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Review: Samuel Beckett: A Passion for Painting, Judith Wilkinson, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, June - September 2006

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**C** Judith Wilkinson

National Gallery of  
Ireland, Dublin

June – September  
2006



**SAMUEL BECKETT:  
A PASSION FOR PAINTING**

(opposite)  
 Gerard Byrne  
*Construction IV from existing photographs (After Giacometti). A re-construction based on the tree made by Alberto Giacometti for the 1961 Paris production of "En Attendant Godot" (Odéon Théâtre de France, 1961)*  
*The 1961 tree was subsequently lost / destroyed. Byrne's work is a speculative reconstruction of Giacometti's tree, based on existing photographs of the 1961 production.*  
 1961, 2004, courtesy the artist

In 1933 Samuel Beckett applied for the post of assistant curator at the National Gallery in London. Telling his friend Thomas MacGreevy, "I think I'd be happy there for a time amongst the pigeons... apart from my conoyership [sic] that can just about separate Uccello from a handsaw, I could cork the post as well as another... but it won't come off and I don't expect it to." Despite Beckett's false modesty, for as we have subsequently learned he had a keen knowledge of art history and an astute eye for talent, he never got the chance to try his hand at curating. With the recent flurry of centenary exhibitions being mounted

to celebrate Beckett's interest in the visual, one can't help but wonder what he might have made of the works being selected in his honour.

**Samuel Beckett: a passion for painting** is the latest offering in a programme of both national and international art events. Housed in the National Gallery's Millennium Wing and curated by head of exhibitions Fionnuala Croke, this essentially conservative project has a strong historical mandate which has been realised with almost militaristic precision. Drawing upon Beckett's relationship with the National Gallery as a youth, and later on his close friendships with Jack B Yeats and MacGreevy (the gallery's director from 1950 – 63), the exhibition focuses on Beckett's interest in painting as potentially galvanised by these three influential points of contact. An influence so important, this exhibition claims, it would persist throughout Beckett's creative life.

Constructing a pictorial shrine to Beckett, five consecutive chambers invite audiences to trace a strict chronology of works thought to have influenced his writing. The paintings exhibited range from Old Masters to works from the writer's own collection. Only two of the works shown are mentioned directly in Beckett's texts. The remaining selections follow a forensic logic of investigation, forcing causal links between paintings viewed by Beckett and images later depicted in his work. These fastidious associations inevitably bring to mind Beckett's caution to potential readers of Joyce, "The danger is in the neatness of identifications..."

This curatorial strategy, suffocated by its attendant fixation with uncovering biographical and pictorial inspiration for Beckett's genius, forces the works on display into a closed circuit relationship that begins and ends with the writer. Although the visual resem-

blances are sometimes striking, especially when an image of Beckett's muse Billie Whitelaw clutching her chest cross armed is displayed next to a Gheraducci Madonna in a similar stance, the analogies drawn from these superficial juxtapositions can exist only on a purely formal or at best narrative level.

Denying the complexity of Beckett's artistic corpus and refusing to acknowledge him as an accomplished visual artist in his own right, this kind of exhibition-making firmly re-situates Beckett in an existentialist humanist context. The images on display here are simply too 'Beckettian', a phrase which has become erroneously synonymous with the plight of the lonely traveller and dejected underling. They fit far too neatly into a post-war philosophical rhetoric – a limited historiographical reading of Beckett long abandoned by contemporary artists and scholars. But most importantly the obvious lack of Beckett's devilish sense of humour and indefatigable wit from this exhibition is the greatest loss to an Irish audience.

Fortunately the National Gallery's reserve has not been replicated by all of the Beckett centenary events, some of which have demonstrated a more enthusiastic energy and innovative approach. Collaborating with the Barbican in London for instance, the Gate Theatre mounted an exciting series of productions, including a new stage adaptation of *Eh Jo* by Canadian film director Atom Egoyan. The larger-than-life projection of Jo's face, which looms hauntingly over the audience in Egoyan's interpretation of Beckett's TV play, reminds us of the writer's own experimental advances in the worlds of film, sound, choreography and design. It is these creative encounters that have secured Beckett's importance as a vital precursor to current video, installation and performance art practice.

Another project which skilfully avoided the previously outlined pitfalls was the aptly entitled photographic diptych *Space of doubt* by Mary McIntyre at the Goethe Institut, Dublin. Allowing the viewer to formulate their own responses to an essentially anonymous image of an uninhabited institutional space, the work reflects far more accurately Beckett's preoccupation with uncertainty and lack of meaning.

Given the National Gallery's historical emphasis perhaps, we are expecting too much from this exhibition in terms of a more progressive curatorial strategy. And yet the exhibition itself makes gestures towards this potential. Riann Coulter's incisive commentary within the catalogue alludes to Beckett's resonance in contemporary art for instance and the inclusion of Gerard Byrne's *After Alberto Giacometti (1901 – 1966)*... is a playful red herring amongst an otherwise predictable grouping. A reconstruction of Giacometti's tree, designed in collaboration with Beckett for the 1961 production of *Godot* at the Odéon – Théâtre de France, it resembles the original with a tongue-in-cheek accuracy. Byrne's works of re-enactment, with their faltering fidelity to their origins, are ironic provocations to the very obsession with historical veracity demonstrated in this show.

For the Beckett enthusiast, this beautifully installed show will prove rewarding for its impressive depth of research and for the occasion to view some seldom-seen correspondences and rare artist's books. The centenary celebrations, however, present an ideal opportunity to develop new audiences for Beckett's work and to acknowledge his increasing relevance for current art practices and contemporary thought. This diverse and dynamic Beckett,

a Beckett that refuses to be fixed, evades the exhibition at the National Gallery and must be sought elsewhere.

Judith Wilkinson is an independent curator and PhD candidate at Goldsmiths College.