

Visual art to illuminate and intrigue

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Two big names may dominate this year's programme, but there's plenty of work by other artists to whet the viewing public's appetite, writes Aidan Dunne

A COUPLE OF BIG names dominate the visual arts programme of this year's Galway Arts Festival, one predictable, the other distinctly less so. Bill Viola is one of the foremost artists at work in the world today and Joni Mitchell too is renowned, though obviously more for music than visual art. But that's what she's doing in Galway, with her exhibition *Green Flag Song*, and, rather than the domestically scaled oil paintings made in a Post-Impressionist style she has made in the past, her new work is photographic, big, and fairly in-your-face. It consists of a series of triptychs of grainy images, some in negative, snatched from television broadcasts and processed so that natural colour is distorted.

The work was made in tandem with her recent album *Shine*, and shares the same concerns. Mitchell, who declared her exasperation with the popular music industry in 2002 and said she was opting out of it, was drawn back, unlikely as it may seem, by an invitation from Starbucks' Hear Music label and by her own growing dismay at the way the world was going. The Bush administration in the US, the war in Iraq and untrammelled environmental degradation are at the core of what troubles her. Hence the nightmarish quality of the images in *Green Flag Song*, though along with glimpses of the toppling of Saddam's statue in Baghdad, of victims of violence and massed ranks of military, we also see Busby Berkeley dancers going through their intricately choreographed routines.

It was a Busby Berkeley musical seen on a dodgy television that suggested a *modus operandi* to Mitchell, and the dance scenes are oddly appropriate, suggesting a kind of communal madness, an illogical exuberance, the lure and dangers of mob rule. Mitchell is a major musician with a phenomenal body of work to her credit. It's unlikely that she will ever attain the same status as a visual artist, but this exhibition, a series of postcards from the edge, so to speak, is creditable and effective, and is made with real visual flair. Seen en masse it is a bit overwhelming, which is clearly part of the intention, but look at any piece individually and it holds up very well.

IF YOU ARE interested in Bill Viola - and he usually gets a warm response when his videos are shown in Ireland - it's well worth your while getting to Galway, because the festival includes what amounts to a substantial survey of his output as far back as 1976, though it doesn't feature any of his more recent projects. Viola's work has developed in parallel with video technology, and benefits from his solid technical grounding. Rather than presuming that, because he is an artist, he can do pretty much what he likes and it will be art, he made a point of becoming technically proficient in his chosen medium.

His earliest pieces evidence the influence of such artists as Bruce Neumann, who took the fledgling video recorder and applied it to the artist's, rather than the television studio to see what it might be capable of. And Viola's work initially had something of the stark, conceptual austerity of Neumann's. If that conceptual approach is exclusively pursued though, it can become arid and alienating, not to mention earnest in its presumption of philosophical significance. In fact, rather than merely interrogating the technology itself, Viola has from the first been interested in employing it to explore fundamental aspects of human existence.

When he was six years old he almost drowned, and the other-worldly nature of that experience informs his fascination with water (and perhaps with its opposite, deserts) and with extreme, borderline states of consciousness, as exemplified in being born and dying, for example, and in various attempts to arrive at some truths about the nature of life and the world in the different mystical traditions, notably including Christianity, Sufism and Zen Buddhism. All of this is hugely ambitious, some critics feeling that it is too ambitious, that art as it is currently configured cannot deal with these metaphysical questions. Viola's work, though, generates tremendous personal responses from viewers, which must tell us something.

It is also made with absolute personal commitment. Give yourself over to the pieces on view in Galway, and you will find yourself engaged in intriguing meditations on time, memory, states of consciousness, and transformative phenomena and experiences of various kinds. You can see a development from shorter, simpler early pieces to more complex ones though, as Viola has pointed out, the early pieces broach subjects that frame what followed. It can be gruelling, not in the obvious sense but in the emotional intensity of what we see. *The Passing*, made in 1991, for example, is a remarkable and memorable work, considered to be among his very best, that looks both backwards and forwards in terms of his oeuvre. Some of Viola's pieces and all of Mitchell's are at the Festival Box Office in Merchants Road, which makes a brilliant exhibition venue, one dominated by Max Streicher's fantastic inflatable, airborne, kinetic paper sculptures: they need no elaboration. It's also where you can see what is the best show yet

mounted by Artspace Studios artists, In Situ.

Galway-born Ruth McHugh is a consistently fine, thoughtful artist and an inspired choice for the festival. Her solo show *Tracery* at the Aula Maxima UCG is rich and cohesive while covering a lot of ground conceptually. She moves from the personal and domestic to the global with great ingenuity. In the peeling layers of whitewash on a coal shed, a map of the world takes shape like an hallucination or a dream. Similarly, a simple glass globe might be the Earth. Underlying this, there is perhaps the idea of a child's developing awareness of the wider world.

Through the skilful use of a combination of video (a mesmerising piece of contact juggling), photographs and mixed media collages, McHugh uses the restored conservatory at the National Botanic Gardens as an emblem of the Victorian impulse to quantify, catalogue and conquer the world, with a eye to the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace and Walter Benjamin's unfinished investigation into the history of 19th century modernity as symbolised by Parisian shopping arcades, *The Arcades Project*. In *Phantasmagoria*, the natural world seems on the point of overwhelming the efforts made to classify and contain it. The work rewards careful, considered attention.

At the Galway Arts Centre, *Darkness Visible* is a well conceived, beautifully installed show exploring what might be termed the neo-Gothic imagination. It was curated by Breda Lynch and Ann Mulrooney and they've hit on a rich thematic vein. Their approach also spotlights what is clearly a distinct strand in contemporary Irish art (though the show isn't confined to Irish artists). Alice Maher's recent work, for example, is right at home in a Gothic frame, and Eoin McHugh's *Dome Design Study* is amazing when seen in the context of a photograph documenting the finished sculpture.

Other darklights, so to speak, include Mulrooney's ambiguous, hybrid forms made from cast peat moss and glue, George Bolster's high camp reworking of religious iconography, the ominous, teeming surfaces of Andy Harper's dark, labyrinthine paintings and Kate Street's show-stopper, *Bird in the Hand II*, which gives a grisly twist to its title.

AT THE WHITE ROOM Gallery, Kevin Mooney's *Somewhere in the West* offers a satirical take on the transformation of the West of Ireland, demonstrating how the fondly regarded and strongly marketed image has become progressively removed from the reality. It's hardly a novel idea, but Mooney does it with some flair. His *Western Landscape* offers a classically picturesque view of Connemara largely obscured by huge mechanical diggers. Ghostly images of generically bland apartment blocks overlie natural vistas. Even if the points are obvious, they still need to be made.

It's great to have a chance to see the Depression era work of the American photographer Walker Evans at the Aula Maxima UCG, not least because it might give pause to those who seem quite entertained by the idea of economic recession.

Evans used a 10 by eight-inch camera and the images are stunning in their level of detail, clarity and insight. His portraits are wonderful, but so to are his architectural studies, including those of what he called the "primitive" churches, basic wooden structures in poverty-stricken areas.

At Cluain Mhuire GMIT, Mark St John Ellis's touring group show, *The Plinian Sponge, Maybe?* is a terrific look at the work of a number of artists who take a quizzical, investigative look at the possibilities of painting. The pieces are mostly small in scale, presumably for logistical reasons. Highlights include works by Graham Crowley, Philippa Sutherland, Claire Kerr and Jonathan Hunter. At the University College Hospital, *Subjected* is a good group show. Jennifer Cunningham, Allyson Keehan and Louise Neiland all stand out.

Out at G126, in Dadalenin, Rainer Ganahl plays on the notion that Stalin was, incognito, a Dadaist, based on the fact that his time in Zurich overlapped with that of Tristan Tzara and, as it happens, James Joyce. It's a subject elaborated, with more humour, by Tom Stoppard in his play *Travesties*. Sean Henry's *The Floating Man* deserves a permanent home at the City Hall. There's a lot of Pauline Bewick in *Seven Ages* at the Kenny Gallery. She's an artist who tends to polarise opinion: it's frothy stuff, but if you like it, you like it.

If you get to the Norman Villa Gallery in Lower Salthill, you can sample Philip Lindey's whimsically absurd surrealism in his popular paintings.

The Galway Arts Festival runs until July 27. www.galwayartsfestival.com

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