

Oyster Grit

As the tendrils, fog and fabric of these works poke at and attempt to envelop me I realise that there is not now, and likely never will be a single explanatory vat within which I can deposit them to contain the many untidy ends of meaning currently cluttering up my thoughts. There are plenty of clues available as to what these artists do, how they might relate and why they should be shown together at this time. However, having become immersed in the microcosmic realm they collectively create, the fact that they are all represented by the same gallery seems pretty low on the list of priorities driving the design behind, if not the guts within, this group exhibition.

A letter of startling clarity from one artist to another about the nature of making and the recent flurry of verbal and electronic correspondence I have been party to all lead to a shared personal territory far removed from gallery and art world protocol. Separate dialogues between artists (who have never before shown as a group) continue beyond the periods of overlap during the annual exhibition schedule and all remain informed and curious as to the process of and impact on the group of the director selecting further individuals for representation. A sense of being in exile; an ever-present dissatisfaction with their chosen modes of enquiry and a fascination with historical models of representation; attention to detail and a dogged, old-fashioned commitment to the projects they pursue all infect but do little to actually describe these individuals' very different practices.

At several points during this non-scientific process of visual investigation, a Venn diagram has seemed the most appropriate method of imposing order onto unruly portions of abstract thought. Even this practical, evidence-based approach, though, struggles in my mind's eye to accurately map the amorphous territory of theoretical interpretation. As quickly as threads of meaning emerge they become inextricably bound to the analytical framework that has made such consideration possible. Shared sensibilities and points of reference spin tangible (if temporal) webs between specific works but like fingerprints delicately dusted into life can only exist as long as that upon which they are printed. The path of deconstruction is simultaneously exciting but, at times, solitary with the security blanket embrace of emotional response ever tempting as the clouds of perceptual debate roll in.

The title – 'Oyster Grit' – has materialised from the midst of organisation and pre-conceptualisation of the event. Does this describe a moment of perceptual surety interrupted, perhaps, or the point of fracture between the idea and phenomenon of an experience? The visceral quality invoked by these two words together – the glottal hike that might result from detection of a small, calcified speck within the viscous briny swallow of shellfish – enables (in the context of looking) a temporary rift between analysis and response; a fissure in the wall of preconception offering a glimpse of something potentially pure. With investment, these works offer such accidental moments. Often prompted by an unexpected presence or combination of elements they provoke responses that feel chipped from the unknown – a dense cerebral core comprised of personal and inherited moments pressed into granite through the weight of time. Yet the thoughts they inspire are not sharp or flinty but mercurial and hard to grasp, snagging on the clunky workings of the mind like fabric pulled through the teeth of an outmoded machine.

Daniel Gustav Cramer plays with pictorial truth but never to the point of actually recreating it. The guise through which his emotionally charged journeys are revealed – recently, photographic representations of the landscape – grants us a false sense of security towards the subject that gradually evaporates under the weight of our gaze. Cramer's trilogy series that began in 2004 – 'Woodland', 'Underwater', 'Mountain' – with its painterly frame of reference (and perhaps the artist's German heritage) has prompted alignment of his practice with Neo-Romantic photographic tradition. But narrative in this context is something to be transposed rather than available to interpret from the ephemeral, if faithful, bucolic details we are presented with.

The prosaic subject headings inform us of what precisely we are looking at but these are no tourist snapshots or politicised views of the natural world in crisis. The proffered reality of each image hovers between the familiar and a prophetic sense of the uncanny contained within a compositionally disciplined,

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almost Modernist frame. Cramer makes no attempt to control his surroundings though – waiting for the right photographic conditions can take days – but with patience and a clear objective is able to imbue the elements he chooses with curatorial as opposed to documentary specificity. The moderate physical scale of these works is just enough to evoke a sense of the profound without over-egging epic potential or condensing the suggestion of elemental power to the point of combustion.

Light-spattered trees appear to bend and bristle in the lupine deep, while Vorticist spikes of geological strata pierce curtains of vaporous gloom with an optical persistence that defies the static logic of the 'still'. Cramer's technical illumination of the seabed, on the other hand, reveals lunar qualities that can only be explained by close inspection – the bottle-top magnification of the foreground. The formality of presentation here feels like a mutagenetic skin that alters in accordance with its two-fold mission: inviting ocular ownership to secure gut response while protecting the private intentions that pulse through the fibre of the image.

On the flip side of the narrative coin, **Miho Sato's** pared down painting process echoes back some of these concerns from a distant, fractured realm. Both wait proportionately long periods of time for the correct imagery to arrive within their lives, but where Cramer is beholden to the whims of nature, Sato fatalistically fishes from the sea of visual ephemera fly posted to and hidden within the everyday. You can imagine myriad secret connections creating skeins of new meaning beneath her characteristically black grounds. Sato's pictorial veil, which simultaneously connects and separates us from the contemporary motifs she describes, appears as transitory as Cramer's meteorological ruse, but is essentially comprised of translucent membranes of acrylic paint.

In the 'real' world, Sato's chosen subjects/emoles, regardless of their status, may at any time become wrinkled under buttocks on a bus, slapped haphazardly on the side of a building or imprisoned within library tomes disconnected from the metronomic tick-tock of modern life. In her often small, impossibly spare paintings they are given a second chance. But rather than reframe the iconic as something new, Sato works the disparity between public consciousness of these characters and her own representation of them as an outsider (she came to London in 2000 from Japan) partially subsumed by the melting pot of the city. Moomin, Justin, Maria, Nessie, Robin, Cowboy... might leap from the wall into virtual existence or slowly materialise within the mind's eye, depending on our relationship to them.

Like Cramer, Sato's production process follows a strict set of creative guidelines, but with paint her chosen medium is free to eradicate or reconfigure detail at will. A limited palette and propensity towards harsh cropping encourage a sense of familiarity while preventing formulaic results. It is testament to Sato's perfectionism that old sources of material inspiration have yet to be discarded for the sake of associative innovation. The latest body of works feature Blighty's cock robin reduced to a gunmetal grey silhouette trapped atop a branch within an indigo ground. It may appear that a similar fate has befallen the evanescent female being floating in the mid-section of another. But, almost instantly for some, she will take her rightful place in the annals of film as opposed to art history as the spirit-possessed child in 'Exorcist'. Her face, now cleared of its memorably twisted features, promotes an eerie sense of calm referentially equidistant between the morgue and the lofty heights of religious iconography.

In another context, a visual alliance between the photographic practice of **Ailbhe Ní Bhriain** and the drawings of Jeffrey T Y Lee might seem odd. However, despite their different perspectives on authorship, both appear driven by inquiry into the landscape, the evocative lure of the monochromatic and a need to control the elements at their disposal. Modes of representation feature heavily: whether questioning our relationship to the design and delineation of spatial territory or human culpability in the recording of historic events. Where Ní Bhriain explores the push and pull between notions of access to the picture plane and material or conceptual opposites (dark/light, internal/external, manmade/organic), Lee adopts a process-based, minimal approach to describing interior and exterior settings, yet both have made works that have the potential to co-exist as facsimiles of real places and moments snatched from the collective memory.

Ní Bhriain consciously constructed 'Perimeter' series is fraught with the tension created between reordered architectural surfaces – the glossy and impenetrable

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qualities of which are by turns seductive and repellent. With her stylised imagery, Ní Bhriain confronts us with our aesthetic assumptions about the task and appearance of photography, until we realise the personal commitment involved in customising these vacillatory images (that could be the precursory or end shots abutting narrative explanation). As in Cramer's rural realm, the lack of human presence creates drama without pathos and the curious juxtaposition of rigorous geometric planning and the sensory possibilities of matter hints at a lack of resolution between logistical and fantastical agendas.

The Cork-based artist's post-production sensibility implies a contrary attitude to materiality and space. In each frame, internal and external worlds overlap; rotated urban elements and re-contextualised plant life are combined to create improbable areas of detail (such as the dull shine of floor tiles bearing down from the top of an image or the glimmer of borrowed light framing the cylindrical curvature of a concrete tunnel) within an otherworldly whole. Where Cramer's breathy mountain scenes appear to absorb the attention they receive, the weighty quality Ní Bhriain's tonally dark, often filmic images threatens, like the back draft of a raging fire or thermonuclear blast, to suck those before them into the picture frame. Light features as a necessary evil – a source of vital interruption to the orchestration of obscurity. But the natural life here has adapted to and morphed within the darkness: the inky reach of a reflected forest about to spread its feathery way across a waterlogged floor is suggestive of a primordial realm, but contemporary facets – mirrored walls, sheeting or rope, which may contain or stultify action – pull us back into the present.

In quiet, highly detailed drawings, **Jeffrey T Y Lee** explores the minimal methods through which meaning can be implied and interpreted. Fine grids hold laboriously applied pencil lines that combine to form scenes of aerial combat reliably reproduced from decomposing WWII film footage. Dusty museum interiors, strictly off the public map, slowly take form within the dark ink-hatched depths of his 'Web' drawings: swatches of linear marks create countless pewter planes that oscillate with the uncertainty of a light-starved eye. Lee's purity of approach is deliberately and fascinatingly contradictory, for his systematic invention, though intrinsically faithful to the original and available to view, could never actually deputise for the truth of the collectively germane imagery he describes, as the temporal quality of their manufacture equally alludes to the less reliable territory of memory.

Taking in the obscure details of 'Web 1' (a back room at the V&A rammed to the gunnels with antiquities in various states of repair) is to feel partially sighted and forced to rely upon other faculties to navigate the space described. The lack of light, as in the work of Ní Bhriain, alludes to preservation of the past and an unwillingness to be swept along with the less quantifiable current of the here and now. Again, the collectively recognised forms through which we assimilate the visual and understand the experiential, become tools with which to net interest. Quiet political subtexts, such as public access to institutions and the means through which the past is archived, embed within the mind like particles of ancient dust sieved carefully through the gaps between marks to avoid disrupting sensory experience. In Lee's practice, as with many of the works touched upon here, conceptual clarity is achieved through a process of economy – as if he is reticent to contribute to a world already packed with stuff.

Where Lee's works are one-step removed from their time-based points of reference, **Haris Epaminonda's** collages have been manufactured from the repro evidence of commercial photography's past. The carefully cut and interlaced sections of 1950s reference books resonate with a fantastical nostalgia that transcends the specificity of their sources. These delicately composed, visually abstemious works toy with the premises of pictorial correctness. At first spec we sense that something extraordinary has occurred but it takes a while to extricate the inherent anomalies of the image from the recent doctoring it has received.

As in Ní Bhriain's interim territory, physical laws have been abandoned, the everyday reordered to create new meaning. Though equally particular in terms of construction, these are not the same rectilinear containers for projected thought. The appearance of the real and the narrative possibilities it represents might co-exist in each image, but Epaminonda's reconfigured scapes are not purely ours to colonise for they are already tainted with the political flavours of other peoples' histories. The frozen points of intersection are often disquieting: families appear to leach moments of inner turmoil through borrowed eyes; doily-spliced urban and pastoral habitats rupture like acid-splashed skin as one physical entity breaks through another; while architectural symbols of human

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aspiration have been perspectively tweaked and melded with future visions of the world from which they were hewn.

Epaminonda's video works animate the same sense of precise transformation. In 'Nemesis 52', ordinary objects are combined with only the slightest evidence of human intervention, to become performative props in a succession of curious rituals. Where the collages hold the constructed tension steady, the moving image allows for it to build. While we are aware that one half of the action in each case is the mirrored twin of the other, it is incredibly difficult to unpick Epaminonda's seamlessly edited process. In the first performance, a vaginal mollusc-type creature appears to self-inflate a pair of blue balloons from its pump-like core; in others, folded lengths of pink fabric and surgically gloved fingers fuse and reform like kaleidoscopic beads. In a similar way to Lee's spare renderings, the threads of potential meaning (political utopias, gender, cultures of collecting) have been subtly strung to infer rather than dictate response.

Mhairi Vari's brand of eclectic metamorphosis takes physical form through time-intensive DIY processes. Suburban bric-a-brac, tools and natural materials are cut, punctured and adhered for the bigger sculptural picture. Final product though, seems more about the end point to a vital cumulative process than conceptual resolution. Vari's playful approach to the properties of her chosen materials often yields fantastical, borderline sinister results. The found and procured elements she brings together enable the evocative histories of the objects to imply cultural context, while incongruous textures provide an associative cat flap between visceral and cognitive response. Familiarity in this case is not a visual decoy but the affirmative treat we are rewarded with for negotiating the spiky extremities of her otherworldly manifestations.

The componential build of these hybrid forms suggests a need to define the limits of the working process and the physical capabilities of the stuff from which they grow. It's hard not to recoil from a seemingly writhing heap of untitled material currently residing in Vari's studio. But this potentially infested form is actually a pair of jeans riveted some 35,000 times with plastic consumer label tags. Numbers, in terms of defining mass, it seems, are key. In an earlier work, 'Shed', Vari partially coated assorted items from someone's garden sanctuary in coloured discs of Plasticine (cut from the pre-scaled tubes as bought) transforming the prosaic jumble into something resembling an exotic bird.

Vari's current project, for this the exhibition, will showcase her paradoxically surgical/production line commitment to the making process: for she has personally drilled in the region of 16,000 homes in a large (but not monumentally so) branch for a community of flat-headed clout nails. The heads of each have been individually painted with many colours of nail polish to give this twisted natural form a contrastingly machismoid, yet undeniably feminine facelift. Vari may eschew traditional sculptural materials, yet she creates entities that reflect the formal considerations of the craft. The scale of this piece is beyond the ornamental but small enough for us to feel charmed by, if a little wary, of its serpent-like bulk.

Lucy Pawlak's alteration of everyday sites (often her studio) is motivated by filmic as opposed to sculptural concerns. Over time, interior habitats become filled with objects, notes, drawings and wall daubing in the creation of sets for her videos. Similarly to Vari and Epaminonda, Pawlak's material curiosity is palpable, but her means of production is, by contrast, unbridled. Somehow though, against the cluttered odds, all elements feel essential to her creative objective. Pawlak's unfussy but naturally discerning eye seems guided by an internal directive that, while obviously self-referential, brings a sense of playfulness and an honesty to her work that collude to mystify categorisation.

Pawlak's films, in which she always stars, have an experimental, avant-garde quality to them that while reminiscent of Bloomsbury or Beatnik escapades, retain a genuine sense of spontaneity and the artist's delight with the possibilities of the medium. They are not, however, openly naïve. The character studies, which inform, for example, 'Naked Woman' (the artist's ludicrous, but touching nude nocturnal communion with the plant and animal life of Hyde Park), and 'Bearded Man' (Pawlak, or Naked Woman's male 'nomad' alter-ego without a mission), allude to the faint but ever-present boundaries of normalcy and a conceptual space disconnected from the past and present within which these characters reside.

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In 'Revenge of the Insides', Pawlak guides us around the live/work space she has customised for this film 'in which nothing happens'. The camera pans and lingers with an intimacy that feels like the preservation of data for memory. It's as though the privileged access we are given to Pawlak's inner sanctum goes some distance towards describing the way she feels about her practice, for the tentative process of filming fits with the prolific amount and nature of the stuff at our visually limited disposal. There is something unnerving and a bit CSI about the intense combination of elements in this well-packed grotto: a blurred photographic glimpse of Brian Sewell and images of Pawlak in her many actor guises, innumerable retro trinkets and evidence of a frenzied fresco attack in which the walls appear to partially absorb the many things adhered to them. It all sounds a little contrived, but the experience is strangely compelling. This intense mix of critique, humour and invention is so carefully arranged within the junkshop window of the personal that it's hard to differentiate between ruse and revelation.

Theatre and spectacle are omnipresent in the work of **Ansel Krut**. Vaudevillian portraits bring to life facets of humanity not normally associated with the genre. The cartoonish characterisation that defines his work provides a metaphorical framework for Krut's unapologetic portrayals of the human condition while acknowledging his narrative lineage through painting's past. The canvas, like the taut floor of the boxing arena, feels at times like a pictorial battleground: a tensile surface between fantasy and reality upon which to wrestle with an endless sequence of painterly permutations. Where Sato's humanoid motifs look as though drained of life's essence, certain of Krut's crossbred creatures appear to have sucked the barely described world around them dry, others bled Technicolor figments of their deprived imaginations back onto the ground from which it was originally stolen.

Krut's imaginary world, like that of Ní Bhriain, is not founded upon Earthly logistics. You get the feeling that, pictorially, anything could happen. As Jeanette Winterson writes of the house with no floors in *Sexing the Cherry*: "After a few simple experiments it became certain that for the people who had abandoned gravity, gravity had abandoned them. There was a general rejoicing, and from that day forth no one concerned themselves with floors or with falling". Its inhabitants, all in different states of configuration, exist like animals beyond the borders of personal and social responsibility.

'Sailor Lolly', the painting selected for this show, is one of Krut's earlier, quieter hybrid portraits. The single figure we are presented with appears female in origin, not that such things can be taken for granted in these works. Bolted-on limbs and a classical pose speak simultaneously of the archetypal beauty of the doll and the muse, yet the saucy inference of the title relegates this turban-topped madam to the cheap seats. This painter's model is not so much 'Girl with a Pearl Earring' as he-she with a rusty rivet. Tentative curvilinear arcs and scrubby, scarcely filled areas of tone give this piece a sense of urgency – as if this is the last pose before the end of the life drawing session.

No matter how quietly shocking or out of their time the works of these eight artists may appear, the apparent non-conformity of this group is driven by individual default settings over a collective sense of design. There is little evidence of preoccupation with trend or ownership – as if they might be curators of lost thoughts or property. The past, the many sources of reference unashamedly acknowledged in these works, offers an essential portal between states, a Narnian wardrobe of unknown elements that must be negotiated in the process of moving forward, a backstitch during the re-hem of a second-hand garment essential to the wending linear strength of the hand-sewn whole.

Rebecca Geldard, London 2007