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‘The Ever Widening Spiral,’ an exhibition at the Alley Theatre and Strabane and Sperrin Visitor Information Centre (27 September–15 October 2021), revolves around Strabane-born Brian O’Nolan’s *The Third Policeman* (published under the pseudonym Flann O’Brien). The novel’s unending hell-based narrative perpetuates the widening spiral of the exhibition’s title. The exhibition was conceived and curated by Eddie O’Kane and features his work alongside that of Joanna O’Kane and David O’Kane. It includes a compelling range of media: painting, drawing, sculpture, printmaking, 3D printing, film, and animation. The exhibition is informed by a meditation on place, in that the artists contend that O’Nolan’s birthplace, Strabane, as well as his connections to Donegal, had a major influence in his writing. Many of the artworks displayed reference these influences with houses and businesses in the area featured visually or textually.

O’Nolan was born in a house on the Bowling Green, Strabane in 1911. In ‘Macasamhail (The Double),’ by Eddie O’Kane, O’Nolan is represented in profile, confronting himself in his place of birth. The church is framed through the window and the architectural elements intersect. It appears as a frame within a frame. The church is in the window frame, framed by the figures, framed by the lace curtains, framed by the edge of the canvas. This *mise en abyme* is reminiscent of the trope of infinite regress in *The Third Policeman*, such as the chest within a chest within a chest... The wedding of O’Nolan’s parents at Murlough Chapel near Lifford is depicted as a group portrait, where all figures are sketched except the bride and groom who are more fully represented. This portrayal underlines the nature and fallibility of human memory, where nostalgic impressions reside.

O’Nolan spent his childhood with his brothers, cycling and exploring, in Strabane and neighbouring Lifford, where the steep hill of Stumpy’s Brae is found. The folk tale of ‘The Legend of Stumpy’s Brae,’ captured in an 1844 poem by Cecil Frances Alexander, was a familiar story locally. O’Nolan is likely to have felt a strong connection with Alexander, as her husband’s church is directly opposite O’Nolan’s birthplace on the Bowling Green. In ‘Stumpy’s Brae,’ a man and wife murder a pedlar who seeks shelter in their home in order to steal his money. After cutting off his legs, they put him in a chest and bury him. In *The Third Policeman*, two men murder a cattle dealer on his way home and steal his cash box. They bury his body and, for the rest of the novel, the unnamed narrator remains preoccupied with finding the cash box, which has been hidden by his accomplice. In ‘Stumpy’s Brae,’ the victim returns to haunt the couple at their home and follows them when they emigrate. The ghost pledges to haunt them for generations. Both stories centre on tales of greed, murder, guilt, and retribution in which the murderers inhabit a nightmarish world without escape. ‘The Legend of

Stumpy's Brae' is told in three companion paintings by Edward O'Kane. In the first painting, 'Stumpy's Brae,' a small-two windowed thatched cottage is depicted at the bottom of a hill against a backdrop of trees. It glows ominously and projects a strange foreboding evening light. 'Pack Him in Tight' is a scene of the cottage interior with a nine-pane window and a trunk beneath it flanked by a metal pot and an axe. Finally, the third painting, entitled 'Night Visit,' features the cottage surrounded by an otherworldly atmosphere. There is a light in the window, signalling welcome, perhaps, yet the overall ambience is menacing, and the title references the fateful night that the pedlar ventured to take shelter in this house.

In a series of three large scale charcoal works on Fabriano paper, Eddie O'Kane provides a meditation on O'Nolan's novel and incorporates his own memories. Two of these works feature coffins that are arranged in the style of an Irish wake. The centre drawing includes a proliferation of chests entitled 'I Took All My Sins Out and Put Them on the Table.' The image conceptualises the sinful dimension of science and physics that O'Nolan observed, while highlighting the innumerable sins that might be committed in a human lifetime. In the drawing on the left, entitled 'I Would Have Sought Sleep Again,' we see the haunted narrator of *The Third Policeman* in the coffin. The narrator is unable to sleep because his sleep is broken by the constant hammering of the men in the barrack yard beside the jail, building the scaffolding on which he is to be hanged. In the drawing, he anticipates his death and being laid in the coffin with the policemen about to nail down the lid. The circles flanking the coffin appear at once as sounding bowls and the wheels of a bicycle. Two policemen are ominously featured in the top corners of the work. The drawing on the right, entitled 'Would You Like to See Mrs P... Son?,' documents the artist's childhood experience where he was lifted at a wake to see the deceased and viewed this lady's remains with mass cards surrounding. The remaining imagery is of endless buns, sandwiches, and cups of tea, echoing the wake experience of tea continuously being brought to mourners. This drawing feels at once familiar yet macabre in the artist's visualisation of his own childhood experience placed alongside that of O'Nolan's deeply troubled narrator. There is an uneasy association between the two that points to the fallacy of memory and jumbled connections.

Suspended in front of these drawings is the large-scale fibre glass installation 'Personae' by Joanna O'Kane. These translucent masks highlight the fleeting nature of life, the passing of time, and the persistence of half-glimpsed memories; themes articulated in the drawings and the overall exhibition. They also allude to the multiple identities of Brian O'Nolan. These masks extend the ever-widening spiral in their frame of reference. They follow the tradition of masks as developed by the Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello, who deployed two types in his work, one for impersonation and the

other for personification. Both functions are in evidence here. The models for these masks are the other exhibiting artists, Edward and David O'Kane, who are impersonating the enigmatic policemen from O'Nolan's novel. The artists are, therefore, also personified and featured as protagonists in their own meta-fictional exhibition narrative, trying on selves and testing alternative identities selected from O'Nolan's writings. The masks appear to float ethereally in space and are reminiscent of death masks. The somewhat spectral expressions on these masks have relevance beyond themselves to the unfolding narrative in the space surrounding them. This is not the only iteration of these masks in the exhibition; they have seeped into works elsewhere as the spiral continues.

In David O'Kane's work, the masks are present in his stop motion animation entitled 'The Third Policeman' created in Boston College's Dublin headquarters in 2019. Ghostly impressions of footsteps appear in the deep blue carpet as a black cash box flickers into existence, but otherwise there is no human presence in the room. Charcoal drawings of a bird in flight emerge from the box, depositing books of law in a circle. The animated birds then pass over the books, opening them as they progress and distributing pages from the novel, which spiral out onto the floor and walls. Masks then appear on the open books as the box morphs into the author's typewriter. The sun rises, and a shaft of light travels across the room and appears to summon the policeman into existence. The work is mesmerising in its meditation on the passing of time, authorial intention, and aesthetic representation. In David O'Kane's large-scale painting 'Three Policemen,' the mask reappears, obscuring the faces of the three figures. The artist's father Eddie modelled for this artwork, wearing a mask and a replica of an early 20th-century RIC policeman's uniform. Within this piece, the viewer is confronted with a nightmarish scenario that Christian Dupont has described as 'the terror of posthumous interrogation under the policemen's otherworldly glare.'¹ One central figure dominates with his hands on the table before him and two sentinels, hands behind their backs, echo his stance. Their oppressive shadows loom dramatically above their heads, implicating the viewer in the action, while the unusual nightmarish palette heightens the frightening atmosphere.

As a new departure for artistic practice in Ireland's North West, artwork in this exhibition involves the use of 3D printing technology to explore some of O'Nolan's scientific theories. Eddie O'Kane works with his mentor and technical advisor Christopher Roulston, Lecturer in Engineering, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, to produce these works. Their collaboration is akin to the theorising dialogue that occurs

¹ Christian Yves Dupont, 'Flanntasmagoria!', *Irish Arts Review* 36, no. 3 (Autumn 2019). Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/bc-ir:108978>.

in the novel between the narrator and the policemen where scientific conjecture and surmising inform a range of concepts and metaphors. The very act of creating 3D printed multiples based on the narrative and scientific theories of the imaginary philosopher De Selby taps into both the humour and complexity of O’Nolan’s work. As Michael Foley notes, O’Nolan ‘seems to have predicted string theory and parallel universes’² when he wrote, in *The Third Policeman*, that ‘[n]ew and unimaginable dimensions will supersede the present order.’³

The 3D objects created by Eddie O’Kane are dislocated and fragmentary metaphors for the novel’s fantastic scientific concepts. They connect with the theory of serialism in *The Third Policeman*, where objects uncannily materialise and reoccur; mirrors and bicycles for instance. The artist has created a spiral of mirrors to articulate this theory and the title reflects its inspiration: ‘De Selby Was Obsessed with Mirrors.’ The tiny 3D printed mirrors have decorative surrounds and a face emerging from the mirror’s centre, and these repeat in a spiral of continuity. The bicycle features heavily in the novel and is referenced to support Sergeant Pluck’s atomic theory, in which a two-way exchange of atoms between humans and bicycles is activated through exclusive travel by bicycle and intensive cycling. This exchange is demonstrated in the small 3D sculptures by Eddie O’Kane that reproduce a bicycle which is contemporary with the novel’s timeframe. It appears as a normal bicycle in this series in all respects, except for the face that has formed on the front, the bare feet that extend where the pedals should be, and the long arms that take the place of spokes in the wheel. These 3D artworks are titled ‘Halfway to Being a Bicycle Himself’ and they communicate the artist’s intention to articulate sculpturally what are already highly visual narrative metaphors. Added to this is the theme of infinite regression where boxes are held within boxes until they seem imperceptible to the naked eye – ‘receding to some unimaginable ultimum’⁴ – and the suite of 3D printed chests that illustrate this concept is entitled ‘The Only Sole Correct Thing to Contain the Chest was Another Chest of the Same but Littler Cubic Dimension.’

‘The Ever Widening Spiral’ is part of a series that has been exhibited at venues including Salzburg University; the Burns Library, Boston College, USA; the Irish Embassy, Berlin; Boston College Headquarters, Dublin; and the Old Courthouse in

² Michael Foley, ‘*The Third Policeman* by Flann O’Brien: An Expert Investigation,’ *The Irish Times* (25 August 2015). Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/the-third-policeman-by-flann-o-brien-an-expert-investigation-1.2328019>.

³ Flann O’Brien, *The Complete Novels: At Swim-Two-Birds, The Third Policeman, The Poor Mouth, The Hard Life, The Dalkey Archive*, introd. Keith Donohue (London: Everyman, 2007), 305.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 327.

Competing Interests

The author is related to the exhibiting artists (daughter of Eddie and Joanna and sister of David). She had no role in organising this exhibition.

