

Immigrants' story at Villanova show

A look at the Irish life in England by Victoria Donohoe For The Inquirer

Forget art that's the epitome of inaccessibility and elitism. The exhibit "The Quiet Men: London Irish Painters," making its U.S. debut at Villanova, tells the fascinating story of five Irishmen who immigrated to England many decades ago, or who grew up there as outsiders, living and making art on the margins.

The show has an engaging immediacy, and surprising variety. At its best, the art combines visual unpretentiousness with social bite; the focus is often on humble quotidian episodes - pub tumult, bus-stop queues, street laborers - seen up close.

But look carefully for signs of primitive authenticity. Are these men too sophisticated to be considered folk artists? Are they instead merely providing picturesque entertainment, social novelties? I don't think so. Some of the work has subtle touches of humor that suggest affinity with folk art. Often the response to color is keen. And there's a rather eccentric life pulse in much of the work, giving it undeniable interest, yet at times also making it optically "heavy."

For example, Brian Whelan's bold, large-scale paintings have immense physical presence. They're loaded with imagery and design, densely configured into a rich pattern of considerable complexity. Whelan, the show's cocurator, treats material surface as his paintings' choicest option.

Some of John Duffin's victories, among the show's finest moments, are won on the self-limiting terrain of linear energy alone, in his striking architectural views indoors and out. What keeps Duffin's work on track is the intensity of its emotional charge.

The other featured artists are Bernard Canavan, Dermot Holland, and the late Daniel Carmody, all distinctive painters of the emigrant Irish life. Canavan, for example, always portrayed with respect the rough-and-tumble lives of Irish workers. And that's what gives his people paintings their creative potential and quality.

To its credit, this show does not categorize or homogenize, but seeks to reveal through inflection and nuance the subtle diversity of a broad, often overlooked immigrant theme.



Villanova University Art Gallery, Connelly Center, Villanova. To Oct. 6. 11 a.m.-11 p.m. daily. Free. 610-519-4612.