

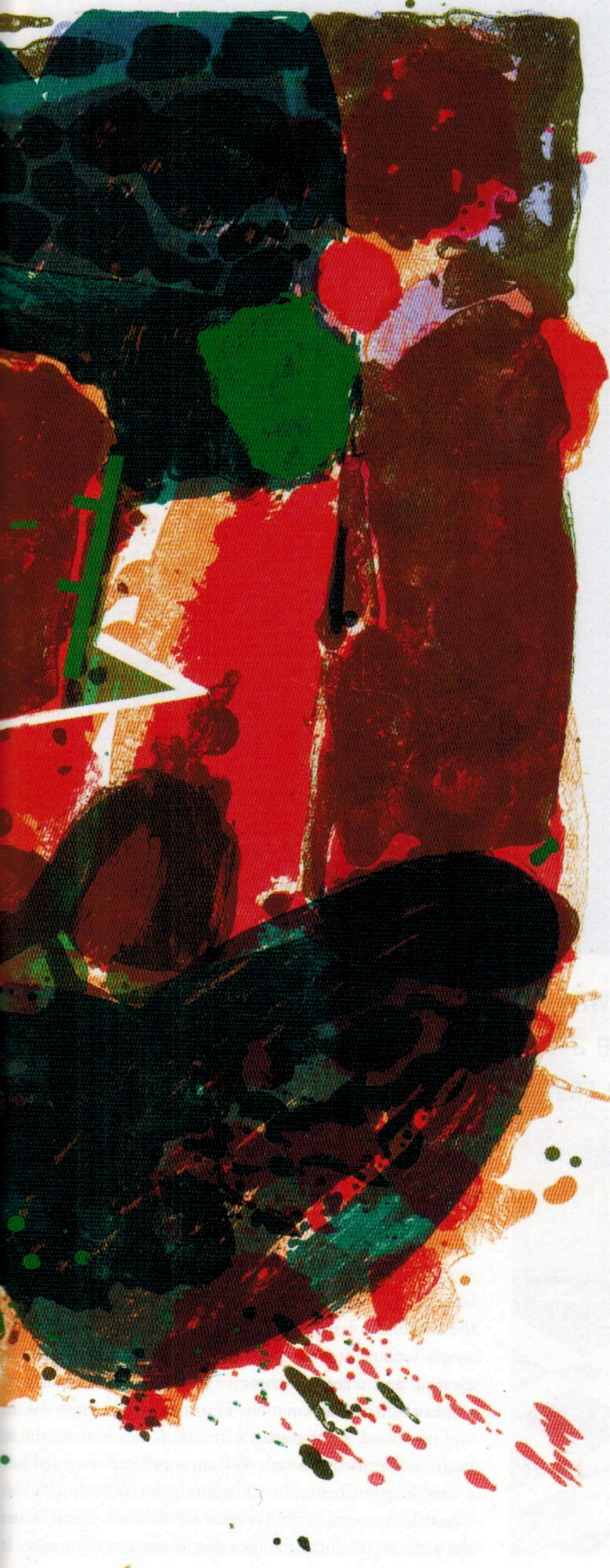


Revelation

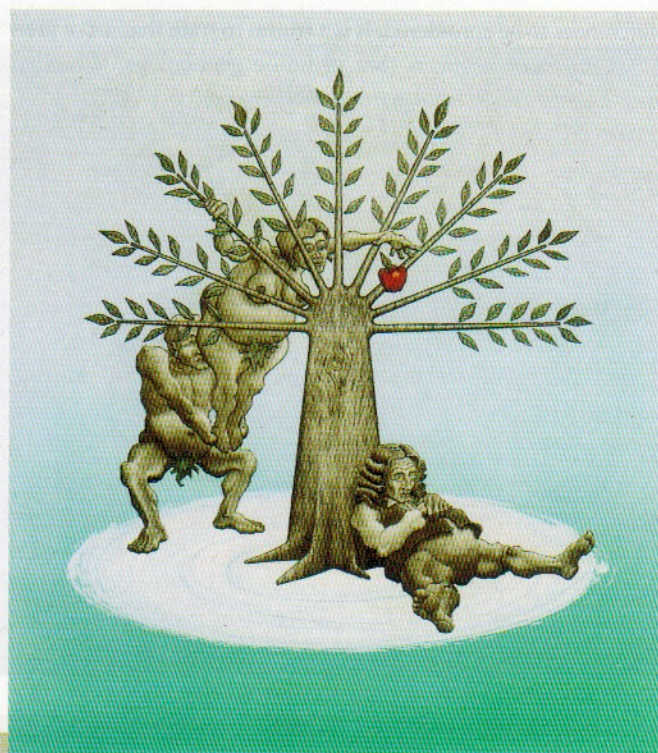
ANNE HODGE previews a collaborative exhibition featuring contemporary prints by Graphic Studio Dublin, whose point of inspiration was the permanent collection at the National Gallery of Ireland

1 TERENCE GRAVETT
6-12-17 2008
screenprint
50 x 65cm

2 KELVIN MANN
*When man touched
the apple he fell,
when the apple
touched man he
rose* 2008
etching 34 x 30cm



A.P. Zirkweh 07



Twenty-nine contemporary prints are the focus of this exciting spring Print Gallery exhibition at the National Gallery. Each print was made especially for the show by contemporary artists, members of Graphic Studio Dublin and invited printmakers and artists. In 2005 Graphic Studio Dublin approached the National Gallery of Ireland with an idea for a collaborative exhibition featuring contemporary prints.¹ Founded in 1960, Graphic Studio Dublin was the first fine art print studio to be established in Ireland. Based on the model founded by the influential British printmaker Stanley William Hayter (1901-1988), it has always been pioneering; teaching, facilitating and promoting all aspects of printmaking (See IAR March Diary, p32). Graphic Studio has recently moved to new premises at Distillery House, off the North Circular Road, and will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary in 2010. Following much discussion and planning the exhibition entitled 'Revelation' gradually became a reality. Participating artists were encouraged to look to the National Gallery of Ireland's rich collection of paintings, drawings and prints for inspiration. Works in the collection sparked off ideas, but, in general, the finished prints are not direct translations from the paintings or drawings.

One might reasonably ask: Why put on an exhibition of contemporary prints in the National Gallery of Ireland whose venerable and much loved collections reflect its role to collect and display high quality art of the past? Experience during five years as a curator in the NGI has shown me that visitors are excited by and interested in seeing contemporary works placed alongside works from our own 'venerable' collections. Recent Print Gallery exhibitions which have included works by living artists have been popular. Such juxtaposition allows for comparisons to be made, for connections to be traced and for similarities and

differences to be considered. It is a truism to state that art of previous generations affects that of future generations. Whether the artist borrows from past ideas, subjects or techniques or rejects and rebels against those ideas; 'old' art always has some impact upon the endeavours of new generations of artists.

Of the twenty-nine artists involved in this exhibition, eighteen are printmakers who devised and made their works themselves. These prints vary greatly in terms of style and technique: everything from painstaking mezzotint to painterly carborundum, from colourful etchings to colourless collography (embossing). The eleven invited painters and non-print artists worked with two master printers from the Graphic Studio. These expert printmakers, Robert Russell and Tom Phelan, helped the artists to translate their ideas into print form. They advised on inks, papers and techniques and helped in the technical processes of creating a plate and actually printing the etched image on to paper. Both master printers have contributed their own prints to the exhibition too; Russell's print (Fig 4) is a vibrant coloured mezzotint vision of St Paul's rearing horse in an apocalyptic landscape while Phelan's is an abstract etching on walnut with an intriguing title *Woman with red ruff*.

It was amazing to watch an established painter like Séan McSweeney (Fig 3) at work in the Graphic Studio's workshop with Robert Russell. Although his plan for the finished image was very strong and definite, McSweeney relied totally on the printer's expertise and advice in printing the carborundum plate and expressed a childlike wonder at how colours could be manipulated by wiping, overprinting and dampening the paper. Snatches of conversation, overheard when the printer and painter stood back to consider the newly revealed proof just peeled off the press, illustrate how closely the two must work together to create a result: 'It's lovely here – the yellow is able to take the blue ... maybe a brushstroke of yellow under the blue? ... I'm happy with the white ... yes it's cleaner ... that side doesn't bother me so much ... the density of the blue is different ... the paper might have been a bit dry ... maybe the wiping was different ...'

Special days were organised where the artists could visit the National Gallery's Print Room to view works on paper, icons and other works usually kept in store. A broad selection was taken out, ranging from delicate Italian old master drawings to the beautifully drawn and often hilarious illustrated letters of the Irish artist William Orpen (1878-1931). About fifteen artists came into the Print Room on these days and it was fascinating to observe them at work. Some immediately donned the regulation white gloves and enthusiastically explored the boxes of drawings, gasping at the beauty and age of the objects within. Others seemed distinctly underwhelmed by the works on display. Most were silent while they examined the drawings.

It was interesting to consider what might inspire the artists and to wonder how inspiration would be revealed through the finished prints. A number showed particular interest in the Gallery's icon collection. They seemed drawn in by the mystery and holiness that emanates from these small paintings, created as a way of worshipping God. Some artists chose oil paintings



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on display in the main rooms as the starting point for their prints. Many are very familiar with the Gallery and have favourite paintings they like to return to.

It was decided not to include the artist's statement in the label hung beside each print on display. As a result the visitor to the exhibition has the freedom to interpret the work through simply looking at and thinking about the printed image. It's an exciting and enjoyable thing to do – to approach an artwork without notes or explanation. The only foothold into the 'meaning' of a work or the artist's intention (aside from the image itself) is the title, although this can sometimes be a red herring, a case in point being Tom Phelan's print *Woman with red ruff*. The title of a work of art has great significance. It can be used by the artist to reinforce the idea put forward in the image. It can



3 SEÁN MCSWEENEY
Red landscape 2008
carborundum
50 x 65cm

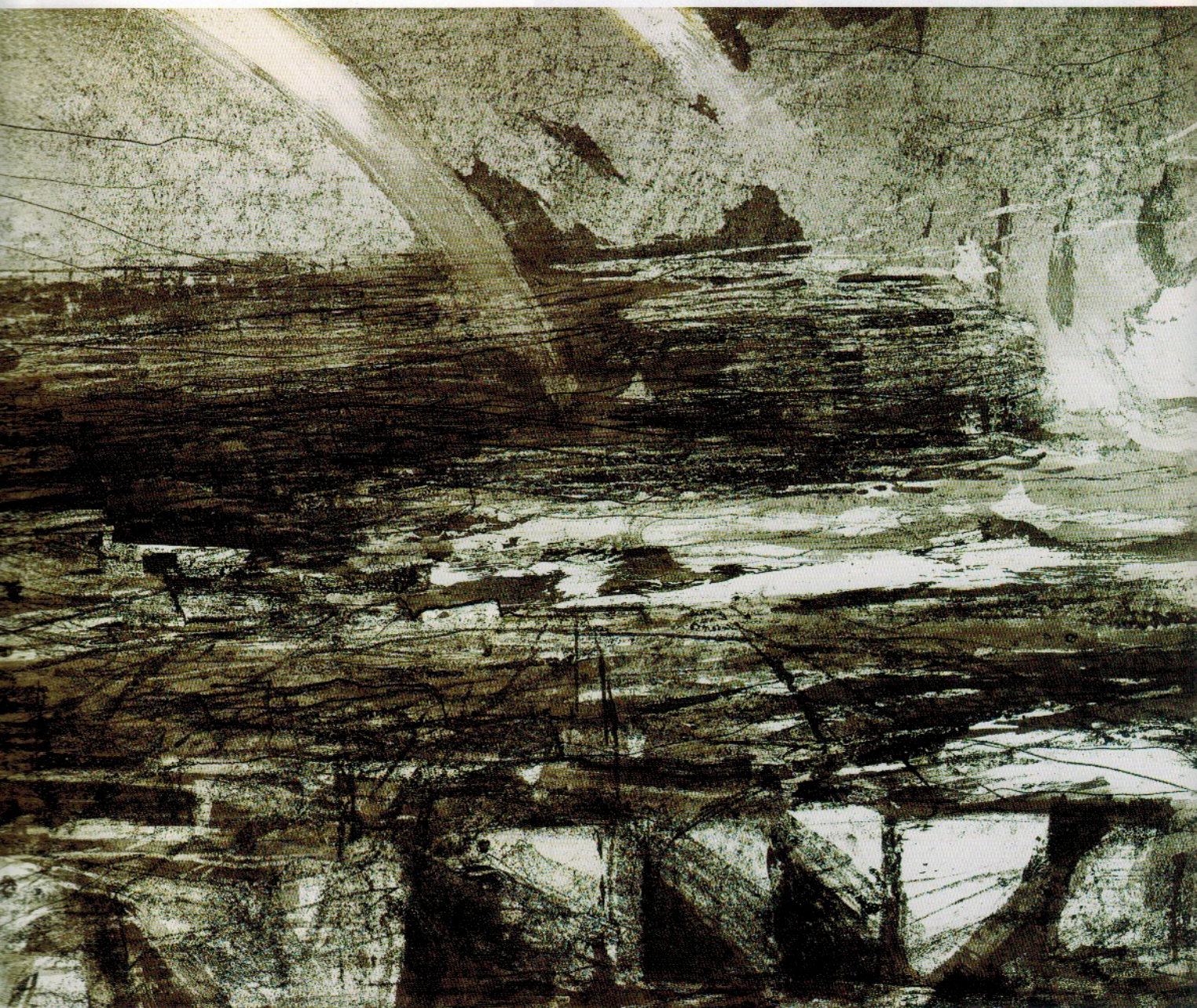
4 ROBERT RUSSELL
Road to Damascus
2008 mezzotint
32 x 49cm

5 JEAN BARDON
Annunciation lilies
2008 etching with
gold leaf 40 x 21cm

arrest attention, help enlighten or even confuse the viewer.

A good number of artists chose to create prints that explore Judeo-Christian notions of revelation. This is probably unsurprising given that religious paintings and drawings make up a large section of the Gallery's collection, and some of the most dramatic and iconic works on permanent display are biblical or religious scenes. A number of the prints including Jean Bardon's richly coloured image *Annunciation lilies*, (Fig 5) feature the lily which appears in many of the Gallery's religious pictures. Other artists chose to explore non faith-based aspects of the theme. The works discussed below give a sense of the wide-ranging interpretations of the theme.

Francis Danby's large oil painting *The Opening of the Sixth Seal*, (NGI 167), which hangs prominently in the Irish Rooms inspired many artists including Terence Gravett. Gravett's loud, dramatic lithograph has some of the excitement, confusion and energy of a child's painting (Fig 1). The white slash brings meaning to the mass of bold overlaid shapes and colours and prompts one to connect it with Danby's vivid representation of the apocalypse, as described in the Book of Revelation 6: 12-17. Gravett however skips over any religious significance in Danby's painting and



The composition slowly reveals itself, like a landscape emerging out of mist and spray, but at the same time things remain hidden

6 DONALD TESKEY
Headland revisited
2008 etching
53 x 68cm

7 MAEV LENAGHAN
A little bird told me,
2008 etching
15 x 30cm

8 MARTIN GALE
Circus tent 2008
aquatint 18 x 29cm

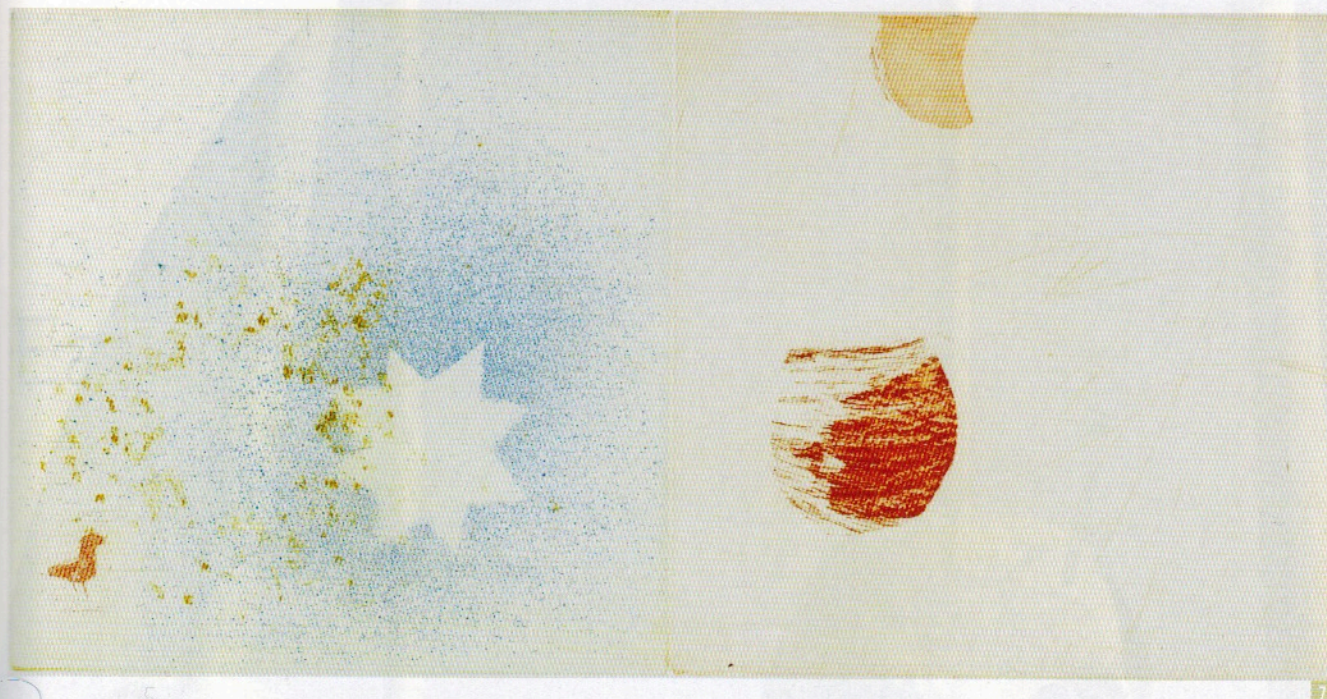
compares it instead to Cecil B de Mille's epic biblical movies.

Kelvin Mann's humorous print (Fig 2) neatly draws together two divergent aspects of revelation. He creates a fantastical image showing Eve, egged on by Adam, getting ready to drop the apple on Isaac Newton's head. In fact, this image is not as bizarre as it first seems. Although traditionally Newton has been portrayed as a rationalist, recent research has shown that he was a deeply religious man who believed that before the fall of Adam and Eve all the laws of science were known by humans but had been forgotten. Newton put forward the view that he was simply 'rediscovering' old knowledge.

Revelation in nature features as the starting point for some artists. One can work out that the painter Donald Teskey's atmospheric print is a coastal landscape from the angular cliffs in the foreground and the rainbow arching over the whole; the title: *Headland revisited* (Fig 6) confirms this. However the over-

layering of textures and marks makes it difficult to decipher where land ends and sea begins. This print, inspired by Nathaniel Hone the Younger's sketchy yet expressive late 19th-century landscape watercolours, is incredibly busy – the whole sheet is covered with marks, streaks and textures. The composition slowly reveals itself, like a landscape emerging out of mist and spray, but at the same time things remain hidden.

Maev Leneghan's delicate print *A little bird told me ...* (Fig 7) is comprised of two delicately etched plates printed side by side. The first depicts a tiny bird facing a large white eight-sided star, while the second seems to show a primitive earthenware vessel. Interestingly the Star of Bethlehem was traditionally depicted as an eight-sided star. Although not obviously connected, her starting point was a 17th-century Dutch painting by Nicolaes Maes *Vertumnus and Pomona* (NGI 347). Leneghan's print is a palimpsest made up of faint marks, perhaps accidental, perhaps



deliberate. Through its simplicity and mystery, it captures an essential aspect of our lives. We go about our mundane daily business but occasionally catch a glimpse of something amazing or beautiful, beyond the ordinary.

Sharon Lee uses the seed as a symbol of revelation. Her depiction of the varying shapes and forms of seeds makes us think about the amazing revelation of nature: a small often dull looking object when placed in the right environment grows and reveals itself in a totally different form as a plant with flowers, fruit and leaves. Lee gives quirky visual form to the time honoured phrase 'the seeds of inspiration'.

A circus tent in a rural landscape is Martin Gale's visualisation of the concept of revelation (Fig 8). His print evokes memories of childhood, of the excitement and joy of coming across something wonderful unexpectedly. The circus tent promises drama and thrills, a taste of the unusual, the exotic. Baudelaire stated that literary genius was being able to summon up childhood at will. John Banville holds that: 'Practically all art springs from childhood, because that's where we have experience in its absolute raw state – practically everything that hit you then was coming at you for the first time, it was all new and brightly lit.'²

From the beginning this exhibition has been a collaborative effort. The Gallery has worked closely with the artists and Graphic Studio administrators to bring about a unique exhibition of new works that interpret a complex and philosophical concept. As curator the revelation for me was that assumptions cannot be made about how artists will interpret a brief. The 'meaning' of a print or any artwork, what it is 'about', is elastic and requires the viewer to spend time with the work. Inspiration is a strange creature, it cannot easily be defined or pinned down. It is clear that, although the art of today continues to draw from the art of yesterday, it always manages to say something new, to put forward the ideas and thoughts of its creator and sometimes even highlights the concerns and live issues



of the day. In chapter one of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* the narrator admonishes the reader: 'Slow down; you think Creation happens in a rush? So then neither does revelation ...'.³ These newly created prints need time to reveal themselves to us in an unhurried way. In a world whose pace is ever-increasing, it is the artist who stands back and views our surroundings so that an alternative perspective can be offered for consideration. In this exhibition twenty-nine artists share their interpretation of the concept of revelation. The resulting panorama is more than the sum of its constituent individual parts: it is a revelation about revelation, revealed to anyone who finds time to view it as a whole. ■

ANNE HODGE is Curator of Prints and Drawings at the National Gallery of Ireland.

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Photographer Roy Hewson.

Revelation, National Gallery of Ireland, 9 April – 24 August, 2008.

1 Jean Bardon, a member of Graphic Studio, came up with the original idea.

2 John Banville, *Sunday Times Culture Magazine*, 18 November, 2007.

3 Salman Rushdie *The Satanic Verses*, (Ch.1), Viking, 1988.