

Irish Women Modernists and Animation Practice as a Reclamation of Cultural and Artistic Space

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Irish Women Modernists and Animation Practice as a Reclamation of Cultural and Artistic Space

Yvonne Hennessy

Ireland's geographical position is an important factor to consider regarding animation practices and techniques that were developing in both North America and Europe during the early-twentieth century. Irish artists and filmmakers travelled widely for education and exhibition of their artworks. Film created by Irish artists was only distributed in Ireland under strict censorship laws. Irish society in the early twentieth century was a place of social and political upheaval. The struggle for independence from British rule and the establishment of an Irish government with its own Constitution succeeded in doing two things. It established a Constitution in which the Irish state was sovereign and it embedded discrimination against women into the socio-political fabric of the country. As discussed in much critical literature of the latter half of the century the Constitution was mired in patriarchal and religious sanctimony. (Corcoran, 2013) In Europe and North America animation practices and techniques by painters, illustrators and craft workers were included in Modernist movements and used by artists seeking, as Mary Ellen Bute described an "unending canvas". (Anon., 1965) Irish artists moved in these same circles and this paper is proposing that Irish Modernist painter Marion King experimented with animation as part of her practice.

Due to Ireland's culture of emigration that prevailed, this paper proposes that Irish Modernist artists pursued animation as an extension of their artistic practice, a fact that has thus far been ignored in Irish heritage and animation scholarship. This has led to a considerable amount of undocumented Irish animation history spanning the twentieth century when animation was flourishing as industry, and as artistic practice, globally.

Irish women artists have only in recent years been included in the long list of Irish modernist painters, male artists always at the top of archival catalogues. Irish female artists were victims of a critical occlusion in comparison to their male counterparts. Irish Modernist arts practice occurred as a reaction to the wider European movement. Dorothy Walker in her book Modern Art in Ireland says that Irish Modernism worked at a tangent to international movements. (Walker, 1997) Leading proponents include Irish modernist Mainie Jellett who pioneered the technique of academic Cubism but whose work remained largely ignored until 1992. Abstraction did not assimilate with the print media in the 1920s and 30s and it may be that other practices including animation were overlooked in a similar way in Ireland.

Ironically, the conservative political developments in Ireland coincided with the global developments of moving-image. The enactment of the Irish Constitution was directly responsible for the removal of important female advocates from their creative roles when it was favoured that working outside of the home was a male venture. However, women, despite holding subordinate status to men in Irish society, did in fact play significant roles in the early development of animation practice in Ireland but those vital details of Irish animation history have been undocumented. The culture of neglect surrounding women animation artists in Ireland can be identified by investigating gender inequality and the lacuna that exists regarding animation as a Modernist artistic practice and the lack of documentation regarding women in film in Ireland. This research seeks to remedy this occlusion and situate Irish animation at the vanguard of Irish women's Modernist artistic practice.

It is the contention of this research that Irish women were involved in the production of experimental and animated film practices. The ignored contribution of women to Irish animation history has left a 50-year gap in knowledge, a lack of documentation and incorrect cataloguing in Irish archives. While animated cartoons were popular in Irish cinemas and played regularly with the main film feature, much of the cinema listings from Irish national

newspapers from as early as 1917 reveal that the animations shown were from commercial American and European studios and independent overseas filmmakers. (Anon., 1917)

Irish animation critics have not considered the undocumented and uncatalogued materials of Irish history when writing about animation in Ireland, with some critics referring to the amateur developments of the 1910s as a “false dawn” after which the field of Irish animation took the rest of the century to develop. (Woods, 2003) The gendered segregation of histories and exclusion of artwork on grounds of gender has led to a considerable tranche of undocumented Irish animation history, particularly omitting the role of women artists. Both men and women were working across all types and styles of animation practice, pioneering and developing a multitude of techniques. By the 1960s there was a global catalogue of animations and artists using moving images in their work (Stephenson, 1967), yet in Ireland,

Despite the expanding volume of research [in women’s history in Ireland], many historians still consider women’s history to be a distinct area of study which has little relevance for mainstream history. (MacCurtain, et al., 1992)

This “false dawn” is an erroneous sweeping statement which ignores the fact that there has never been a comprehensive research project to investigate Irish archives and to properly catalogue the animations that are known to exist. There are animations on film reels held at the Irish Film Institute that have not been properly catalogued and are not priority for preservation. The animations are overlooked and are currently neglected in the archive.

Marion King was born in Ireland in 1897 but she may have spent much of her early life in the UK. She studied at Leeds College of Art before returning to Ireland in 1922 where it is believed that she lived until her death in 1963. (Snoddy, 1996) King had lived outside of Ireland during the political and social upheavals but on her return at age 25 she entered an Ireland that’s new Government, in collaboration with the Catholic Church, was heavily

influencing society's engagement with film, books and art. The Censorship of Films Act (1923) and the Censorship of Publications Act (1929) were direct attacks on societal freedom in the arts.

Marion King's life and artwork has been forgotten and uncatalogued, but this paper seeks to highlight that King's artistic practices will place a currently undocumented Irish animation history within the field of Irish Modernism. Little is known of the years between King studying at the Leeds College of Art in *c.*1915, and 1931 when she first exhibited her then already patented "painting on glass" technique. (Anon., 1933)

In Ireland, Modernists and so-called "rebel artists" were rejected from exhibition space. The rejected artists sought to have their work recognised as important and worthy. Marion King moved in these artistic circles and exhibited extensively as a solo artist and in group exhibitions in France, Chicago and New York.

King's patented technique of drawing on "the front surface of a sheet of glass or the like and applying the body of the picture in colours to the back of the sheet" is a process that was used in the creation of animated cartoons since 1914 when American animator Earl Hurd patented the process of "cel animation" in New York. Hurd later joined Paul Terry, in his studio Terrytoons. Terrytoons cartoon animations were popular with Irish audiences and featured regularly in newspaper cinema listings. (Anon., 1933)

While it is yet undocumented where Marion King created her artwork between 1922 and 1931 this research suggests that she was travelling to America and to Europe for study and exhibition of her artworks. This would have exposed her to the Modernist animation practices taking place outside of Ireland. Like Mainie Jellett, Evie Hone and other Irish artists that travelled, King would have honed her artistic vision as a result of this exposure to the exciting new

developments taking place as the centre of gravity of Modernist practice moved from Paris to New York.

King was adopting animation techniques into her fine arts practice and exhibiting them as detailed individual paintings where the work would normally be a sequence of moving images or frames. She was commended in the Academy of Irish Art exhibition in Dublin for her “craftwork”. By 1937, King’s variety of artwork included “illustrations for books, magazine covers, Christmas cards, designs for brass works, oil and watercolour paintings” as well as her paintings on glass. (Anon., 1937) Irish “craftwork” in the form of basket weaving and boat building was documented widely on film during this same period. (Condon, 2008) Filmmakers recorded scenes of rural natives undertaking their daily chores. This style of film was common with Irish filmmakers who wanted to document an Irish identity that would set it apart from Britain.

There are Irish-made animations on a film reel held at the Irish Film Institute depicting Irish craftwork. The film reel dates from 1938. The opening title card on the animation, “Micilin Muc”, itself states, in Irish language text, that it is “number 6” in a series of such animations. At least five more of this series are uncatalogued or lost. The film reel is important to this research for a number of reasons. Firstly, the reel contains animations, both Irish homemade and commercial American cartoons that are not catalogued or documented separately in the archive. Secondly, the animation is uncredited. There is no artist or cartoonist or camera operator attached to the film. However, there are a number of elements given the approximate date of creation, aesthetic and subject matter that will link Marion King as the creator.

Marion King was a successful children’s book illustrator by the mid-1930s when this animation was created. She had written and illustrated at least nine Irish language children’s books. Her books told stories of her original characters. King also used Irish folklore and mythology in

her work. The 'Micilin Muc' animation is based on an old Irish language poem. The animation has a particular style and aesthetic. It is a paper cut-out animation which resembles that of Lottie Reiniger work. Reiniger animations were popular in Ireland and King would have been aware of her work. Comparatively, the animated character and King's illustration of her original character "Sean Bunny" are similar in style, costume and proportions. Both wear the same shoes, buttoned sleeves and scarf. The story itself is one of mischief, something that Sean Bunny's adventures are full of. Animation was a way for King to further explore storytelling for children.

The last exhibition of artwork by King was in April 1940. She exhibited "Drawings for Children" at the Academy of Christian Art in Dublin. (Anon., 1940) Children's art competitions and art classes followed, which moved King from the featured exhibiting artist in Irish newspaper articles to a lesser status in Irish artistic circles. Comic strip cartoons and children's illustrations aligned themselves to industry animated film. King's move into artwork for a young audience affectively disappeared her from high artistic circles.

From 1943, until her death in 1963, King presented a children's radio programme, "Drawing and Painting with Marion King". The initial reaction at the radio station was negative,

The idea [of a radio programme about drawing] did seem ridiculous, but Miss Marion King enthusiastically pooh-poohed objections and set to work. She announced flatly that she did not intend to "teach", at least not in the school sense of the word, but that her objective was to awaken the imagination of the children and to encourage them to draw. (Anon., 2000)

Through the radio programme King brought her cartoon characters to life and by its popularity in 1953 her most famous character, Sean Bunny, got his own comic strip cartoon in *The Irish Times*. Ireland did not have a television station platform for King's popular characters to perform on film. However, King continued to publish illustrated books, run art competitions

and encourage children to draw and use their imagination. Reports and newspaper features on Marion King faded in the years leading up to her death. The art competitions and illustrated books continued, the radio programme was listed in the national papers and in July 1963 when King died the newspapers ran her obituary, celebrating her artistic contributions and love of children. Five years after her death King's work re-emerged and was listed for auction alongside Sean Keating and Jack B. Yeats. (National Gallery of Ireland, n.d.) After which King is not remembered or catalogued, documented or referred to in terms of her patented painting technique or her artistic career, neither in exhibition and in children's book illustrations.

Marion King was the likely creator of the 'Micilin Muc' series in 1938 and she was central to the radical new practices that defined Irish Modernism. She encouraged an appetite in generations of children to draw cartoon characters in Ireland as a precursor to an animation industry and she paved the way for future generations to study and promote animation education in the country.

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