

Paintings to be seen in the flesh

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VISUAL ARTS:IN PRECIOUS THINGS, at the Highlanes Municipal Art Gallery in Drogheda, Graham Crowley has put together a tremendously lively and accessible exhibition of contemporary painting.

Chances are that most of the 19 artists will not be familiar to an Irish audience. Almost all of them are from the UK, while Marta Marcé, who is from Barcelona, is currently living in London, as is Varda Caivano, who is from Argentina.

When he was invited to curate a painting show, Crowley, who retired early from his position as professor of painting at the Royal College of Art in London and is now living in West Cork, decided to concentrate on artists whose work has, in the last 10 years or so, "given me cause to think". There's plenty of food for thought in a show that's heterogeneous to the point of unruliness. No two artists share a style, but that's partly Crowley's point, and somehow the whole thing works. It helps that Drogheda's municipal gallery is a spacious venue, surprisingly spacious even. It opened in October 2006 and is an imaginative, though tactful, conversion of the Franciscan friary church. The altar is still in place and, again, somehow that works too.

Highlanes is important for Drogheda on many levels, not least in providing a home for the municipal collection. The collection was founded by Bea Orpen and her husband, CEF (Terry) Trench, and is of real historical and artistic interest. The provision of Highlanes as a home has already served to revivify it.

With Precious Things, Crowley is providing instruction as well as amusement. He is making the point that painting is part of an open, ongoing cultural conversation rather than an art-historical category. It cannot be contained, he implies, within the fixed boundaries of theoretical debates built around the oppositions of modern and postmodern, conceptualism and painting. Broadly speaking, he locates the work of all the artists as fitting within what is termed post-conceptual painting, painting that acknowledges the legacy of Marcel Duchamp and conceptualism without becoming bogged down in an entrenched battle about it, and without being defensive about the status of painting within the art world.

Things have changed in this regard, but those habitual oppositions and enmities are still prevalent to a significant extent. It's immediately clear that the artists in the show don't worry unduly about where their work fits in relation to modernism or other modes of practice. This is not to say that they are historically ignorant. Far from it, but they are not making work in response to modernist dogma, for example, in the way that so many postmodern artists have felt it incumbent upon themselves to do. Instead they are engaging promiscuously with myriad visual traditions and with contemporary cultural circumstances, and doing so in a spirit of relish and liveliness.

Ansel Krut and Paul Housley are among a substantial number of painters who have reinvigorated figuration with subversive wit and inventiveness. Krut's Whistling Winnie is amazing in that its cartoonish, curiously composite figure comes across as being simultaneously animate and inanimate, and yet conveys real pathos.

Equally, Housley's Reflective Snoopy drags a graphic idiom into another context, not to mock but to imbue it with feeling. A word of caution: the work of both artists, and of most of the others in the show, is best appreciated in the flesh. It's substantially dependent on qualities of texture and touch that tend to get lost in reproduction, common though it is to encounter paintings in the form of mere images.

In Varda Caivano's beautifully nuanced paintings, solid objects and images alike seem to dissolve into a blur of possibilities, as though they have been semi-erased, and we have to try to reconstruct what was there.

Both Mali Morris and Marta Mercé are more definite about what is there. Each creates paintings on the basis of rules and systems we are not party to but the role of which we can infer from the pictorial organisation we see. Morris has a light touch and a nice feeling for colour. There's a sense of musical improvisation in her layered, radiant compositions with their informal grids and circles. Mercé, too, uses colour adventurously in overlapping, harmonious patterns.

Michael Crowther's fine floral still-lives recall Giorgio Morandi with their subdued tonality and their slow, engaging surfaces. The subjects are barely articulated against soft, muted grounds, a painterly strategy that has the effect of

drawing us into the works. We feel we have to get closer to them to really see them, and the result is that we enter more fully into their psychological as much as their pictorial space.

They are quietly powerful paintings. In *Still*, Kiera Bennett renders a very large-scale view of a backwater that suggests a run-down urban industrial setting. She, too, employs a carefully controlled tonality with great verve and ability, and the overall effect is not a million miles away from Eithne Jordan's low-key realism.

A more high-definition realism is evident in Geraint Evans's large-scale paintings, which depict fantastic scenes in a matter-of-fact way.

Scale is a recurrent preoccupation: modellers work on a sprawling, snowy mountain landscape in a timbered attic, while, in another work, people who might dwell in that landscape are depicted as being contained in a huge constructed dome. There's an hallucinatory quality to Jeffrey Dennis's vignettes of contemporary life. Multiple images are embedded in a granular matrix as though churned around in a cement mixer for images.

William Daniels's remarkable trompe-l'oeil painting of Napoleon Crossing the Great Saint Bear Pass does not look like a painting at all, it looks like a sculptural collage constructed from pieces of torn paper and card. In fact, it's painted from just such a construction, in a way that recalls German artist Thomas Demand's technique of making paper models from photographs and then photographing the models. Daniels's work is obsessively detailed and quite extraordinary to look at. Each piece must take him forever.

There's much more to enjoy: Adam Dant's virtuoso ink drawings, Hannah Maybank's bas-relief paintings, Zoe Mendelson's fantastical elaborations, exquisite graphics by John Strutton, Will Turner's startling amendments to pop images, Joshua Thomson's schematic jazz-rock history, Julian Perry's exploration of personal interventions in landscape and Sara MacKillop's reinventions of packaging.

It is, in all, a tremendous exhibition by any standard and more than merits a visit to Drogheda.

- *Precious Things*, curated by Graham Crowley, with paintings by Keira Bennett, Simon Bill, Varda Caivano, Michael Crowther, William Daniels, Adam Dant, Jeffrey Dennis, Geraint Evans, Paul Housley, Ansel Krut, Sarah MacKillop, Marta Marcé, Hannagh Maybank, Zoe Mendelson, Mali Morris, Julian Perry, John Strutton, Joshua Thomson and Will Turner; Highlanes Gallery, St Laurence Street, Drogheda, until Nov 11

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