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Cover: Blur. Photographed by Pennie Smith

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Cristín Leach Hughes is taken back to the Swinging Sixties at Lismore Castle Arts

Richard Wood was a member of the student committee that organised a picture-hire scheme at Trinity College Dublin in the late 1960s. Many years later, he recalled a dilemma faced by the volunteers after they bought a piece of op art by Carlos Cruz-Diez from a gallery in Paris; there was no money to transport it home. One of the students offered to collect it during the holidays. According to Wood, William Garner turned up at the start of the following term with Physichrome 295 under his arm. Asked how he had got to France and back, he replied: “I thumbed, both ways.”

Such were the 1960s, and that spirit of enthusiasm, commitment and occasional folly drove a scheme known as the College Gallery. It was launched in the 1959-60 academic year by Professor George Dawson, the founder of Trinity’s Department of Genetics, to allow students to borrow art for their walls for a small fee. The idea had a long-term impact on the students who took part and on the role of art in college life. An initial grant of £100 from the Trinity College Trust was used to purchase 27 framed reproductions of international masters, but the College Gallery soon focused on new art.

Cruz-Diez’s 1967 work is now on show at Lismore Castle Arts, part of Trinity’s College Gallery: The Swing of the Sixties, an exhibition curated by Woods. The title of the Venezuelan artist’s piece is a guide to what it does: his Physichrome works change colour as you move around them. It’s something of a 1960s trick and one that doesn’t deserve to play for long once we’ve all seen it, but this is a nice piece. It winks and blinks in flashes of coloured squares as you pass, and was certainly worth the undergrad’s trip to Paris.

Trinity’s picture-hire scheme is still in place. Dawson’s passion inspired academic study of art and art history at the university in 1961. His scheme was the genesis of the Douglas Hyde Gallery, the university’s contemporary-art venue, which opened in 1978. Woods quotes Dawson as saying: “I never understood the educational value of bare walls.” Dawson also believed in supporting contemporary artists. He made no hierarchical distinctions between Irish and international art. The show at Lismore makes no distinctions either. Cecil King hangs in a room with Josef Albers; Barrie Cooke shares a wall with Karel Appel; Patrick Scott with Cruz-Diez.

The art of the 1960s was all about colour and eye-grabbing visual tricks, the physicality of objects, texture and fabric, context and composition. It frequently contained irony; it was political and about cleverness and wit. At least that’s how it seems now. In Ireland, artists such as Cooke and Patrick Collins took a new approach to landscape. Exhibition catalogues of the time were full of works desperate to say something new; to shake off the past and replace it with something better, brighter, louder, younger, fresher.

The art of the period was in-your-face, unapologetic and determined. It was op, pop and kinetic. It was less about feelings or emotions, and more about style and statement. It did something unexpected to your eyes. The popularity of mediums such as air brush and screen print affected how artists approached their subject matter. In experimenting, artists discovered an affinity between the subjects that interested them and these new mediums. They clicked, and a lot of this art is about that visual click.

It’s evident in Victor Vasarely’s gold-and-yellow dot compositions, two of which are here; in Albers’s Homage to the Square series; even in Cooke’s Bennett’s Bridge painting with its utterly different aesthetic. It’s when something good happens on the surface of the work; something important because it’s new. That click is what King was looking for when he repeated his V and tapered rectangle shapes in his Berlin Suite.
screenprints. It's what Albers was aiming for when he made squares of red float in other squares of red with barely discernible differences between the hues.

They were all trying to wake up our eyeballs, to make sure we didn't passively consume the imagery, to make sure we wouldn't just look but also see. Artists sought to break habitual connections between the brain and the eye, to snap us out of complacent looking. Forced to make new connections, we might also experience a new way of thinking. They felt this art could change the world. The artists, their collectors and promoters, like the geneticist Dawson, believed it was life-changing; altering how you saw.

Roy Lichtenstein's trademark colour dots appear in Night Seascape, a felt banner in this show. Red on white, they turn streaks of clouds into tendrils of polka-dotted mist. Zig-zag reflections in the water, golden on a navy black sea, are full of movement despite their innate, sewn flatness. They imply light that shimmers, just as the polka-dot streaks imply blush-coloured cloud, because artists such as Lichtenstein taught us to read them this way. He taught us that bare cartoon-style lines and absurd magnification of the print industry's Ben-Day dots could be reconciled by the brain into a readable picture. One that was all the more engaging because of what it said to us about the meanings we ascribe to objects, their representation and the manner of their production. These ideas were particularly exciting to Irish artists such as Michael Farrell, whose Study '66 painting is included here.

Vasarely can make you see a gradual glow, though you are looking at individual circles of subtly graded colour. Peter Sedgley's works, purchased for the scheme at the Light into Movement exhibition at Trinity in 1968, are glowing circles that play with your eyes. Looking at both is an appropriately trippy 1960s-era experience, and the mantra endures: open your eyes, open your mind.

Cooke's brilliant Bennett's Bridge is an eye-slit of deep olive and fir-tree green. A gash of verdant life in a cave of navy blackness, it's driven by a movement, such as a gallop to the right, a flow of green tumbling over unseen rocks. It's alive. The landscapes in this show are tumultuous, including Inch by Pat Scott, which is speckled, almost charred, inky skyscape. There's a ghostly, spirit-filled composition in grey and white by Collins, and Nano Reid's nightmarish Resting in the Square with its monster-hybrid animal figures and glowing-yellow Celtic high cross casting light over a runny, cow-dung-coloured scene. Up in the corner is a reclining, almost invisible, human figure.

The only portrait is Mick O'Dea's pen-and-wash sketch of Dawson, produced in 1985. It's not really necessary, although it's a nice likeness and shows him in context, with work by artists he admired and collected. It's here in tribute to one man's vision, without which Trinity's current status as a significant home for art might not have happened. The portrait also humanises the show. It produces a shift in mood, one that's indicative of what art of the 1960s predominantly did not have.

This era's art was concerned with noise and silence, with mechanics and technology, with art as object-making, and its role in wider society. It was not about people and their feelings or their inner lives, and was not driven by self-reflection. It was not art made primarily as an expression of the artist's intimate persona. That was still to come.

The Swing of the Sixties is at Lismore Castle Arts until June 7; lismorecastlearts.ie