

ER

ENCLAVE REVIEW

John Beattie: An Artist, The Studio,
and all the rest...

RHA, Dublin

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An Artist, The Studio, and all the rest... presented two films by John Beattie, representing the culmination of an ambitious project, begun in 2006, which explores both the function and portrayal of artists. The focus for Part I is the personal studio of the past president of the RHA, Thomas Ryan, and institutional studio spaces within the Academy. Part II re-stages Gustave Courbet's *The Artist's Studio*, 1854-55. In this series Beattie holds up the Irish art world to the viewer for inspection. Peering into this scene involves complicity and entanglement in it. The portrayals are individually sympathetic, yet shortcomings of the structure are implied.

In Part I, enticing and absorbing scenes meander in a romantic presentation of elements of Ryan's studio. Traditions are

uneasily symbolised. Dark wooden floors, a heavy, old-fashioned leather desk, bunches of paint-brushes, each tip meticulously wrapped and standing point-upwards in a jug, miniature statues, oil paints, and one of Ryan's signature subjects, a single, pretty, pastel pink rose. The flower as a subject of continued representation becomes fragmented, as the rose is captured on film, alongside multiple sketches and paintings in which it features in various stages of completion.

One approach to institutional teaching is alluded to by an empty room prepared for a life drawing class, with easels, a platform with a red chair, and a vast, elaborately framed full-length mirror, to be used by a life model. Later on a handful of busts and statues are seen stored on a shelf, including an Egyptian head and a classical nude. One is fallen and broken, suggesting their neglected status, no longer required as a pedagogical tool.

Beattie himself remains elusive and maintains some anonymity by avoiding any recording of his own face. Instead, one of Ryan's sketchbooks, which forms a visual diary with demarcated years and recurring themes, is opened and the pages turned by the hands of the younger man. Eventually, a thumbnail line drawing depicting the head and shoulders of Beattie is shown.

Ryan features in various ways; as a vigorous younger man in his heroically styled *Self-Portrait*, 1965, he appears smoking and painting. During the film, he enters an Academy room and dons a formal gown, an authoritative figure, if by now a little frail. He speaks occasionally, sometimes in dialogue with Beattie. During the conversation the focus is on both sets of artists' hands, as the means to physically construct future works. Unifying commonalities seem to be implied, a mutual regard for discipline, determination and a desire for excellence, avoiding the lack of ambiguity of a youth-age stereotype.

Although there is no sound of accompanying voices at this point, evidently the discussion refers to Ryan's participation in Part II, as the camera pans to Courbet's painting, reproduced on Beattie's laptop. The richly layered visuals of Ryan's studio contrasts with the neatness of the technology, yet the laptop also functions as a repository, a place for experimentation and for the completion of work.

Courbet's painting, *The Artist's Studio, a Real Allegory Summing Up Seven Years of My Artistic and Moral Life*, was intentionally politically provocative and biting. Unlike Courbet's painting, Part II of Beattie's film elects to pin the restaging to purely art world references. Challenges arose from choosing to do so, as any attempt to substitute Courbet's cast of characters with contemporary figures from the Irish art world (rather than anonymous actors), posed dangers of provoking comparisons between original and re-enactment.

Beattie successfully persuaded well-known practitioners in the Irish art world, with all their identities, organisational affiliations and personal networks, to participate. These people, and the vulnerable position in which they were placed, are delicately balanced with their status as the funders, artists' champions and possibly adversaries. Particular references for Irish audiences are somewhat mitigated by the universality of the re-enactment.

The film begins with a theatrical space, created with a long, striking, sumptuous red curtain that forms a rich backdrop to the whole, with an easel at the centre. The developing scene includes a blond tousle-haired boy, a somewhat incongruous male life model attired in classical Disney-cartoon hero wear, and some of the symbolic props of the original (a guitar, a black plumed hat and a fallen dagger).

The female nude model of Courbet's original is replaced by performance artist Amanda Coogan. She seems to feature as herself as a public performer, wearing one of her characteristic costumes: a long, sweeping, turquoise-blue dress. Coogan's own live performance work creates tensions between personae and identities and challenges the boundaries of understandings of conscious and instinctive participation. Her involvement is crucial to the film, as it supports a gentler reading of the often uneasy participation of the other actors and positions their posing and occasional discomfort as more knowing. Notably, Beattie remains entirely off-stage and does not substitute for Courbet, as the artist on the centre stage. Instead, Ryan is centralised, holding his palette and brush, sitting at an oil painting of an interior. Beattie is embedded, though, in the personal networks he draws on, from those who have

funded his projects, to those involved in his residency at IMMA, where the film was recorded in the Great Hall.

The films offer a place from which to consider the microcosmic self-referential art world, the personal aspects of working in the studio, and the ability to negotiate this world of politics and favours. They tread a fine line between both personal respect for the people involved and some analysis of the implications of these structures. In contrast to Courbet's original, there is an absence of a visual representation of a wider public audience for Beattie's artistic output, or the implications of a strong social critique.

Beattie firmly resists the temptation to impose one narrative, or to seek notoriety. Navigating the powerful strategy of re-enactment causes tensions for both artist and viewer. It provides a strong set of references, with conventional tropes and multiple layers. However, there are also complications associated with the potential for overly literal interpretations and the specificity associated with recognising particular practitioners in an Irish art world context.

Pippa Little is an independent art critic, art historian and curator. Her PhD thesis explored the artistic process through an empirical study, identified a 'lexicon of creativity' from analysing artists' experiences and established implications for contemporary curatorial practice. *John Beattie: An Artist, The Studio, and all the rest...* was on view 15 November 2012 – 21 December 2012.



John Beattie: *An Artist, The Studio, and all the rest...*, 2012. HD film still. Duration 15mins. Image courtesy of the artist.