

## Sonia Shiel

### Reviews

Sunday Times Magazine, Cristin Leach Hughes. Saturday, 12 January, 2013. TEMPLEBAR GALLERY AND STUDIOS: To Start With, Lets Remove The Colour.  
The Irish Times, Aidan Dunne. Friday 01 January, 2012. KEVIN KAVANAGH GALLERY: The Human Race.  
The Irish Times, Aidan Dunne. Friday 13 January, 2012 KEVIN KAVANAGH GALLERY: The Human Race.  
Circa, Art Magazine, Chris Clarke. 2008. BUTLER GALLERY: The Brief Tremendous.  
The Irish Times, Aidan Dunne. August 2010. TEMPLEBAR GALLERY AND STUDIOS: Bran New Brains.  
The Irish Times, Karen Butler. July, 2009. GREEN ON RED GALLERY: Dawning of an Aspect.  
The Irish Times, Eimear O'Kane. 2008. KERLIN GALLERY: Phoenix Park.  
The Irish Times, Aidan Dunne. Wednesday, August 20<sup>th</sup> 2008. TBGS: I Can Can I? On Painting and Potentiality.  
Evening Herald HQ Magazine. August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2008. TBGS: I Can Can I? On Painting and Potentiality  
Circa Art Magazine, Susan Garcia. Friday 24 April, 2004. RHA GALLERY; Hennessy Craig Award

### Publications

'Creative Ireland: The Visual Arts [Contemporary Visual Art in Ireland 2000 – 2011]'  
curated/edited by Noel Kelly & Seán Kissane. ISBN: 978-1-907683-11-4  
'Sonia Shiel' published by the RHA, Dublin, 2009. ISBN 1-903875-53-6  
'Sonia Shiel, Babels Biting the Moon' published by HIAP, FOUR & Roscommon Arts Centre, 2007  
'House Projects' supported by the Arts Council Project Award, 2007. ISBN 978-0-9549844-2-7

### Texts

'Creative Ireland: The Visual Arts [Contemporary Visual Art in Ireland 2000 – 2011]' 'sonia Shiel'  
by Noel Kelly  
'Nobody's Perfect' text by Mark Hutchinson 2009  
'A Resolute Vulnerability' text by Chris Fite Wassilak 2009  
'Sonia Shiel at the RHA' text by Paul McAree. 2009.  
'The Brief Tremendous' text by Chris Clarke. 2009.  
'Handmade' text by Patrick Murphy, RHA, Director. 2008  
'Babel's Biting the Moon' text by Charlotte Bonham-Carter. 2007  
'Sheltering Daydreams' text by Catherine Bernard. 2007  
'A Carpenters Omelette' text by Dave Dymont. 2007

### Radio Reviews / Links

**RTE RADIO ONE: ARENA Presented by Sean Rocks, Wednesday, 28 March 2012.**

[http://www.rte.ie/radio1/arena/archive1/2012/0328/arena\\_av.html?3242412,null,209](http://www.rte.ie/radio1/arena/archive1/2012/0328/arena_av.html?3242412,null,209)

Vicky Smith reviews 'Man with Fableous Tail' with Sean Rocks.

Sonia Shiel's- 'Man with Fableous Tail' has just opened at Galway Arts Centre. A new solo exhibition by this Dublin Based Irish artist, it features narrative based paintings and installations.

Further information on [www.galwayartscentre.ie](http://www.galwayartscentre.ie).

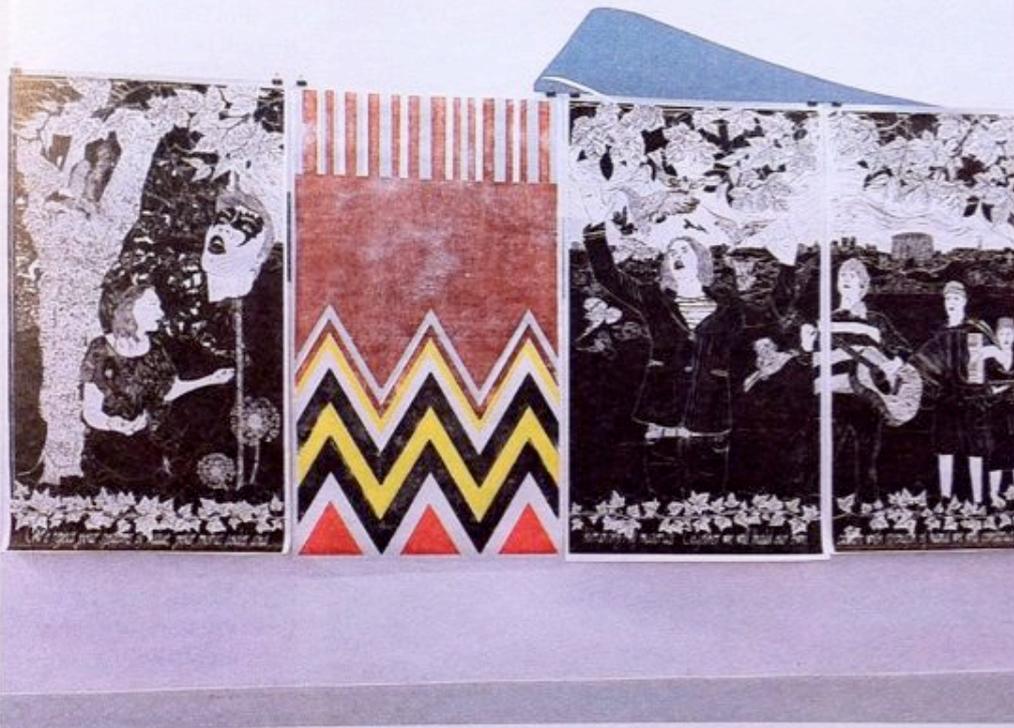
Play Clip 6:28

**RTE RADIO ONE: ARENA Presented by Sean Rocks, Friday, 13 August 2010.**

[http://www.rte.ie/radio1/arena/archive1/2010/0813/arena\\_av.html?2803510,null,209](http://www.rte.ie/radio1/arena/archive1/2010/0813/arena_av.html?2803510,null,209)

Richie Beirne Reports on Sonia Shiel's exhibition is called "Bran New Brains" and is inspired by the scarecrow in the Wizard of Oz. "Bran New Brains" is running until the 28<sup>th</sup> of August at the Temple Bar Art Gallery.

Play Clip 6:46



**To Start With, Let's Remove the Colour**

This show has an anarchic, aggressive feel epitomised by Mark Pearson's Knack Kraft, a large installation which injects bursts of loud music into the gallery space. Works by six artists jostle for attention, a result of curator Paul McAree's interest in how contributors to a group show must compete for viewers' concentration. Ryan McClelland's relief prints on Japanese paper hang on top of Jo Mitchell's wall mural, a ribbon of painted text which winds its way around the gallery. Simon Bedwell has put ceramic ashtrays on the floor in quiet corners and hidden spots,

leaving a barely perceptible scent of cigarillos in the room. The most satisfying interplay comes from the positioning of Marc Bijl's freezer installation, which emits a mysterious red glow from beneath a semi-closed lid, and the comic-book-style melodrama of Sonia Shiel's painted cardboard constructions as her damsel in distress poses, hands tied, near the word "THREAT" placed by Bijl on the wall behind.

**Cristin Leach Hughes**

*Temple Bar Galleries and Studios, Dublin,  
Tue-Sat 11am-6pm,  
01 671 0073*

**The Human Race, By Aidan Dunne, 2012**

**Kevin Kavanagh, Chancery Lane, Dublin Tues-Fri 10.30am-5.30pm, Sat 11am-5pm Until Feb 11 01-4759514**

Dublin-born Sonia Shiel is an artist of considerable energy and scope, and her initial exhibitions revealed her as a painter with a questing mind and a felicitous touch. She has aimed not only to refine and develop her impressive technical ability within the terms of painting per se, but to expand the conceptual framework of her projects so that they are large-scale composite installations incorporating a diversity of materials and techniques, including painting. Hence Shiel's lively, vigorous use of sculpture, video and found objects in playful, sometimes kinetic pieces that both entertain and challenge.

FRIDAY 13.01.2012

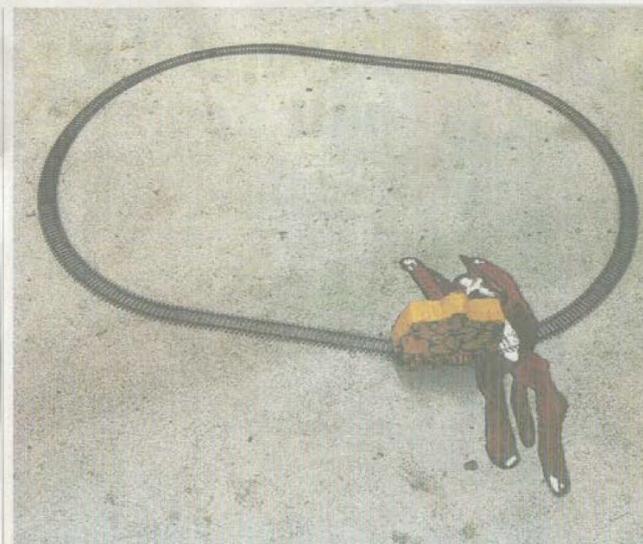
THE IRISH TIMES

THE TICKET

LISTINGS

ART

Art listings:  
Aidan Dunne  
adunne@irishtimes.com



## Moving at the speed of life

**THE HUMAN RACE**  
Kevin Kavanagh, Chancery Lane, Dublin Tues-Fri 10.30am-5.30pm, Sat 11am-5pm Until Feb 11 01-4759514

Dublin-born Sonia Shiel is an artist of considerable energy and scope, and her initial exhibitions revealed her as a painter with a questing mind and a felicitous touch. She has aimed not only to refine and develop her impressive technical ability within the terms of painting per se, but to expand the conceptual framework of her projects so that they are large-scale composite installations incorporating a diversity of materials and techniques,

including painting. Hence Shiel's lively, vigorous use of sculpture, video and found objects in playful, sometimes kinetic pieces that both entertain and challenge.

In the generous space of the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery Shiel aims to offer a satiric sideswipe at "the Human Race" as a race, a contest, "of wins, losses and enterprise", all within the setting of a pastoral landscape.

AIDAN DUNNE

### CAN'T SEE THAT? CATCH THIS

**Carey Clarke: A Retrospective** Royal Hibernian Academy, Gallagher Gallery, Dublin Until Feb 26

**"The Critic and/or vs the Artist" by James Merrigan  
(to read full article go to [www: billionjournal.com](http://www.billionjournal.com).)**

The rational critic of art cannot risk this abandonment into “oceanic” undifferentiation, he[she] can only deal with the limits that come after this plunge into such a world of non-containment. Robert Smithson[1]

There is the argument that Robert Smithson was a better writer than artist; but there is an alternative argument that his writing bridged the gap between his art and the viewer. In his essay *A Sedimentation of the Mind* (1968) Smithson wrote that “Critics, by focusing on the “art object,” deprive the artist of any existence in the world of both mind and matter.”[2] What he was getting at, from what was an idealistically artist-centre position, was the critic robs the artist of time/temporality when he/she fences-off the art object in their analysis. Smithson positively termed the art object's existence in the world as “Oceanic,” encompassing mind, matter and everything in between.

(....)

Aside from this provocation, throughout the conversation I was questioning the lack of writing that confronts painting in contemporary contexts, along with my own reluctance or avoidance of the medium when it comes to writing on art. I also commented on the reluctance of curators to use painting in their projects, and when they do it is more a form of obligation – one context mentioned was Mary Conlon’s recent curatorial at Ormston House Limerick, *Monkey Wrench*, which featured ‘painting’, to which I will return to later.



Sonia Shiel, *The Incongruity of Learning*; *Monkey Wrench*, curated by Mary Conlon at Ormston House Limerick, November 2011;

So, we are back at an undetermined crossroads without a sign post in sight; but there is hope for the art critic. By ignoring the conceptual reasons why Mary Conlon chose to put Kevin Cosgrove, **Sonia Shiel** and Keith Winter together in the group show Monkey Wrench at Ormston House Limerick, I am using the default position of the art critic in how we commandeer contexts for our own selfish arguments. The practice follows the trend of conceptual recycling and recontextualisation by curator/viewer/critic, that the art object endures in its short lifespan, starting when it first leaves the artist's studio, the moment when it no longer conceptually belongs to the artist. The fundamental reasons why I direct your attention to Conlon's curatorial in particular is the fact that painting was not just an add-on, but it featured; well, only if you label Shiel's work as 'painting' – which I wouldn't usually – but the artist's *The Incongruity of Learning* offered a loophole for the rigid critic to maneuver.

With 'conceptual recontextualisation' in mind we could view Conlon's curatorial Monkey Wrench as based on a hierarchical structure of tradition vs progress. From the perspective that traditional technique wins over so-called contemporary conceptual progress, Kevin Cosgrove's focus on good, representational painting technique would be last on the score card; followed by **Shiel's** 'stilted' pair of 'sporting' paintings; and in the lead is Keith Winter's 'out/in-house' stage for potentially private/made public acts of sexual activity. Flipping the hierarchical structure to acknowledge technique/craft as key to progress we would obviously flip the score card, but there is another viewpoint that may take Shiel beyond 'deuce'.

**Shiel's** "stilted" paintings stand away from the wall but are attached by the imagined potential of a volleyed ball between twin tennis players on one big/one small canvas. The former description is a personal conceptual leap that defies the physically restricted framing of this work. Physically, although the two paintings are separated from the wall – the larger painting of the two, seemingly holds on to the wall for dear life by outstretched timber batons. So in the first instance this specific work by **Shiel** offers a loophole for expansive notions, but it is necessary and critically rewarding to illustrate its limitations in the second instance. But this is exactly what Smithson dislikes about the critic's verbal table; for him their table resembles the frame and is certainly not round enough. Jacques Derrida, a philosopher that you don't associate with the image, has more than enough to say in sheer volume in his exhaustive analysis of painting/language in *The Truth in Painting*:

No 'theory', no 'practice', no 'theoretical practice' can intervene effectively in this field if it does not weigh up and bear on the frame, which is the decisive structure of what is at stake, at the invisible limit to (between) the interiority of meaning.[7]

We have to take on board that Derrida has a bias for the 'frame', or what he refers to as the paragonal frame: "neither work (ergon) nor outside the work [hors d'oeuvre], neither inside or outside, neither above nor below, it disconcerts any opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it gives rise to the work..."[8] I have underlined 'indeterminate' because although Derrida does not commit to a 'real' or visible 'frame', his paragon(invisible frame) determines the existence of the work between inside/outside. Why is it assumed that progress in art is defined by indeterminate assertions and by deconstructing the traditional/historical frame into "poetic debris"?(Smithson's terminology).

Why does historical 'baggage' suggest the loss of one's legs? Painting's strengths and weaknesses are doubly contained within the frame, physically and historically. The frame may place painting outside the contemporary discourse and methods of disarticulation and non-containment, this is not a bad thing! Terms like 'anything goes' have been wrongly pronounced in regard to painting's encyclopedic aesthetic, but for the time being, painting-not scatter-installations-are better off

tightly squeezed into the frame, while the critic will hold onto the limitations that language offers in front of the art object, otherwise, the verbal scutters will ensue, or maybe they already have...

Conclusions for the promotion of a future of traditional Truth: Scatter Installations are not paintings; a sculpture is not a drawing: END!

Cited

[1] Robert Smithson, A Sedimentation if the Mind (1968); from Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, University of California Press, 1996, p. 102.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Andrew Graham-Dixon, Sort of, almost, in a way, nearly, The Independent, 15-04-1994

[6] Adrian Searle, Unbound: Possibilities in Painting, Hayward Gallery Publishing, 1994

[7] Jacques Derrida, The Truth in Painting, trans. by G. Bennington and I. McLeod, University of Chicago Press, 1978

[8] Ibid.

**'Creative Ireland: The Visual Arts [Contemporary Visual Art in Ireland 2000 - 2011]' curated/edited by Noel Kelly & Seán Kissane. ISBN: 978-1-907683-11-4 (Noel Kelly, 2011)**

Sonia Shiel's *The Applause* is indicative of a circuslike society where social and moral acceptance seeks approbation from the outside world. Shiel's ability to portray romantic ideals through a comedic deadpan complexity of imagery provides her with moments that border the grotesque and the fantastical. Her figures appear to be in the throes of applause rather than engaged in any form of celebration. In building up layers in her work Shiel rarely stops at the moment when ultimate beauty is achieved. Instead, she takes that moment as the departure point for looking at the darker aspects of humanity and displaces the beauty with strokes of psychological terror.



The Applause, 2009, Oil on canvas, 20 x 30cm. Sonia Shiel

Shiel graduated from IADT with an MA in Visual Art Practices IADT. She has exhibited extensively nationally and internationally including solo presentations in Temple Bar Gallery and Studios, Dublin; Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin; Butler Gallery, Kilkenny; Ard Bia, Berlin; FOUR Dublin and The Cable Factory, Helsinki. Group exhibitions including Bizarre Bazaare and Timbuktu at Pallas Contemporary Projects; Dawn of an Aspect at Green on Red Dublin and Sheltering Daydreams at House Projects New York. Shiel received the Tony O' Malley award from the Butler Gallery and has works in private and public collections in Ireland, the UK, Germany and Finland, including the Office of Public Works, Dublin and the offices of Dublin Contemporary.

**A Resolute Vulnerability, By Chris Fite Wassilak 2010**

From 'Sonia Shiel' RHA publication, 2010. [www.growgnome.com](http://www.growgnome.com)

The painter kneels between the woman's open legs, delicately applying a brush. The original painting, Pierre Subleyras' *The Pack-Saddle* (1735) is an illustration of the rather more tame poem by 17th century fabulist Jean de La Fontaine, which tells of an artist who, when away from home, would paint the image of a donkey on his wife's navel. Rubbed off in the heat of the moment, Subleyras depicts the adulterer, a rival painter, as he is attempting to cover his tracks; but in a moment of forgetfulness—or professional pique—the lover adds a saddle as a flourish to the image and gives away the game. Sonia Shiel's version of the very same moment in *The Studio* (2008) is somewhat different: the woman curls into herself with downcast eyes, in apparent bashful pleasure; the illicit lover, in the original wearing a simple cloth cap, here dons a formal white wig; but perhaps most noticeably, his paintbrush is pointed distinctly lower. Shiel's interpretation of Subleyras was not based on the tales of La Fontaine, but more on her own beliefs in the transformative properties and powers of the artist: here recasting the scene to reflect her indignant impression that the painter was attempting to perfect her, using paint to make her more beautiful.

Shiel works across a range of medium, from her figurative paintings that detail contradictory settings and landscapes, to her handmade animations, or her deceptively ramshackle sculptures which belie their own constitution. But she is a multimedia artist for whom the act of painting is a central methodology and metaphor. It is the paradoxical embodiment of her art; a layered process which reveals itself through time, while simultaneously maintaining a resolute façade; an art which reaches back centuries that can carry within it the ideals and aspirations of its past while being put to new uses; it is the corporeal means of building a seductive fiction.

Visually, her work carries a rather idiosyncratic lineage, drawing, as above, on the rococo flourishes of Subleyras and Jean-Honoré Fragonard. In the deserted monuments and empty piazzas of her more recent paintings like *Maybe I am paranormal* (2009), we can find the Surrealist architectural landscapes of Giorgio De Chirico, while all around we are also confronted with the unruly, erratic and seething

thick-lined brushstrokes of late Philip Guston. But in the way she evokes and assembles these visions there is a self-conscious play of aspiration and failure; classical architecture and painting subjects provide the backdrop for contemporary contradictions and distinctly modern observations that temper their apparent lofty ambitions. The solitary campanile of *Do you think anyone will come?* (2009) sits on its own in an intimidating wilderness, the statue atop looking down onto the pile of trash accumulating beneath it. The wildlife portrait of a small branch of four cardinals is disrupted only by one of the birds who bears a large, white 'S' on his breast. Surely he must be joking, to claim as he does in the title, *I am Superman* (2009). Each painting presents a situation that slowly begins to fold in on itself with anachronistic details and impossibilities, an inherent ambiguity that is also readily evident in her sculptures and installations. The bulbs on the towering

board that that spell out My name in lights (2009) are made of cardboard and packing tape; they might succeed in spelling the words that convey a yearning grandiosity, but by the very nature of its make-up we can see its professed aim will never happen. At the centre of her exhibition at the RHA, To the Middle (2009) reached up towards an ersatz night sky made of punctured black paper. An old-fashioned style lift constructed out of cardboard sat expectantly, unable to go up or down, while trailing around it was a set of increasingly flimsy steps. Each step of this stairway to heaven was made of cardboard and planed timber (both painted a darker brown and given large, exaggerated knots to appear like 'real' fake wood), as they wound their way around and onto the elevator to reach the doubtful reward of their two-dimensional paper goal.

Shiel's work could be seen to be, on its sleeve, 'romantic' (in the common current use of the word), in its constant dream-gazing and regard for classical forms of beauty. More accurately, even, her stance corresponds to the vision of the artist passed down from the early, original Romantic movement, with its "dream of romanticising, re-enchanting, re-mythologizing the world." At the heart of the Romantics was a mixture of a nostalgic awe for beauty, particularly the sublime of nature, and a cult of the individual, a potent mix in that time that expressed what has best been described as the "daring expansiveness and...desolating vulnerability of the late eighteenth-century imagination." Shiel seeks to re-enact this bold imagination, but with a self-critical yearning, a stance that recalls the ambivalent tensions of Bas Jan Ader and the romantic conceptualist artists of the 60s and 70s, who took up a reified Romanticism, consciously performing the self-as-artist, tinged with a melancholic hopefulness.

But, crucially, Shiel is all too aware that the romanticizations of the 1790s and 1960s were journeys caught in the impossible attempt to emerge into the past. Her own performative nostalgia, in again taking up the Romantic stance, is for the role of art itself; not only is the idealism of those past eras impossible in this day and age, John Keats' 'thing of beauty' cannot maintain its 'joy for ever' under contemporary strains. Shiel, in response, turns her self-performance of self-as-artist to, more specifically, artist-as-painter, occupying the role of the painter as the classical creator of beauty. Within that role, Shiel uses the opaque substance of paint to create artworks that draw from an idealised past, whether visually or conceptually, but are stopped just short in their emergence as aesthetic objects. Instead, she catches them precariously on the precipice struggling between disillusioned dreams and constantly renewed definitions of beauty. Not so much painting a rosy picture of the world as deliberately looking at it through rotting rose-tinted glasses: hers is a self-aware idealism, consistently undercut, a wide-eyed wonder that can't help but watch itself fail. In this paradoxical emergence Shiel persistently questions what is demanded of and seen in art, to acknowledge—to paraphrase Keats—that its loveliness might not increase, but its relevance will not diminish.

Sven Lutticken, "The Rebel As Consumer," in *Texte zur Kunst* no. 65 (March 2007), p. 135.  
Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries*, Oxford University Press, 1981, page 24.  
The term 'romantic conceptualism' has come into use following Jörg Heiser's article 'Emotional Rescue' in *Frieze* no. 71 (November- December 2002), and his subsequent exhibition, entitled 'Romantic Conceptualism' which included Ader, Andy Warhol, Yoko Ono, Susan Hiller and Lygia Clark among others.

John Keats, "A Thing of Beauty is a Joy for Ever" (1818): "A thing of beauty is a joy forever:/ Its loveliness increases; it will never/ Pass into nothingness"

## **Nobody's Perfect by Mark Hutchinson 2010**

From 'Sonia Shiel' RHA publication, 2010. [www.markhutchinson.org](http://www.markhutchinson.org)

There are many ways in which comedy might play a role in making art. If, in popular culture, making art itself is often something to be laughed at, it should be borne in mind that comedy also has a critical potential to dislodge and displace. In taking a critical stance towards the dominant habits and ideas of art, or what she describes as 'the persistence of the ego' Sonia Shiel uses comedy. For "Of This I am Sure," she built a home-made lie detector, by carefully following the instructions of a video on the internet, she ended up with something which looked exactly as it should. However, in practise, it did not detect any lies but affirmed any and every statement as the truth. There is something about this promiscuous lie detector which is endearing and critical in its very uselessness. It can be read as a far fetched metaphor in hardware for a certain excess, an excess which is of the essence of comedy, which removes us from the expected and the practical.

\*

The great Irish comedian, Dave Allen, told a joke that went something like this:

A priest gets up very early one Sunday morning in order to play golf without being seen because, of course, he should not be playing golf on a Sunday. However, up in Heaven, Saint Peter spots him and rushes off to tell God. As the priest lines up his tee shot, Saint Peter urges God to strike him down with lightning. God lifts His finger and points it at the priest. The priest plays his shot: the ball sails through the air, lands on the green, rolls across it and drops in the hole. A hole in one. The priest is ecstatic; Saint Peter is furious: "Why did you do that?" he demands of God. God calmly turns to Saint Peter and says: "Who's he going tell?"

The point is that, for the priest, the torment of not being able to discuss his success will be far greater than the pleasure of the experience itself. Why? We never simply experience something in itself. The fact that when we experience something out of the ordinary, we have an urgent need to tell someone about it, testifies to the fact that our experiences are always experienced in relation to a dimension outside of ourselves. We are not simply at home in our bodies. In lacanian psychoanalysis, this dimension is called the symbolic order. And the symbolic order conjures into existence what is called the Big Other: an external entity in relation to which our inner experience is made meaningful. It is the Big Other which grounds and guarantees what one does. The situation is complicated because the Big Other does not exist.<sup>1</sup> For example, God is one obvious form the Big Other can take. And talking to God is a way to ground one's experience. But talking to God is not simply submissive: it is also the attempt to force the Big Other into existence through the performance of talking to it.

For artists, Art is often the embodiment of the Big Other: an ultimate guarantee that rescues whatever we do from its messy particularity. Artist may not often talk to Art but they habitually make sacrifices to it, in one form or another. This is not only to prostrate oneself before Art but the attempt to force Art into existence.

Art & Language conclude their essay 'Abstract Expression,' in which they have been discussing causality in pictures, by saying: "But causality is vanity. The real project is to do without it: to make do with nothing."<sup>2</sup> However, there are two radically different ways in which we could take this "nothing." The first way, which I'm tempted to call the postmodern way, would see 'making do

with nothing' as opening the door for multiplicity, relativism and a certain freedom: if there are no reliable criteria for action, you can do whatever you like. In such circumstances, as long as your choice is sincere in its particularity it cannot be criticised: it's hard to be wrong about what your particular interests are. This situation, it could be argued, is in many ways the situation of contemporary art. Today, there seems to be no compelling reason for being one kind of artist rather than another.

But there is a second way to take the slogan 'making do with nothing.' In this case, the "nothing" includes making do without particular interests and individual eccentricities. Above all, it is to making do without the idea of Art itself. Rather than making do without criteria within Art, this would be to make do without Art per se; without the distinction of Art as its own set of practices. It is to manage without the comfort of recognising what one does in the Big Other.

However, the artist's belief in Art is not simply manifest in dramatic moments. Indeed, the artist can actively and consciously deny any belief in Art and yet this belief can be manifest in the everyday habits, customs and practices of the artist. Belief is manifest not in theory but in practise: in the pull of the studio and the comfort of technique. In writing about political revolution, Slavoj Žižek has said that the revolution must strike twice.<sup>3</sup> It is not enough to overthrow the explicit structures and institutions of power. The old society resides, precisely, in its everyday habits, customs and practices: it is here that its values and assumptions are embedded in material practice. Without overturning everyday life, the old society will simply resurface in a new form. And, *mutatis mutandis*, does the same not hold for art? Any transformation of art must change not simply our explicit conception of art but the daily practice within which the ideology of art is embedded. This is where the true difficulty and violence of revolution lies: not in seizing power but in breaking personal attachments to familiar and comfortable habits. Truly changing things must include changing oneself: making oneself out of place. For the artist, this is the true radicality of making do with nothing: it is not simply making do without external or additional support but rather requires the active destruction of everything one takes for granted.

The attempt to make do with nothing is the attempt to break out of the restraints of habitual practice: of ideology embedded in everyday intuition. In general, we might say that this is how ideology works: not by giving the wrong answer but by giving the wrong question. Ideology does not seek to persuade but rather gives the wrong co-ordinates for thought and action. For example, debates about what makes a baby turn into the person it becomes are habitually framed in terms of the choice between 'nature' and 'nurture.' The rhetorical power of the similarity in the sounds of the two words are part of the ideological slight of hand here. Nevertheless, we should pay attention to the assumptions shared by posing the choice in terms of 'nature' and 'nurture.' 'Nature' supposes that the subject is determined by factors that precede the individual, whether they be genes, God or something else; 'nurture' supposes that the subject is determined by factors that operate on the individual as he or she develops, whether they be familial, social or so on. Thus, they share both the assumption that the subject coincides with the individual and the assumption that the subject is passively determined in a non-reflexive way. Against this false choice, psychoanalysis would argue that the crucial process is trauma. The child actively chooses what to make of itself in impossible circumstances: where the available language is not its own and where its fundamental desires are prohibited.

In England, in the 1970s, there was a genre of jokes known as 'Irish Jokes,' which relied upon the understanding that there would be a stupid Irishman as the butt of every joke. One such joke (which also takes other forms) has an Englishman stopping to ask an Irishman for directions. The Irishman pauses for thought. Then he replies: "I wouldn't start from here." However, is this really such a stupid answer? Of course this answer can be read as a failure to understand the basic logic of giving directions. However, it might be more interesting to read the answer as a refusal to accept the terms of the question or as a withdrawal from its logic. It's not hard to imagine an Irish

worker winding up an English landowner with such an answer, for example. Indeed, the humour of the joke might come not from the apparent stupidity of the answer but precisely from our identification with the fictitious Irishman: from our recognition of the way all questions attempt to impose a logic upon us.

Withdrawal from the habitual choices of art means not being at home. Familiarity is not simply a matter of knowing the explicit rules but of knowing when the rules apply and when they don't. In other words, the Law depends upon unspoken supplements and common knowledge. At a trivial, everyday level, when I bump into my neighbour and he ritually asks 'How are you?' he expects the answer 'Fine.' A detailed description of my various ailments would be taken as a troubling deviation from the protocols of such situations.

The displacement of being not-at-home entails two related possibilities for misunderstanding. The first is incomprehension: a failure to understand the everyday cultural habits and rituals which are taken for granted by those who are at home. In the film in which the fictional ambassador of Kazakhstan, Borat, played by Sacha Baron Cohen, tours the United States, he is, at one point, invited to a Republican dinner party. During the meal, he manages to convey to his host his needs to go to the toilet and is shown to the Bathroom. He returns carrying a small plastic bag. As he enquires of his host how he should dispose of this bag it becomes obvious, to her dismay, that this bag contains the result of his trip to the Bathroom. Here, we are not simply laughing at the discomfort of the xenophobic Republicans; more than this, we identify with Borat being out of place. Indeed, Borat is a vehicle for making the familiar strange, for making the invisible appear.

The second possibility for misunderstanding entailed by not being at home is taking things too literally or seriously. It is, for example, not knowing when a question has a 'polite' or ritual answer, as in the example of my neighbour's question, above. This can be a question of not knowing when to stop; of excess; of giving more than was bargained for. But it can also be a question of not providing an excess that is expected, as when workers disrupt production by 'working to rule.' This type of misunderstanding is related to the active and deliberate strategy of 'overidentification,' theorised by Žižek.<sup>4</sup> Overidentification is, precisely, to take things literally, without the expected ironic distance. This is proposed as a response to the fact that ideology is cynical: in asking wrong questions and giving false choices, ideology does not care what you think; its only concern is that you accept the unspoken assumptions and hidden supplements which underpin its explicit content. Overidentification challenges ideology by taking its explicit content more seriously than it takes it itself. In communist Poland, there was an official Day of the Police and Security Service. In Wrocław a group calling themselves Orange Alternative organised a march to show their support for these civil servants. They showered police officers and patrol cars with flowers and attempted to embrace and thank them. These attempts were met with reasonable force and some arrests.<sup>5</sup>

Being out of place (as opposed to being lost or fallen) is comedic: it is to invite misunderstanding. But here we should bear in mind the tentative distinction Alenka Župancic proposes between bad and good comedy.<sup>6</sup> In bad or conservative comedy, things are thrown out of place only for everything to be restored to its proper place in the end. In good comedy, in contrast, not only do things remain out of place but the displacement spreads, becoming a movement which continues to disrupt and displace. Here we might think of different types of sit-com. In 'Friends,' the role played by characters outside the group of friends was to disrupt the unity of the group – but only so that the group could expel the intruder and reassert its hermeticism. In 'Fawlty Towers,' in contrast, an external element disrupts the normal functioning of the hotel and every attempt to dispel it leads to yet more disruption – until all is chaos; at this point the program ends without resolution and without order restored.

It is difficult to imagine what an art of refusal might be like in these times of artistic multiplicity and relativism. It is hard to withdraw from the dominant expectations of art precisely because

today, in art, anything goes. It is in this situation that comedy has critical potential for art: it is precisely in relation to this situation of multiplicity and relativism that the artist needs to feel not-at-home. But it should be added that this displacement is a process or a movement rather than a static dislocation: it is to be in a continual process of making do with nothing.

To attempt to make do without art is to be out of place within art. What connects the idea of 'making do with nothing' to the idea of 'good comedy' is the aversion to particularity. As I described above, the radical sense of 'making do with nothing' does not mean doing anything and then getting the particularity of what one has done accepted as art: it is to make do without particularity. Following Zupancic, it is bad comedy which is about the Particular finding its proper place; good comedy by-passes the Particular, in that particular things become props in a process that destabilises the very idea of things having proper places. One example Zupancic uses is an archetypal comedic situation where a Baron slips over and lands in a muddy puddle. For Zupancic, the true comedy here lies not in the high being brought low. If we stop here we have stopped too soon. Rather, the true comedy lies in the fact that the Baron subsequently gets up and carries on despite his fall. The muddy puddle has only brought him down to earth physically, not psychologically; rather than shaking his belief it has demonstrated that his belief in his own Baronhood is unshakeable. It is thus that the muddy puddle is a prop that sets this demonstration in motion.

A props department, in a theatre or film studio, is full of things that can be put to use in different ways in different circumstances. A prop does not have an intrinsic identity, even if it was made for particular circumstances. Props are not meant to stand out: they are useful inasmuch as they can combine with other props and scenery to form different backgrounds or sets, which are, in turn, part of a narrative or process. Props are never the real thing; even when an art director uses a real mug to stand in for a mug on a film set, for example, this mug has ceased to be used as a mug and instead is used as a prop: it has entered a world of artifice, where its identity is formed in relation to the movement of other elements of the artifice rather than its erstwhile history.

Why might an artist use props? To what problem might this be a solution? Of course props can be used unremarkably as part of a conventional product of display in one form or another. But what is of interest here is the idea of Shiel engaging with the process of making props rather than the utility of props in relation to a conventional artistic product. In this case, what is important is that props are knowingly artificial and that they are things not to be looked at in their own right. Trompe L'oeil was the lowest of the genres because it destabilised the position of the spectator: there wasn't a correct place from which to look at a trompe l'oeil painting precisely because you didn't know what you were meant to be looking at or even that you were meant to be looking.<sup>7</sup> A picture of a pin-board, for example, would be hung in a house, in a place where you might expect to find a pin-board, rather than in a place where you'd expect a picture to be. The idea was to trick the spectator; or, rather, the spectator, as opposed to the individual, only came into being as a result of being tricked. We might expect such a spectator to be a little paranoid: to move about; investigate; look with anticipation; touch or even pick up the painting. In other words, trompe l'oeil made looking itself uncertain. Given the specific situation at the time, what we might call the artistic conjuncture, trompe l'oeil displaced painting from the conventions of art: quite literally from its proper place. Trompe l'oeil was comedy. Within our own artistic conjuncture, props might have a similar potential. Props connect with trompe l'oeil in their irreverence for particularity and focus on activity and process rather than fixed results.

Props are unlikely candidates for artworks precisely in that they can only be props in relation to other things: a prop is intrinsically not itself. It is in this light that we might think of Sonia Shiel's work in terms of props. It is not that she has any kind of attachment to props per se, rather, what is of interest is that props combine artifice with being part of a process. In the work *Miles of Miles*, for example, she combines innumerable sections of "painted-on" road; here "painted-on" neatly

expresses how the 'road' is merely a fragile surface that emerges out of a combination of pieces. These are things to be used and reused as part of a promiscuous process rather than to be arrested and fixed. And it is out of the uncertainty, persistence and excessiveness of this movement that the comedic dimension arises. Thus, her work not only deals in places where the Law and stability are in doubt, which is to say places in the process of being transformed in one way or another; her work also enacts a kind of instability, where her artworks are always liable to reform or move on. It is, perhaps, worth noting that her paintings are made with a similar sense of "painted-on" fragility: not only do they seek to render the substantial farcical or fantastical in some way, but they, too, are amended over time and, as she puts it, "carry their evolution with them." Unlike *trompe l'oeil*, she does not create illusions; rather, the processes she uses, whether in making things or paintings, open up a comedic dimension of uncertainty. This is to refuse the comfort of familiar choices. The ability to bare uncertainty and to persist in the face of not knowing what is going to happen next, is of the essence of good comedy and of an art which is not at home.

\*

At the end of the film 'Some Like It Hot,' Daphne (Jack Lemmon in drag) is coming up with all sorts of reasons why Osgood Fielding, an old millionaire who has taken a fancy to Daphne, should not marry her. Finally Daphne gives up the pretence of being a woman, pulls off his wig and declares, in his normal voice, 'I'm a man.' To which Osgood replies "Well - Nobody's perfect." We should read this final refusal to submit to reason not as a sign of delusion but rather as a principled refusal to let things return to normal. This is to remain faithful to the transformatory potential of love, to the exceptional, in the face of all the reasons why one should be sensible and realistic. It is to resist the cynicism of the conventional. It is to persist. It is this connection between comedy, refusal and persistence that should interest us as artists. Good comedy is intricately tied up with being faithful to the belief that something else is possible.

#### Notes

1

There is no space here for a proper foray into the complexities of lacanian thought. For an entertaining introduction see Slavoj Zizek, *How to Read Lacan*, Granta, London, 2006

2

Art & Language, 'Abstract Expression,' reproduced in *Modernism, Criticism, Realism*, Charles Harrison and Fred Orton (Ed.s), Harper and Row, London, 1984

3

Slavoj Zizek, 'Revolution Must Strike Twice,' *London Review of Books*, Vol.24 No.14, July 2002, pp. 13-15

4

Overidentification crops up frequently in Zizek. See, for example, Slavoj Zizek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, Verso, London, 1994/2005, pp. 71-72

5

See Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse, 'Subversive Affirmation. On Mimesis as Strategy of Resistance,' available here: <http://www.projects.v2.nl/~arns/Texts/Media/Arns-Sasse-EAM-final.pdf>

6

Alenka Zupancic, 'The 'Concrete Universal,' and What Comedy Can Tell Us About It,' in *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, Slavoj Zizek (Ed.), Verso, London, 2006

For more on Trompe L'oeil, see my 'Gotcha: Why Trompe L'oeil Painting Is Better Than Sliced Bread,' in everything 3.3, 2000; it is also available from

### **Bran New Brains by Aidan Dunne, Temple Bar Gallery and Studios, The Irish Times, August 2010**

'Bran New Brains' which delights in its inventive energy has been on show since the middle of July, but has been continually added to ever since, a DIY display of how we buy into the manufacture of art and of fantasy

Sonia Shiel has spent the past few weeks populating Temple Bar Gallery with an offbeat collection of pictures and objects. There's a computer monitor on a table, a water tap in the middle of the floor, an assemblage of floorboards on which about half a dozen paintings are placed. Virtually everything is roughhewn and transparently bogus. It is, Shiel says: "All about trying to recreate the background to art production rather than art as we usually see it. It's about the making of art but where everything is so obviously stuck together and false." Not only that, she's made the work during the course of the exhibition. "I was thinking about the way an artist makes a body of work and by the time it's exhibited the artist is no longer there." So she has been there, labouring away every day since July 16th, continually adding to and progressing what's on view. While the show's been open all along, it will be completed only on August 19th and will then stand as a finished product until August 28th.

It's called Bran New Brains, a reference to the Scarecrow's proud announcement of his new hardware in *The Wizard of Oz*. The film is a prime example of something obviously put together in the studio, a DIY fantasy, yet we are more than happy to buy into the manufactured fantasy. Just as, Shiel says, we buy into the art fantasy. "The starting point was the way people would ask me what my show was going to be about. That got me thinking about the superficiality of research." Research is a buzzword in art colleges and art practice right now. "There's got to be lots of research involved in it. But how real is that? Does it make it more real?" She looked, of course, to the internet. "You can research anything on the internet. It's full of byte-sized expertise" Is it true or false? She set out to find out how to make a lie-detector. "There are endless demonstrations about how to...anything" She settled on instructions provided by a Minnesota father and son. Her computer monitor piece is about that: the father and son are there on the screen, and the makings of the detector, pliers, circuit board, leads, batteries, are scattered about the table surface. They are all unreal, though, cartoon-like, painted 3D-models of those things, from monitor to batteries. Did she actually make a lie-detector? "it's surprisingly easy. But I have to admit that the one I made didn't work. It just says everything is true."

Her next research subject was happiness. "That produced a lot of romantic stories, surprisingly enough. Usually romances in colourful, dramatic settings." Her paintings feature scenes from some of these stories. Heroines usually finding themselves in distress, threatened by lions, falling from precarious rope-bridges, that sort of thing, but luckily saved in the nick of time by granite-jawed heroes. As the paintings have progressed they've all been invaded by flocks of lovebirds. "Because," Shiel explains, "the thematic conventions overwhelm everything in the end. It's all too much, it's overkill." Which is the way it can be with art, she adds. "Artists often think in grandiose terms. Hoping to start a revolution or save the world. The reality is they go and make things in their studios."

Still, being an artist does give one at least imaginative freedom and authority. "As part of the shows development I decided I'd flood the floor of the gallery." Hence the "tap" that emerges from the ground. Her idea is that it prompts us to think of the glossy grey-painted floor as a sheet of water, water surrounding an island of painted floorboards on which the paintings are arranged. "It's an island of romantic fantasy." The show abounds with such layers of symbolism and metaphor. So is art condemned to being at one remove, incapable of influencing the real world? Actually that isn't what she means to imply. One of the smaller pieces consists of "a fake hammer and a real egg". The fake hammer has broken the real egg. It's clear that Shiel's work delights in its own inventive energy. The strength of art, for her, lies in that sometimes desperate inventiveness. "The idea is the why, but the work is always the how."

**Dawning of an Aspect, Curated by Mary Cremin, by Karen Butler, The Irish Times, July, 2009**



**KERLIN GALLERY: PHOENIX PARK by Eimear O'Kane The Irish Times, 2008**

16 February - 15 March 2008

PHOENIX PARK is an exhibition of new work by six exciting young artists, Aoife Collins, Vera Klute, Eoin McHugh, Clive Murphy, Seamus Nolan and Sonia Shiel. Aoife Collins, Vera Klute, Eoin McHugh, Clive Murphy, Seamus Nolan and Sonia Shiel

It's an exhibition of six very different practices, 5 Irish and 1 German, located in either Dublin or New York, working in a range of media that includes animation, drawing, sculpture, sound, installation and painting. Avoiding the constraints of a thematic show Phoenix Park seeks to celebrate the current cultural climate, presenting a multiplicity of individual practices, occupying a shared space articulating a very diverse set of concerns and subjects.

Aoife Collins' work often employs existing materials or objects, transferring them with a painstaking attention to detail and craft into new and disturbingly altered configurations. Through a carefully considered de-construction and re-construction of everyday found objects for example a plastic potted plant or displays of plastic flowers Collins' questions the roles of function and form while generating new objects of striking beauty and complexity.

Vera Klute employs the very immediate and accessible discipline of drawing, to create sophisticated animations, drawings and paintings. For this show Klute has made an animation that is played on two screens. The images are immediately recognizable yet strange and mysterious. The work eschews any traditional linear narrative fostering instead a rich and limitless world of associations and curious suggestions.

Eoin Mc Hugh's practice is centred around a profound interest in the psychology of imagery. He explores the communicative and social nature of art and its action on both public and domestic architecture. Through delicate paintings and an ambitious non-pattern wallpaper, Mc Hugh creates a 2 dimensional investigation of the gallery space as a bridge between the public and the intensely private.

Clive Murphy's practice draws from the peripheries of visual culture, mining lo-fi sources for familiar signifiers in order to explore their wider cultural resonance. Murphy uses material often overlooked, striving for results that are greater than the sums of their parts; a disused cardboard box is transformed into an inflatable with dangerous, explosive potential, a cassette recorder is transformed to become the source of a constantly moving landscape drawing replete with soundtrack or the oft discarded hotel brochure becomes a series of subtle yet provocative drawings.

Seamus Nolan's work investigates the relative value of objects and social processes as they appear within different economies and contexts. Nolan attempts to unravel in social and political terms the inherent structures and codes from which we understand the world around us. His practice has led to active work in community organisations, most notably 'Hotel Ballymun' a large scale sculptural performance which saw the transformation of the 15th Floor, of Clarke Tower,

Ballymun into a boutique hotel. In the Kerlin Nolan will recreate a large scale sculpture that is confrontational and compelling.

Sonia Shiel presents a new body of paintings rich in both painterly description and narrative associations. Shiel's use of paint itself is suggestive and enigmatic. The emergent imagery is loaded with references to mythologies and anecdotes from popular history and art production. Each painting can be read as a stage for characters to emerge from the paint itself and take up roles evoking worlds of exaggerated drama, vulnerability or of tender intimacy. Worlds that seem at war between the real and the fantastical.

**Handmade, by Patrick T. Murphy, 2008.**  
**From Babels Biting the Moon, HIAP/FOUR and ROSCOMMON ARTS CENTRE**  
**publication. [www.royalhibernianacademy.ie](http://www.royalhibernianacademy.ie)**

The work of Sonia Shiel is not easily categorized spanning as it does painting, video and installation. This diversity of approach is a valid strategy in today's world where the access to electronic technologies is as readily available to the individual artist as a tube of paint. What pulls them together within Shiel's work is her emphasis on process, on play. Everything is moving, careening with curiosity, skill and humour to uncover the banal and the epic. This body of new work sees Shiel make use of everyday materials to build literal fabrications of 'lofty' notions. Her shambolic constructions simultaneously rouse and abandon ideas of ceremony, pomp and ego. They merge video, sculpture and paintings to expose subjects associated with the world's make-up and by revealing their own, assume the subject of creativity itself. Her paintings though figurative are just about so, always tethering on the cusp of dissolution into abstraction, or alternately, always stopping short of distinctive image. Her surfaces are fluid, cascading into form, thinning into stain, their dynamic swirls insisting on the performative act of their creation. To look at a Sonia Shiel painting is to partner the artist in its making. Her coloration is off beat, a mix of lush and industrial. Though candy coloured they can be, they are never sweet. There is a dispute in these works, a struggle between the biddable and the obstinate. The painted ground threatens to devour the image, the image seems oblivious to its fragility, absorbed as it is by the touch and nuance of some very tasty brush work.

The vulnerable aspiration of art making, the processes employed to edge closer to something to say, something worth saying, are directly alluded to in Shiel's work. Whereas the maelstrom of paint captures in stop-action the artist's elusive goals, her video work directly cites the need for experiment to secure discovery. In "Two beads and a bicycle pump", 2006, we are introduced to the goofiness of the studio. One is reminded of Bruce Nauman's and Robert Wegman's early experiments with the then newly available video technology in the early seventies. It was work that gave insight into the artistic process and the necessity of playfulness to its ability to reveal. This was further emphasized in Fischli and Weiss's, *The way things go*, 1987, a master work celebrating the profundity of play - this video coming amid the ponderous and oft time pretentious political work of that decade. Shiel also mixes the high and the low in her videos combining low production values with high intelligence. This is an artist who eschews the paraphernalia of technological accessories opting for the domestic video camera and her skill of putting the simple in front of it to great effect. In *Titanic*, 2007, the archetypal cruise liner is drawn on the hand, the waltz *Song D'Autome* provides the soundtrack. The animation is the movement of the hand, the crunch of the fist the punchline for the tragedy. In *Shoot Out*, 2007, the humour of shooting the

stars instead of the shooting star is devilishly clever, the effect created using an array of flashlights.

Shiel is not content with her work being exclusively confined to the two dimensional, either still or moving. She wishes to extend her range into real space. Much of the strategy she deploys to attain such ground is more assemblage than sculpture. She utilises existing objects (often found on site) and implicates existing architectural features to amplify her paintings and videos. Sonia Shiel engages with the fairytale and the epic. But unlike say Karen Kilimnick who espouses a naive pre-pubescent view of romantic narratives, Shiel is more Angela Carter, for her the darker side of our psyche seeps out through the fabric of the tale. There is everything light about Shiel's work and simultaneously everything dark, there is creative play and destructive desolation, there is the fleeting image and its residual meaning, there is a fullness.

**Sonia Shiel: The Brief Tremendous, at the Butler Gallery, by Chris Clarke, 2008.**  
From Circa **Sonia Shiel: The Brief Tremendous, Butler Gallery, by Chris Clarke, 2008.**

"Man feels an active power within himself, the whole of nature lies before him as a potential element for him to form and shape, and he cannot help but regard her in the first instance solely as material for his purposes. Thus in the very beginning he can hardly recognise any other object of aspiration and imagination than man himself and his manifold states and conditions, and indeed he feels compelled by the vivid force of phantasy to ascribe a human individuality even to lifeless things, and further to divine things as well."

Carl Gustav Carus, Nine Letters on Landscape Painting (1831)

In Nine Letters on Landscape Painting, the German Romantic (and friend of Caspar David Friedrich) Carl Gustav Carus espouses an active relationship to nature, through art, in which the painted landscape serves as a reflection of both human and Godly creation. The painting and painter are microcosms of an infinite and incomprehensible whole, the work of art testifying to, in Carus' words, "the inner affinity between man and the world spirit." It's a view that has changed somewhat since; from vaguely mystical, yet essentially non-doctrinal, strands of environmentalism, to despoliation in the name of progress and pragmatism. The inner affinity is often weighted to one side over the other. The Dublin-based artist Sonia Shiel is neither precisely a Romantic nor a crude realist. In her latest exhibition, there's a trade-off between beauty and industry, where nature is remade through its cast-offs and cuttings. In Trappings, a single tree branch has sprouted and stretched from the base of a glass display case to breach the opposite corner. Fragments of ornamental plastic birds are scattered on top, nest-like, as if disturbed by the sudden rupture of the vitrine. The confinement of nature within the fixed parameters of the picture frame cannot help but eventually buckle and break its bonds. There is a tension between the man-made and the natural in Shiel's practice that is epitomised here, in the sculptural works that resemble outgrowths and protrusions from gallery walls, and in the paintings of idyllic landscapes blighted by tunnels and pipelines. The respective mediums often overlap; pieces of card are tacked onto (and hanging off of) canvas surfaces, while Beastly Acts II, a painting of a woman clinging to a tightrope, is itself suspended between two vertical bars fixed from the ceiling. The image is replicated in its presentation; the rods connecting the canvas to the support are perfectly aligned with the painted rope. This merging of artistic disciplines or mediums is indicative of Shiel's syncretic reconciliation of sublime, primeval nature with mundane, everyday practices. A small appliance of fibre-optics and copper, plugged directly into the gallery foyer wall (as if left to charge during the working day) is titled Sample of Holiness. A circular racing track of spilled

concrete and frayed, battered cardboard appears to have been either scrapped together in minutes or eroded out of solid rock. Nocturne depicts a playing card and a nighttime image of a mountain range, over-painted with thick swathes of blue that drip down the canvas, obscuring and delineating the peaks and troughs of the landscape before sliding off the surface. In the suites of landscape and architectural paintings, one also finds something of an updated, open-eyed Romantic sensibility. Instead of Friedrich's immaculately rendered ruins of abbeys and monasteries overgrown by flora, Shiel squeezes paint directly from the tube, scraping and smudging it into trees and rivers, cement bunkers, steel vats. It is a view from ahead, from another planet even (the paintings bear names of Mars, Venus, and Jupiter, neatly referencing both future exploration and classical history), in which these contemporary eyesores become the monuments to ancient eras and ideals. There is an acknowledgement of relentlessness in these works, of the passage of time's uncaring obliteration of human endeavor, of all art and architecture. Here, one sees Shiel's application of found materials in a new light, as the fractured, scattered remains of mankind's futile attempts to form and shape nature.

**I Can Can I? On Painting and Potentiality by Aidan Dunne, Wednesday, August 20<sup>th</sup> 2008, The Irish Times**

VISUAL ARTS: I CAN / CAN I?: on paintings and potentiality at Temple Bar Gallery is one of the best exhibitions running in Dublin at the moment, thanks in no small part to the vim and vigour of Sonia Shiel's contribution to the proceedings. It's a three-person show, and to single her out is in no way to disparage her two companions, Michael Coleman and Hanneline Visnes, but Shiel's centrepiece, an elaborate painted construction titled Sal-on , will surely bring a smile to your face. All three artists are painters, and the show's proposition is that "interrogation and experimentation" are necessary if painting "is to continue to evolve towards a place of limitless potential". Yet, as an explanatory note suggests, a state of potentiality implies the possibility of potential remaining unrealised, hence the doubt that dogs the assertive I Can .

Coleman is an obvious candidate for such a show. It's hard to think of another painter whose work is poised so precariously on the edge of potentiality, and who is so intent on second guessing himself, on never giving in to the predictable or the obvious. There's a necessary ruthlessness to the way he is prepared to invest hugely in a body of work and then, because it seems too settled or consolidated, negate it all at a stroke. He has earned a reputation for enormous changes at the last minute, for obliterating an exhibition's worth of work just as it's due to open. Except that, for him, obliteration is not only part of but is in a way the point of the work. His composite in this show, Seventh Heaven , consists of seven canvasses of various dimensions, each painted monochromatically but unevenly with a colour enlivened by the addition of iridescent, acrylic pigment, giving a bit of a lift to things. A sense of precariousness is communicated. By contrast, Visnes's work, which is meticulously representational, is fixed and definite. It does fix impossible realities, though, in surreal images. Eagles in paired formations hold jewellery aloft for our inspection, for example. While the work is technically accomplished, it also comes across as being a bit arch and contrived. The same could be said for Shiel's various pieces, but contrivance is what they are about. Her Sal-on is a ramshackle assemblage of painted wood, card, canvasses and other elements that combine to create a likeness of an archetypal saloon bar in the Wild West, as filtered through films and comic books. The whole edifice is liberally punctured by bullet holes and has a wild, anarchic energy that threatens to tear the illusion apart. Yet somehow it does hold brilliantly together as a piece of bravura contrivance. Painting wet in wet, Shiel builds up thick surfaces of incredibly glossy oil paint, and the sheer lushness is ideally suited to The Studio , a small painting in which a Casanova-like figure lends new meaning to the term painting the nude....

**August 28th . 2008. Evening Herald HQ Magazine.**

The Potentiality Exhibition  
I Can / Can I? (on painting and potentiality)

The current exhibition at Temple Bar Galleries sees three artists explore their relationship with painting. Sonia Shiel and Michael Coleman from Ireland and Hanneline Visnes, a Norwegian artist based in Scotland, ask questions of the medium that move from formal interrogation to downright cheeky.

Each artist examines their work in the context of Potentiality a concept originally framed by Aristotle which concerns itself with the potency of possibilities, What if?, Where does this lead? and Why / Why not? . The exhibition is not an answer to these questions, but a process of investigating what it means to be a painter working in visual arts practice in 2008.

Coleman shows a calm, fixed installation of related canvases in juicy hues a restrained progression from his body of compulsive, stylised painting. Visnes shows the most traditional work here. A surreal motif involving raptors and jewellery is riffed out at various sizes, on unprimed MDF or paper, with an emphasis on controlled rendering. One larger piece is a very satisfactory resolution of deftly brushed filigree.

Shiel appears to have grasped the bull by the horns and wrestled it into a kind of submission. One of Ireland's finest young painters (winning the Hennessy Craig award in 2004), she has long exhibited technical fluency. Recent years have seen her practice absorb increasingly experimental contexts. This is certainly true of her work here, to the point where paint is subverted, as in the case of Sal-on (shown above). As well as incorporating small canvases, paint also skins this assemblage, creating an almost theatrical construct.

There is risk here, in subverting the reverence which conventionally applies to gallery paintings. But this show is about risk and questions. The biggest one of all? Are these the right questions?

I Can / Can I? On Painting and Potentiality,  
continues at Temple Bar Galleries until 20th September

**Sonia Shiel - 'Babel's Biting the Moon' by Charlotte Bonham-Carter. 2007.**  
**FOUR and Roscommon Arts Centre. [www.fourdublin.com](http://www.fourdublin.com)**

It is not surprising that many of Sonia Shiel's early works were inspired by genre paintings– a kind of painting popularized in the early 17th century, when artists began to represent everyday phenomena, such as peasants at market, or men drinking in taverns. The French master of genre painting, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, is clearly an important stylistic influence on the artist. However, Shiel has also keenly explored that saccharine sort of genre painting dubbed 'chocolate box painting.' Always executed on a small scale, presumably because of their original function of adorning Cadbury's chocolate boxes, 'chocolate box paintings' are unwittingly banal. However, while Shiel experiments with the 'chocolate box' tradition, her renditions– imbued with a glossy texture of thickly applied paint– embrace the mundane with an ironic sense of grandiosity that elicits a variety of complex emotions from the viewer.

Shiel's recent paintings have become increasingly ambiguous in form, occupying a space somewhere between figuration and abstraction. In the two paintings exhibited in 'Babel's Biting the Moon,' Shiel adopts earthy, flesh coloured tones, while simultaneously employing her distinctive visceral sheen--- a sloppy sheath of smoothness over the canvas's minutely textured surface. In each painting, a considered distribution of color results in a masterfully balanced composition. In Shiel's work, it is difficult to discern background and foreground, or positive and negative space. As a result, hierarchies of shapes and signifiers dissolve, and Shiel's often fanciful referents assume convincing ground. One painting in the exhibition depicts Little Red Riding Hood, the other, an abstracted wolf figure. The paintings were made during Shiel's residency in Finland. During her stay, Shiel set up a collection point, asking local residents to donate objects. The painting depicting a wolf stems from the donation of a wolf's skeleton. Just as the objects carry with them the personal histories and experiences of their owners, so too does each painting possess its own individual story. In her work, Shiel often grapples with fairytales and mythology. However, her interest extends beyond storytelling in popular culture, and her paintings frequently depict transgressive figures, such as beings that are part human, part beast, or part man, part woman.

Shiel's exposition of phantasmagorical worlds, and their transformative capacities, is typical of her experiments with proportion. Both of the works on show at Roscommon Art Centre are executed on a small scale. Shiel is interested in making the mundane epic, and the epic mundane. It is no coincidence that Shiel should use one of the most epic names in the Bible, 'Babel,' in the title of the exhibition. Also typical, however, is her desire to undermine the epic, in this case by contextualizing 'Babel' in a phrase that connotes a children's nursery rhyme. In 2007, Shiel made a video piece entitled, 'Titanic.' In characteristically low-tech production, the video records a hand that has been penned with the outline of a boat. As the hand moves, the boat rocks and sways, set to the melodramatic drone of a violin. Here, Shiel takes one of the world's biggest luxury liners, greatest myths, and most extravagant Hollywood productions and literally shrinks it down to the size of her palm.

In Shiel's juxtaposition of video and paintings at Roscommon Art Centre, it is difficult to tell whether the works co-exist as separate entities, or whether they are indeed intended to be understood as one installation. This uncertainty is an extrapolation of the sort of ambiguity that Shiel exhibits in the figurative forms of her paintings, again refusing easy categorization. Similar to her films and paintings, there is an edginess to the installation at Roscommon that is born of seemingly hastily fashioned constructions of raw, exposed materials. Dissected brown envelopes are made into a wood cabin, a white faux leather curtain is a substitute for a roof, and an upside down bucket becomes a lampshade. In these alchemic gestures, Shiel eludes to the kind of mythological, fantasy, and fairy tale worlds that have often featured in her work.

The video aspect of 'Babel's Biting the Moon' is a purposefully clumsy portrayal of a constellation of stars in a night sky. The stars in the sky are actually dangling flashlights, and every now and then, one of them falls (or is shot down). Shiel's utilization of low-tech materials is not unlike the Croatian artist, David Maljkovic, whose video, 'Scene for a New Heritage II' (2004/6) depicts a 'futuristic' car encased in tin foil. The video is watched by the viewer from within a ramshackle wooden tunnel that appears to have been built with just a hammer and nails. In this way, both Maljkovic and Shiel use an architectural structure to facilitate an actual and imagined entrance into the video work and- in Shiel's case- the paintings as well. As the viewer enters the exhibition at Roscommon, his experience is commandeered by a number of framing devices. The first frame is dictated by the white curtain that drapes over the shack. A glimpse of a dark sky and a constellation of stars is all that is visible. As the viewer moves forward, he takes in the painting of Little Red Riding Hood, and a fuller vista of the starry sky. Shiel's staggered visual revelations enable the visitor to imagine his own entrance into the installation's pictorial frame.

A sudden awareness of one's own size within the installation is brought on by the coziness of the entranceway, and the small scale of the paintings. This feeling of awkwardness is immediately compounded by the video projection's chilling soundtrack. Alternatively read as optimistic, or completely apocalyptic, the video's simple flash light portrayal of a night sky is loaded with cultural references, from Van Gogh's 'Starry Night' to the cries for help that are made in Morse code, by people in distress. Shiel's movement towards the juxtaposition of film and paintings is an important progression for an artist who has long considered the function of narrative in her work. Shiel's execution of narrative with makeshift materials and haphazard constructions belies a complex understanding of craft and the act of making. It is this adeptness with craft that sets Shiel apart from the plethora of artists working today who are increasingly distanced from the tangibility of their practice. Just as Shiel draws upon the maelstrom of folklore and pop culture that defines our society, so too does she find ingenious ways of utilizing the physical world around her, while confounding a facile understanding of what we see, and even who we are.

**Shiel shines at RHA April 2004.**

**Circa, Contemporary Art Magazine, Susan Garcia, Friday 24 April, 2004**

Sonia Shiel takes Hennessy Craig Scholarship at RHA

The painter Sonia Shiel snapped up the third Hennessy Craig Scholarship of 10,000 euro last week. She was presented with the award at the Prize Giving Ceremony which took place on 16 April at the Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin. Rival nominees were Geraldine O'Neill, Colin Martin and Comghall Casey. Her painting Part Candy was selected by the Academy as an 'oustanding work' in this year's 174th Annual Exhibition, the opening of which took place on Monday 19 April and, as usual, drew in the crowds. The scholarship is designed to "enable a painter to pursue a course of self-determined or formal study in Ireland or abroad" and "is open to any painter under the age of thirty-five exhibiting in the open submission of the Academy's Annual Exhibition." Shiel is a Dublin-based artist. The emphasis of her work over the last five years has been on "the process and physicality of paint, negotiating subject and ground." Influenced by the North West Coast of Ireland, much of Shiel's work interprets the "apparent manifestations of loss and resilience" in its landscape, and its people's attempts to adapt and in some cases abandon. She also explores similar tensions between decadence and austerity in the process of painting. Aidan Dunne in the Irish Times described her paintings as "subtle and oblique," but he says "they are also informed by the artist's exceptional attention to process, a self-critical watchfulness of her own judgements. The result is a body of work that is extremely, though quietly, rich and vital... Shiel tries to negotiate another position for herself, a pictorial space that is equal to the complexities and paradoxes of experience. In what is her most accomplished work to date, she does so quite successfully...she surprises us...she takes risks that pay off handsomely.'