

Not what one hoped for

Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin

'Imagining Ulysses'

by David Hamilton

There is something like circularity in this exhibition. Just as Joyce himself used loops, so the celebrated pop artist Richard Hamilton has returned to the project which he gave up during his Slade studies in 1950. So he has re-*envisaged* the work for this project, and one feels loathe to criticise a man of 80 engaged in revisionism of his own life and career. Yet this show was not what one would have hoped for.

Firstly, there is not much work.

Secondly, what there is comes in the form of plans for finished illustrations.

Preparatory work is the locus classicus of exploration and therefore a plentiful study resource for academics. Yet few go the way of Buonarroti and create beauty from same. Leonardo's sketchbooks document at points his odd philology and patrons' military-economic interests (in the Quattro/Cinquecento as now these are one and the same), rather more than his fine drafting.

Such works were only bared for scrutiny because collectors wanted their mittens on them; collectors like the Vatican who would stamp a silverpoint study like a library book as if to claim the genius for God.

For Hamilton to produce preparatory work as gallery material is risky, and is worth contrasting with Sile de Valera's (12.2 Million Euro) purchase-as-career-epitaph of the Paul Leon / Joyce manuscripts. The difference is that Joyce worked through language with the eye of a clinician and a radical spirit. He is also dead, and remembered for publishing classics alone.

Hamilton has been a painter of repute for most of his life, and a teacher also. He should then know that one does oneself little good hanging bad work next to good, whatever the thematic continuity and stylistic similitude. Display one of Emin's scratchy biro paeans to dysmenorrhoea next to a Schiele and you marr the Austrian. If history, as Santayana averred, is something one should learn from, one of its little tutorials leads that one must never marr an Austrian. They are likely to do all sorts, and so all sorts artists must not exhibit if some of the sorts shown show the artist to be out of sorts. Why then multiple drafts of simple executions? Manet's barmaid turns up in duplicate and without the macadamized ennuï in 'Bronze by Gold'. The numerous prep pieces are unenlightening. 'In Home's House' is a montage of pharaoh, Easter Island head and virgin Marys. There are many productions of the finished image, and all are a little weak. Yet there are some wonderful pieces. See the 'Finn MacCool' heliogravure, which is all early Klimt – dusky, evocative. 'How a great daily organ is turned' is neatly turned draftsmanship. 'The heaventre of the stars' featured constellations digitally mapped out over sleeping figures. A nice simple idea, well executed. Then we have bathing Bloom, satyromane avatar of modern

literature. His 'leete free' gets a look in, and not just one – many again. Bloom in the soakpot any way you like it really – monotonic, outlined, like an O'Keefe lilly, only decidedly not labial. Yet the exercise, to return to the central theme, is distracting and unimpressive. The book for the exhibition is more the thing, as the relevant passages are illustrated by single plates. Joyce is the Pericles of Dublin the cultural capital. If one is to present his work anew one must really do the thing properly. Similarly, when one makes such an evident bid as Mr. Hamilton's for inclusion within the phalanx of radical 20th century artists one must show the better work, that one be better thought of. Reputation, unlike academics, does not grow on the periphery of an artists' work. Nor is it mass that makes an artists' name. The rub is the substantial centre of the work, and its quality. Gronewald left but a few panels but his place was staked. Certain of the pieces in the 'Imagining Ulysses' exhibition had quality. As few as they were, they would be beneficial to the justifiable fame of Mr. Hamilton of themselves, without the paper company. 'Ulysses', meanwhile, remains a Rosetta Stone, insofar as no Blake has arisen to properly illustrate the miraculous cantos of the jejune Jesuit. The ineluctable modality of Joyce's unalterable depiction remains just so.