



John Beattie on the set of 'An Artist, the studio and all the rest', 2012

Tom Ryan (PPRHA), *Self Portrait*, 1965, oil on canvas

The set of 'An Artist, the studio and all the rest', 2012

The Artist's Studio

JOHN BEATTIE DESCRIBES HOW HE MADE TWO NEW FILMS FOR HIS UPCOMING SHOW AT THE RHA, DUBLIN, WHICH WILL TAKE PLACE IN NOVEMBER 2012.

BACKGROUND

'An Artist, the Studio, and all the rest...' takes the form of two HD film projections with audio, produced and directed between 2006 – 2012. Part one will be presented to the viewer as performative research, shot in the studio of the artist Tom Ryan (PPRHA born 1929) and the RHA School. Here, I observed what became a 'master / apprentice' relationship that has developed between myself and Tom Ryan since 2006.

Appropriating the 1854 / 1855 painting by Gustav Courbet, *The Artist's Studio*, part two is a staged, choreographed moving-image film, shot in the Great Hall at IMMA, where representatives from various levels of the arts in Ireland were invited to be filmed in the context of this surreal, staged studio.

My work explores ideas and perceptions relating to notions of the artist, the studio and relationships with the audience. Through process-based and context-specific methodologies, my work attempts to create discourse between traditional, classic academic and contemporary practice. Employing the use of film production and performance, my interest lies in how the viewer deconstructs or unravels the creative process.

PROCESS

The starting point for this process was a phone call, a letter and a studio visit, followed by an initiated task set by the artist Tom Ryan. To cut a long story short, I first came across Tom Ryan through his work, then through talking with him over the phone. I was immediately struck by his opinions and comments on contemporary practices and practitioners. He regarded this kind of work as a form of "cult and heresy, and a bad, ill-informed one at that".

Tom represents the early teachings and principles of traditional, classic academic painting and drawing, and continues to stand for what he believes to be art that is of "value and worth". Now in his mid eighties, he has a long history of holding high ranking positions such as President of The RHA, President of The United Arts Club, Governor of The National Gallery of Ireland and Founding Member of The European Council of National Academies of Fine Art (Madrid). He was educated at Limerick School of Art and The National College of Art & Design, Dublin under Sean Keating and Maurice MacGonigal. He has personality, drive and absolute commitment to the preservation of his tradition. He was, for me, a fascinating subject.

Following the phone call, I wrote a letter inviting him to work with me on a collaboration. I wanted us to contribute equally – though we come from opposite backgrounds – to produce some form of work

through the exchange of shared knowledge. He responded to this proposal by saying that he wouldn't work with me. However, he would consider it if he could see that I had some form of skill, *ie* that I could draw! He set me to task, and asked me to produce a self portrait on paper as a measure of my artistic skill.

With this in mind I went back to the studio (in a sense) to re-learn self portraiture. At this time I was based, as Artist in Residence, at Fire Station Artists' Studio, Dublin (2006 – 2009). 'Drawing', in the conceptual sense, was an important subject in my practice. I produced drawings where the process of production and the context were integral to the reading of the work and incorporated methods of photographic documentation, sculpture, performance and video.

"If the artist carries through his idea and makes it into visible form, then all the steps in the process are of importance. The idea itself, even if not made visual, is as much a work of art as any finished product. All intervening steps – scribbles, sketches, drawings, failed works, models, studies, thoughts, conversations – are of interest. Those that show the thought process of the artist are sometimes more interesting than the final product."

Once the drawing was produced, I invited Tom into my studio to view the portrait. He was surprised that I could actually 'draw'. This represented my golden ticket and the first step towards initiation into a method of performative research, working as apprentice to the master.

THE STUDIO AND PRODUCTION

The concept and subject of 'the studio' has been an ongoing enquiry in my practice: the artist's studio as classic romantic setting, or whether the studio extends beyond that into the social, public and political spheres, opening up a wider conversation with the audience on what is produced there. A noted exhibition on this theme was 'The Studio' at The Hugh Lane Gallery, curated by Jens Hoffman and Christina Kennedy, in 2006. A fundamental reference point for my own investigations on this theme was Gustav Courbet's iconic painting *The Artist's Studio*. It is an allegory of Courbet's life as a painter, portrayed as a heroic venture, in which he is flanked by friends and admirers on the right and challenges and opposition to the left. Friends on the right include the art critics Champfleury and Charles Baudelaire, and art collector Alfred Bruyas. The figures on the left include a priest, a prostitute, a grave digger and a merchant. To the right of Courbet is a female nude model who represents the classical academic tradition. The artist sits in the centre, independent of the crowd, performing the act of painting. The work approaches many issues: the role of the artist,

feminism and the studio as a social / political space.

While Artist in Residence at IMMA in 2011, and since the beginning of this project in 2006, I had been working closely with professional film makers, producers and directors. I have also been involved in the technical post-production workflows involved in cinematic filmmaking. Before starting the residency, I had already begun plans to co-ordinate a large-scale film shoot to re-create and re-interpret the Courbet painting. The approach to this took over a year of planning and research. My intention was to invite real people, who were representatives at various levels in the arts and visual arts in Ireland, from national cultural institutions and organisations such as the Arts Council, Culture Ireland, Visual Artists Ireland and Dublin City Arts Office. I also invited arts representatives from the government, a variety of artists, writers, critics, curators, community activists, individuals responsible for the production and installation of gallery / museum exhibitions and people who have supported my own career and practice, placing them all into a staged reconstructed scene in the context of 'the studio'.

I began writing letters to specific individuals with my proposal and intentions. I then conducted many studio visits to illustrate the work and investigations to date and to also allay any fears participants might have about being portrayed negatively. There were many challenges and obstacles in opening up this process. Before deciding on a date for filming, and before anyone agreed to get involved, important decisions had to be made on conceptual strategies, theoretical framework, logistics, location, production management and who was going to represent Courbet.

"The camera that presents the performance of the film actor to the public need not respect the performance as an integral whole. Guided by the cameraman, the camera continually changes its position with respect to the performance [...] also, the film actor lacks the opportunity of the stage actor to adjust to the audience during his performance, since he does not present his performance to the audience in person. This permits the audience to take the position of a critic, without experiencing any personal contact with the actor. The audience's identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera."³

Through the supportive co-ordinators and heads of department of the IMMA Artist in Residency Program (Helen O'Donoghue, Janice Hough), I was given access to the Great Hall, an historic heritage building on the North Wing of the museum – the ideal location. We had four days full access to the Great Hall, 20 crew members and over 30 individuals committed to being in the scene. In this time we had to set up, co-ordinate the event, rehearse with the crew and extras, time and practice each camera shot, in order to be fully organised for the arrival of each participant to be filmed and choreographed in the scene.

The person who played Courbet was Tom Ryan. By negotiating this act through placing Tom in a contemporary context, we resolved a project where we had learned to respect each other's craft, traditions, skill – whether we agree with them or not – through the exchange of shared knowledge.

THE EXHIBITION

The work will be exhibited in Galleries II and III at the RHA. (Gallery II will present part one and Gallery III will present part two.) Both works will be exhibited as large-scale video projections. Part two will feature a newly-developed soundtrack I have been working on with soprano singers Michelle O'Rourke and Donna Malone, and a group of classical musicians. It also includes recordings of the sound from audiences crowding gallery spaces during exhibition openings across Dublin. The post production of both the audio and the video work is kindly supported through the Arts Council Projects Award 2012. I would like to acknowledge the support of The Arts Council, Fire Station Artists' Studios, ARP Program IMMA, Bow Lane Recording Studios, Sonic Recording Studios, Screen Scene, the crew and cast involved in the production.

Originally from Co Donegal, John Beattie is currently based in Dublin as a visual artist and works in Resource Management at Fire Station Artists' Studios, Dublin.

Notes

1. From an interview with Tom Ryan in his studio, 2006
2. Sol Le Witt, 0–9, 1967, New York
3. Walter Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction in *Illuminations*, 1968, (ed Hannah Arendt)