



The Locus+ Archive

Shane Cullen

Fragmens sur les Institutions Republicaines IV. (1996)

Shane Cullen: An Artist of the Peacefires?
Mic Moroney

The serpent of Republican politics lies coiled up at the knot-veined, masculist root of Shane Cullen's broadly conceptualist oeuvre: an extended homage to radicalism, discipline and ideology in the form of an expanding symbol-system of codified political and mythic extremism, now gaining currency in the white "liberal spaces" of Europe's art galleries.

Drawing its neo-classical style from the visual vocabularies of empires, nation-states and revolutionary political movements, Cullen's work often draws its content directly from the texts and iconography of various real and idealised Republics (Classical, American, French, Soviet, Irish). With their pristine visual textures and clean finish, his paintings, carvings and bronzes (or, where economics dictate, less ostensibly heroic materials like plaster, high-grade styrofoam or board) evince a sort of grim nostalgia for utopian revolutionary ideologies. Always remaining suggestively close to the bloody upheavals of their introduction, it's as if he were illustrating a heightened version of history as yet unrealised - or even unwritten, apart from certain revolutionary tracts, or perhaps the works of Adorno and Nietzsche.

A lot of Cullen's work in Dublin during the 1980s was focused around busy, classic-figurative reformulations of historically disputatious symbols and insignia: the bright, colourful, semiotic anarchy of his triptych, *Union Standard* (1987) - an ornate, concentrated logography of everything from slavery to Chinese Communism; the sombre bronze-relief plaques of *Fragmens Sur Les Institutions Républicaines II*, (1989) - the very title, of course, doffing a cap to the manifestos of Saint-Juste - with their occultish evocations of Rome, Fascism and the French republic; the canvas, *Fragmens Sur Les Institutions Républicaines III*, now the property of the Republic of Ireland's Arts Council, depicting a rampant young Napoleon's head (Grammar); DDR state emblems refracted through Freemasonic compass-and-squares; or re-rendered early posters advertising land and bounty in the unclaimed Americas (California, Cornucopia of the World).

Around 1990, Cullen shifted towards large, often monochrome, text-dominated panels and canvases, and the self-imposed labours of hand-painting a series of long, sometimes obscurely chosen tenetic texts in large-format industrial-scale displays: 1950s Irish labour legislation (*The Factories Act, 1955*, painted in 1990); the delicate implacability of *Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe Communiqué*, (1987): *Concern of the Warsaw Pact* (1991); or the hewn-in-plaster, *Parliament na mBan* (The Women's Parliament) (1992), a tiny, samizdat-style book-bound transcription, in intricate Gaelic script, of a text from the early 17th century - chipped, character by character, into three large slabs of cool plaster (now being cast in bronze). Most recently, he completed a

canvas begun in 1994, *Double Entry*, a painting of the Irish Health and Safety Regulations Act, inset with two gaily coloured images; a pornographic anal/vaginal double-penetration close-up, and a green, Celtified piece of Russian militaristic propaganda painting.

Whatever syntax you might impose on it, Cullen's work represents a series of harsh, implied Ur-political critiques, using a powderkeg of sometimes subversive raw materials which are rarely mediated, other than by elevation to the status of coolly depersonalised monuments and memorials. Since 1993, Cullen has gathered them all under the rubric of his soi-disant Council for the Preservation of Monuments to Martyrdom and Resistance. The most recent and largest addition (both in terms of sheer scale and time spent on it) is the great text-wall of *Fragmens Sur Les Institutions Républicaines IV* - an austere, quasi-minimalist memorial to the agonies and sustaining mythologies of the IRA/INLA Hunger Strikers in the Long Kesh Prison in 1981. Despite continued IRA bombing and shooting campaigns outside the jails, the deaths of 10 prisoners galvanised nationalist-republican support as never before, paying off instantly with Sinn Fein deputies returned to the Irish Dail and Westminster (IRA martyr-poet, Bobby Sands, died on hunger-strike as a British MP). They inflamed another paroxysm of violent unrest across Northern Ireland, yet before the brokering of the 1994 ceasefire, made for the single biggest propaganda coup the movement had achieved. Locked in a mythic, attritional psychodrama with the unyielding Margaret Thatcher, the prisoners regained some of the political status they demanded. In retaliation, the IRA vowed to kill Thatcher - and very nearly did, in the Brighton bombing of 1984. With the dust of that history hardly settled, and another tense interregnum in the conflict now opening up, there's a serious whack off this kind of information rendered large as art, but Cullen's focus is purely on the unthinkable, drawn-out moment of the hunger strikes themselves. His strategy is, as ever, to reverentially lift the *ipsissima verba* (from the citizen's distance of David Beresford's emotive, novelistic best-seller, *Ten Men Dead*) of the "comms" or communiques smuggled out of the prison to the IRA and Sinn Fein leaderships outside the prisons.

Fashioned in high-grade styrofoam - 96 upright panels (8x2 ft), squeaked together in blocks of eight typographical columns (8x16ft) - *Fragmens IV*, like the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, disembodies and cools down the hysteric intensity of its subject. The text stands in newspaper-like columns of white Bodoni typeface (with its associations with the Enlightenment and the French Revolutionary period) against a dark, state-military ivy-green; the colour-scheme of Irish independence. It's a great accretion of text, 35,000 words of painstaking messages written on H-Block-issue toilet paper and Rizla/Swan skins; wrapped in clingfilm and smuggled out, often up the back passages of IRA Volunteers when receiving a visit, and passed on to relatives - sometimes through the tongue-flick of a kiss. Providing a broken, sketchy narrative of the fatal protests, the comms bear all the grisly, emotive fascination of authenticity; providing a close yet curiously unreal insight into these acts of resistance: each "comm" a flickering match-lit view of the minds behind the wild-looking images of red-eyed Blanketmen in their bare, filthy cells. For all the deconstructed reality of five years on the Dirty Protest - from which the hunger strikes had climactically escalated - the language is clear, officious, religious, humorous, affectionate and desperate by turns - yet always framed by the all-consuming struggle: encoded military communications and stiff-upper-lip camaraderie ranging to breaks of prayerful emotion, intimacy and terror. The comms document the beatings and anal searches at the hands of exasperated prison officers, the cell-trashing protests; the biographies of strike volunteers for dissemination in *An Phoblacht*; Sands' election; the shock waves of his death within the prison; and frequently, O/C Brendan "Bik" McFarlane's dilemmas in selecting replacements, as the dreadful toll mounts up in the face of NIO inflexibility. Within Cullen's own framing of the texts, the hunger strikers

identify themselves as deliberate agents of propaganda; self-consciously deploying images, symbols and actions to trigger a response shaped by the tradition and history of Terence McSwiney's marathon, fatal 73-day fast in the Free State in 1921, and the long martyrological hero-line of Irish Republican freedom fighters. The comms too (only a fraction of the original total remaining) played their part in the hunger strike operation: sustaining morale, command structure and unity of purpose.

Viewed in Northern Ireland, *Fragmens IV* may induce baffled abhorrence amongst older moderates, never mind more unionist-minded folk, to whom these texts, however displayed, represent the rosary-muttering jiggery-popery of evilly deluded killers. To many others, *Fragmens IV* will seem a timely hagiographic memorial to axiomatic hero-icons. It will be interesting to gauge responses when it graces Derry's highly-regarded Orchard Gallery later this year. In the wounded, sectarian mosaic of NI life, it may be difficult to adopt a position from which it can be taken as neutral.

Even in the South of Ireland, where education, politics and general culture have about-turned and downplayed the Anglophobic martial rhetoric of old over the last three decades, Cullen's monumental paean to writing and all-out resistance makes it impossible to deflect the awful authenticity of the prisoner's beliefs. Etched against a backdrop of starvation pains and physical disintegration - almost as if the prisoners were, like Cullen, consumed by the text (if you can luxuriate in the armchair metaphor of Roland Barthes in this context). His purist emphasis on text seems to ironically reflect the obsessive hold of word and texts over Irish history, but certainly, Cullen is deploying a clear strategy in side-stepping the familiar visual iconography (Sands' laughing face, etc.) that dominates memories and republican murals of these over-mythologised events. It's impossible to de-mythologise them. The blankness of the text gives a kind of delayed impact; scratching at the reality it depicts through an quietly enforced act of public reading.

Psychoanalytically, you can interpret hunger striking as an utterly traumatised response; curiously weaving here into a histrionic race-memory of the Great Irish Famine, as much as a chilling cluster of Irish rebel mythologies which congealed with Patrick Pearse's bizarre self-sacrificial paramilitarism in 1916; and the latter's overt fusion of himself, in his plays and poetry, with a rebel Christ (Bobby Sands's own writings liberally quote Pearse). Taken with the more florid aspects of Roman Catholicism, the complex of traditionalist ideas underpinning IRA doctrine (later infused with revolutionary socialism) makes for a potent mixture, particularly when fuelled by the inescapable hard knocks of disadvantage, oppression and incarceration.

The self-sacrifices documented in the comms also feed off the rich Irish funerary tradition, which Republican mythology embellishes with its charged, symbolic reverence for dead Fenians and rebel graves. The sheer potency - again from Pearse's chilling oration over the grave of O'Donovan-Rossa - reached outlandish proportions in 1976 (the year the Dirty Protests began), when IRA-man Frank Stagg died on hunger strike, protesting for political status in a British prison. Flying the body home, security forces had to switch the flight to Shannon, as some diehard "Official" republicans were waiting at Dublin airport to commandeer the corpse. The body was rushed to Ballina, where it was interred under concrete in a family plot, and placed under 24-hour police guard for a year. The very night the guard was removed, unknown parties stole into the graveyard, disinterred the corpse, and removed it to the republican plot in the cemetery.

Fragmens IV took Cullen over two years and a number of European residencies to complete. *Fragmens IV* was finally unveiled in toto at the Centre d'Art Contemporain de Vassiviere in Limousin in December 1996. At the time of writing, it is showing at

Glasgow's CCA, along with a mini-retrospective of earlier work. Locus+ exhibited it, aptly enough, in a former printing works, now the home of the Tyneside Irish Centre in Newcastle. The accompanying booklet for that show, aping an official Irish government publication, contains John Corcoran's insightful historical essay (in English and translated into Irish, in twin columns on the page) on Irish emigration to the North East of England since the Famine, again touching on paradoxical emigre mirages of the lapping shores of a distant, free Irish Republic.

Cullen's work calls for a more political than art-historical analysis. When shown in Dublin, there was a predictable backlash in the press, while the only journalist to get stuck into the maw of the issues was the Irish Times' Fintan O'Toole. The latter's evident distaste for the extremism of the hunger strike led him to judge Cullen's verbatim, ostensibly no-comment approach, as another form of aestheticisation ("an extraordinarily dirty political act... cleaned up"), as fetishisation, and in its decontextualisation, as ultimately "evasive". Context has always been problematic for artists working within Northern Ireland, yet in Cullen, oddly, a Southerner is grasping a nettle and going it alone, without access to Sinn Fein or other traditional republican organisations, such as the largest political party in the South, Fianna Fail (Soldiers of Destiny), now the main bulwark of a minority coalition government. Its gallery/artworld context, to date, has provided a protective environment for *Fragmens IV*, yet this seems to dissipate Cullen's aims - to fan the flames, in a wider sense, of classic Republican discourse, many of the core principles of which are embedded in our notions of democracy. As such, *Fragmens IV* defines Cullen not so much as a rabid nationalist, but maybe - to borrow a neologism from his friend and fellow-artist Michael Arbuckle - as an artist of the peacefires.