

Gerard Dillon and the West of Ireland

The painter of “Innishlacken Couple” is one of the most celebrated Irish artists of the 20th century, Gerard Dillon.

Dillon, an urban artist, working class individual, was born in Easter 1916 to a Catholic family on the Falls road, spending his childhood growing up in West Belfast. Dillon was the youngest of the family of eight and all three of Dillon’s brothers died of a heart condition in their early 50’s. Dillon shortly followed, passing away from a stroke at the age of fifty-five.

Dillon’s parents were very opposite, his church-going mother, Mary, deeply expressed her sympathy to the Republican cause, contrasting to her husband Joe who served in the British army and was loyal to the Queen.

At age 14, Dillon left school to become an apprentice house painter and decorator in London, where he lived for many years but returned to Belfast with the outbreak of the second World War, where he began to paint and reconnect with friends. Dillon had stated, “I’d rather be in some old untidy graveyard in Belfast, than a London cemetery with a team of gardeners”. Over the next five years, his work reflected his new reactions and interactions in life, showcasing more than simple moments. This is when he really developed as a painter, finding his artistic style.

In 1939, a cycling trip to Connemara, West Ireland, changed Dillon’s life and he quickly fell in love with the West of Ireland. In 1951 Dillon spent a year living on the coast of Connemara on the Island of Innishlacken. As a gay, working class artist, Dillon sometimes felt excluded from many aspects of Irish society but found a sense of peace and identity in Connemara, away from the constraints of the Catholic Church and State that was forced upon him by his mother as a child. Dillon felt that the West of Ireland had a great sense of wonder for visitors from “the red brick city”. Dillon stated in 1955, “Connemara is the place for a painter”. Dillon grew fascinated with the West of Ireland, especially Connemara as it shown an “authentic Ireland”, away from British colonialism.

Upon visiting Connemara, Dillon was fascinated with the rugged beauty of the landscape and rurales. Dillon knew he had found something special away from the city life he was so used to. For Dillon, the west became almost a muse for him and used the cities as settings for his exhibitions. Dillon took great inspiration from the West of Ireland in his painting and used Connemara as a

strong backdrop and narrative in his figurative painting. Many of his pieces focus on the people of the west, providing those who view them an insight to the atmosphere and context of the West of Ireland, showing the rituals of the landscape.

During Dillon's one year stay on Innishlacken Island, off the coast of Connemara, he stayed in a cottage where he would work on his landscape paintings of the mystical land around him. Many of Dillon's landscape paintings were often completed as seen through a window. Dillon would rarely paint outdoors. Dillon even added in the figurative elements in the landscape, always depicting them doing some form of action. Almost like Dillon was a director, placing his actors on stage against the narrative he has created.

Despite living in cities such as London, Belfast and Dublin, traditional Irish motifs of the west stuck with Dillon, as seen in his painting "Innishlacken Couple". Traditional Irish iconography is seen using the cross sitting on the mantel piece, centred between a man and woman on chairs. Through the closed off body language and recognisable props on the mantle, this piece appears to be more nostalgic than romantic to Dillon, maybe representing his own mother and father's relationship. Dillon's paintings follow a recognisable pattern where all figurative characters appear to have green toned skin, this has become a recognisable trait through Dillon's practice. Through this piece "Innishlacken Couple" we, the audience, can really catch a glimpse of Dillon's colourful, child-like, obscured mind, where he can see the heroic in the ordinary.

During the years leading up to his own brother's age of death, Gerard Dillon's work revolved mostly around his own mortality, fearing the uncertainty. This is when Dillon created most of his clown themed paintings such as "clown with bird canvas" and "hole in the hill". In "clown with bird canvas", a painting is depicted within a painting - this is seen again in "Innishlacken couple". This is a common theme throughout Dillon's work.

Very early on in Gerard Dillon's career he decided he would only serve his self in his artwork, never the commercial trend. Dillon was devoted to doing this even if it meant his paintings would not sell. These lead to him creating beautiful, original paintings such as "yellow bungalow" which he took inspiration from Vincent van Gogh's "bedroom in Arles".

Overall, Gerard Dillon is undoubtedly a natural painter and colourist who's work tilts perspective with an often surreal, imaginative force, using the authentic west of Ireland as his main source of inspiration.