

Stephen Loughman

The lake



With his latest show, collectively titled *The Lake*, Stephen Loughman continues to develop his repertoire of framed and layered views. The typical attention to detail in representation plays on his exploration of the connected but contradictory ideas of realism and illusionism. His work, rather than being imitative or naturalistic, conveys instead the idea that all portrayals are mediated, drawing attention to their selected and contrived nature, however factual or mimetic they may appear to be.

Loughman is currently interested in exploring the world as seen through a lens, exploiting the viewer's familiarity with photographic and cinematic conventions, but applying them to unexpected environments and circumstances. Consequently, the imagery seems at once familiar and strange. The absence of figures in most of the paintings in the show with one exception, the close-up of a baby *Untitled No.3*, prompts an uneasy array of responses, from abandonment to anticipation, to the spaces that seem to be recently emptied or about to be entered, like a stage or film set.

Despite the over-arching title, the individual works are disconnected from each other in their methods of representation emphasized by the varied sizes and shapes which vary from the traditional rectangular to the roundel and the most unusual, a long oval. While all can be loosely described as 'realist', they vary from the detailed *Voices* to the looser handling of the flowers in *Wrong*. The hard clarity of some works, where all elements are given equal attention, contrasts with the way a human eye or photographic lens operates - with greater clarity at the focal point and blurring at the peripheral vision. The effect of Loughman's approach is to flatten the image and give it a disconcertingly abstracted, surreal quality which serves the purpose of

the overall concept of questioning the reality of the mimetic image. The adoption of a thematic title for the show as a whole, however, implies a connectivity which, together with the cinematic conventions, suggests – but does not supply – a narrative. The title of the show, *The Lake*, is the same as that for the oval painting, an underwater view depicting elegant strands of water-weeds streaming in a murky current. All images, it is suggested, are therefore connected to this pivot; an otherwise incidental scene is consequently heavy with implications that tap into expectations programmed by television and cinema.

The first work encountered on entering the compact space of the gallery, *Voices*, depicting a bar interior, is essentially an internal view of the doorway and windows seen through a serving hatch which is, in turn, framed by grimy flock wallpaper. The close attention to mundane and familiar details – wall fans, a loudspeaker, an exit sign, cheap 'rustic' light fittings – leads us to read them as significant clues, but to little avail. This framed view, isolated from its surrounding context and focused upon, is a defining element for the show as a whole and is inferred in the remainder of the works. For example, the almost identical images, *Untitled I* and *Untitled II*, each of the same forest clearing, are presented like consecutive frames in a movie. The forest has long captured the imagination as a fearful place in both text and image, myth and fairytale, from Albrecht Altdorfer's *St. George and the Dragon* to illustrations for Grimm's fairytales, and contemporary visual culture draws in turn on the preconceptions attaching to it. *Waiting*, a lens-shaped image of a dark sky framing an imaginary moon-like planet across which foliage is decoratively silhouetted, plays both on nineteenth century Romantic

paintings and twentieth century cinematic motifs. Other works provide further potential narrative links – the vulnerable child absorbed in sleep, the isolated shack shrouded in mist, and the rope suspended above the lake with all of its sinister connotations.

Wrong has no obvious place in the narrative sequence; its role is to rather to indicate how the narrative is read. The overblown blooms and the flies which seemingly alight upon them suggest the *memento mori* of Dutch seventeenth century painting symbolising transience and decay. The contrast in representation however between the blurred flowers and the sharply detailed insects seems 'wrong' until it is realised that the flies are located on the surface of a window pane through which the flowers are imperfectly observed, a reminder of the potential for the lens view to distort and mislead.

Loughman's references to cinematic motifs and methods is not simply to propose the contemporary relevance of his work to a similarly wide audience through paralleling its conventions, nor to showcase a savvy familiarity with popular media. It is rather to draw attention, in an age saturated with imaging, to the selectivity involved – of the layering and intervention that complicates perception and veils meaning. This show demonstrates that Loughman has not yet exhausted his exploration of unexpected subjects and intriguing fragments, nor their invitation to resolve them into an inevitably and deliberately incomplete whole.

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(opposite)
Stephen Loughman
Waiting, 2005
oil on canvas, 50cm diameter
courtesy Kevin Kavanagh Gallery