

# IKON

## Exhibition Guide

**Rita Donagh**

**28 September – 13 November 2005**

**First & Second Floor Galleries**

This is the most comprehensive exhibition to date of work by British artist Rita Donagh. It includes paintings, drawings, collages and sculptural pieces which take inspiration from personal and political concerns. Donagh's most recent series of paintings, displayed here for the first time, takes the Black Country as its subject, a place significant not only as the cradle of the Industrial Revolution, but also as the artist's birthplace.

Born in 1939 in Wednesbury, Staffordshire, Donagh's interest in art began at an early age. Her attraction to the style of technical drawing was perhaps due to the influence of her father, who was a toolmaker. As a teenager, Donagh took evening life classes at the Bilston College of Further Education, where she was able to draw from the nude. This laid the foundations for her subsequent art practice. In 1956–62, Donagh studied Fine Art at the University of Durham, Newcastle upon Tyne. Here she began to develop a style that embodied a tension between figurative representation and the abstract, as seen in her early paintings such as *Life Model I*, (1960), *Life Model II*, (1961), *Racing engine*, (1962) and *Climatron*, (c.1965).

During the 1960s and 70s, Donagh's work became more overtly conceptual. In 1966 she travelled to New York and was introduced into the New York scene by the artist Mark Lancaster, who had worked in Andy Warhol's experimental art space The Factory. There are references to Warhol scattered throughout Donagh's work from this time. Her first major project, *Figure Compositions*, (1964–71), consists of a number of pieces based on a magazine photograph of young, gay men striking poses as they are harassed by the police in New York. Taking this image as the basis for a series of studies, the artist used various materials including silver foil, oil paint, graph and tissue paper, to create a combination of silhouettes and interlocking outlines distilled from the original image. The resolution is *Contour*, (1967–8), an elegant assemblage of canvas, silk screen and a neon/argon tube.

Donagh's subsequent work was more explicitly concerned with current affairs, often conveying a radically political stance. *Reflection on Three Weeks in May 1970*, (1970–71), for example, contains a reference to the shooting of four American students by the National Guard at Kent State University in Ohio, during a protest over the Vietnam War. The shocking news of these deaths broke as Donagh and a number of her students at Reading University were working on an extended studio project involving installation and performance. *Reflection on Three Weeks in May 1970*, the artist's painted response to the project, features a grid plotted with crosses. An obscure pink shape placed above the blue cross symbolises the blood spilt at Kent State.

From the early 1980s, Donagh's work dealt with the turbulent political situation in Ireland. Mindful of her Irish ancestry, she combined photographs of death and destruction caused by terrorism with modified maps of the six Ulster counties and drawings of H-block prison buildings. These images recur in her work from this time, transformed in various ways through the artist's meticulous and painstaking style. The H-block paintings refer to Long Kesh (or the 'Maze') prison compound in County Antrim, fifteen miles west of Belfast, a site of political unrest and focus of much controversy. The H-block complex consisted of a series of buildings designed to hold prisoners of different paramilitary groups.

Donagh's work focused on the way news of the Troubles was mediated in the press and consumed in the public sphere and she often used secondary sources, such as newspaper and television images, as the basis for her work. *Counterpane*, (1987–88), is based on a newspaper photograph of a bandsman killed in the 1982 IRA Regent's Park bombing incident. Donagh situates the figure in a dream-like space, cloaked by a patchwork quilt – an old family remnant – in a compassionate gesture. A hand enters from above – does it reveal or conceal the shrouded form?

In the early 1990s, Donagh produced a number of works that touched on the predicament of women in a male-dominated art world. *Slade*, (1994), is the title of her most ambitious project from this time. The artist depicts herself, draped in a one-piece garment, her right hand holds a mahl stick\* defensively across her face, her left bears an empty artist's palette as though it were a shield. To the right of the painting is a pattern of concentric squares which may be a reference to abstraction, contrasting with the realism of the self-portrait. However, the pattern is derived from the patchwork quilt of *Counterpane* and functions also as symbol of women's creative work.

Donagh's recent paintings echo elements in her earlier work, for example, her extensive use of maps, the sparingly applied paint and the inspiration drawn from

secondary source material. In *Darlaston*, (2004), *Old Map*, (2004) and *Canals*, (2005), the artist has traced the lines of the Black Country canal system. These waterways were the circulatory system of the Industrial Revolution, they transported necessary supplies to the cities and factories and attracted thousands of immigrant workers to the area, including Donagh's parents. It is fitting that Donagh's most recent work takes inspiration from her birthplace, the industrial landscape of the Midlands.