peers, they partly defined their artistic merit on the basis of a disassociation from the national, a bias that remains largely in place to this day.²⁵

The Canon as Viewing Filter: Bacon

With le Brocquy's work from the 1940s and 1950s, the competing socio-cultural histories that inform his references can be clearly associated with the two different national art discourses because he was directly active as an artist in both contexts. With Bacon we do not have such a clear-cut divergent reception. While Read's biographical entry on Bacon in *Contemporary British Art* (1951) reads simply 'Francis Bacon. Born in Dublin (1910)', his birth and youth in Ireland remained widely unknown after his widespread success.²⁶ Bacon never engaged with the Irish art scene in his lifetime. Today, one might wonder why his national identity bears any relevance on discussions of his work. Let us consider the centrality of British national framing to standard readings of the painting that first established Bacon's reputation, *Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944), and raise the question of how a change in perceived national identity might alter this reception.

Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion is a triptych presenting three unhomey figures in contorted poses against a vivid orange background. Given that it

came to critical attention following the war, we can, not surprisingly, observe it being received along similar terms as *A Family*. The triptych was taken to represent the suffering and angst of the post-war period in Britain and, by extension, the universal suffering of humankind. These readings were supported by existentialism and its intellectual milieu of 1940s Europe. More specifically, the painting's title relates the figures to the saints traditionally portrayed at the foot of the cross in religious painting and Bacon had intended to paint a larger crucifixion beneath which the figures would appear. He later related these figures to the Eumenides — the Furies of Greek myth, who avenged family crimes of murder and rape. The painting was also informed by a photograph purporting to show the materialization of ectoplasm, as well as by the work of Picasso — a range of sources that lay beyond war experience as such.

The analogies drawn between the angst in Bacon's early work and the wider mood of post-war despair in Britain formed a basis for his ascribed status as an artist whose work represented a central contemporary experience. This secured his early success and subsequent reputation as one of the most important artists of the twentieth century. The association with the Second World War also made Bacon a 'national' painter, similar to the way that Picasso became revered as a Spaniard through his painting of *Guernica* (1937). This was especially important with Bacon because his work was not seen to draw on any British artists of the past or even to have had a visible influence on subsequent artistic generations. As Bacon critic and contemporary John Russell put it: 'We don't feel, as we do with other English painters, that an English forebear is lurking somewhere behind his shoulder; we feel rather, that he is completely alone.'²⁷ Being an autodidact, Bacon also lacked association with a particular educational institution, which might have more securely placed him in a British tradition.

Yet the link to the war was tenuous. Neither the general public nor members of the British art world could in fact identify with *Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* when it was shown in 1945, with the exception of the very few individuals who later secured Bacon's fame. Russell recalls: 'The mysterious forms were regarded as freaks; monsters irrelevant to the concerns of the day, and the product of an imagination so eccentric as not to count in any permanent way.'²⁸ In fact, the *Crucifixion* series on which the association was based had been started in the 1930s, long before the Second World War started. This raises questions of the source of violence in the work. Given the early emergence of this imagery, Bacon's youth in Ireland becomes relevant at this point.

Bacon was hardly more than ten years old when the War of Independence (1919–21) broke out in Ireland. This was quickly followed by the Civil War (1922–23). Many of the homes of Anglo-Irish families in Bacon's social circle were burned down by republican forces. The Bacons would have felt under particular threat, as they lived in a large country home belonging to Francis's maternal grandmother, who was married to the district inspector of the Royal Irish Constabulary for County Kildare. Bacon recalls the fact that his grandmother never stood with her back to the window; this detail indicates the sense of fear and vulnerability that presided in Anglo-Irish circles at the time. Yet there also seems to have been psychological tensions of a familial nature. Bacon's father had been a British army major. Following his retirement to Ireland to become a horse-trainer, he retained a disciplinarian approach to his 'sissy' son Francis. When Bacon's father found the sixteen-year-old Francis wearing his mother's underwear, he was promptly banished from home and sent to Berlin, where his uncle lived. This forced early exit from home must have been traumatic for the young artist and, because homosexuality remained illegal in Britain and Europe, Bacon's gayness

27 John Russell, *Francis Bacon* (London, 1964), 190.

28 Russell, *Francis Bacon*, 9.

- 29 Bacon cited in Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon: Anatomy of an Enigma* (London, 2008), 19.
- 30 Andrew Sinclair, *Francis Bacon: His Life and Violent Times* (London, 1993), 27.
- 31 Peppiatt, *Anatomy of an Enigma*, 118.
- 32 Bacon was particularly adamant that his work bore no relation to that of Samuel Beckett, whose existentialism he disavowed, in keeping with his other statements on the movement, although he is known to have read and been fascinated by the philosopher and writer Albert Camus in his early career.
- 33 Although he readily accepted the chance to represent Britain in the Venice Biennale in 1954, Bacon refused to be personally representative. He did not even attend the exhibition, despite being in Italy at the time. He later turned down both of the national honours bestowed on him by the British nation; in 1960 the title of Commander of the British Empire (CBE) and in 1977 the title of Honourable Companion of the British Empire (CH), traditionally awarded to those who have 'rendered conspicuous service of national importance'. See Richard Holiday, 'Artist Declines a CH', *Sunday Telegraph*, 5 June 1977.

was to remain a kind of interior identity professionally well into his adult life. It clearly informed his work, but it was disavowed in the public reception of his work and Bacon entrenched this disavowal by insisting on the irrelevance of biography to readings of his work.

When he was initially questioned about his origins by Tate director Sir John Rothenstein in the lead-up to his first retrospective at the Tate Gallery in 1962, Bacon answered: 'I had no upbringing at all ... I used to simply work on my father's farm near Dublin'— a description that bears little resemblance to his actual upbringing.²⁹ To a much closer acquaintance, his Anglo-Irish colleague Lord Grey Gowrie, he confided that the memory of Ireland was both an important and traumatic memory for him and that it did affect the paintings.³⁰ Nevertheless, in the long term, Bacon largely banned any autobiographical interpretations. He insisted on privileging certain readings of his own works and underplayed all but a few chosen artistic influences. His biographer Michael Peppiatt comments:

In retrospect the extent to which Bacon managed to impose his own view of his art on the rest of the world is phenomenal. He not only painted his images but — and this testifies to his powers of persuasion — also told critics, collectors and the public what to think of them. This 'official' line, brilliant and revealing as it often turned out to be, also tended to obfuscate, especially as regards his early work.³¹

The studio relocation to Ireland raises the question of the importance of Bacon's childhood and youth to the later development of his work. It potentially challenges wider resistance to drawing on Bacon's biography in interpreting his paintings, although the legacy of his own banning of autobiographical readings is hard to shake off.

Over the years, it is often through passing references to Irish literature that critics have implied the relevance of his 'Irish side', a tendency that frustrated Bacon, despite his outspoken interest in the writers in question, not least Yeats.³² Like le Brocquy, Bacon generally avoided discussing his nationality. When questioned directly about being Irish, Bacon expressed his admiration for Irish people and for Irish literature, but added, 'I am not Irish, unfortunately'. This is one of a few passing statements that seem to confirm that Bacon might have wanted to identify with Irishness. Yet Bacon grew up with little sense of the possibility that he might justifiably call himself Irish, despite having been born and reared in the country. This surely had to do with the polarized climate of the Civil War as much as his parents' English identities, a situation made more difficult by his father's military affiliations. His ambivalence regarding national identity was also made manifest on the few occasions when he was explicitly asked to be representative of the British nation.³³

The complexities of individual self-identifications tend to have little purchase in public life, however. As Étienne Balibar observes, whether identities, 'or, rather, identifications', are active or passive, voluntary or imposed, individual or collective, their unstable nature does not make them any less concrete for practical purposes:

Their multiplicity, their hypothetical or fictive nature, do not make them any less real. But it is obvious that those identities are not well defined. And consequently, from a logical — or juridical or national — point of view, they are not defined at all — or, rather, they would not be if, despite the fundamental impossibility inherent in them, they were not subject to a forced definition. In other words, their practical definition requires a 'reduction of complexity', the application of a simplifying force or of what we might,

paradoxically, term a supplement of simplicity. And this, naturally, also complicates many things.³⁴

Curators and art historians are also faced with the unenviable task that artists' identities have to be defined for art-historical and canon-forming purposes. Criteria are indefinite, encompassing citizenship, place of birth and nationality of parents, among other things. Like the nation-state itself however, the national underpinning of curatorial and art-historical discourses (as proto-canon formation) is 'a formidable reducer of complexity, though its very existence is a permanent cause of complexity'.

Both le Brocquy and Bacon's canonical identities were established definitively thanks to the selection processes for national representation at the Venice Biennale, only a few years after they first made acquaintance with each other in London in 1951. Le Brocquy and Bacon would have had a comparable standing in the British art world by the time they met. When it came to selecting the representatives of Britain for the 1954 Venice Biennale, they would have been in a relatively small pool of 'British' artists likely to have been considered. In the end Bacon was singled out, along with another figurative painter, Lucian Freud, and the more senior Ben Nicholson. Bacon's co-representation of Britain in the Venice Biennale of that year was the first opportunity for a truly international audience to see his work and the opening of doors to his subsequent international fame. This framing of Bacon as British in the eyes of the international art world closed down any question that might have remained regarding his national identity and Bacon's reputation in the British canon was secured.³⁵

In his selection for the subsequent Venice Biennale of 1956, the Irish commissioner and critic James White noted that 'the English ... have already presented [F. E.] McWilliam and Francis Bacon, two Irish

artists'. He suggested that it would be wise to establish le Brocquy as Irish, as 'the English are eager to claim Le Brocquy for themselves'.³⁶ Following this observation, le Brocquy was asked to represent Ireland in 1956, along with Hilary Heron, a prominent Irish sculptor. Through this curatorial framing, le Brocquy thus 'became Irish' again. The Biennale was an important opportunity for le Brocquy, who, although he was already established in the British and Irish art worlds, lacked a wider international reputation. The international attention brought by his subsequent receipt of a Premio Aquisitato award further ensured that he would be recognized internationally as Irish, despite his prior framing as British in the London art world.

In his analysis of the complex relationship between artists' professional careers and the market value of their work, Olav Velthuis highlights how dependent the subsequent value of an artist's work is on this initial moment of widespread critical attention: 'Whereas at the beginning of an artist's career, chance and luck are crucial in the establishment of cultural value, succeeding acts of valuation will depend on the previous ones. Thus, institutional recognition emerges in a gradual, social, and path-dependent process.'³⁷ Following a prestigious showing such as the Venice Biennale, it would thus be difficult to re-establish the terms on which Bacon's or le Brocquy's work or identities are received, given that their current value (in artistic and market terms) has been built upon this early foundation. The close relationship between the market and the art world means that any (unlikely) subsequent reframing will always be governed by the aim of accumulating higher cultural capital, prestige and market value. Let us consider the implications for their subsequent careers.

34 Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, trans. Christine Jones, James Swenson and Chris Turner (London, 2002), 76.

35 Peppiatt, *Anatomy of an Enigma*, 183. The only exception to Bacon's British framing came when he temporarily lost his cultural capital through being brought up for a drugs charge in 1971. The headlines of the tabloid newspapers read 'Irish Artist Up for Drugs Charge'. (Recounted by John Minihan, photographer and friend of Bacon in conversation with the author in 2005).

36 James White quoted by Kennedy, 'Made in England', 482. The other artist referred to here is Northern Irish artist F. E. McWilliam, who had represented Britain at the São Paulo Biennial in 1952.

37 Olav Velthuis, *Talking Prices: Symbolic Meanings of Prices on the Market for Contemporary Art* (Princeton, NJ, 2007), 160.

- 38 While there have been occasional inclusions of le Brocquy's work in relation to this period in survey exhibitions and publications, they are few and far between. Publications include Peter Nahum and Tom Tempest Redford, *British Art from the 20th Century* (London, 1989), and Alan Windsor, ed., *Modern British Painting and Printmaking 1900–1990* (Aldershot, 1998).
- 39 There were illustrated discussions of le Brocquy's work in John Russell's definitive *From Sickert to 1948* (London, 1948), E. M. Languy's *Cinquante Ans d'Art Moderne: Exposition Universelle et Internationale de Bruxelles 1958* (Brussels, 1958), and Werner Haftmann's *Painting in the Twentieth Century* (Santa Barbara, CA, 1965). Furthermore, le Brocquy taught a course on drawing for textile design at the Royal College of Art. He was a member of the London Group from 1955 and was included in *Sixty Paintings for 1951* held at the 1951 Festival of Britain at the South Bank Centre. His exhibitions were reviewed in major newspapers like the *Observer* and *The Times*. His borderline celebrity status is perhaps most visible in extras like the *House and Garden* feature on his studio in its July 1953 edition and *Vogue* magazine's presentation of le Brocquy in its 'People are Talking About ...' section in March 1957, reserved for the most avant-garde and famous.

Louis le Brocquy: After Irish Representation at the Venice Biennale

To date it has often been the case that Irish artists are present in the British canon as British and in the Irish canon as Irish. Thus, le Brocquy was known as a British artist in Britain and an Irish artist in Ireland. Yet the overt representation of le Brocquy as Irish through the Venice Biennale and through his later reputation as 'Ireland's greatest living artist' made it impossible for this double framing to continue. This had significant repercussions for the British reception of his work. In fact, within a decade of his Venice Biennale representation, le Brocquy appears to have fallen out of favour in the British art world. His only exhibitions in London in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s were at Gimpel Fils or in Irish-themed group exhibitions at Pym's Gallery, which specializes in Irish art, with the exception of his inclusion in one group exhibition at the Tate, entitled *Portrait of the Artist* (1989).

One reason for this might be hazarded — that from 1965 le Brocquy engaged in a new series of work, which differed stylistically from the work for which he had been best known in the 1940s and 1950s. But there had been more dramatic stylistic shifts in his work from the *Tinker* period (c. 1945–48) and the *Grey* period (c. 1951–54) to the white *Presences* of the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, and these had posed no problem to his British reputation. Another might be that le Brocquy moved to France in 1958. But he continued to be represented in London by Gimpel Fils, which facilitated easy mediation for British curatorial purposes. Nor did place of residence seem to have had any effect on his wider international career. During these thirty years of relative invisibility in Britain, le Brocquy's work was shown in museums, galleries, biennials and triennials throughout Western Europe, as well as in Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Croatia, South Africa, India, China, Korea, Japan and the United States.

Aside from his curatorial neglect in Britain following the mid-1960s, le Brocquy is barely visible in contemporary art-historical and curatorial representations of the British art world from the immediate post-war period to the late 1950s.³⁸ This is all the more noteworthy when we consider those with whom he had shared equal success — including Bacon, Freud and Sutherland — or when we put him in the company of Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth and Lynn Chadwick, his fellow artists represented by Gimpel Fils, then one of the most important galleries in London. This absence would be understandable in the case of a less successful artist, whose presence was less visible or largely undocumented. Yet anybody researching the period could have not failed to come across le Brocquy's inclusion in exhibitions at prestigious London venues like Leicester Galleries, the Whitechapel Gallery, the Tate Gallery, or in major survey publications of modern British and international art from the 1950s. Even taking one important critic into consideration, Herbert Read, we can observe that he presented illustrated accounts of le Brocquy's work in three major anthologies, *Contemporary British Art* (1951), *Art since 1945* (1958) and *A Concise History of Modern Painting* (1959).³⁹

Perhaps the most noteworthy curatorial exclusion was from an exhibition that focused specifically on figurative painters working in London in the 1950s. Entitled *Transition: The London Art Scene in the Fifties*, this show was curated by Martin Harrison with Tomoko Sato and held at the Barbican Centre in 2002. A survey show presenting le Brocquy's generation of artists who came to prominence after 1945, it included all of the peers with whom he exhibited in London. It even had a special section focusing on *60 Paintings for '51*, an exhibition held at the 1951 Festival of Britain visited by over eight million, in which he was included. Yet le Brocquy's work was nowhere to be seen. The sole mention of his name is on a list of artists teaching in a post-war initiative to



Fig. 3: Louis le Brocquy, *Image of James Joyce (detail)*, 1977, oil on canvas, 70 × 70 cm, Tate Collection © the artist

raise the standards of industrial design. Le Brocquy had taught drawing at the Royal College of Art as part of this enterprise. However, he apparently provoked no further curatorial interest.⁴⁰

In contrast, le Brocquy has enjoyed almost a cult status in Ireland. His being championed as the ‘greatest Irish artist’ was secured in 1975 when he started to produce *Portrait Heads*, the series of head

images that were mostly based on Irish writers. Le Brocquy considered writers fascinating subjects for the study of human consciousness visible in the face; he continued this series for thirty years. This subject matter brought about a return of the tendency to frame le Brocquy’s work in terms of Irish literature, now supported by the artist himself.⁴¹ I wonder how we might see this return to literary sources

40 Harrison, ed., *Transition*, 102.

- 41 See le Brocquy's own account of the work in *Louis le Brocquy Portrait Heads: A Celebration of the Artist's Ninetieth Birthday*, exhibition catalogue (Dublin, 2006).
- 42 In many ways this series extended the interests of an earlier series entitled *Presences*, which attempted to capture that which lay beyond the outer appearance or the body, which contemporary critics had associated with existentialism, *art autre* and Kleinian psychology. See Riann Coulter, 'Louis le Brocquy's *Presences*, 1956–64: Irish, British or International?', *Irish Review*, 39 (2009), 139–48. Now, however, le Brocquy's focus lay on the head as a container of consciousness. An interim series entitled *Ancestral Heads* had focused more literally on this notion, following le Brocquy seeing a Polynesian decorated skull at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris and his later research on Celtic notions of the head. See *Louis le Brocquy and the Celtic Head Image*, exhibition catalogue (New York, 1981).
- 43 Cited in *Louis le Brocquy: A Retrospective Selection of Oil Paintings 1939–1966*, exh. cat. (Belfast and Dublin, 1966–67).
- 44 Bacon made this comment on *Image of Lorca* at a retrospective held at Gimpel Fils. Cited in Madden and le Brocquy, *A Painter Seeing His Way*, 287.
- 45 The touring exhibition *Louis le Brocquy: Studies towards an Image of James Joyce*, held in Genoa at the Galleria d'Arte San Marco dei Giustiniani from 12 November to 7 December 1977, came close to offering this viewing experience. It consisted of 24 charcoal drawings, 35 watercolours and 10 oils of Joyce, selected from a series of 120 portraits of the writer, all executed in 1977.

of validation in relation to the artist's reference to the limitations of Irish art in the 1981 interview. Was le Brocquy cashing in on his Irishness, consciously or subconsciously, by drawing on the Irish public's identification with literature rather than art? Was he cashing in on the high cultural capital of Irish literature abroad, which had helped to launch his early career in London?

Le Brocquy seems to have gained national and international fame of a certain kind through the reception of these images in terms of their literary associations. Yet, arguably, the artistic impetus behind this thirty-year series has been overshadowed in the process. While the portrait conventionally portrays one representative image of the sitter, *Portrait Heads* involved painting up to a few hundred images of any one individual, based on memory and with the aid of photographs and media images. This obsessive repetition dealt with the question of representation as such — the ability or inability to capture that which lies beyond appearance.⁴² We might best recall Bacon's observation that le Brocquy belongs to a category of artists 'obsessed by figuration outside and on the other side of illustration — who are aware of the vast and potent possibilities of inventing ways by which fact and appearance can be reconjugated'.⁴³ Le Brocquy's partner, the artist Anne Madden, recalls Bacon's later comments on le Brocquy's *Image of Lorca* (1978), finding the sunken, darkened eye 'extraordinary' because it was a very difficult thing to make an undefined eye socket 'work'.⁴⁴

When the National Gallery in Dublin paid homage to the series in an exhibition held in 2006, sixteen works were represented, of which eleven were portraits of writers — namely Yeats, Joyce, Lorca and Beckett — and the rest artists, including Picasso and Bacon. Visiting the exhibition and looking at these portraits in isolation from the series to which each belongs, one's attention is somewhat unnaturally focused on the identity of the

subject. Although up to three images of some subjects were included, perhaps to recapture le Brocquy's greater engagement with 'inventing ways by which fact and appearance can be reconjugated', the ambition of the overall project was largely obscured. What might it mean to see all 120 versions of le Brocquy's *Portrait of James Joyce* (1977) (Fig. 3) in one space?⁴⁵ Surely Joyce as persona, as a name, a historical literary figure, would start to break down. We would be left with the impossible nature of the grasping towards representation as such. Physical attributes in Joyce's face might give way to what might be described as the memory of an energy presence. Le Brocquy often keeps photographs of his subjects to hand but puts them away before he even begins a work. The result comes close to the kind of image that remains of a person after death; an image that is real but intangible. When we try to pinpoint it, it disappears. His portraits shift the focus from the represented to the process of representing and to the relationship between the subject of representation and the act of representation as such.

Le Brocquy's work has been frequently exhibited in Ireland, yet rarely in ways that really do justice to the whole range of his artistic concerns. His work is typically included a few at a time into museum survey exhibitions of Irish art, group exhibitions of portraiture, or medium-based exhibitions celebrating tapestry, drawing or graphics. The wider public embrace of the works in which Irish elements are visible has meant that the critical significance of le Brocquy's formally innovative work from the 1940s and 1950s, in particular, has been under-represented in curatorial terms, even in Ireland, until recently. By far the most comprehensive exhibitions of le Brocquy's work to date have been those held in relation to the artist's ninetieth birthday celebrations in 2006. This is especially true of an exhibition held at the Hunt