

Eye for detail

Representational art doesn't have to be restricted or conservative, writes Aidan Dunne, as he visits a group exhibition that undercuts our tendency to take the ordinary for granted

There is still a lingering notion that abstract art is modern and progressive, while representational art is conservative and hidebound. In Ireland, that idea extends back to the rhetorical contrast between the Irish Exhibition of Living Art and the Royal Hibernian Academy. Yet it is undeniably true that representational art — and specifically painting — has proved capable time and again of reinventing itself.

See It As It Is, a group exhibition curated by Carlene Farrell, which opens today at Dracocht in the Blanchardstown Centre, marshaes a disparate group of younger, mostly Irish representational artists whose work is today sharply observed, and unmistakably contemporary.

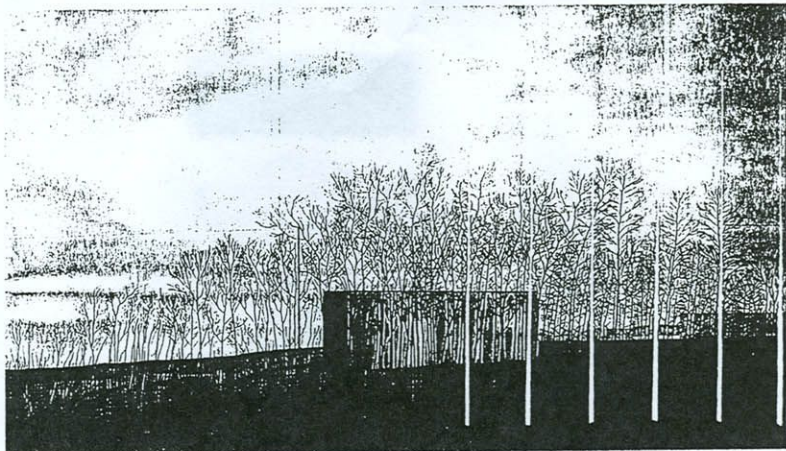
Throughout the 1990s it was clear that an emerging generation of artists in Ireland was exploring and renewing aspects of realism. Painters such as Mark Joyce, James Hanly, Aidan McDermott, Sarah Duceen and Ollie Connerford were coming through art college at a time when the prevailing trends were towards neo-conceptualism. Installation, photography and new media, unconsciously devised new representational strategies in an old, unfashionable medium: painting. In this they were following the lead of a generation of artists, typified by the Belgian Luc Tuymans. One of the main differences between their work and straight academicism was its awareness of and response to the complexity of the current visual environment. They were not harking nostalgically back to a pre-modernist era.

Farrell's show focuses on what could be loosely described as the second generation of artists working in this area. But, remarkably — and it is truly an interesting sidelight on curatorial practices in Ireland in the 1990s — *See It As It Is* is probably the first exhibition to attempt a systematic, homogeneous view of the work by the included artists.

"All these artists are using traditional means, in a way but they are doing something different with them," says Farrell. "You can make an abstract painting and because it is abstract it immediately seems to be complex and demanding but, because it is so familiar, so simple even, it's quite difficult to take on the language of representation and do something new with it." The show, she says, somewhat she had in mind even prior to her appointment as Visual Arts Officer at Dracocht, partly because, as a painter herself, she made work in a similar vein in the early 1990s.

She was looking for a very precise quality in the work of the artists she invited to exhibit — very precise, but difficult to articulate. "This is a sort of 'simplicity way of expressing it,'" she says, "but you know how you can hear any number of pop songs... They all have basically the same words and are about the same things. But then you hear a song that has all of the same elements but somehow manages to sound different."

While a great deal of the work reflects the voids of contemporary urban existence (which makes the show New Blanchardstown seem particularly appropriate), it is not simply a case of urban versus rural, or new Ireland versus old. Closer to the mark might be a knack for taking something essential — an object, even a hand, and seeing something new in it, or presenting it in a



Byword by Stephen Loughman, courtesy of the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery; the meticulous ordinariness of his suburban scenes suggests something like anxiety

way that undercuts our tendency to take things for granted.

French born Nathalie de Pauquier, for example, paints still life in which everyday work and domestic objects are arranged in slightly incongruous groupings and painted much larger than life-size in a style of simplified, emphatic clarity. There is something attractive about her work, in part, evidently yet ultimately puzzling world.

Stephen Loughman's suburban scenes, conveyed with a studied neutrality, provoke us into looking for some telling detail. Their meticulous ordinariness suggests something like anxiety. A certain coolness, a detachment is, Farrell feels, a common factor in the work. She likes the way the artists take one step back from emotion. That is to say the work can be and usually is emotionally charged, but it is never romantic or sentimental. Typical in this regard, perhaps, are Katy Simpson's oblique, multi-panel paintings. Substantially borrowing their iconography from classical, they come freighted with psychological implication, using objects rather than people to offer us open ended narrative possibilities. Their carefully titled wordplay of details — telephones, beds, trees, doors, chairs, for example — provides complex settings which we can inhabit with our own narratives, picking up hints and clues. But because they are open and suggestive, they continually engage our attention. Colin Martin's

earlier work explored a comparable psychological terrain, within a domestic environment, more explicitly with figures. Recently he has relegated figures to a visually more subordinate role in paintings that use the external world to describe the indi-

vident painter who does pretty much the same thing with the imagery of rural Ireland.

In a slightly different mood, David Quinn is an example of an artist who could almost be assigned to the mainstream traditions of Irish landscape

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rectly internal emotional states and memories. These works recall the familiar compositional devices, the cropping and staging of photographic snapshots.

There is an entire genre of contemporary photography given over to the "objective" documentation of the — mostly — urban landscape, with its incongruities and blankness. Much of the painting here is clearly related to that genre, and much of it consciously employs elements of the language of photography.

Miss O'Kelly's cryptic made paintings delight in recording impersonal, deserted urban spaces and they exploit the tension between the blank, repetitive environment and the hand made image — in Hilda Smith, from Killybegs, is a technically per-

fecting — but not quite. Born in Sligo, he lives in the northwest and his subjects are usually rural. Yet there is something edgy and unsettling about his work, which takes a mundane, recognisable world, a superficially untroubled countryside, as its subject. He likes the hours of the day — or night — when the light is slightly strange, like twilight, when things shed their familiarity.

The other artists in the show are John Crowley, Aidan McDermott and Gavin O'Curry. While the work in *See It As It Is* is, as Farrell observes, in a sense simple because it is so readily accessible, it also makes us look anew at the world we inhabit every day, a world we largely take for granted.

See It As It Is is at Dracocht, Blanchardstown Centre, until November 24th