

F.E. McWilliam (1909-92) | *Woman in a Bomb Blast*

1974, bronze, 61 x 141 x 54 cm, donated 2012, part of the AIB Art Collection



This sculpture by Northern Irish artist F.E. McWilliam (1909-92) is one of several in his “Women of Belfast” series (1972-74) and was donated to the State in 2012 as part of the AIB Art Collection.

McWilliam’s sculpture was created in the context of The Troubles, the conflict in Northern Ireland between Unionists and Republicans that erupted into

violence in 1968. This conflict was the legacy of the Third Home Rule Bill (1914) and the Anglo-Irish Treaty (1921) which resulted in the partition of Ireland into the 26 counties of the Irish Free State (Republic of Ireland since 1949) and the 6 counties of Northern Ireland.

As a response to the sectarian violence of The Troubles, McWilliam’s figure of a woman thrown to the ground in the aftermath of an explosion represents the scores of civilian casualties in Northern Ireland. The position of her limbs speaks of the violence and, indeed, the violation of her body by the bombers. Extended in different directions, her limbs communicate to the viewer the sense of her utter disorientation in the moment, while her covered head at once suggests the force of the blast and the anonymity of the woman. Her slender form is seemingly very fragile, yet the material McWilliam uses implies that the woman is more resilient than she first appears.

By casting in bronze, the strong alloy of weaker metals copper and tin, the artist infuses his subject with the spirit of strength in unity. As does Robert Ballagh in his *The Rape of the Sabines after David* (1970), McWilliam presents the viewer with a direct response to The Troubles and, through the use of shocking imagery, calls for an end to sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. His use of traditional methods in a contemporary, yet timeless manner ensures that this anonymous *Woman in a Bomb Blast* remains a potent and universal statement against civil conflict that is as relevant to the world today as it is to Belfast in 1974 or Dublin in 1916.

To find out more, see Peter Murray’s essay on this painting in *Three Centuries of Irish Art* (2014) which is available at the gallery bookshop.