Sean Hillen - 100 Works

"Hillen's unique perspective on the world makes you smile and look again. There is always something more, something that slips in and lingers until you realise there is no one pattern to perception but many."

Global Dóras

Sean Hillen is an artist familiar to everyone with an appreciation of contemporary Irish art. This is perhaps due to the fact that his distinctive work has been featured on the covers of many books and magazines. This collective public awareness is problematic as what we know of the artist's work is a mere fraction of his prodigious output. We only think we know Hillen and have so much more to learn from this innovative practitioner.

Hillen is an inventor; an alchemist of new realms in his collages. He takes the known and the unknown, the possible and the impossible, the actual and the indefinite, the real and the imagined, the historic and the fantastic and he combines these ingredients into a fresh recipe that has an altogether novel flavour on the palette of the mind. He can look at a subject repeatedly with a different perspective every time. He reminds me of Ray Bradbury in The Martian Chronicles writing about the collisions between aliens and humankind, their differing worlds and perspectives. Bradbury presents his multiple expressions of this one theme and each is illuminating in itself but it also expands on the overall portfolio of stories. They work independently but are interconnected like Hillen's compositions.

100 Works is the first major solo exhibition of Sean Hillen in Northern Ireland, and is focused on his practice as a collagist, with works dating back to the early 1980's. It is retrospective in feel and scale yet the term has been resisted by the artist. He grew up in Newry during the Troubles and studied in London at LCP and at the Slade School. Within 100 Works everything was selected by the artist. There was no external curator as the artist was essentially conducting an excavation of his archived works. It is approximately half of everything Hillen made. He has had this project in mind for some years. A call out was issued to public collections and a number of private collectors that the artist had never met. He had a very comprehensive response and consequently an extensive range of original works to exhibit. Many of the works featured have been rarely-or-never seen.

The artist began the 'collaging process out of necessity. I had the photographs but people had limited interest in these as they were so I began embroidering them to make them more complex and vivid. He cites the influence of Dada and the British Pop Movement, particularly the independents Eduardo Paolozzi and Richard Hamilton; both were present in the form of postcards pinned on his workspace wall as a student. Consequently Hillen had to reconcile his experience of sixties pop culture; an intensely optimistic time with Northern Ireland of the seventies; comparatively bleak and volatile. In this 'crucible the work was formed' and it is hardly surprising that there is a fusion of opposites within Hillen's practice. The collages act as a discourse of a kind; they are open. Each work is an invitation to the viewer to start a conversation.

His first major series of collage works was focused on The Troubles and this was followed by a subsequent series 'IRELANDIS' that was described as 'the most vivid and emblematic...of the hopes and fears of 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland'. In 1995 at his first IRELANDIS exhibition, Seamus Heaney remarked; Seán Hillen's art obviously is born out of an awareness of division - out of being in two places at one time,