

PROFILE

Building the Foundations

SEÁN O SULLIVAN PROFILES THE RDS TAYLOR AWARD AND RDS STUDENT AWARDS EXHIBITION, HELD ANNUALLY AT THE RDS, DUBLIN.



Peter Murray, *This Land Again* (2009 Taylor Award Winner)

THE Royal Dublin Society's Student Art Awards and exhibition, held annually during July and August, have been a part of the RDS programme since 1860. They are one of many vehicles for the society's mission of promoting the arts, science, industry and agriculture within Ireland, a task to which the RDS has applied itself since 1731. The Student Art Awards' main prize, The Taylor Art Award began with an endowment in the will of Captain George Archibald Taylor in 1856. Taylor died a young man, and left his estate to a series of Trustees with the instruction that they endow his extensive art collection to a national art gallery, though none existed at the time. Upon his death the government formed the National Gallery to house his collection. His will also required that his Trustees give a sum of money to an outstanding art student every year. Although the RDS granted the first Taylor Art Award in 1860, research is still required on the identities of its recipients during its first fifteen years. The records date back to 1876, when Edward J. Brennan was the sixteenth winner, and likely the recipient of £100.

Previous Taylor Art Award winners have included Walter Osborne, William Orpen, Melanie le Brocq, Dorothy Cross and James Hanley. Speaking with Antony Lewis-Crosby, the Chairman of the Taylor Art Trust, I discovered that the Taylor Award is quite likely the oldest privately funded national art award in the world. As a whole, the RDS Student Art Awards are open to any full-time student from the Republic or Northern Ireland. However the RDS cannot grant the Taylor Award to anyone over the age of twenty-five. The RDS has given permission to rescind this rule in 2011; as Antony Lewis-Crosby has explained, he regretted where he had seen deserving work by mature students accepted for exhibition, but that was inadmissible for the main prize.⁽¹⁾

Each of the RDS Student Art Awards are administrated by the RDS, under its Arts Development team led by Sarah Ross. In selecting the prize winners the RDS convenes a judging panel composed of three invited experts in the visual arts. It also appoints the chairperson of the judging panel; in 2010 this will be Eddie O'Reilly. The Royal Hibernian Academy and the National Gallery of Ireland then appoint one panellist each. The RDS tasks these three with deliberating over the nearly five hundred submissions received for the Awards every year from colleges around the country, and to provide their feedback on entries in an overall written report.

The quality of work both submitted and displayed in the annual exhibition gives the public strong insight into changing currents in Irish culture. Lewis-Crosby notes, "talking to the judges we get a feeling as to the quality of the work that's coming in from the colleges, and what is outstanding in any particular year. Painting has come back, last year it was very strong. The winner in 2008 was a video artist, but then in 2009 the quality of the video work had weakened. Each year there are slightly different emphases coming through." Lewis-Crosby's father, worried about the standard of traditional methods when compared to new

tendencies in art, created the most recent addition to the annual endowments. The R.C. Lewis-Crosby Award recognises distinction in painting, which in the late 1980s was seemingly falling out of vogue with younger students—a trend that Lewis-Crosby notes as having reversed recently.

Antony Lewis-Crosby had previously served in a career operating orchestras in London, most recently as the Managing Director of the London Mozart Players. His responsibility to the Taylor Art Trust is primarily that of managing its financial health. The Trustees have had to reduce the endowment from a high point of €20,000 in 2007, to a still substantial €5,000 in 2010; Lewis-Crosby mentioned that the restructuring of the Award's finances was necessary in order to allow it to continue indefinitely. The prize should ideally give its recipient the freedom to practice as an artist, using the fund as support; for instance the winner of the 2008 prize, Robert Manson, used his money to obtain a 35mm print of his award-winning film. Lewis-Crosby points to Sir William Orpen, who won the Taylor Art Award on three occasions in his early career, and reputedly found it to be an extraordinary boost—he was soon to be in high demand as a portrait artist.

That the awards are privately funded presents an unusual challenge to their organisers, that of how to keep money flowing from private donors, and to exceptional young artists. Over the last two years, these challenges have been compounded by the economic difficulties facing all patrons of the arts. However, this has not prevented the RDS from ensuring that every award that it has endowed in the past still exists in 2010. Aside from the Taylor Art Award, these include the RDS James White Award for Drawing, the Patrick Freyer Award, the RDS Printmaking Award, the Henry Higgins Travelling Scholarship and the Peter O'Kane Solo Exhibition at Cavanacor Gallery.

In early 2011, the 150th anniversary of the Taylor Art Award will be celebrated, the RDS is organising a retrospective exhibition provisionally entitled 'RDS Taylor Art Award – Celebrating 150 Years,' that will gather some of the most noted works by past winners of the award. Patrick J. Murphy will curate the exhibition; he was previously the Art Advisor to the Office of Public Works and the Chairman of the Arts Council. Patrick Murphy is a lifelong patron of Irish art; he has donated more than 350 items from his personal collection to the University of Limerick, and mentions with some pride an episode where he prevented Dublin Airport Authority from auctioning 96 state-owned works by Nora McGuinness to foreign private collectors. The government subsequently gave the works to the Crawford Gallery, Cork.⁽²⁾

Murphy's selection will involve a difficult balancing act in choosing between acquiring expensive significant works, and smaller less celebrated pieces, a choice complicated by the cost of insuring the exhibition; some of the included works are valued in excess of €500,000. On behalf of the Taylor Art Trust, Murphy has selected fifty works by twenty-five Taylor

Art Award winners, and plans that the exhibition will receive a three-week run. The list of participants represents an unmistakably solid cross-section within the history of Irish art. The artists will include Walter Osborne, Roderic O' Connor, Sir William Orpen, Beatrice Elvery, W. J. Leech, Mary Swanzy, Patrick Tuohy, Harry Clarke, Seán Keating, Mainie Jellett, Nora McGuinness, Maurice McGonigal, Colin Middleton, Melanie le Brocq, Louis le Brocq, Hilary Heron, Anne Griffin Bernstorff, Dorothy Cross, Ronnie Hughes, James Hanley, Eamon O' Kane, Isobel Egan, Maria McKinney, Robert Manson and the winner of the 2010 competition.⁽³⁾ As Patrick Murphy explained, his motivation in becoming involved in the exhibition was that he could secure works that remain unseen by the public at large—"it is rare that artists of this quality are put together, but I did not become involved in the exhibition to just borrow works from the National Gallery of Ireland and IMMA, because people can see those. I want to get masterpieces out of private collections, particularly those ones around the country that the public have never gotten to see."

Seán O Sullivan

The deadline for application to the RDS Student Art Awards is the 18th June. The exhibition 'The RDS Taylor Art Award – Celebrating 150 Years' will open at the RDS in early 2011. For further information, visit www.rds.ie/arts

NOTES

1. Quotations concerning the RDS Student Awards and the Taylor Award were taken from a conversation between the author and The Chairman of the Taylor Art Trust, Antony Lewis-Crosby, 22 March 2010.

2. Quotations concerning the RDS Taylor Award Retrospective Exhibition are taken from a conversation between the author and The Curator of 'The RDS Taylor Art Award – Celebrating 150 Years', Patrick J. Murphy, 22 March 2010.

3. The artists represented in the RDS Taylor Award Retrospective Exhibition are correct at the time of print.

Sarah Ross, Arts Development Executive for the RDS provided extensive information for this article.

Taylor Art Award Winners 1980 – 2009

1980 Stephen Rinn, Eamonn Vincent Sinnott, Robert Russell, Regina H. Hughes (Commended), Donnacha Mac Gabhann, Peter Jones, John O' Leary.	Ronnie Hughes, Padraig Hughes, Margaret Morrison.
1981 Mary Burke, Stephen Rinn (Commended) Donnacha Mac Gabhann, Maureen Cahill, Mary P. O'Connor, Eamonn Vincent Sinnott, Heather Winfred White, Adrienne M. Diamond.	1990 Maureen O'Connor, Gary Clarke, Helen Richmond, Mark Orange.
1982 Angela P.E. Shanahan, Josephine A. Fogarty, Gretta O'Rourke, Kenneth J. Donfield, Anne Siggins, Geraldine O'Malley, Marie W. O'Connell, Attracta Madden, Stephen Rinn.	1991 James Hanley, Katherina Park, Siobhan O Leary.
1983 Anne Crowley, Mary Philomena O'Connor, Gerard P. Sweeney.	1992 Helen Finney, Davis Quinn.
1984 Dorothy Mae Smith, Joanna Robertson, Thomas A. McGuirk, Denis Lonergan.	1993 Conor Walton, Cora Burke, Nicola Bunbury.
1985 Ellen Moore, Annaraoi Wyer, Yvonne P. Blackmore, Catherina J. Goodhue, Noel Guilfoyle.	1994 Louise Norton.
1986 Helen McAllister, Mary Madigan, Annraoi Wyer, Margaret McLoughlin.	1995 Marie Foley.
1987 Alice Mary Power, Dorothy Ann Daly, Jane Bowe.	1996 Eamonn O'Kane, Thomas Mulcahy.
1988 Jason Roche, Mary Kirby.	1997 Breda Marron, Julianne Neville, Susan Connolly, Eoin Llewellyn.
1989 Helen Richmond,	1998 Eoin Llewellyn.
	1999 Neva Elliot, Isobel Egan.
	2000 Aideen Cahill, Rosemary O'Gorman.
	2001 Richard Gavin, Jessica Brouder.
	2002 Jennifer Cunningham, Yvonne Lee.
	2003 Sarah Fitzpatrick.
	2004 Ray Tsang.
	2005 Maria McKinney.
	2006 Liam Ryan.
	2007 Ceri Garfield, Clive Moloney, Sam Keogh, Harriet Tahany.
	2008 Robert Manson.
	2009 Peter Murray.