

DENIS



A Modern Man

Paintings & Drawings by Denis McBride
25.09.26 – 02.10.26

No one ever seemed to know what he was up to. But if we can say that Denis McBride had a project it was to share his love for all the exuberant inventiveness of twentieth century modernist art. Denis's art was a passionate outpouring from a man who wished that others could see what he saw and to adore what he adored.

To stand in a room filled with Denis's art is to enter into a conversation with someone for whom the experiments of the previous century were not a passing fad, but something vital that had to be shared. Look - he seems to say - how brilliant Matisse was. Look at what Picasso gave us! Look at Paul Klee's boundless imagination and Kazimir Malevich's revolutionary vision. There's Andy Warhol and Josef Beuys and Georgia O'Keefe. Oh! And you can even find early computer art here.

Denis was trained at the Belfast School of Art during its golden age in the 1960s. He then went to Hornsey College of Art in 1964, where Pop Art ruled and artists like Peter Green championed progressive ideas.

At this crucial moment Denis won a scholarship to study at the Paul Klee Institute in Bern. The philosophy of Klee and the Bauhaus guided him as an artist and a teacher until he retired in 1997. Like the founders of the Bauhaus, Denis possessed a compulsive need to experiment in everything he did, whether in terms of ideas, form or material.

Unlike his Bauhaus forerunners - Klee, Itten and Kandinsky - McBride had no time for esoteric spiritualism. Denis's pictures come from the darker, earthier parts of the human psyche. One of his greatest achievements as an artist was to show that the aesthetics of interwar modernism could be adapted to subject matter as raw and malformed as Belfast in the 1970s and 1980s. The critic, Clement Greenburg, wrote that Klee's art is the art of the neat Swiss Canton. Denis's art is the art of a city losing its mind. He dives into the messiness of human existence and is unafraid to poke around the parts of the mind that most people try to ignore. Nonetheless, what marks his work above all else is a deep sense of humanity.

This humanity was particularly apparent in Denis's conduct as a teacher. He was tender and nurturing. He had little time for art school glamour boys, instead encouraging the quieter, less certain students. As someone once said, "Denis had the ability to make the comfortable uncomfortable and the uncomfortable comfortable." And he would often take it upon himself to tutor those he deemed too green to pass the art school's entrance exams so that they could try again the next year.

This exhibition, then, is an opportunity for Denis McBride to teach us again. Look at Denis's boundless imagination! Look at his joyful use of colour! Look at his wit, skill and bravery as a painter! Look at what we have been missing all these years.

