

Remembrance I and II

Paul Nugent's series of pictures, two of which are titled *My mother as the Painter's Wife after van Eyck*, oil on canvas, 2009, intrigue from the outset because the images are clearly not of his, or indeed any other, twenty-first-century painter's wife. Instead, like the series of *Cardinals* he showed in his first solo exhibition in 1997, two of which are now in the collection of the IMMA, they weave back into history to explore ideas about memory, veracity of representation, the use and proliferation of imagery and the place of painting in contemporary representation.

The Victorian commentator, Lady Charles Eastlake, remarked "There is no lack of evidence ... of the photographer believing that art had hitherto been but a blundering groping after that truth, which the cleanest and precisest photography was now destined to reveal." It could be said the 'precisest' representation from the 15th century is what is offered in Van Eyck's portrait of his wife, providing the original source for these two works in Paul Nugent's series. However, as Lady Eastlake pointed out that role has since been stolen from the painter by the camera. Paul Nugent's quiet evocation of 15th century Flemish portraits or 18th century Spanish ones, (an example of which is the painting titled *Veil probably after Goya*, oil on canvas, 2009), are familiar enough to convince the viewer that they know the originals. It is only when you try to track the sources you realise that his sitters have taken on a subtly organic and entirely convincing new aspect. These images emerge from photographs taken by the artist over ten years ago, of his mother, draped in costumes and headdresses, constructed from cardboard and cloth and posed to match the remembered images the artist carried in his head of the source paintings, never seen in the original but familiar from their many reproductions in art-books and journals. In a reversal of the 19th century pattern, Nugent works from photography back to painting, not photographs of 'reality' however, but of re-constructions of the artist's fallible human memories of that reality. The paintings then, in their understated presence, question the role of memory, the truth of the photograph and the whole notion of archival practice. If we remember incorrectly what does that tell us? Does it mean that the memory is weak or that our need to interpret the original is more powerful and if so, why?

A great deal of Nugent's work to date has dealt with people and places associated with religion - Cardinals, Franciscans, churches loaded with symbolic furnishings, religious statuary, and lately, orphanages. These formed the more overtly challenging subject matter of Remembrance I, some of which is retained for the second phase of the exhibition. Ghostly representations of an orphanage in Dominick Street from the 1940s, the photographic source like the state of our knowledge is tantalisingly remote, made more so by the artist's monochrome palettes. Other superficially beautiful images, such as *Seance* and *Charcot's Ghost* depict the Chapel of the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, and raise the spectre of the man of medicine and science who claimed to use photography to document the condition of his patients but may, in fact, have provoked their episodes through his use of flash photography. Did the camera record the truth or create it?

What the paintings tell us is that memory is not just a repository where we store things we might want to revisit for pleasure but also the place where the ghosts of history, benign or otherwise, hover, like the negative waiting to be printed into something positive, like the images that emerge from beneath the surface in Paul Nugent's paintings.

Catherine Marshall, October 2009

Co-Editor, Volume V. Art and Architecture of Ireland, on secondment from the Irish Museum of Modern Art.