

Measure and Meaning by R.W. Rendell.

Theoretical physicist living in Washington, DC where he is currently working on the quantum measurement problem.

The Post-Modernist, London-Irish, Counter-Reformation of Brian Whelan

or How a London-born lad of Irish parents grew up in Ealing under the influence of both Catholic Church and Pub, became educated wearing bleeding heart badges on his blazer as a boy and as a Royal Academy of Art scholar as a young man, went on to paint with demonic creativity in East Anglia for the past decades, developed a now uniquely recognized style embellished with glittering foil, utilizing pre-Reformation images depicting generations of quiet immigrant men awash in the turmoil of contemporary life amid saints, angels, miracles, Death and God, and impelled rapturous viewers to find the measure and meaning of what they are seeing.

CONTENTS



Transmetropolitan with article sections added by the author

Part 1: Whelan's Work Emerges Before Us on the Wall

Part 2: Whelan's London-Irish Roots Permeates the Works with Felt Absences

Part 3: Whelan's Visual Works are Primed by Spoken and Written Word

Part 4: Whelan's Narrative Style Reached into the Past and onto the Arc of Art History

Part 5: Whelan's Medievalish Artistic Devices Explode into a Modern Vocabulary

Part 6: Whelan's Cracking of Jokes in Even the Darkest of Places Rings True

Part 7: Whelan's Ubiquitous Use of Ale and Poteen Grows out of a Way of Life

Part 8: Whelan's Divine in Physical Form Brings the Reformation into Today's Turmoil

Part 9: Whelan's Fusing of Ancient and Contemporary Generates New Directions

*“He determines the number of the stars,
and calls them each by name.” Psalm 147:3-4*

Part 1: In The Beginning
or How the View of a Work of Whelan Emerges Before Us on the Wall

London-Irish artist Brian Whelan’s paintings offer an archeology of an immigrant mind; their stories, songs, toasts and prayers, spread across a city’s trains and buses, churches and pubs, suffused with incense, smoke and alcohol. The drive and purpose of Whelan’s paintings may be kept a secret, even to the artist himself, but they readily give up to the viewer a host of glories and sensations, just by standing in their proximity. The viewer might begin on a steep cityscape fractured with skyscraper towers, pubs and churches, then move slowly back in time where men act out events leading to Sainthood, though seemingly adjacent to such scenes as laborers, bishops, footballers and the odd philosopher-musician packed into a careening train. We expect to hear street slang translated into the lilt of a Latin Mass. Generations of quiet immigrant men dig trenches and drive the red buses, buoyed up by a pint or smoke or cuddle in an apartment above a chip shop, going through the motions of love, laughter and death.



London Lovers

Occupying a somewhat different space within these same trains and pubs, death stands vigil at an all-night card game. Demons and angels have debates and drunken arguments at a bar backed by an Irish band, their segmented wings and horns somehow not disturbing the regulars. Occasionally, souls may be seen being judged on the brink of Doom. At any time, a corrective measure may be taken by the majesty of God in the image of Ronnie Drew descending from a fissure in the heavens. This city hangs at a tilt, outside of geology and the placement of planet within solar system within galaxy within supercluster; it is suspended from a high point where Hosannas are sung. The vast skies above these cities resemble globular star clusters pulled in through the Hubble telescope by a miracle. Seamus Heaney¹ has invoked the annals’ depiction of a boat appearing above the monks in an oratory, anchored to the altar rails. Whelan’s oratory is the entire metropolis with a soundtrack sung by The Boy from County Hell, and the anchored boatful of monks above it in the sky providing the umbilical chord, which if not physical, is emotional, cultural and even spiritual.

¹ Seamus Heaney – Selected Poems by Seamus Heaney, From “Seeing Things”, 1991

Part 2: *Subculture Under Siege*
or How Whelan's London-Irish Roots Permeates the Works with Felt Absences

Whelan supplies the dark comedy of the Irish Diaspora with a laugh-track. Though made of wood, canvas, and layers of paint, paintings are also software activated by our minds to delve deeper. Whelan knows this too and he will readily explain, standing there with us and aided by a glass of ale, what led to these spectacles hanging on the walls before us. Whelan, a child of Irish migrants of the 1950's grew up as a teenager and young man witnessing an extraordinary social trauma of the Irish not in Ireland but in Britain, a country where most Irish immigrants seeking a route out of their economic hardship went. The Irish in Britain not only watched the civil rights movement, Bloody Sunday, hunger strikes, blanket men and the Diplock Courts in Northern Ireland, but also in the UK - the bombing of the City of London, Birmingham, Guildford and Margaret Thatcher's government at The Grand Hotel Brighton. These events put enormous strain on the very minutia of daily life on British streets. In pubs, buses, trains, employment, politics and culture. The suspension of Habeas Corpus in Northern Ireland, and by extension to the Irish in the UK, was followed by many tragic miscarriages of Justice. The Irish in Britain were discriminated against, ghettoized, lampooned and under suspicion. His own father was arrested on a charge and abused by police who used his Irish nationality and ethnic identity as a stick with which to whip him. The charge was dismissed by the judge on the grounds that the confession, which was the only evidence, was obtained under what was euphemistically described as "severe duress". Little has been said about the enormous pressures put upon the Irish living in Britain at this time but it has undoubtedly coloured the psyche of a generation of Irish living in the UK.

The Holy City as an ubiquitous presence in his work may also in part be explained by Whelan's careful distinction between culture he draws on and the culture that shaped him. From the age of two through to the age of nine (it was at the age of nine that the family returned to Ireland for a time before returning again to London) he lived in Southall in Middlesex on the edge of west London. Southall and Ealing at that time became a focal point for an enormous wave of Asians, both Hindu and Muslims, which still exists today. The first generation Irish living in Southall became an island, inside an Asian island, inside a British island. This was a strong early influence on his experience of the city and subsequently on the series of what may be called ecumenical works. These carefully articulated paintings of vibrancy, wonder, pleasure, glow with warmth. The churches, mosques, temples and synagogues, set against an ever changing turbulent sky, comfortably nestle into each other for protection from the storm.



Holy Island

The underlying pressure of that world's turmoil and pain is not in an obvious or illustrative way illustrated in the paintings, but in an absence. Bro John Hegarty² when being confronted with Whelan's work for the first time declared that it was obviously done by an Irishman, even though there are no overt references to his cultural background. Picasso likewise said during World War Two "I do not paint the war, but the war is in my paintings". Such felt absences, within the walls of Whelan's creative mind, can have a strangely powerful effect and can be even stronger than when explicit. This happens throughout history whenever a culture implodes by oppression. A prominent related example is the work of Vermeer, another Catholic minority, in the mid-1600's which were years of terrible religious conflict throughout Europe, aftershocks of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, including his city of Delft. The serenity of Vermeer's perfect light-filled rooms belies the bloody conflicts of the times³, although subtle intrusions can be sensed, for example by pregnant women reading letters from absent young men or by the sight of maps reflecting the geographical diasporas of war. There are many absent stories which intersect the calmness of these rooms and such stories also lie beneath the surface of Whelan's colour-filled paintings with not dissimilar connections to religious bigotry and deadly power games. How many of Whelan's walled cities and gardens, citadels and islands are expressions of a subculture under siege? Subject matter safe from the storm. Havens of grace, reflection and contemplation. Are these battlements built for defense of the soul? It is impossible to tell. We can only look at them and feel a softly articulated anxiety, calmed inside the glories of his imagination and in the context of his cultural identity.



Scellig

² Bro John Hegarty, Order of Saint Gabriel. Quoted from the opening night of an exhibition at Ealing Abbey (St Benedicts) entitled Holy Ground in 2001.

³ The contrast between the serenity of Vermeer's paintings and the violent context in which they were created is central to the opera 'Writing to Vermeer' (1998), by Dutch composer Louis Andriessen with libretto by British director Peter Greenaway (premier recording, Nonesuch 79887-2, May 2006). Parallels between the emergence of Vermeer's paintings in war-torn Delft and recent turmoil in Bosnia are discussed by Lawrence Weschler, 'Vermeer in Bosnia: Cultural Comedies and Political Tragedies' (Pantheon, NY, 2004).

Part 3: A Thousand Words
or How Whelan's Visual Works are Primed by Spoken and Written Word

A very telling painting from 1997, *The Sitting*, shows Oscar Wilde, Brendan Behan, Jonathan Swift, G.B. Shaw, W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, Flann O'Brien, and Samuel Beckett all sitting as Whelan works on their portrait before them.



The Sitting

Why do Ireland's greatest writers patiently sit for Mr. Whelan? Whelan has a gift for writing and likely would have pursued this as a profession⁴ had he not devoted himself full-time to painting. It was following *The Sitting* that he began creating the modernist vocabulary of pre-Reformation images seen in his current paintings. However, both writing and painting for Whelan involve a continual recurring dialogue with friends, colleagues, and strangers to grasp at understanding and find new leverage to expose the underside of an idea. One of these sessions with Whelan, perhaps taking place in a pub, inevitably involve jokes, telling of stories, criticisms high and low, unexpected observations, all the essentials of *craic*. This may be the most primal of European art forms along with its cousins, the *claddae* and the Irish funeral, communal parties loud with talk and singing. The Irish are prolifically verbal, whether by spoken or written word.

Irish filmmaker Jim Sheridan has said: "Sometimes I wish I could let go of the words in my head. The Irish condition is primarily schizophrenic. You get a great Irish writer – the best are Joyce or Beckett – and they tend toward madness. The verbal mind...our culture is visually deprived"⁵ Even a prominent filmmaker struggles with the visual. Not only film, but canvas, board and paper. Whelan has said that one reason for this may be that a people that experienced famine, war, economic hardship and mass immigration, carried only their portable culture with them in their heads, hearts and suitcases. Poems and songs have few requirements short of a good memory or the ability to carry a tune and don't require peace and prosperity in order to flourish. Today we see, amongst the exiles of a forever expanding diaspora, the visual emerging and beginning to flourish amongst the 2nd and 3rd generations, albeit with burden and struggle. London-Irish artist Bernard Canavan, one of the so called Quiet Men that also includes Whelan,

⁴ Whelan has written two scripts that have been performed on TV.

⁵ Interviewed regarding his film *Brothers*, The Washington Post, p. E5, December 6, 2009.

has said with all modesty⁶: “It is the second generation that has become artists.” And still primed by talk. The Quiet Men all have the reputation of both visual artists and great tellers of stories. During the opening of The Quiet Men exhibition at the PM Gallery (London, 2009) an ability to talk about their work was not lacking. As one visitor put it “You get great value from these guys.”

Part 4: *Painting What You Don't See* ***or How Whelan's Modernist Narrative Style Reached into the Past and onto the Arc of Art History***

As finches on two isolated islands will slowly change until we have new species of finches, so Whelan's span of years painting in Suffolk and Norfolk have seemingly evolved a set of images seen nowhere else. However, artists do not always respond like finches even on the same island. Whelan's works have the feeling of combined poetry and myth, fairy tale and folklore, sacred texts and travelogue, constructed using virtuosic technique. Constable, painting over two hundred years earlier the same lowland scenery of East Anglia (England) in which Whelan now lives, viewed painting very differently, as a science that should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature. Constable's revered images continually make allowance for the accidental position from which he viewed them. Art history⁷ views Constable at the end of a long evolution that led away from the schema of medieval styles down to the impressionist, when the artists' long-term goal of 'painting what you see' was finally proclaimed as scientifically accurate. However, all histories turn out to be richer and more subtle than recorded. Art never actively evolves or improves but relentlessly keeps moving where it will. Paintings often owe more to other paintings than to direct observation and paintings end up knowing things that the artist did not intentionally put in or is not concerned with. And the arc of art history eventually fragmented across the salt plains of contemporary art.

During Whelan's early years as a student of art, the narrative imagery of human activity within serious art steadily contracted and shrank, resulting in a material and spiritual divestiture. Whelan's work can be seen as a reinvestiture of human narrative, re connecting with a fundamental role the artist has. That of story teller. It is relevant to mention an exhibition held at the ICA (Institute of Contemporary Art) in London of narrative painting which Whelan visited as a student of art. He tells us that many art schools at the time discouraged figurative art. The story, if there was one, was to be told in the tutorials and mission statements. The Narrative Painting exhibition, curated by Timothy Hyman, strung together several artists whose work contained a narrative, without considering them as a school. It was highly influential at the time. Emboldened by the experience of the show he later submitted a painting to the annual Young Contemporaries Exhibition at the same institution and remarkably had two paintings accepted, although only one was actually hung. For what to many was thought of as a new style, Whelan found himself becoming more relevant by the shifting or possibly the swinging of the pendulum back to the narrative in contemporary art through this exhibition.

Whelan's work inhabits, not a Darwinian, but a strange Lamarckian world where finches would directly inherit acquired characteristics instead of evolving by natural selection. In Whelan's case, from the pre-Reformation art still visible in the churches in Suffolk and Norfolk where he has painted the past twenty-five years, linking also to the issues of the present-day Diasporas.

⁶ Irish Times, October 22, 2009, *A Journey to the Past*.

⁷ E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2000).

He has built a vocabulary of images informed by medieval art, from a perspective unavailable to medieval artists. That is the twentieth century – with all it implies with technology and the new developments in modern art, not to mention cave paintings found in the nineteenth century and predating the Reformation by tens of thousands of years. His compulsion of twenty-five years with the brush has resulted in fluid complexity along with prolific almost demonic output⁸. Daemons we are told are refitted souls who accompany and guide us in our present journey. Whelan has become the daemon of the anonymous painters of altar pieces and illuminated manuscripts giving their work sudden meaning in our midst. The middle ages read The Old Testament through the new. Whelan reads today through the pages of art history, alongside the kindred spirits of the anonymous medieval painters of ages past – and which in his hands seem all so close to our contemporary experience.

Part 5: *Ce N'est Pas Un Icon*⁹
or How Whelan's Medievalish Artistic Devices Explode into a Transcendent Modern Vocabulary

The image of St. Brendan's boat is not St. Brendan's boat and it cuts through ocean only in the abstract field of the mind activated by the blur of painted strokes, its voyage renewed by every viewer in the gallery who happens to look over, and the boat sails safely under the breath of God forever.



Brendan's Voyage

Whelan's boats don't look particularly seaworthy, without the proper dimensions to carry a legion of monks. These of course are the characteristics of the medieval artist which rely on minimum schema needed to make a boat function in the narrative. Though medieval art produced grand painting, much of it was also an art of copyists to adapt classical art to the narrative and teaching of church doctrine and with tenuous contact of art with the visible world.

⁸ Whelan's large output is reflected in his statement: "I remember a tutor of mine saying to me – with great seriousness, 'Do anything it takes to continue working. Anything!'"

⁹ Quote from Brian Whelan.

We also see within Whelan the use of medievalish devices for packing sequential events into single frames and the crowding of figures to the edges of the frame. However, he amplifies these techniques into paintings dominated by primary colours, fire and light with painted layers augmented by silver and gold foil taken from wrappers with brand names still visible, not a colour so much in his hands as an element. They exist on a plane but appear to be on the verge of buckling from an underlying pressure. Scenes are plastically squeezed toward an axis oriented between the pole stars of joy and discontent.

Medieval art much relied on allegory, which Beckett had derided as “the glorious double entry, with every credit in the said column, a debt in the meant”¹⁰ Whelan’s bookkeeping is more subtle and underlined by rapturous fun. He is not teaching doctrine but does bring in the spirit of ancient texts and scientific-mystical works. Robert Fludd’s *Medicina catholica* (1631), in which God imparts life to man through spirits in the air brought by the four winds, corresponding to the four elements and the four humours, has a frontispiece engraving, *God Taking the Pulse of Man*, showing the right hand of God issuing from the clouds and grasping an extended arm below to take its pulse. Affected by the sun, the four winds “contain the breath of the Lord, which is the vital nutrient that is breathed into our bodies...” We can similarly see the safety of St. Brendan’s boat in fulfillment of Ezekiel’s prophecy (37:7-10) that God restores life to their bodies by the breath imparted by the four winds.



Myth of Return

Part 6: Irreverent Reverence

or How Whelan’s Cracking of Jokes in Even the Darkest of Places Rings True

Whelan’s work has sometimes been compared to the contemporary graphic art of comic strips, both in the caricature style of the figures and wit on a par with the Simpsons. However, these aspects too can be traced back to the medieval era. The central aspects of medieval art had the serious purpose of teaching doctrine. However, less well known are the widespread appearance of irreverent art, in the form of arse-kissing priests, lascivious apes, harp-playing asses and other impudent figures, within the margins of illuminated manuscripts, gargoyles, the bottoms of choir stalls and the bases of columns and arches.¹¹ These took the form of jests and puns both visual and linguistic, some sexual and scatological. Their appearance originated during the

¹⁰ In his review of Jack Yeat’s *Amaranthers*; see *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism*, ed. S.E. Gonarski (Grove Press, NY, 1986), p. 40.

¹¹ *Image at the Edge, The Margins of Medieval Art*, Michael Camille (Reaktion Books, London, 1992).

transition in the production of manuscripts from text-writer and artist as one and the same person to that of a scribe followed by an illuminator. The illuminator eventually played the role an irreverent counterpoint which undermined and often ridiculed the serious central text. These also focused attention on the underside of society, the peasants, servants and beggars. Both Whelan's serious (such as his *The Martyrdom of St. Edmund*, which is permanently installed in St. Edmundsbury Cathedral, England) and irreverent elements have their counterparts in pre-Reformation art.



The Martyrdom of St Edmund

Irreverent commentary has a long tradition onward from the medieval. Whelan's works are apt to generate lively dialogue, much as Hogarth's did in the eighteenth century and Goya's and Daumier's in the nineteenth, and the later political pamphleteers. The use of schemata in representing character and expression also continued on with similarities to the medieval. William Hogarth doubted whether copying directly from nature would really be of use for his goal of satirizing society. Instead, he acquired a retentive memory for physiognomy and expressions and found an imaginative grammar of objects and people. Whelan's similar ability to depict expressions is quite phenomenal and he has the added task of also representing the supernatural. An old Chinese treatise on art had said¹²: "Everyone is acquainted with dogs and horses since they are seen daily. To reproduce their likeness is very difficult. On the other hand, demons and spiritual beings have not definite form and since no one has ever seen them they are easy to execute." However, this is not the case and the fantastical are not at all easy to execute without falling into cliché. Whelan has gone far beyond the typical depictions of these. This is seen by the impact resulting from his meticulous rendering of saints, devils and immigrants in all their variety, from the expression of St. Edmund to the contortions of his fiddle and squeeze-box playing devils.



Squeezebox devil

¹² E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2000). p. x.

Part 7: *What Ales Society?*

or How the Ubiquitous Use of Ale and Poteen in Whelan's Works Grows out of a Way of Life

Today's astronomers find that our galaxy is filled with interstellar clouds of alcohol in the form of ethanol and methanol billions of kilometers across, clouds that were also drifting in the deep past preceding the Reformation. The globular stars we observe in the night skies above Whelan's cities may well be immersed in these same clouds of alcohol. This may not be accidental as drink is also ubiquitous within Whelan's works as well. Indeed, evidence suggests that the desire for alcohol may have been a primary motivation for the first cultivation of grains and the subsequent rise of cities¹³. Drink is directly linked both to pre-Reformation and present-day immigrant life central to his current work. Historians see Western Europe of the sixteenth century roughly divided both by drinking patterns and by religion with a beer-drinking culture in the northern Protestant dominated regions and a largely wine-drinking culture in southern Europe which had remained loyal to the Catholic Church.¹⁴ The various reformations of the sixteenth century affected and influenced European drinking patterns in subtle and complex ways, but these changes were not necessarily for what the reformers hoped. The social lives of the communities were no longer centered on the feasts and celebrations of the parish church and most of these rituals had shifted to the ale houses by the seventeenth century. The English Reformation had not only ended the practice of church ales but had also significantly diminished the social elements traditionally connected to the sacraments.

Whelan had an exhibition of his works entitled *The Church Pub*¹⁵ in which he explored the pre-Reformation links between the church and ales. The exhibition was proudly sponsored in part by St Peter's brewery which sent over a barrel of beer for the opening. We've seen that what leavens Whelan's work is good talk as part of the essentials of craic. Drink is a welcome supplement for this. Whereas absinthe-drinkers were the focus of many early 20th century artists (Manet, Picasso, Toulouse Latrec, Degas), Whelan's works often focus instead on beer and poteen, the homebrew laced with a mythological pedigree synonymous in equal measure with magic and the desperation of a typical immigrant. Joyce actually has poteen render Stephen temporarily impotent in an early version of *Ulysses*, but this eventually became absinthe when the novel was printed¹⁶. Unlike Joyce¹⁷, Whelan remained loyal to poteen and produced a series called *The Poteen Drinkers*, in which an angel is being plied with drinks by a devil at the bar.

¹³ Dr. Peter J. Adamo, *Eat Right for Your Type* (xxx).

¹⁴ *Alcohol, A Social and Cultural History*, ed. M.P. Holt (Berg, Oxford, New York, 2006).

¹⁵ *The Church Pub*, 2000 Aldeburgh Fringe Festival, Suffolk.

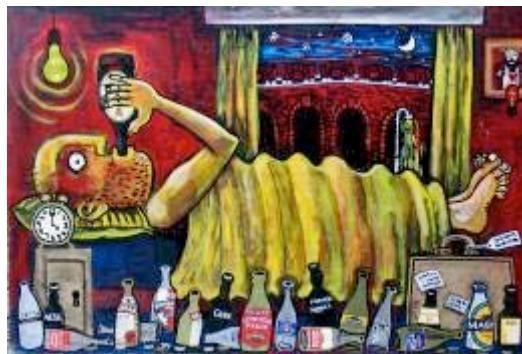
¹⁶ *Joyce's Ulysses Notebooks in the British Museum* (ed. P.F. Herring, University Press of Virginia, 1972).

¹⁷ "Ah, he's very thoughtful...when he's not absinthe minded... He is, really", James Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake* (The Viking Press, New York, Centennial Edition, 1984, p.464).



The Poteen Drinkers

In any of Whelan's versions on this theme, we don't always need to fill in a dialogue between angel and devil. Is the angel's discourse necessarily closer to music spoken in proverbs and the devil's spoken in rasped indictments? And is it obvious which one would be the angry drunk? In any case, they could both drink any one of us under the table. Though Whelan's struggling immigrants, often at the next table, do try to keep up. These often result in one of Whelan's remarkable tableaux of human implosion, such as in the striking *Loneliness of the Long Distance Drinker*.



The Loneliness of the Long Distance Drinker

Part 8: Physics of the Sacred

or How Whelan's Use of the Divine in Physical Form Brings the Reformation into Today's Turmoil

A clock's chiming within the Paradise of *The Divine Comedy* is the first reference to mechanical timepieces in European literature. Pre-Reformation art had placed much of our world within the otherworldly and the medieval was a clockwork universe set in movement by divine cogs and machinery. A preindustrial sublime, both in paintings and tapestries. A stunning example is a tapestry *Movement of the Universe*¹⁸, of pre-Reformation Flemish origin c. 1450, woven of brightly colored images representing the movements of the heavens emanating from a glowing and bearded figure of God as the Prime Mover, who directs an angel to turn a wooden crank

¹⁸ *Circa 1492, Art in the Age of Exploration*, Jay Levinson. (Yale University Press, 1991), pp.214-215. One of the Latin inscriptions on the tapestry translates as: "The poets say when the angel acts under the power of the prime mover the world is made fit for this by its own agility and the sky revolves controlling its motion".

fixed to the celestial sphere, with images of eminent personages and ecclesiastical symbols reaching from zodiacal constellations down to a flowery meadow on earth. We may wonder if the designer of the tapestry would actually insist that God specify a wooden crank to carry out His design. But then how else? Each age has God naturally using the cutting edge technology of the day. The apple is the symbol of the Fall, a frequent theme of Whelan's, and it also fell at Newton's feet and led him to develop the mechanics of the clockwork universe, the underlying picture of our world for 400 years until it unraveled in both physics and art by Einstein and Picasso respectively. Contemporary art has incorporated and ingested this unraveling.

Whelan's time displacement of the contemporary and pre-Reformation circumvents this unraveling and intermingles both pre-Reformation era wooden cogs with the current science and technology of nanoscale sensing, genetic engineering and brain imaging. Whelan's inventory of images seem equally taken from the contents of a trading ship or an illustrated manual for a mechanics of the soul as from laboratory cloning and jet aviation. A human genetically engineered to become a Saint might be a plausible topic for Whelan. Serious current attempts to locate neural correlates of the divine might be viewed as a first realization of some of Whelan's visions, an attempt at a neurotheology.¹⁹ The workings of a physics of the sacred, juxtaposed to our more immediately sensed contemporary, domestic and personal world, which Whelan has consciously rooted in our parochial existence, celebrates an informal, even casual interaction with the divine. The central issue at the time of the Reformation was the contrasting views of the nature of the human relationship with God. In a sense, a modernist version of this form a backdrop for Whelan's paintings, reflecting the Catholic focus on a hierarchy of sacred intermediaries to God and, through its artists, the bringing of this focus before the viewer into physical form. The divine in physical form. There we have the schism and the cultural revolution of northern Europe.

**Part 9: *Keep the Brush in Your Hand*²⁰
or *How Whelan's Continual Fusing of Ancient and Contemporary Generates New Directions***

An artist, like a Satyr, is a mythological creature, their duties and identities the same now as millennia ago. Through his work, Whelan might be seen as a man without contemporaries or else perhaps a contemporary of the painters and writers of an earlier age. Artists who feel themselves somewhat outside their own time, form perhaps a quiet fellowship across the years, with artists whose names they will never know.

For example Milton, who also immersed himself in Catholic art when Protestant sympathies were growing. Milton depicted the earth hanging from a golden chain in *Paradise Lost* at a time when Galileo had just demonstrated that earth was the planet of a minor star. The fusing of old and new became Milton's creative process, intermingling the old and new testaments, making the Son present at creation. Brian Whelan also produces works with ancient origins and contemporary elements that merge the very notion of old and new. Whelan's world has the appearance of being brand new but taken out of a box which has been stored on the shelf for centuries.

¹⁹*Neural Correlates of a Mystical Experience in Carmelite Nuns*, M. Beauregard and V. Paquette in *Neuroscience Letters*, Vol. 405, No.3, pp. 186-190, September 25, 2006.

²⁰ Advice to Whelan from poet Seamus Heaney (Nobel Laureate in Literature).

New elements have begun appearing in Whelan's most recent works. Greek myths, explorations of his travels in Africa, still life (more 'paused life' in his hands since Whelan's work never comes to a stand still), and art for use by London-Irish bands. Perhaps these signal new directions Whelan is exploring. These new elements appeared concurrently with his immense Nonetych painting, *Transmetropolitan*, titled after a song of The Pogues²¹.



Transmetropolitan

This painting in nine panels, showing all facets of his modern immigrant cities, has echoes of much of his earlier work and might be regarded as an overarching painting, a summation of a period as Picasso had frequently done. A painting is a machine made out of brushstrokes and we have seen some unique facets of how Brian Whelan skillfully operates it. Further excursions will engage deeper into the terrain of Whelan's work, seeking out new resonances, delving into the particulars of individual paintings. In this way, we will merge with the wild seas and globular stars, becoming part of the continual transformations of spirit, flesh and landscape in Brian Whelan's London-Irish Counter-Reformation.

Ron Rendell 2011

²¹ *Red Roses for Me*, The Pogues, WEA Records and Stiff Records, 1984