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A top talent who hasn't got his due

THE ARTS: While John Walker has produced superb work, his worth has been somewhat overshadowed, partly by deciding to base himself away from traditional centres of the art world, writes **AIDAN DUNNE**



MY ROLE , MY MISSION, AS I SAW IT, WAS TO LOOK OUT FOR ARTISTS WHO ARE NOT LOCATED IN THE BIG CENTRES, WHO MIGHT EASILY BE OVERLOOKED FOR THAT REASON, BUT WHO DESERVE TO BE RECOGNISED,' SAYS JOHN WALKER, WHOSE WORK IS BEING EXHIBITED AT THE DOCK IN CARRICK-ON-SHANNON

JOHN WALKER is one of a number of English artists who emerged in the latter half of the 20th century and immediately seemed to feel at home in an international context. Born in Birmingham in 1939, he has spent most of his working life to date abroad, initially in New York, then for a prolonged spell in Melbourne, Australia, and latterly back in the US, where he is director of graduate painting at Boston University. Though he's been in America since the end of the 1980s, a slight Australian drawl is still detectible in his voice. A self-contained, smartly dressed man with an easy manner, he was in Ireland recently for the opening of his exhibition *John Walker: Painter at The Dock* in Carrick-on-Shannon.

The show is beautifully installed in The Dock and demonstrates the gallery's formidable quality as a venue. *John Walker: Painter* features some large-scale paintings and a substantial number of tiny pieces from his *Beano* card series. For beano read bingo. When gambling games like bingo became illegal in certain states, the organisers came up with the simple solution of changing the name. The exclusive subject of the paintings made on beano cards is the coastal landscape near Damariscotta in Maine, where Walker has a home and spends a great deal of every year. His obsessive subject is a section of shoreline on his own land, a cove with a tidal pool. "I'm the world's leading expert on that cove," he remarks. The distinctive

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curvilinear shape of the pool is immediately recognisable in the majority of the tiny *Beano* paintings and in the immeasurably larger works.

The motif remains the same but the seasons, the weather and the time of day and, often, night, account for an infinity of variations, many of which are played out in a bracingly fast, vivid, improvisational manner with oil paint on the beano cards. We get incisive postcard glimpses of the mud and water, the trees, the air and the light, elements that are monumentally rehearsed in the several huge canvases on view. Walker is thoroughly at ease working on a vast scale, investing the paintings with a level of frenzied energy that belies his personal equanimity. He relishes the physicality of the environment, even working the mud of the shore into the thick mass of the painting surfaces.

In a way it's appropriate that his first major solo show in Ireland should occupy a regional venue, because he became acutely aware when he was growing up that he came from a regional background in relation to the London-centric English art world. Having studied at the Birmingham School of Art he was twice refused a place at art college in London. Then he won first prize in a national drawing competition for young artists and found himself sitting next to the heads of the London art schools at the awards dinner. Why don't you come to study in London, one of them said. He pointed out that they had turned him down – partly on the basis of his winning drawing, too – and duly went on to Académie de la Chaumière in Paris where he had a great time.

EVEN AS HE received great acclaim at home, amassing an impressive string of awards and accolades (he represented the UK at the Venice Biennale in 1972, and won the then extremely prestigious John Moores Painting Prize in 1976, for example), he continued to look abroad, travelling to New York where he spent three years from 1979 on a Harkness Fellowship and subsequently to Australia. Still, after those initial rejections, he appeared blessed, to the extent that he felt slightly guilty: "After all, the cake was so small, and I seemed to be getting huge chunks of it," he says with a smile. Some of this he puts down to his dealer at the time, Nigel Greenwood. Greenwood was, Walker says, "a wonderful kind of person, a brilliant networker who was really on your side, always working for you".

Like several of his peers, he had been greatly influenced by American Abstract Expressionism and Post-Painterly Abstraction, as well as by European painters working in a comparable vein. It makes sense to group him with such English painters as Gillian Ayres, Henry Mundy, John Hoyland and Howard Hodgkin. All are artists of outstanding calibre but, with the exception of Hodgkin, while they are recognised as estimable figures, none has quite received their historical due. Ayres, Hoyland and Walker, for example, were all producing superb work in the 1970s, but they were in no sense a concerted group or movement, and their achievements were overshadowed by the rise of other, more fashionable trends in the art world.

In Walker's case, it is more than likely that the process was accelerated by his departure from the English scene. He fell in love with and went on to marry an art historian, an American woman who was based in Melbourne, and he moved there. They've since split up. In fact, he notes in passing, he's just remarried a few weeks ago, to his partner of the last six or seven

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years. “It was a Buddhist ceremony, though neither of us are actually Buddhists. The nun who performed the ceremony bore a striking resemblance to Mia Farrow and, when we arrived, I thought, ‘Crikey, are we going to be married by Mia Farrow?’”

After spending some time in Melbourne, he was offered the position of dean of the school of art in Victoria College, and took it – “I’ve never applied for a job,” he observes, just followed the offers. He set about revitalising the art school, largely by recruiting women as lecturers, mature artists who, he says, had been neglected by the establishment, and younger artists, male and female, ditto. “The art school became the place to be.”

PRIOR TO AUSTRALIA, he had made several significant, large-scale series of paintings, notably *Blackboard Pieces* using chalk and the *Juggernaut* works. He introduced chalk dust and collaged canvas into the “pure” paint surface, engineering complicated spatial arrangements that referred to landscape and architectonic structures, works that were abstract but related directly to the real world. In Australia, he looked at local art and its influence is reflected in his *Oceania* series. Some of the *Oceania* paintings incorporate biblical texts, and texts generally became part of his pictorial vocabulary. He had also become increasingly influenced by such European painters as Velásquez, Goya, Édouard Manet and Henri Matisse, and begun using oil paint rather than acrylic. As with his use of the outline of the tidal pool in Maine, often his references to a particular painter will take the form of a single motif, an outline lifted directly from a particular painting and providing a structure within which he can improvise.

Having been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship he was then invited to sit on the committee, filling the place vacated by Jasper Johns. On the Guggenheim, as on many other committees and panels, he had a personal priority: “My role, my mission, as I saw it, was to look out for artists who are not located in the big centres, who might easily be overlooked for that reason, but who deserve to be recognised.” When he left Australia for the US, he taught for a time at Yale, and was then invited to head the art school at Boston University. “Because of Australia, I think I’d acquired a reputation as someone who fixes art schools.”

Looking around, he could see that painting was out of vogue in art schools generally. “But that didn’t mean there weren’t painters. So I decided that Boston should be a painting school, and students who wanted to paint would gravitate towards it, which is what happened.” He never saw teaching as an impediment to his own painting, partly because he’s always insisted that his own painting is integral to his teaching practice, and because he really likes the students. “I have my own studio in the school, but with an open door policy. Students are free to come and go. As for me, I have this immense feeling of gratitude that I can paint every day.”

John Walker: Painter is at The Dock, St George’s Terrace, Carrick-on-Shannon, until Sept 5.

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