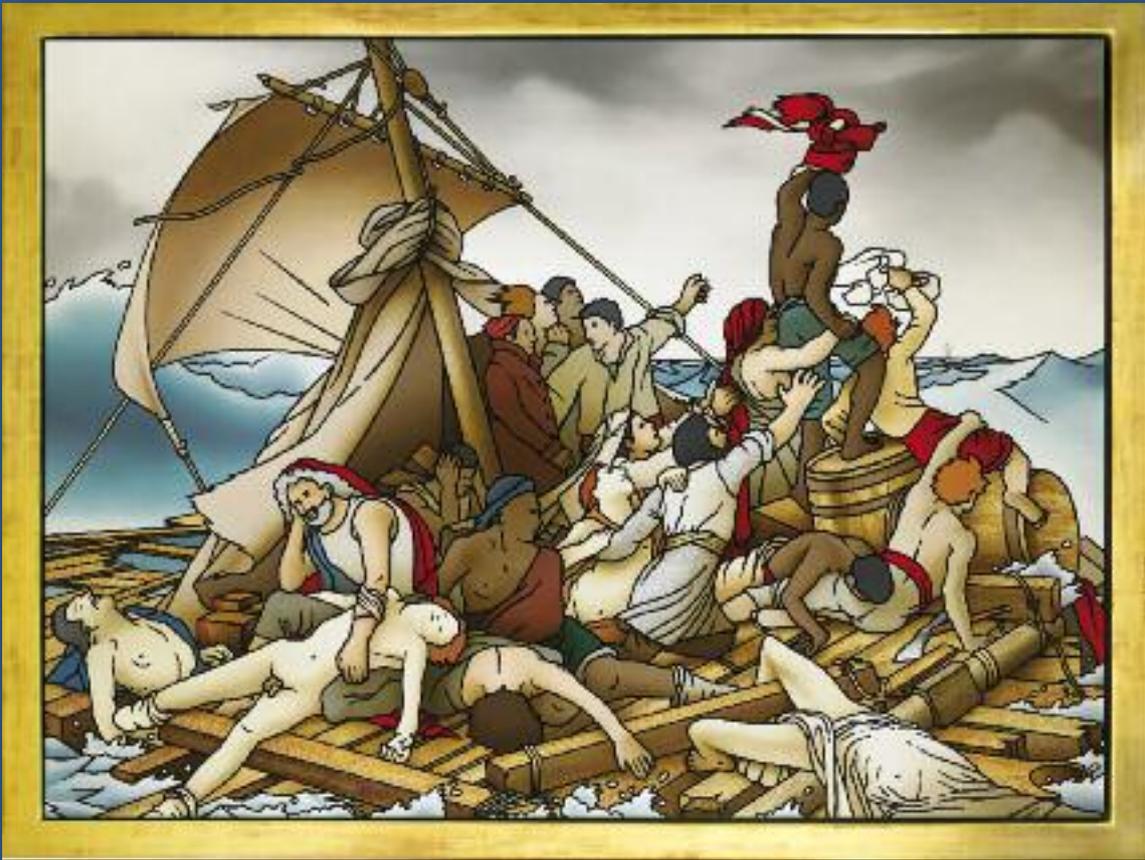


ROBERT BALLAGH

Homage to Géricault's  
*Raft of the Medusa*



THE GORRY GALLERY  
in association with  
DAMIEN MATTHEWS FINE ART



Robert Ballagh  
Dublin, 1969.

THE GORRY GALLERY  
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presents

ROBERT BALLAGH

Homage to Géricault's  
*Raft of the Medusa*

and

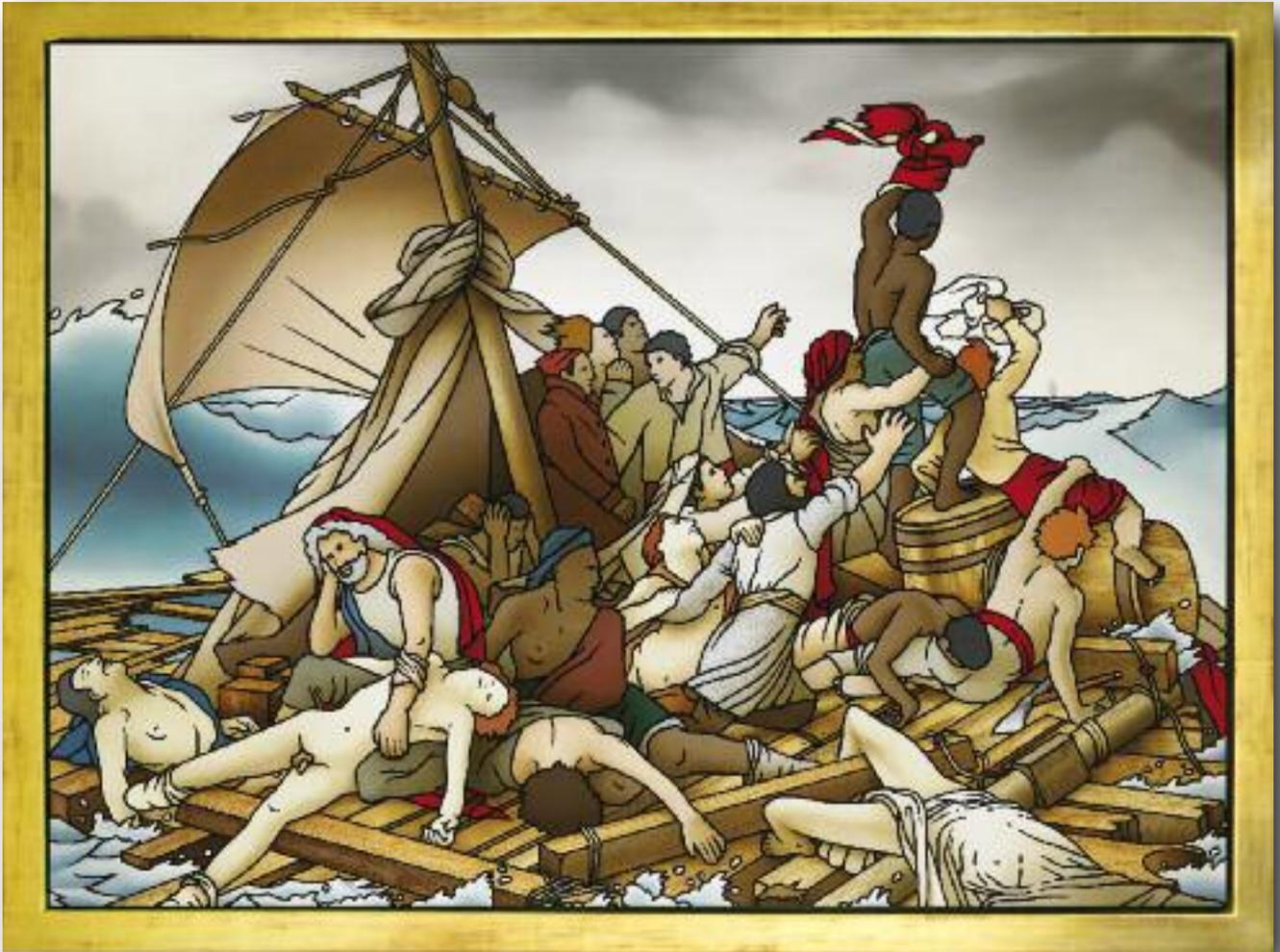
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*Raft of the Medusa after Géricault*

Oil and Acrylic on Canvas  
60" x 84"

## INTRODUCTION

Robert Ballagh is acknowledged as Ireland's pre-eminent painter of modern Irish history. Over a long career, spanning from the iconic *Marchers Series* (begun in 1968) up to the present picture, *Homage to Géricault's Raft of the Medusa* (completed in late 2008), he has continually made moving and perceptive references to the country's political and social history. The way in which he has utilised an original Pop Art style to evoke the resonances and dissonances of recent Irish history, distinguishes him both as a sensitive and stirring recorder of Irish social movements over the past forty years and as an important artist with a universal vision.

Damien Matthews and James & Thérèse Gorry.  
February, 2009.

# ROBERT BALLAGH

## Homage to Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*

In the early spring of 2008, Robert Ballagh found that the image of Théodore Géricault's epic 1819 oil painting *Raft of the Medusa* (Louvre Collection since 1824) kept returning to him with haunting urgency. Certain associations between the acutely shifting nature of contemporary Irish society and the content and composition of the original picture began to strike him with unexpectedly subtle force. The result is his new Pop Art style painting *Raft of the Medusa* after Géricault, which updates the masterpiece whilst retaining the essence of its humane universality.



*Raft of the Medusa* by Théodore Géricault, 1819.

In the early 1970s Ballagh had considered *Raft of the Medusa* as the source and subject for a painting in the Pop Art style, but he rejected the idea then as one whose time had not yet come. It was during that troubled period in Irish history that Ballagh – no longer in thrall to Modernist art as a primary source of inspiration – had felt compelled to make his own radically distilled versions of several key European history paintings renowned for their grandeur of feeling and charged political sentiment. The results were, notably, his Pop Art paintings, *Liberty on the Barricades* after Delacroix, *The Third of May* after Goya and *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* after David. Eschewing overt satire and polemic in these concisely wrought interpretations, Ballagh had intuited a parallel between these original masterpieces and a fair account of contemporary antagonisms and atrocities in the north of Ireland.

When he began painting his Homage last year, Ballagh felt a disquieting presentiment that contemporary Ireland was heading into uncharted waters; the country's economic boom over the previous decade

seemed (along with many of the hopes and aspirations this fuelled in the general population) unsustainable. Géricault's painting – showing dead and dying survivors of the *Medusa* on a makeshift raft, some spotting a ship on the horizon, which may prove a source of salvation or else cruelly elusive – struck an intuitive chord with the artist as 'a powerful iconic work that could act as an apt allegory for the Ireland of our time too'.

The rapid growth of the Irish economy – which is usually dated to the fiscal austerity programme implemented by the minority Fianna Fáil government which came to power in March 1987, and which took off in earnest in the mid-1990s had by mid-2008 slowed down considerably. In September 2008 Ireland became the first Eurozone country officially to enter recession. The Celtic Tiger boom period was over. Robert Ballagh paints a picture of a society that became mesmerised by the illusory glamour of ever-inflating property prices – to the extent that (as the *Economist* magazine pointed out) in 2004 over 80,000 new homes were constructed in Ireland, compared to 160,000 that year in the UK – a country with fifteen times the population. He notes that 'especially in Ireland, banks lent recklessly – allowing bankers to take out huge bonuses – and developers borrowed excessively. Most have now been caught out. The bubble has burst. And it is largely ordinary Irish people who have to pay the price, with cut-backs in social services, and increased taxes on consumer goods.'

Ballagh describes the economic and political predicament in Ireland today as 'terribly unfair. Those who were responsible for the current situation are being bailed out with the taxpayers' money. The very people who have plunged us all into this – in Ireland, America, England and elsewhere – through their greed and incompetence are being bailed out by the general population.'

He finds a moving 'parallel of metaphors between the original painting by Géricault and my adaptation. When Géricault painted his picture of terrible tragedy, it was seen by French people as a metaphor for the recklessness and incompetence of the governing authorities. My version today alludes to the failure of leadership in Celtic Tiger Ireland in economic and regulatory terms.

People tend to blame only the banks – but it was the politicians who failed to regulate, and who allowed the situation to develop. There is a real parallel today – those who were charged with the management of this country were not only incompetent but reckless. Just like in the *Raft of the Medusa*, the heedless and incompetent got the lifeboats. The rest of us, like the innocent survivors on the raft, have been left to pay the price. Like the captain and crew on *La Méduse*, the banks today have got the bail-out. Both situations are rooted in a kind of selfishness fuelled by incompetence and greed. Inequality and unfairness, the way of privilege, are seen to prevail. The unqualified captain of *La Méduse* got his job due to political connections – that kind of nepotism will probably always exist.’

Referring to the recent election of Barack Obama in the United States, Ballagh makes a further intuitive parallel between the original Géricault picture and his version: ‘Let’s hope that the boat on the horizon is the American election result – the harbinger of change. That was a very interesting moment for Géricault to paint – there was hope, and then, for a time, hope slipped away.’

Ballagh sees this current economic crisis, in Ireland but also globally, as indicative of a painful period of ‘deep transition. I would hope that an entirely new way would be found – not capitalism as we know it but not old-fashioned communism either. We’ve already learnt from the mistakes in the Soviet Union that there is a role for the market in society. We have now to understand that there is room for a market system that allows itself to be properly regulated – so that greed can’t go on the rampage again – and that provides for good public services rooted in humane values.

‘For a decade in Ireland there has been this rush to greed and aggrandisement. The economic fundamentals have not been sound, and there has been a failure to recognise ecological realities. At the heart of this has been the kind of attitude created by Reaganomics and Thatcherism in the 1980s – which rejected neighbourliness and a thing ‘such as society’ in favour of deregulation and privatisation. The result has been seen in recent times with global capitalism on the verge of an abyss, the virtual shipwreck of a system, with lots of innocent people becoming vulnerable in the ensuing downturn with all its swingeing cuts and deficits. The only hope now is some kind of ethical corrective – if we can see a return to some kind of social democracy, a move away from the irresponsibility of reckless politicians. Sustainability and accountability are of the essence to me in three key areas – in terms of the economy, democracy and ecology.’

Ballagh’s homage was painted in his Dublin studio with a large reproduction of Géricault’s original at hand. He consulted the latter in terms of composition (which he simplified while keeping true to essentials) and colour. Though his colours are emphatically schematised, they still stay true to the original atmosphere, in details such as the glowering sky with its lucid accents, the minatory darks of the sea swell, the light glistening on the muscular backs of some of the survivors and the deceased, the red of garments and the poignantly improvisatory flag of hope beckoning to the ship lying miniscule, almost invisible on the horizon.

‘As in my Pop Art homages of the early 1970s, I wanted to pay full respect to a great artist but also bring his iconic image up to date. I was not aiming for political satire – to do so would only demean the achievement of Géricault.’ Unlike in the 1970s’ pictures, ‘I put in simple shading while trying to keep true to Géricault’s people.’ Ballagh’s necessary formal simplification of the scene, in keeping with the spirit of our age, concentrates less on the straining heroic muscularity of Géricault’s figures, and more on their common humanity. Indeed, what so disconcerted many contemporary critics of Géricault’s painting was the way that his own treatment of naked and nearly naked figures stripped bare customary social differentiations, those of status, rank, race and nationality, in favour of entangled human forms indiscriminately embodying what Shakespeare described as aspects of ‘poor, bare, forked’ humanity. This seemed radically subversive (and also seen as exemplifying a fierce anti-slave trade outlook) in Géricault’s own day. It was seen as a challenge to the accepted social hierarchy of race and class under the restored Napoleonic

monarchy of Louis XVIII, especially since the apex of the composition – and the splendidly vigorous apex of hope itself – is not some monumental white warrior but rather a lithe black man, stripped to the waist, hopefully and desperately signalling the distant ship.



Detail of Homage to Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa*.

Ballagh’s 1970s’ pictures after the Masters were done in acrylic paint which gave them a bold yet unmodulated look. ‘But now I’ve moved to oil paint, with some tonal glazing, and used a wood-graining technique to evoke

the nature of the timber raft'. The use of the black oil paint line delineating the figures, waves and raft and sails, helps endow this painting with a disciplined spontaneity, a freshness of feeling that enlivens this scene of almost unendurable suffering. This is Pop Art refined to a new level of maturity and subtle vigour, somewhat removed from its late 1950s' and 60s' origins of radical sparseness.

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Géricault was 25 years old when in September 1816 he left Paris for Italy, partly to escape from the 'terrible perplexity' of a romantic relationship but also to see for himself the monumental art of the Italian masters, notably Michelangelo's frescoes. At about the same time news was reaching France of the shipwreck of *La Méduse*. In the autumn of 1818, shaving his hair of its red-blond curls, Géricault retired to his Montmartre studio for eight months, embarking on many initial painted studies and drawings based on the nearly contemporaneous and still highly controversial account of the shipwreck before choosing the exact subject for his painting. This has been characterised as one of the first truly modern history paintings, imbuing a vital current story with the kind of muscular energetic grandeur associated with Raphael and Michelangelo, eliminating trivial details in favour of a universal intimacy based in close, particular observation.



One of many preparatory drawings by Géricault for his *Raft of the Medusa*.

The challenge Géricault faced was to find a single monumental scene which would coherently convey the tragic reality of the shipwreck, with as clear a focus as possible in depicting scenes of alarming mayhem, whilst spurning bathos, bombast, sentimentality and overt symbolism. He made many brilliant drawings and oil studies of different aspects and stages of the shipwreck before settling on the scene he ultimately portrayed. This intensive preparatory stage helped clarify his focus and purpose, and many elements in these initial studies were succinctly adapted for use in the final composition.

Two survivors, the ship's surgeon Henri Savigny and Alexandre Corréard, had written an account of the shipwreck, first published in November 1817; this became the source of Géricault's painting. (One writer has noted that 'these two men were far from being impartial chroniclers. Their book more designed to incriminate the captain of *La Méduse*, while at the same time minimize or explain their own part in the atrocities which occurred on the raft').

On July 2<sup>nd</sup> 1816, a government frigate *La Méduse*, carrying French soldiers and sailors to the colony of Senegal, had struck a reef off the West African coast. The incompetent aristocratic captain Hugues Duroys de Chaumareys had, along with other senior officers and their families (numbering 250 people), brutally commandeered the six lifeboats, leaving the remaining 150 crew and passengers (including one woman) to scramble onto a makeshift raft (about 28 feet wide by 65 feet long) composed of beams and masts roughly held together with ropes. Savigny later recalled that the raft 'had sunk at least three feet, and so closely were we huddled together that it was impossible to move a single step. Fore and aft, we had water up to our middle.'

In violation of an agreement that the lifeboats should tow the raft to land, the captain and his men cut the cables attached to the raft, leaving it at the mercy of the elements, and with only the most basic provisions. Savigny recorded that once he and his fellows realised they were abandoned, 'all the horrors of famine and thirst were then depicted in our imaginations.' Up to their waists in sea water, 'all the sailors and soldiers gave themselves up to despair, and it was with great difficulty that we succeeded in calming them'. The night was tempestuous: 'A great number of our passengers who had not a seaman's foot tumbled over one another.' Daybreak revealed that ten people, trapped between the boards of the raft, had died, and the same number had been carried off to sea.

The following day saw scenes of people crushed in the desperate scramble for foothold at the raft's more solid middle. Many crew, 'giving themselves up for lost, fell a-drinking until they lost their reason'. A mutiny ensued as one man attempted to cut the ropes holding the raft together. The battle between crew and officers and some passengers, with swords and knives, ended with sixty-five lives lost and the rebels subdued. Days of hunger, thirst, wracking exposure to the elements, and cannibalism, followed. On the sixth day, there were twenty-eight survivors, of whom thirteen 'had wholly lost their reason'. After an agonised council, the hardier survivors decided to throw these thirteen into the sea,

as a way to preserve the meagre rations for themselves. 'We averted our eyes, and shed tears of blood over the fate of these unhappy creatures... After this catastrophe we threw all our arms into the sea; they inspired us with a horror that we could not conquer.'

Corréard and Savigny quoted the sombre speech of a veteran of the Napoleonic Wars, who, as he lay dying on the raft, pointed out how much more terrible shipwreck is even than battle: 'All that I suffered in so many forced marches... was nothing in comparison with what I endure on this frightful machine.... Here, I often have the same dangers, and what is more dreadful, I have to combat Frenchmen and comrades.'

It is the sighting of the *Argus*, a vessel in the original convoy of *La Méduse*, on the morning of July 17<sup>th</sup>, that is the subject of Géricault's painting. 'Captain Dupont, casting his eye on the horizon, perceived a ship, and announced it to us by a cry of joy... we could only distinguish the top of its masts... Fears, however, soon mixed with our hopes... We did all we could to make ourselves observed; we piled up our casks, at the top of which we fixed handkerchiefs of different colours. Unfortunately, in spite of all these signals, the brig disappeared. From the delirium of joy we passed to that of dejection and grief.' Géricault's painting evokes extremes of human experience: from the ineffable dejection of the father figure facing us, cradling his dead 'son', to the rising movement of the body of men on the raft, aspiring towards the elusive vessel far away.

But Géricault had tellingly not chosen to portray the moment of rescue itself; in fact, the raft had not then been spotted, and the *Argus* disappeared off the horizon. The men despairingly settled down in a tent they had rigged together under the mast to await death. The *Argus*, however, returned two hours later. There were fifteen survivors (five of whom died soon after reaching land) from the original one hundred and fifty. In his painting, Géricault deliberately does not depict the men in their starving, ravaged state yet the extremity of their predicament is dynamically evoked.

Initially, information about the incompetent, treacherous behaviour of the captain of *La Méduse* was suppressed by the French state, but a full, leaked revelation appeared in the press in September 1818 causing a public scandal. It was shown that the French regime had corruptly (as Lorenz Eitner has written) given 'the command of ships to political favourites and allowed aristocratic officers to abandon their men in times of crisis'.

Géricault's painting was first shown at the Salon at the Louvre in August 1819, both disturbing and intriguing the general public, and arousing great praise or irate criticism from the newspaper critics according to their political hue. In June 1820, it was shown at William Bullock's Egyptian Hall in London's Piccadilly, for an admission fee of one shilling, along with a lithographed version available as part of a 'Description' (or catalogue) for sixpence. The following year (from February 3<sup>rd</sup> to March 29<sup>th</sup>) it was exhibited at The Rotunda in Dublin – under the title of *Scene of Shipwreck* though visitors were under no illusion as to its impressive contemporary relevance.



Lying-in-Hospital & Rotunda, Dublin by W.H. Bartlett, c.1810.

The Rotunda Hospital, located at the top of what is now O'Connell Street, on Parnell Square, had moved to its present location in 1757; this charitable institution had several function rooms where fundraising events were held. The subject of *La Méduse* rose even higher in the Irish national consciousness in 1821 when another artistic endeavour, the 'Novel Marine Peristrepic Panorama of the Shipwreck of The Medusa' – a vast and rather crudely painted elaborate portrayal with moving figures and enfolding scenes with accompanying music – was simultaneously on show elsewhere in Dublin.

An illuminating article in *The Burlington Magazine* (May 2008) by Philip McEvansoneya of Trinity College, Dublin, firmly rebuts previous assertions made that the showing of Géricault's picture 'received no mention in the Dublin Press'. He has surveyed Dublin newspapers of the time and found that the 'private view of the exhibition was reported in *Carrick's Morning Post and Daily Advertiser* and, rather unpredictably, by the *Irish Farmers' Journal*. The former also reprinted from the London *Examiner* a discussion of the painting's subject and an evocation of its qualities. *Carrick's Morning Post* remarked on the successful opening of the exhibition when "nearly three hundred persons of rank and fashion, and a great number of artists" were in attendance. It reported the expression of the "unanimous opinion [...]"

that it is far superior to any painting offered for public exhibition in this city within our time.” Among those present were the Bishop of Killaloe; Lord Frankfort; the Most Reverend Dr Troy (the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin); the Reverend John Torrens (the Archdeacon of Dublin); Sir John Galbraith; the Hon. Col. Gore and “many other Ladies and Gentleman remarkable for their taste and judgement”.’

McEvansoneya goes on to point out that such an illustrious guest list ‘served to mark out the exhibition as a social as well as a cultural event of unquestionable propriety - as the presence of members of both the Protestant and Catholic hierarchies demonstrates’. A retrospective article on the exhibition appeared in April 1821 in the short-lived literary monthly, the *Dublin Inquisitor*. The anonymous author’s response included his belief (as evoked by McEvansoneya) that ‘the painting lacked realistic evidence of the privations undergone by the survivors’. This was quite a common contemporary criticism, but it had been Géricault’s intention (in the finished painting rather than in his

severely realistic preparatory studies) to arouse sensations of sympathetic awe (as opposed to overwhelming feelings of horrified disgust) in the picture’s spectators.

Géricault died in January 1824, aged just 32. His *Raft of the Medusa* remains at once a universal and historically focussed vision of humanity *in extremis*, and also a subtle meditation on the ship of state run aground. It remains, as Ballagh’s *Homage* to it so movingly attests, a challengingly inspirational work of art for us today.

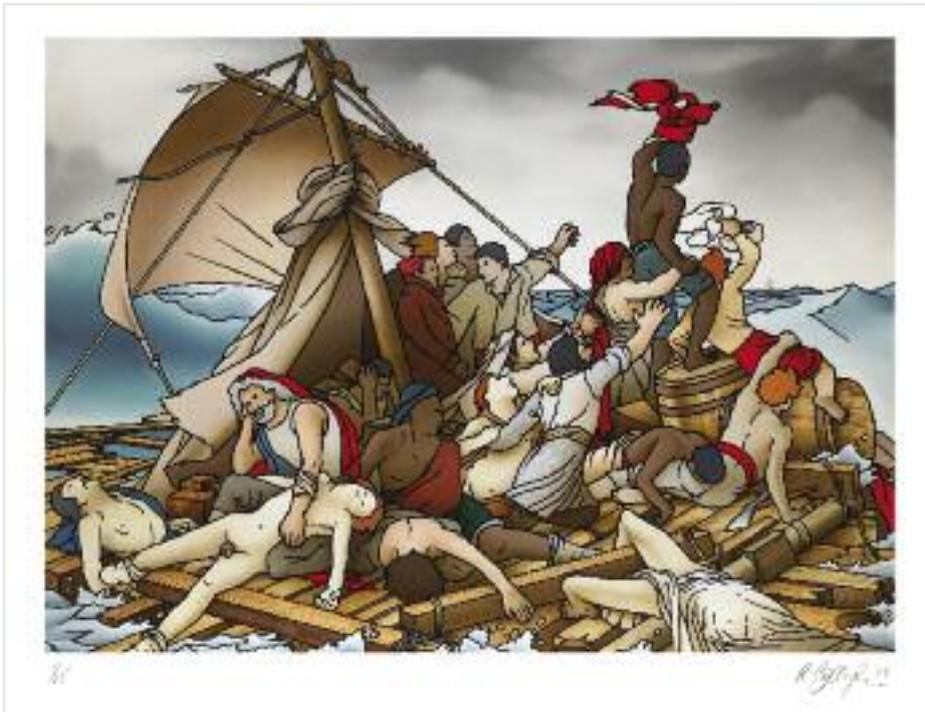
*Philip Vann*

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*A writer on the visual arts, Philip Vann is based in Cambridge. He has written numerous books on modern and contemporary artists, including William Crozier, Dora Holzhandler, Cyril Power, Greg Tricker and Joash Woodrow.*

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### 1. *Raft of the Medusa* after Géricault

Print Size 32" x 44"

Signed Lower Right & Numbered Lower Left

€1,650 (edition of 25)

In 2008, moved and disquieted by the straitened economic circumstances suffered by ordinary Irish people as the ship of state runs increasingly aground, Ballagh made his own version of Théodore Géricault's epic 1819 painting, *Raft of the Medusa*. This creative re-interpretation – its deliberately concise Pop Art style enlivened with spontaneously fresh brushwork – portrays the fate of shipwreck survivors on a makeshift raft as they spot a rescue vessel on the horizon. Géricault's rendering of this intense moment of radical hope struck a poignant chord with Ballagh, who sees this grand historical painting as 'a powerful iconic work that could act as an apt allegory for the Ireland of our time too'.



### 2. *Hope*

Print Size 28" x 20"

Signed Lower Right & Numbered Lower Left

€950 (edition of 25)

Géricault initially made many close-up preparatory studies of figures on the raft of *La Méduse*, searching for an overall harmonious composition of compelling authority. In *Hope*, Robert Ballagh has made his own painterly Pop Art version of a study of the single figure at the apex of the final original composition – the lithe black man stripped to the waist desperately waving a rag at the vessel on the distant horizon. By employing a radically fresh contemporary style, Ballagh has brought the man's desperate appeal for salvation in murky, dangerous waters movingly up-to-date.

Ballagh's concern in the late 1960s with political issues – in particular that of violence and injustice in the north of Ireland and abroad – was reflected in a remarkable series of paintings that reproduced in starkly simplified forms scenes of insurrection and violence from classical masterpieces of European painting. Ballagh's Pop Art adaptations, with a stinging succinctness of their own, powerfully relate the original works' politically charged subject matter to events in recent Irish history.



### 3. *The Intervention of the Sabine Women after David*

Print Size 29" x 36"

Signed Lower Right & Numbered Lower Left

€1,450 (edition of 25)

The French neo-classical painter Jacques-Louis David took as his subject an event in early Roman history, which followed the abduction of a group of Sabine women by the male followers of Romulus. David's picture depicts the brave, poignant intervention of the Sabine women in the battle between their Roman husbands and Sabine relatives. At the picture's heart is Hersilia, Romulus' wife and daughter of the Sabine leader, as she dramatically places her babies between her husband and her father. Ballagh's Pop Art version simplifies the original composition while retaining, in its elaborated figuration, the original's dynamic force. David intended his picture to be symbolic of the victory of love over conflict and war – a message pertinent to modern times.



### 4. *The Third of May after Goya*

Print Size 29" x 36"

Signed Lower Right & Numbered Lower Left

€1,450 (edition of 25)

Possibly Ballagh's most renowned and recognisable image, a fresh, succinct re-interpretation of Goya's revolutionary 1814 painting portraying the execution of Spanish insurgents by Napoleonic troops in Madrid in 1808. Ballagh's Pop Art stylisation serves to heighten further the dramatic contrast in the original painting between the rigidly poised firing squad and the anguished disorder and mayhem of the victims. The central figure in simple white and yellow garb, kneeling among bloody corpses, with his arms upraised in appeal or defiance, may appear now as much a victim of the 1970s' Troubles, or other modern atrocities, as of Goya's time.



### 5. *Liberty at the Barricades after Delacroix*

Print Size 29" x 36"

Signed Lower Right & Numbered Lower Left

€1,450 (edition of 25)

This work, used by Ballagh in his An Post 1979 Patrick Pearse commemorative stamp, is based on Eugène Delacroix's 1830 painting of the figure of Liberty leading an uprising of Parisians, originally depicted under the banner of the French tricolour representing liberty, equality and fraternity. Ballagh has simplified the contours of Delacroix's neo-classical style here, removing the main figures' features so as to reduce them to their hard-edged essence, expressing a timeless surging aspiration to be free.



**6. *The Death of Marat after David***

Print Size 29" x 19"

Signed Lower Right & Numbered Lower Left

€950 (edition of 25)

Ballagh's starkly economic image is based on and inspired by Jacques-Louis David's neo-classical painting of the death of the French philosopher and political revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat – assassinated in his bath in 1793. David's painting is often considered as an audaciously modern or avant-garde painting for its time with at its heart a paradox: the portrayal of Marat is at once hauntingly topical yet classic in tone, idealising its subject matter yet in some ways remaining realistic. Ballagh's version savours these paradoxes.



**7. *The Turkish Bath after Ingres***

Print Size 25" x 25"

Signed Lower Right & Numbered Lower Left

€1,450 (edition of 25)

This work renders with Pop Art sensibility the curvaceous sensuality of Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' *Turkish Bath*, keeping to the tondo form of the original 1862 painting. Ingres' neo-classical style also contained seeds of modernity in its definite yet subtle distortions of form – facets that later gained the admiration of Picasso and his colleagues. Ballagh's own predilection for silhouette and dark outline comes to the fore in his rendition of this exotic scene, which, like Ingres' suavely contoured original, eschews all overt evidence of the brushstroke.



**8. *My Studio 1969***

Print Size 36" x 40"

Signed Lower Right &

Numbered Lower Left

€1,650 (edition of 25)

This work was created in 1976, says Ballagh, 'as a comment on the earlier works I had made in 1969/70 concerning events in the north of Ireland. Few people got the message at the time so I created this later painting to make my intentions clear'. While faithfully reproducing in the background his earlier reworking of Delacroix's masterpiece, the contemporary studio setting is made clear by the inclusion of various art materials – an ironic usage as redolent of Pop Art as his original version.



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Tel/Fax 01 6795319

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