

In Vienna a few months back I was asked what my specialisation was, as an art critic. Austrian people, I was fast learning, like to know where to situate you right away, what precise box to put you in. In any case, caught unawares and still more unprepared, I found myself blathering and struggling to find an answer that would be in any way adequate. But I thought a bit more about it afterwards and came to one plausible solution, which was: painting. I realised that I have written about painters and painting more than anything else since I started writing about art, though the terms 'painting' and 'painters' are admittedly rather broad and capacious categorisations at this point in time. I have written about brushstrokes and canvas and linseed and line, cobalt blue and carmine red. I have written about perspective, and the way light falls on thick impasto. Point is, I have written a lot about painting, without ever really planning to do so. Or ever really figuring out why I write so much about painting. Or indeed actually ascertaining what painting in fact circumscribes, let alone hazarding a guess at its seemingly eternal appeal.

Not long after the unfortunate incident in Vienna, I began to think about the paintings of Sinéad Ni Mhaonaigh. After emailing back and forth for some time, we arranged that I would visit her so as to have a look at some of her new work, at her home and studio in Bray. A dark and frigid afternoon in the middle of January, the decided-upon day had the dint of an afternoon with the dimmer-switch half the way down. Unusually, the train I had planned to take had been early to leave the city — which meant of course that I missed it and had to wait another quarter hour for the next one — but Sinéad was still waiting for me outside the station, a vision in fluorescence, when I eventually reached the town. Taking off at a fast, blood-thawing pace, we chatted about Dublin rents and exhibitions as we meandered through the town's pretty Victorian streets, over the bridge skimming the People's Park and towards her home. On reaching it, we drank tea at the kitchen table before taking the few short steps out the backdoor to her garden studio. The small space was expertly filled, canvases stacked back to back, some big and some small; and as the weak sun sunk further into the gloom, she pulled out an endless array of paintings, quick-fire, for my appraisal. With some, it seemed Ni Mhaonaigh wanted my opinion, being still on the fence about them; whereas others were accompanied less by a question and more an inviolable statement of fact: *isn't this fantastic*. I found myself acceding to these value judgements, sensing they were correct, but without really knowing why. Some worked well and some worked to a lesser extent, and that, it seemed, was that.

Perhaps it is this particular sense of non-knowing that means I am constantly circling back towards paint. There is something inexhaustible to it, something I think I will never quite "get" — a deficiency likely supported by my teenage desire to become a painter, only to find myself fundamentally incompatible with the physical reality of paint. More than likely, the inexhaustibility specific to painting is one of the main reasons most painters paint, too; after all, the desire to put paint on canvas, while acknowledging its inviolable historical lineage, still remains a strange way to spend the hours, days, weeks and years; writing about painting is probably a stranger proposition still. While with other, more contemporary media — video, to take but one example — the media itself inheres a particular working method that can resemble something approaching a narrative loop: a body of footage has to be organised in such a way as to generate a final product, to get from A to B. With painting, it seems to me that this is far less clear-cut; and with anything that takes up the mantle of abstract painting, doubly so. What is A, and what is B? The painting has to both contain, and prefigure, such a loop.

And this is probably why, when I read that Sinéad Ni Mhaonaigh is often referred to as a "painter's painter," I truly struggle to understand what it means. How does one go about being a painter's painter? Is it something about the way Ni Mhaonaigh handles paint? Her demonstrable enthusiasm

regarding the very materiality of paint on canvas? Or in that she seems to fully comply with the weird temporality of painting itself? It seems to me that all painters accept or utilise the term ‘painter,’ precisely because they understand the limitations of painting’s historical cachet — insofar as making paintings, even when those do not align with any traditional definition of painting, exceeds that self-same historicist stance. The actual process of making a painting now is much the same as making a painting in seventeenth century Florence, or 50s New York; consequently, there is a weirdly flat temporality specific to making even the most stringently contemporary paintings. Materials may have changed somewhat, pigments become brighter and more durable; but, in Ni Mhaonaigh’s case, the fact of putting oil on canvas remains much the same as it has always been. A painter’s painter, in this sense, would be a person who acknowledges the limitations of contemporaneity as determined by putting paint on canvas — always there and yet, *not*.

What struck me that day, and what continues to make itself felt with regard to Ni Mhaonaigh’s paintings, is the pure economy of her brush marks, the precision with which a single line can cleave an illusion of space in the canvas, and with it an entirely new proposition. In such a way, it seems to me, these are not abstract paintings at all, but caught in a process of self-forming: tipped over, line pulled just a little bit further, the whole idea of them changes. Take, for example, the 2006 work *Platform*. Here, the paint’s application is almost sculptural, rubbery stretches of colour pulled back taut inside the painting’s plane. But the work is then flattened out, brought back to painting, through the spidery lines that enclose these wide blocks of colour. Adding to this sense of inner tension, the inclusion of a diminutive colour palette — not, it should be pointed out, resembling anything would be found in Ni Mhaonaigh’s much more practical studio — inserted into the painting’s larger frame, has the result of creating a loop, a sense of time, within the painting itself. Self-referential and playful, it attests to painting’s self-reliance. While shapes and forms often offer themselves up to us, as oddly familiar echoes of architectural space, it is clear that the prime space is that of the painting itself, the weird spatiality — and, indeed, temporality — given by the arrangement of line, colour, and shape. Reminiscent of things and places from everyday life, Ni Mhaonaigh’s paintings seem to start from a place of undoing — the knotty reality of any kind of representation at all.

At other times, these paintings appear entirely disinterested in representation. Instead, we again observe the complete preoccupation with paint itself, with the simple play of colours against one another. Many of the recent paintings pulled out from stacks that afternoon in Bray seemed to follow this logic, canvases filled to bursting with dragged daubs of complementary colours: swampy greens and starchy whites, mauves and greys. Within these busy spaces, something like a pattern emerges, aided along by the imperfect repetition of brush strokes — the natural drag of the hand, perhaps, or the physical impact of brush against the canvas skin. Typically, this patterned plane sits within another, bounded in by the sharp border of a second limit point. A border within a border, then, again bringing our attention of the weird leaps of fancy made possible by colour and line. Even within this doubly negated space, space and time appear to happen as though by accident. The eye tracks a line from colour to line, generating a weird rhythm that is something very close to a second kind of, painterly, sight. Incidences like these mean I am constantly surprised when I look and think about painting. Not by the technical skill required to paint, exactly, but the way that skill is communicated *through* paint. Often, this process — something like the way water tenses with cold, becoming ice — remains indistinct: we are only left to say, *this* is a good painting, or such and such paints well. Perhaps, then, when we describe someone as a painter’s painter it is exactly this mystery that is being brought centre stage. The point at which paint itself assumes something like autonomy, becoming a conduit for skill. And, when I look at and think about Sinead Ni Mhaonaigh’s paintings, I have to remind myself of this point: while painting might be a preoccupation of mine, her works prompt me to accept the limits of my own understanding. And probably to fasten me still further to paint.