



## Art in Focus

### Sleep of Reason by Diane Copperwhite

#### How was it done?

It is made with oil paint on canvas, and it is relatively large. Unusually enough, Copperwhite has been consistently comfortable in alternating between small and large-scale works. She paints with great energy and, she has noted, generally works and reworks, adding and removing paint, investing the surface with tremendous pace.

#### Where can I see it?

It forms part of Copperwhite's outstanding new exhibition, *Proto Fiction and the Sleep of Reason*, at the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, Dublin, until November 2nd, which has the depth and richness of a survey show.

#### Is it a typical work by the artist?

It is quite typical, if relatively dark in tone. But then, the title references Goya's celebrated etching, plate 43 of his *Caprichos*: "El sueño de la razón produce

monstrous" – The sleep of reason produces monsters. The full accompanying epigraph elaborates somewhat, identifying the problem as being fantasy freed from the restraint of reason. In Goya's preparatory sketches and in the etching, a man working at a table – the artist? – has fallen asleep and a host of nightmarish creatures including bats mass around him. Similarly, in Copperwhite's painting, potentially threatening forms coalesce out of the darkness.

It is surely fair to see her evocation of Goya as a comment on our own troubled historical moment. Mind you, she does not tend to comment on events in a direct way in her work, but all the evidence is that she is very interested in how we construct our images of the world, how memory, dreams and fantasy feed into what we then take to be real. The mechanics and uncertainty of perception and the phenomenon of time are certainly

consistent preoccupations for her. These concerns have become all the more pertinent with the rise and rise of digital communications technologies and social media, and the pre-eminence of the virtual and the spurious.

All of which emerges through the medium of paint, for Copperwhite, rather than via a newer technology. It was immediately apparent, as far back as her NCAD degree show in the mid-1990s, that she is a natural painter. Even at that stage her distinctive palette was apparent, a definite preference for a limited number of primary and secondary colours (pinks, greens, yellows, blues) generously leavened with white, plus the lively, choreographed interplay of warm and cool hues. And always with that sense of how hard it is to pin things down, to fix an image, and the absence of any compulsion to do so.

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herself through a cascade of images: a beauty to be fussed over by a neurotic mother; the "queen bee" of her Cork school; a social-media darling and even billboard model. But at a pivotal moment in Louise O'Neill's 2015 novel, *Asking For It*, she doesn't recognise herself in a stream of degrading images, widely shared online. "She is an It," Emma says of the subject, herself, the victim of a gang rape. "She is a thing."

In *Landmark Productions* and *The Everyman's* gruelling adaptation, written by Meadhbh McHugh in collaboration with director Annabelle Comyn, Emma is again startlingly objectified, split between the competing perspectives of small twitching community, the media, online trolls. That fracture informs Comyn's striking production, an unsettling anatomy of rape culture, divided uneasily between the furling energy of youth, excitingly depicted, and the suffocations of a hypocritical society, which finally swamp and overwhelm the story. "I belong to those other boys, as surely as if they have stamped me with a cattle brand," says Emma, in the end as comprehensively "ruined" as the subject of a Victorian "fallen woman" novel. The idea that victimhood is forever, though, is also a facet of rape culture; neither O'Neill nor the show are immune to harmful images.

#### The Playboy of the Western World

*Lyric Theatre, Belfast, Oct 8–Nov 2*

7.30pm (Sat & Sun mat 2.30pm)

Christy Mahon, the timid fugitive of *The Playboy of the Western World*, has finally headed north and so has this cross-border co-production. In the Dublin Theatre Festival and Lyric Theatre's co-production, this leads JM Synge's famous father killer to a border-town bar in 1980s Northern Ireland, making for a freshly unsettling journey. In a comically dismal shebeen – sparse, tobacco stained, peeling – the tedium of unpromising lives is broken by the stranger's tales of violence, which grow to become acts of justified, self-determining struggle. At a time when similar rhetoric is having poisonous effect in the North again, that makes the *Playboy's* gap between "a gallous story and a dirty deed" more politically charged in director Oonagh Murphy's considered staging.