



From the Forge

PATRICK J MURPHY discusses the development of John Behan's distinguished career as he marks his 70th birthday and prepares for two exhibitions later this year

1 John Behan:
Llanac Bull 2006
bronze 106.68 x
35.56 x 53.54cm
Photo: Dean Kelly

2 John Behan
working on
Wings of the World
for Shenzhen,
China 1992

3 *Fighting Bulls*
2006 bronze,
unique 15.24 x
40.64 x 15.24cm
Photo: Dean Kelly

4 *Arrival* 2000
bronze
9.14m x 9.14m
United Nations Plaza
New York, USA

John Behan is seventy years of age this year and marks this important birthday with an upcoming exhibition of new work at the Lavit Gallery in Cork next September, followed soon afterwards by a major exhibition at the prestigious Beaux Art Gallery in Bath, which specialises in featuring the works of important modern sculptors. Behan at seventy is an impressive, successful artist. He has come a long way from his early childhood in the inner city neighbourhood of Sheriff Street, to being one of the most popular and best patronised of living Irish artists, with an international reputation. From earliest childhood, he yearned to become an artist. At fourteen years of age he was haunting the public library in Marino, devouring the contents of the little pocket books on art, featuring such Renaissance masters as Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. Old master drawings were also then a source of intense inspiration for the budding artist, as was the almost daily sight of vast herds of cattle being driven down to Dublin port for live export by drovers, from the cattle market near Prussia Street, then known to Dubliners as Cowtown. No wonder the apprenticed metalworker soon began to fashion images of sturdy bullocks

from scrap metals, before quickly graduating to modelling and casting in bronze. First though, he received a thorough training in welding and forging iron, copper and brass from the blacksmith Paddy McElroy who himself developed his own artistic style and taught the young Behan how to express himself in sculpture.

The first work of art that Behan ever made was a bull, he told John Quinn, in an interview for the radio series 'My Education'. From this apprenticeship it was a logical progression to study art at the National College of Art in Dublin, before intellectual curiosity and single-minded ambition drove him further afield for broader study, first in London and afterwards in Oslo, then returning home to pursue a career as a full-time, professional artist. It was by no means the best of times, particularly for a young sculptor. There were then few enough patrons of contemporary art, and those that bought the works of young artists tended to confine themselves to paintings. Oisín Kelly was then a senior Irish sculptor who made powerful figurative sculptures



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when occasionally commissioned but had to supplement his meagre artistic earnings by teaching at St Columba's College.

Behan was impressed by his flights of birds and in the years to follow was influenced by this artist and created many small and large sculptures of birds in flight and shoals of fish, cast in bronze.

John Behan first exhibited at the Irish Exhibition of Living Art in 1960. Soon he became a member of a like-minded group of young figurative Irish artists known as The Independents, which included such influential figures of today such as, Brian Bourke, Michael Kane, James McKenna, Charles Cullen, Edward Delaney and Joseph O'Connor. The new art was vigorous and robustly representational in an expressionist style which went against the current styles then prevalent in Ireland, including abstraction coming in from abroad, and conservatism within the membership of the Royal Hibernian Academy. The Independents were against the establishment of the day and had to struggle for exposure and recognition. They exhibited together in 1965 and then set up the historic Project Arts Centre in 1967, which became a venue for many subsequent exhibitions and began to



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attract newer, younger audiences. Behan was a founding member of the co-operative. A few years later he took the much needed initiative of setting up the Dublin Art Foundry with colleague Peter O'Brien, thus enabling young Irish sculptors to cast their own works in bronze at reasonable cost and to learn the intricacies of that process at the same time.

Since those early days Behan's reputation has gone onwards and upwards. Writer Fred Johnston has described him as 'arguably Ireland's foremost sculptor' in a *Sunday Times* review. Critic Brian Fallon does not go that far, but enthusiastically traces the development of his career in the publication *The Work of John Behan, Sculpture 1960-1994*, published on the occasion of the artist's retrospective exhibition as part of the Galway Arts Festival 1994, in which he recalls what a stir Behan's small bronze bulls made at the outset of his career. They still do forty years later. It is a feature of Behan's art that he returns again and again to his favourite themes, particularly that of the bull, fashioning numerous variations of his chosen subjects. For example, the *Charging Bull* of 1994 (Fig 8) leads on to the witty and inventive

5 *Good Friday Fish*
2008 bronze 40.64 x 58.42 x 10.16cm
Photo: Cast

6 *Two Warriors*
1974 bronze
45 x 34 x 19cm
AIB Collection

7 *Ghost Famine Ship*
2000 bronze
58.42 x 58.42 x 12.7cm

8 *Charging Bull*
1994 bronze and steel
36 x 89 unique
Photo: Whyte's

9 *Cúchulainn in Chariot*
2006 bronze, unique
55.88 x 20.32 x 76.2cm
Photo: Dean Kelly

Woolly Bull of 2000 and the extraordinary *Llanac Bull* of 2006, which is one of the finest works of art he has created (Fig 1). In this recent masterpiece, he emphasises the strength and the menacing virility of the mighty creature in an expressionist tour-de-force which departs from realistic representation to give us a truly wonderful depiction of a great beast of the imagination. Then, just to demonstrate that he has lost none of his representational powers in that same year, he produced the realistically modelled *Fighting Bulls* with horns locked and bodies straining (Fig 3).

John Behan has acknowledged his admiration for the art of giants of 20th-century art Pablo Picasso and Henry Moore. He is fascinated by Picasso's creative inventiveness, for example, his ability to turn the saddle and handlebars of a bicycle into the seminal sculpture *Head of a Bull, Metamorphosis*, 1943. Likewise, he has admired Picasso's early cubist bronze *Head* of 1909 and his sculpture of a goat, fashioned principally from a discarded shopping basket. These may have prompted Behan to model the striking portrait image of poet Seamus Heaney and the witty depiction titled *Paddy McGinty's Goat* in 2006, which were exhibited that year in The Kenny Gallery in Galway.

Behan's reputation grew rapidly in the 1970s. He was awarded the gold medal of the Oireachtas Exhibition in 1972 and made an associate member of the Royal Hibernian Academy in 1973. He was now reading voraciously about Ireland's past, particularly publications on Fenian mythology. This became a fruitful source of other imagery for many years to come. The 1974 bronze *Two Warriors* in the collection of AIB may owe some debt of inspiration to Henry Moore's *Warrior with Shield* of 1953-4, and is as close to abstraction as Behan was likely to go (Fig 6). He made many sculptures in bronze and assorted metals in the decades to follow, on themes from the 'Fiannaíocht' saga, culminating in the noble *Cúchulainn in Chariot* of 2006 (Fig 9), in which the great warrior stands clutching his spear and shield, in preparation for battle, just as Don Quixote was depicted in 1951 by French sculptor Germaine Richier. The scale of his sculpture began to increase in the 1970s and 1980s.



Years later, after making the *Winged Man* for Ennis in Co Clare in 1990, he was commissioned by a new admirer Tony Ryan of Guinness Peat Aviation to make the large Icarus-like sculpture of a winged figure for Shenzhen in China in 1992 (Fig 2). The artist's obsession with the themes of famine and emigration now followed and culminated in his being awarded a major State commission to install a tall three-masted Famine Ship at Murrisk near Westport, County Mayo, looking out towards spectacular Clew Bay. This was so successful and so well received in government circles that he was soon afterwards officially commissioned to make the massive bronze famine ship titled *Arrival* (Fig 4) for the plaza of the United Nations in New York in 2000. This led to the making of many maquettes and smaller versions in bronze of famine ships, an outstanding example of which is the unique *Ghost Famine Ship* of 2003 where the rigging and the flattened bodies of the expired emigrants coalesce into a dense horizontal pattern of powerful moving abstracted imagery (Fig 7). An atypical but superb public sculpture is his *Equality Emerging* of 2001, a female figure located near the Salmon Weir Bridge in Galway City.

Behan is now an established name in Irish art and has travelled extensively to countries as far away as China and Vietnam where the plight of boat people moved him to conjure up new images of indigenous fishermen and boats. Travels in Greece and Cyprus inspired him to make haunting bronze images from Greek mythology and even ancient crumbling dwellings. In the years to follow he made several variations on the theme of *Good Friday Fish*, the most recent showing sailors holding aloft a giant fish in a narrow craft, reminiscent of a Norse longboat with a dragon prow (Fig 5). He has been elected to membership of Aosdána and the Royal Hibernian Academy and awarded many prizes and honours culminating in an honorary Doctorate of Literature from NUI, Galway in 2000.

John Behan has now been making sculpture, drawings, etchings, and even sometimes paintings, for more than forty years. His energy and his industry in his seventieth year are as vital as ever, and one hopes that his creativity and his zest for life will lead on to many further successes and achievements. He is a charming, generous artist with his own unique artistic personality who has inspired and helped many younger artists, and given pleasure to legions of art lovers. ■

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John Behan, *New Work*, Lavit Gallery, Cork
16-27 September;
John Behan, *New Sculpture*, Beaux Arts Bath, UK
20 October - 15 November 2008.

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