STELLA STEYN (1907-1987):

‘A NAME TO REMEMBER’

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I. Introduction

In July 1987, the same month that Irish-Jewish painter and printmaker Stella Steyn died at her London home at the age of 79, a ground-breaking exhibition opened in her hometown of Dublin. 'Irish Women Artists from the Eighteenth Century to the Present Day', a collaboration between the National Gallery of Ireland, Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, and Douglas Hyde Gallery, shone a light on underappreciated Irish women artists and the institutional obstacles that hindered their success. Steyn, the only Irish artist to have studied at the Bauhaus School in Germany and one of the earliest known illustrators of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, received one of the accompanying catalogue's briefest entries.[1] In 1995, the Gorry Gallery in Dublin mounted a retrospective of Steyn's work and sparked a scattered increase in interest which saw her shown posthumously at the Belgrave Gallery in London in 1996, the Molesworth Gallery in Dublin in 2001 and 2008, and the Merz Gallery in Edinburgh in 2005.[2] In the catalogue for the 2008 Molesworth Gallery exhibition 'Stella Steyn: Fauvist Paintings', writer Robert O'Byrne asks, 'How is it that someone apparently destined for renown in her native country should have been so largely forgotten for so long?'[3] This is the very question that this essay seeks to answer.

When Steyn arrived at the Bauhaus in 1931, she was already established as a successful artist in Dublin, London, and Paris. Between 1927 and 1930, 19 of Steyn's paintings were selected for exhibition at the Royal Hibernian Academy in Dublin; in 1929, she participated in the first American exhibition of contemporary Irish art at the Helen Hackett Gallery in New York, and the Parisian journal *transition* featured her illustrations alongside early sections of *Finnegans Wake*, drawn at Joyce's personal request. In 1930, Steyn was featured in two solo exhibitions: drawings, etchings, and lithographs at St. George's Gallery in London and paintings at the Dublin Painters' Gallery.[4] Of the latter, one reviewer in *The Irish Times* commented,

> Miss Stella Steyn's exhibition in Stephen's Green is attracting the attention that the excellence of the pictures displayed deserves. Her exhibition in London recently caught the critics and the public so effectively that some little controversy raged for a time about the relative merits of the older and younger schools of painting.[5]

This sums up the competing interests of the time in which Steyn worked: the division in the art world between Modernists, experimenting with form, abstraction, and the artistic materials, processes, and techniques of modern life, and artists attached to, in Steyn's words, 'painting which had its roots in tradition'.[6] This phrase is how Steyn, in an 'autobiographical memoir'

posthumously published by the Gorry Gallery, came to describe her own artistic interests. She attributed this to a difficult experience at the Bauhaus: 'This stay at the Bauhaus was, for me, a false move [...]. It had, however, the effect of turning me permanently to [...] Impressionism and Post-Impressionism'.[7] These movements began to be viewed during her lifetime as outdated, but, despite many changes in style, she never strayed from this 'traditional' mode of artmaking.[8] Thus, Steyn's status as the lone Irish person, let alone Irishwoman, in Bauhaus history ultimately led to her divergence from the artistic mainstream of her time and could explain, in part, her absence from the history of art.

This essay uses three focal points in early feminist art criticism to structure its main inquiry: male patronage, conceptions of male genius, and the gendering of artistic genres to favour male artists. Each of the above points applies to a different stage in Steyn's career. Part II argues that Steyn had the male support considered crucial for women artists. Steyn's father supported her attendance of art schools in Ireland, France, and Germany, and her connections to Irish portrait painter Patrick Tuohy and to James Joyce moved her early career forward. Part III frames Steyn's time at the Bauhaus as a direct encounter with the notion of male artistic genius. The Bauhaus is famous for its radical modernist curriculum, but teachers such as Wassily Kandinsky, under whom Steyn studied, believed in fixed differences between the sexes that privileged men's work over that of women. Lastly, Part IV examines Steyn's career in the 1940s and 1950s, focussing on her nude self-portraits. This section argues that Steyn's later body of work can be understood as a feminist revision of the historically gendered genre of the female nude.

Since the 1995 retrospective at the Gorry Gallery, the name Stella Steyn has appeared in a small number of publications, including Theo Snoddy's *Dictionary of Irish Artists: 20th Century* (1996), Ray Rivlin's *Jewish Ireland: A Social History* (2011), and Elizabeth Otto and Patrick Rössler's *Bauhaus Women: A Global Perspective* (2018).[9] She is also the subject of 'Stella Steyn: 1907-1987', a dissertation submitted by Stephanie Barry, M.Phil., to the Department of History of Art and Architecture at Trinity College Dublin in 2007, and my M.A. thesis, 'Anglophone Women of the Bauhaus: A Study of Stella Steyn', submitted to the Centre for British Studies at Humboldt University in 2020.[10] This, aside from exhibition catalogues and parenthetical mentions in other academic works, appears to be the final word on Steyn. The aim of this essay is to further the present work on Steyn, locating her within the larger narrative of twentieth-century art in Western Europe.

II. Parisian Period

In March 1929, Stella Steyn was hailed as one of the 'Leading Figures in Modern Irish Art' in *The New York Times* alongside Harry Clarke, Paul Henry, and Seán Keating.[11] At this time, their work was featured with 19 other Irish artists at the Helen Hackett Gallery in New York.[12] Later that year, Steyn's illustrations of *Finnegans Wake* appeared in the literary journal *transition*. These successes occurred towards the end of the five-year period during which Steyn, supported by her family and Dublin Metropolitan School of Art tutor Patrick Tuohy, honed her skills as a painter and illustrator in Paris. In doing so, she became part of a tradition that began in the 1870s, when Irishwomen first travelled to Paris to further their study of art; she followed directly in the footsteps of such artists as Mainie Jellett and Evie Hone, who had studied in the French capital in the early 1920s.[13] Nothing about these years indicated that Steyn would later disappear almost entirely from the annals of Irish art. This section explains her early achievements as according with the longstanding tradition of women artists as, to quote feminist art historian Linda Nochlin, 'either the daughters of artist fathers, or [...] [having] a close personal connection with a stronger and more dominant male artistic personality'.[14]

Steyn's artistic calling declared itself early in life. In the early 1920s, she travelled to Berlin to study at the Reimann School of Art and Design, the first of many art schools at which she would enrol with the support of her father William Steyn, a successful dentist who immigrated to Ireland from Russia in the 1880s.[15] Upon her return to Dublin in 1924, she began to study under Tuohy, whom she later described as 'Dublin's leading portrait painter, and a most sensitive artist'.[16] It was Tuohy who, in 1926, arranged lodgings for Steyn in Paris and supplied a letter of introduction to James Joyce, whose portrait Tuohy had painted in 1924.[17] For the next five years, Steyn studied at the *Académies Scandinave* and *de la Grande Chaumière*, travelled regularly to Britain and Ireland to exhibit her work, and became a figure of note in Parisian artistic society.[18] In the spring of 1929, Steyn was cited as 'a name to remember' in an article in the *Paris Montparnasse* journal. Author Paul Whiting noted that she was about to depart for a forthcoming exhibition in London but that 'her various colourful berets and her black, confident eyes' would soon be seen again.[19] Shortly thereafter, Joyce commissioned her to produce three illustrations for *Finnegans Wake*, then a work in progress.[20]

Steyn's memoir describes a personal and professional relationship with Joyce that was strained but nonetheless successful.[21] She recounts their initial meeting during her first year in Paris and her impression of Joyce as a 'languid and fragile' man. According to Steyn, Joyce not only 'had very little understanding of the visual arts and would have claimed none' but also knew little about women. She recalls Joyce as '[having] said that it was enough if a woman could write a letter and carry an umbrella gracefully. He thought clothes and trivialities were all that mattered to them'.[22] This quote gives a sense of Steyn's strong will and feminist outlook. Her uncompromising view of Joyce does not, however, seem to have hindered their collaboration. Steyn recalled understanding 'nothing' of the infamously difficult *Wake* and that Joyce counselled her on what to include in the illustrations, drawing her attention to 'the musical quality of the language' and explaining about 'meaning on more than one level'.[23] The resulting etchings are decorative and detailed, a native Dubliner's take on a fundamentally Dublin text that not only reveal the humour at the heart of *Finnegans Wake* but also perform a delicate balancing act with the artistic seriousness of the novel and the iconic status of its author. (Figs. 1, 2, and 3) Following this, Irish art critic Arthur Power asked Steyn to produce illustrations for him as well, but she declined: 'I really didn't want any more worry, and my own work made me happier'.[24]

Like so many women artists before her, Steyn had to balance her desire to make art on her own terms with the role that male patronage played in her budding career. Her father's support enabled her to attend art schools in Ireland, France, and Germany, giving her access to a diverse education in her desired field; Patrick Tuohy facilitated her time studying in Paris and connected her to Joyce; Joyce, in turn, gave her work a platform in *transition*, likely opening doors for Steyn's subsequent work for magazines such as *Vogue*, *Empire*, and *The Bystander* between 1929 and 1935.[25] These men were crucial in the early stages of Steyn's working life, a period in which she seemed to be poised on the verge of a successful career in the arts. It was at these professional heights that Steyn left for Germany.[26] Studying at the Bauhaus, then the centre of the European cultural *avant-garde*, must have seemed the ideal place for Steyn to expand her artistic repertoire and establish herself entirely on her own merits. However, the school would prove to be a hostile environment for the women creatives it claimed to support.

III. Bauhaus Period

In July 1931, reportedly on the personal recommendation of deputy director Wassily Kandinsky, 23-year-old Stella Steyn became the only Irish person to study at the Bauhaus in its 14-year history.[27] The Bauhaus is famed for its revolutionary teaching methods and unique ethos, which urged students to abandon traditional divisions between art and craft, and for its enduring style: geometric, functional, employing primary colours, and made with modern materials.[28] Steyn's experience there, working under such legendary Modernists as Kandinsky, Paul Klee, and Josef Albers, refined her skills as an illustrator and graphic designer, but she later renounced her time at the school.[29] After her departure from Germany, her work never again took on the utilitarian quality of the Bauhaus style. This section explains Steyn's rejection of the Bauhaus by framing her year there as a confrontation with the notion of male artistic genius, understood by Linda Nochlin to be 'an atemporal and mysterious power somehow embedded in the person of the Great Artist'.[30] This understanding of creative talent emphasises individual achievement without considering the impact of gender, race, or class; as asserted by feminist art historians Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, the great artist is thus taken to be synonymous with the male artist.[31]

Kandinsky, with whose methods Stella Steyn reportedly found herself 'out of sympathy', believed that not only artistic genius but creativity itself was the domain of men.[32] His deeply spiritual conception of art sought to liberate painting from dependence on the natural or representational (feminine) to create pure (masculine) art that abstracted both colour and form.[33] Kandinsky viewed femininity as an obstruction to the creation of transformative art and believed that, although women could learn from great painters, great art was a male activity.[34] His belief in fundamental differences between the sexes was reflected in his teaching style. Kandinsky demanded respect from his students and did not tolerate opinions that differed from his own or responses to colour and form that varied from his experience.[35] Unless they showed particular promise, Kandinsky's students, women in particular, suffered from his belief that art 'cannot be learned'.[36] Steyn likely experienced first-hand his conception of himself as not just exceptional but divine. Historian Gerald Izenberg suggests that Kandinsky viewed himself, and other 'true' artists, as called on by the divine to do their work. In answering the call, such artists became 'like God Himself'.[37] These convictions make Kandinsky an ideal case study of the myth of the 'Great Artist' and could explain Steyn's disavowal of the Bauhaus, particularly as his views would have been shared in some form by other teachers and her male peers.

The Bauhaus' 1919 manifesto claimed that applicants would be accepted 'without regard to age or sex', but, as art historian Anja Baumhoff points out, this was impossible when the ideal Bauhaus student was conceived of as male: as a *Bauhäusler*.[38] To succeed at the school, women, who made up just one-third of the total enrolment estimate, needed to select a discipline deemed appropriate by the faculty.[39] Painting, as one of the highest forms of fine art, was one of the most difficult to gain access to. Very few women painted at the Bauhaus.[40] This may have been why Steyn chose to study graphic design in the school's advertising, typography, and printing workshop.[41] There, she produced graphic prints and mixed media collages that are simplified and streamlined in comparison to her Parisian *oeuvre*. (Figs. 4 and 5) In these works, Steyn expertly contrasts sizes, shapes, and horizontal and vertical lines to make aspects of her compositions stand out, revealing an innate understanding of the brand of functional, geometric design that her teachers would have privileged. Art historians Otto and Rössler argue that Steyn's Bauhaus-era works still articulate her more fanciful inclinations, '[invoking] the industrial through play'.[42]

After leaving the Bauhaus, Stella Steyn joined the ranks of her fellow female students, subsumed into the legend of the *Bauhäusler*. Her Bauhaus works stand apart, stifled, perhaps, by this male-oriented narrative but certainly by the regimented characteristics of the graphic design workshop, which were at odds with her natural propensity for vibrant, busy compositions and attachment to figurative art. Above all, it seems, Steyn wanted to be a painter, and the Bauhaus, with its highly gendered understanding of the arts, was simply the wrong place to hone her skills.[43] In the years following her time in Germany, Steyn painted—or exhibited—little. She settled in England and, beginning in the 1950s, changed course once again. Abandoning both the frivolous constructions of her Parisian period and the strict abstraction of the Bauhaus, Steyn forged a new path, subverting the role traditionally assigned to women artists by producing candid nude self-portraits.

IV. Post-War Period

Between her departure from the Bauhaus in 1932 and her professional reappearance in London in the early 1950s, Stella Steyn vanished almost entirely from public view. Little is known about this period of her life, apart from a handful of key details. Steyn left Germany suddenly after her landlady's son came home in his stormtrooper uniform, indicating an increase in local Nazi activity.[44] En route to Dublin, she met English linguist David Ross. The pair married in 1938 and moved to England; Steyn never again lived in Ireland.[45] Her first known venture signalling the end of this period of inactivity was an exhibition of paintings at the Leicester Galleries in London in 1951. This would be the first of Steyn's two appearances at the Leicester Galleries, which is famed for giving such preeminent artists as Matisse, Pissarro, and Picasso their first solo exhibitions in Britain, and marked the beginning of what posthumous exhibition and auction catalogues classify as her most successful period.[46] Over the course of the next decade, Steyn exhibited regularly in London at premiere locations such as the Royal Academy, where she made annual contributions to the summer show between 1952 and 1959, and the Tate Gallery, as well as throughout Britain.

During this final phase of her career, Steyn painted many nude self-portraits.[47] It is no coincidence that Steyn focussed on this subject in her later years. Within art historical discourse, the female nude is the visual culmination of Renaissance idealism. As an embodiment of perfection and universality, the nude is also a marker of some of the more malevolent properties of patriarchal culture, such as power, possession, and subordination.[48] This tension creates opportunities for women artists to disrupt the conventions of a form of representation produced almost exclusively by male artists for male viewers. As Parker and Pollock assert, 'art is not a mirror'—that is, artistic representation is a construction, rather than a reflection, of reality, and as such space is created for the world that is represented in art to be depicted in other ways.[49] Women artists attempting to provide an alternative image of the female nude face the difficult prospect of producing work that breaks with male iconography and addresses their own experiences, acknowledging the role of women not only as objects but as makers and viewers of these images.[50] Steyn embarked upon this very endeavour. Her nude self-portraits challenge the images of women propagated by the tradition of the female nude and, as suggested in the catalogue accompanying the Merz Gallery exhibition in 2005, '[constitute] a remarkable affirmation of the dignity and identity of women, presented with colour, variety, and verve'.[51] Steyn's female nudes can thus be read as a feminist revision of this highly gendered genre—an embracing and embodying of the 'woman' in 'woman artist'.

In *Self-Portrait on Pale Ground*, an exemplar of this stage of Steyn's practice painted circa 1950, Steyn depicts herself in the nude with her arms spread to either side as though daring the viewer to look upon her body. (Fig. 6) This immediately separates this female nude from traditional representations of the female nude, which almost universally feature a young, slender woman who is identified with her body and offers herself to the (male) viewer as a spectacle.[52] There is also a tension in *Self-Portrait* between the expectations of the genre and Steyn's depiction of her body. She emphasises the thickness of her thighs and the curve of her stomach and hips, displaying a rounded body that folds, dimples, and creases. The paint application turns details into impressions: her breasts are shown without nipples and her crotch is a smudged V-shape, as though Steyn wanted neither to cover nor draw attention to these two main indicators of sexual difference. This signals her resistance to dominant representations of female sexuality. By focussing on her own relationship to her body and her experience of the process of ageing, she challenges the traditional female nude. Steyn's relationship to her nude self-portraits thus fundamentally differs from that of a male artist using female models. As model and artist, she disrupts the normative positions of masculine creativity and feminine passivity; as both the subject and the object of the work, she redefines the relationship between spectator and image. Steyn intervenes in the discourse in which nudity = sexual availability = male pleasure, offering an interpretation of the female nude that complicates the assumption that all such images are exclusively for a male spectator.[53]

In the 1960s and 1970s, Steyn appears to have again retreated into private life, resurfacing only intermittently to participate in group exhibitions.[54] Yet it seems that this was Steyn's choice, rather than a lack of interest in her work. Throughout the 1950s, she exhibited at some of the most renowned London art institutions of the day—the Leicester Galleries, the Tate Gallery, and the Royal Academy—as well as premiere northern galleries such as the Walker Art Gallery.[55] Her quality as an artist is attested to by these exhibitions and the artists with whom she shared the gallery walls, which include Ivon Hitchens, Francis Bacon, Lucien Freud, and David Hockney.[56] That she exhibited alongside such celebrated 'men artists' in her later years only adds to the mystery of how a woman who was evidently respected by her contemporaries could fall into near-total obscurity in the decades since her death.

V. Conclusion

Following Steyn's death in 1987, the contents of her studio were partly dispersed among family members; the remainder was put into storage before being sold at auction in 2000 and 2005.[57] On the occasion of the 2005 auction, the Irish *Sunday Business Post* lamented in a piece titled 'White Knight Rescues Forgotten Artist' that many talented artists 'slip through the floorboards because they [...] have no white knight, a dealer or patron', but that, thankfully, in the case of Steyn, a 'white knight'—in this case auctioneer Garrett O'Connor—had arrived to facilitate the sale of her works.[58] In what is almost a parody of gendered language, this writer uses the conventionally gendered image of a knight in shining armour arriving to rescue a damsel in distress to raise one of the principal factors separating successful women artists from 'forgotten artists': a male benefactor. In this sense, Steyn was fortunate. Her father, William Steyn, financially supported her artistic ambitions; her tutor, Patrick Tuohy, sent her to study art in Paris; in Paris, she worked with James Joyce to produce illustrations for *Finnegans Wake*; and, after her death, Garrett O'Connor ensured her work would be passed to the next generation.

Male patronage is one of three factors, alongside the notion of male genius and the gendering of artistic genres to favour male artists, suggested in this essay to have affected the trajectory of Stella Steyn's career. Its aim is to ascertain why Steyn, like so many women artists before her, did not become part of the art historical canon and, 35 years after her death, is almost unknown, despite enjoying commercial success and exhibiting at respected art institutions during her lifetime. This could be due, in part, to Steyn's style undergoing three revolutions in her lifetime. In Paris, she was exposed first-hand to the art movements that would stay with her for the rest of her career, but she was rankled by James Joyce's attitude towards women and control over her work. At the Bauhaus, she was encouraged to modify her work in accordance with the school's desired aesthetic; however, she struggled to make her own artistic practice fit with that of the Bauhaus and its rigid patriarchal structures, as embodied by Wassily Kandinsky. In her later years, Steyn, free of restraining influences, embraced her interest in the human condition. The resulting work integrates the impressions she absorbed in Paris with the most important lessons she took from the Bauhaus. Steyn's nude self-portraits, simultaneously bold and uneroticised, reject the conventional codes of the male-dominated genre. As a devoted student of the arts, Steyn would have known the rules that she was disrupting. These paintings can thus be understood as the

culmination of a lifetime of asserting herself not only as a woman but a woman artist, and perhaps even as a response to two giants of twentieth-century Modernism, Joyce and Kandinsky. Steyn's female nudes, at least in the process of their execution in her studio, embody a wholly female gaze.

Linda Nochlin argues that many notable women artists, either those who achieve renown in life or who are rediscovered and canonised after death, have ultimately been positioned by the art historical discipline as exceptions that prove the rule that creative genius is a male trait. Steyn is neither: she was a moderate success, well-known in her youth and a participant in prestigious group shows in middle age, and received a modest, short-lived rediscovery after her death. In Steyn's lifetime, the factors that had to align for women artists to break through at all—male support, exceptional talent, and luck—reinforced the notion that it is men who deserve to be remembered for their art. This paradigm denied, and thus still denies, Steyn, a versatile artist with a wide breadth of knowledge that enabled her to disrupt established artistic codes and traditions, her rightful place in the history of Irish art. This essay takes the first step towards rectifying this and increasing contemporary engagement with Steyn's remarkable art practice.

VII. Endnotes

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[17] C. Lerm Hayes, *Joyce in Art: Visual Art Inspired by James Joyce*, Dublin, Lilliput Press, 2004, p.19.
[18] Rivlin, p.166; Snoddy, pp.633-34.
[19] P. Whiting, 'Un nom à retenir: Stella Steyn', *Paris Montparnasse*, 1929, quoted in Kennedy, *Retrospective*, p.5.
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[21] Kennedy, *Retrospective*, p.18; Steyn, p.13.
[22] Steyn, p.17.
[23] Steyn, p.15.
[24] Steyn.
[25] O'Byrne, p.23.
[26] MacPherson, p.9; O'Byrne, p.6; Otto and Rössler, p.184.
[27] A. Baumhoff, *The Gendered World of the Bauhaus: The Politics of Power at the Weimar Republic's Premier Art Institute, 1919-1932*, Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 2001, p.17; Snoddy, p.634; D. Sylvester, 'Paintings by Stella Steyn', in *Leicester Galleries: Exhibitions 974-977*, London,

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[29] Steyn, p.16.
[30] Nochlin, p.153.
[31] R. Parker and G. Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1982, pp.68-69.
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[39] Baumhoff, p.6; Müller, pp.12-13; Otto and Rössler, p.6.
[40] Baumhoff, p.147.
[41] Kennedy, *Retrospective*, p.10; Snoddy, p.634; Sylvester, p.18.
[42] Otto and Rössler, p.184.
[43] Baumhoff, p.147.
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[50] R. Betterton, 'How Do Women Look? The Female Nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon', *Feminist Review*, no. 19, 1985, p.10; Nead, pp.61-63; G. Pollock, 'Feminism and Modernism', in R. Parker and G. Pollock (eds.), *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970-1985*, London, Pandora, 1987, p.93.
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