

STEPHEN LOUGHMAN  
DENNIS MCNULTY  
DESPERATE OPTIMISTS

*Representing Ireland  
at the 26th Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil*

25th September – 19th December 2004

IRISH COMMISSIONER: VALERIE CONNOR

Stephen Loughman and Dennis McNulty live in Dublin and desperate optimists (Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor), from Dublin originally, live in London. While they have differing methodologies, use different technologies and operate in discretely different cultural economies, they all have a curiosity and enthusiasm for reconfiguring the conventions of their preferred media. Their interests and approaches converge around hot-spots of inquiry in cultural discourses about the stability of meaning. For one thing, their works take a critical approach to the values and ideologies at work in dominant discourses of naturalism and the representation of reality.

The bringing together of Loughman, McNulty and desperate optimists has come from a desire to start with threads of commonality already present in their work. While a unifying theme can offer a seductive sort of comprehension, especially in the massiveness of an event like the Bienal, it risks the erasure of the syncopated practice, so to speak, that most artists engage in on an ongoing basis. In January 2004, all the artists were asked to travel with me to São Paulo. The visit was a time for these erstwhile strangers to talk to each other about their work and timely in creating the links with people in São Paulo that have become vital in realising Ireland's participation this year.

Stephen Loughman's paintings *Finite*, *Friend*, *Moriarty*, *Remember?*, *Witness*, *Outer space*, *Dreamtime*, *Untitled*, and *Sensation* form the selection of work on show in São Paulo.

Loughman's pictures are connected in an episodic way, rather than in a linear and sequential manner. Whether representing zoological enclosures, museum displays, municipal parkland or domestic space in London, Paris, Dublin or Constanta, one of the primary organising principles in his pictures is how three dimensional space (and the space of movement and action) is mediated by the effects of the optical technology of film and photography. In Yvonne Scott's essay, *Stephen Loughman: Through a glass darkly...*, Loughman's selection of subject matter is described as being consistently about making a choice to depict "environments which are not normally presented as subjects in their own right (as a landscape might be for example)." While Loughman does not paint the landscape as wilderness, he has been painting municipal parks, especially St. Anne's Park, Dublin. In those paintings, the *mise en scène* is the subject. The paintings do not include people. There appears to be no incident, no event, no witnesses and nothing to see. The picturesque design of the park, the civic space of nature, competes with the emptiness of its depiction. The painting *Finite* is the most recent painting to come from this ongoing attachment to that place.

Dennis McNulty's new soundwork includes recordings made in São Paulo. These have been used as source material in the generation of new sounds with regular collaborators in Dublin. McNulty's overall project is titled <http://alpha60.info> and is comprised of a CD, a website and live performances. The CD has been released by Bizarre Records in São Paulo ([www.bizarremusic.com.br](http://www.bizarremusic.com.br)) and is a collaboration with serverproject, David Lacey and Alan O'Boyle. McNulty is involved in several collaborative group projects such as serverproject

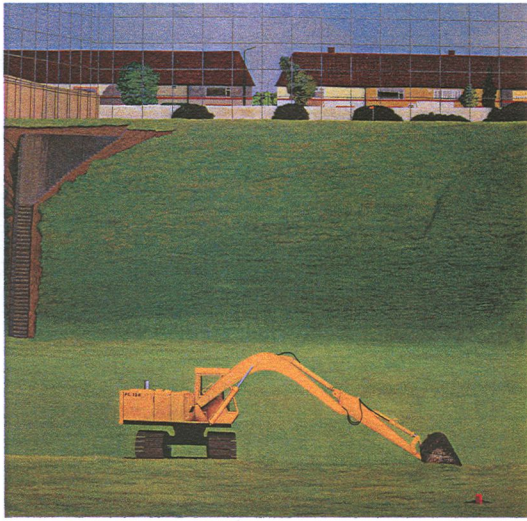
(aka Donnacha Costello, Peter Maybury, David Donohoe and Dennis McNulty), which is an ongoing performance project based around 'live' electronic improvisation and the long-term creation of a sound archive. Commenting on McNulty's strategy of performing in a variety of spaces and places, in *Turn down the staircase: Dennis McNulty's sound installations*, Brian Hand writes that McNulty's "practice is not an art world specific practice but more an art world related practice." On the occasion of the Bienal, McNulty performs solo in Dublin at Busáras (bus station); as well as in São Paulo at the Conjunto Desportivo Baby Barioni/Água Branca (public swimming pool), under the outdoor Marquise adjacent to the Bienal building in Ibirapuera Park, and in collaboration with Minima at Galeria Vermelho (art gallery). McNulty's engagement with the sonic space of selected locations in São Paulo, and the collaboration of like-minded people working in electronic music in the city, will remain available for inclusion and processing in other contexts and forms in the future.

desperate optimists' project for São Paulo, *Civic life: Moore Street* is a 35mm single tracking shot filmed on Moore Street in Dublin. Existing familiar images of the street have typically been aimed at the tourist market to represent an idea of tradition and identity – that which is essentially 'Dublin'. Street traders line either side of the street selling flowers, fish, and vegetables. Some deliveries still arrive by horse and cart. The street is in the city's busiest north-side shopping area, surrounded with the usual Western European high-street shops, well-known local department stores, new and old shopping malls. Most of the commercial buildings on the street have not yet been developed as part of the current gentrification of the area. Here entrepreneurs from Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa have set up shops, restaurants and ad hoc information centres (often established on short-term lease agreements). For *Civic life: Moore Street*, desperate optimists have worked with Arambe, Dublin's first African theatre group. In his essay, *Light on the city: The cinema of desperate optimists*, Ben Slater explains: "Their shift toward the moving image has been inflected by their theatre-making. Not only the 'live art' that they developed in the UK, but also their earlier experiences in Dublin's community theatre. It's this background that radically distinguishes them from other visual artist-cum-film-makers that have emerged in the last decade." Their recent commission, *Who killed Brown Owl?* is a forerunner to their new film for São Paulo, and further films using this technique will follow. *Civic life: Moore Street* will run at selected venues in São Paulo during the Bienal.

Ireland's participation in the 26th São Paulo Bienal has developed from a wish to recognise commonality, embrace contingency and welcome all the possibilities that this can offer. I would look forward to further returns by the artists or their work to São Paulo and future exchanges with contemporaries internationally after the 26th Bienal has come to its close.

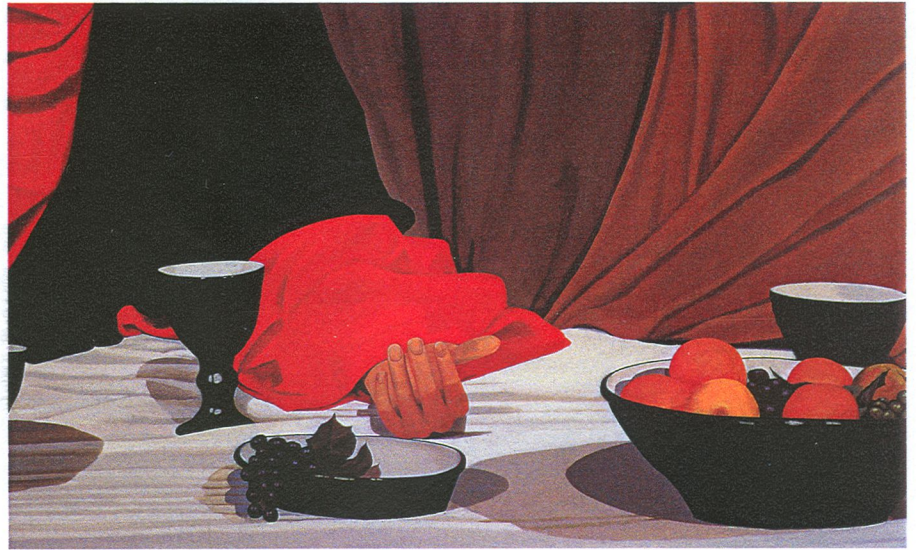
VALERIE CONNOR, IRISH COMMISSIONER FOR THE 26TH SÃO PAULO BIENAL, WAS ALSO COMMISSIONER FOR IRELAND'S PARTICIPATION AT THE 50TH VENICE BIENNALE. AN ARTIST, SHE FREQUENTLY WRITES ON CONTEMPORARY ART, IS A CORRESPONDING EDITOR FOR CONTEMPORARY MAGAZINE AND HAS EDITED SEVERAL ARTISTS' BOOKS. SINCE WORKING AS THE VISUAL ARTS DIRECTOR AT PROJECT ARTS CENTRE, DUBLIN SHE HAS UNDERTAKEN VARIOUS PROJECTS AND COMMISSIONS AS A FREELANCE CURATOR. SHE LIVES IN DUBLIN.





**TUESDAY**  
oil on canvas, 118 x 122,  
1998 private collection

Photography: Liam O'Callaghan



**THE SECRET**  
oil on mdf, 70 x 105,  
2000 private collection

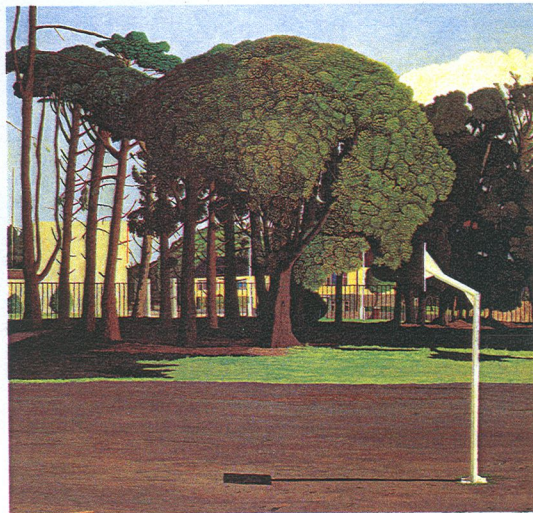
Photography: Michael Boran

continuum and prompts anticipation of the unfolding of the narrative. The potential distortion of reality in film-making is reflected in the abstract qualities of the image, emphasised by the deliberate flattening of perspective. *Irrevocable* depicts what is probably the single most common symbol of television and movie narrative – the gun. This perspectival image shows the device lying on its side, more an exhibit than a tool of destruction in reality or fiction, but the title indicates its capacity to coerce, damage or destroy.

Many of Loughman's works depict environments which are not normally presented as subjects in their own right (as a landscape might be, for example). These are at once evocative, but devoid, of human presence. They tend to have, therefore, a theatrical quality, functioning like empty stage sets, and conveying a sense of expectation. The viewer is invited to participate, to fill the void with their own presences and imaginings. As cinematic images, *Moriarty* and *Remember?* both fall into this category. By setting up physical barriers, *Untitled* and *Finite* place the viewer in the role of audience, awaiting the performance that never happens.

The act of representation involves the interjection of a layer between the observer and the object. However, Loughman's defining interest in the levels of mediation extends to all manner of contrived displays: waxworks museums, aquariums, stage/theatre, television and cinema, zoos, golf courses and public gardens. Their common function is to select, re-present, and interpret fragments of the external world with some coherence. Performance and display operate similarly – actively or passively participating in a process described by Preziosi:





As the theatre's existence ironizes imagined divisions of behaviour into the natural and the artificial, so the museum, by marking the world into the museological and the extramuseological [i.e. that which is not in a museum], renders paradoxical distinctions between original and copy, reality and fiction, presentation and representation, while at the same time keeping such dualities in play.<sup>2</sup>

UNTITLED  
oil on mdf, 62 x 122,  
2000 private collection

Photography: Michael Boran

AN ETERNITY  
oil on canvas, 118 x 122,  
1998 private collection

Photography: Liam O'Callaghan

Theatricality and drama are not confined to fictional narrative; they are tools also of public address. The entire space of *Witness* comprises a long red curtain, suggestive of the potential for concealment and revelation inferred also in the title. The microphone provides the medium of communication, a means of amplification, literal and metaphorical. Theatre is associated with the imaginative interpretation of reality, a role which is paralleled in *Outer space*, a fictional but credible constellation. It is presented in a form which suggests the eye of the telescope or the cosmic map, two channels to access and communicate scientific fact. Fact may be the foundation of reality – but new knowledge undermines that of previous assumptions, so the perception of scientific 'reality' is constantly shifting. Like the photographic image which similarly has the capacity to absorb and display objectively, facts are passive and their selective inclusion/exclusion distorts and misleads. The mirror/reflection is also associated with perceptions of the real. *Dreamtime* – a humorous play on the antipodean world – was prompted by a display at Expo 2000 in Hannover, involving the perfect reflection, in a pool, an artificial forest/garden that was suspended upside down from the ceiling. What was perceived in the pool appeared the right way up; in a reversal of logic, the reflection had the visual rationalism of 'reality' that was denied to the actuality.

The filters through which Loughman observes/presents the world include the telescope and camera lens, and the sheets of glass which protect museum and zoological displays. Glass is not easily detected by the naked eye whose focus is the object beyond, and its apprehension in the paintings depends on context and material clues to indicate its presence – the reflected light on its surface, discernible in *Friend*, or the structural stanchion of the underwater section of the polar bear enclosure in *Untitled*. *Sensation* is inhibited by such barriers, however translucent, while the camera lens translates its subject into a mediated image. In *Finite*, the barrier is a social one, physically flimsy but psychologically robust, represented by the wire-netting fence through which the voyeuristic gaze observes a deep but limited space. It is Poussinesque in its synthetic perfection; a seductive paradise unsullied by the familiarity of access, the reality of experience.

Perception of reality is filtered through the distorting effects of nostalgia and memory both of which are evoked in *Remember?* Films, like songs, associated with one's past, carry with them the baggage of individual histories and recollections, interjecting more layers and departing even further from the potential for objectivity.

The physical filters/barriers (lens, glass, mirror, fence) inferred in the paintings symbolise the cultures of entertainment and knowledge that they serve; their function – to project, direct, reflect and deflect – mirrors the role of the images themselves. Stephen Loughman's realist 'style' is less a mechanism for literal depiction than one of the devices in a complex iconography of perception.

- <sup>1</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, Book X, 601b. He gives examples of the divine creation in nature, which is copied by the carpenter, whose product, in turn, is painted by the artist.
- <sup>2</sup> Donald Preziosi, "Collecting/Museums" (quotation on pp.409-10), in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, *Critical Terms for Art History*, University of Chicago Press; Chicago and London, 2003, pp.407-18.

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