

Held in an unblinking gaze

FOR the past 25 years, Dermot Seymour has been forging a significant artistic presence with his distinctive brand of painting and imagery. His most recent exhibition, the evocatively titled *Dank*, featured at Galway Arts Centre as part of this year's Cúirt Festival of Literature.

The theme of the festival was land, and it would be hard to think of a more appropriate visual accompaniment than Seymour's unblinking paintings of domesticated livestock, the basic currency of west of Ireland farming existence: a rural bestiary of sheep, ass, goat, pig and cow, the last of these being an animal that has become something of a trademark subject in Seymour's oeuvre.

Seymour's visual vocabulary has evolved considerably since he first exhibited in the late 1970s, when his artistic vision first captured the public imagination. Born in Belfast, his formative years coincided with the worst of the Troubles and, not surprisingly, profoundly informed his iconography. They also informed his outlook, and it was in response to those difficult times full of, in his own words, "absurdity and contradictions" that Seymour began to develop his distinctive view of the world, one in which, as he states, "nothing was ever what it seemed".

Trying to detach himself from this bewildering scenario, Seymour began to look at things through the lens of the absurd and, in his own words "the everyday took on a sense of the surreal, the daft," words that still regularly punctuate his conversation.

Although Seymour's imagery was based firmly in the realm of realism, the results were theatrical, strange and compelling. Often defying both gravity and constraints of scale, Seymour juxtaposed animals and rural settings with flags, faceless soldiery, military helicopters, religious icons, sectarian graffiti and other imagery distilled from the artist's first-hand experience, brought together through the logic of the subconscious. The sense of the absurd generated in these works was also reflected in the titles of

Painter Dermot Seymour is preoccupied with what he calls 'the obvious', yet his coolly realistic portrayals of livestock are also imbued with his sense of the absurd, writes Ian Wieczorek

the paintings, long, quirky and often poetic statements that distilled and augmented the wry irony of Seymour's vision.

While works from that time have a distinctly Northern flavour, and are sometimes read as political in nature, Seymour denies any political intention.

"I didn't deliberately try to illustrate any kind of political ideology or political whatever. It was just growing up in a very crazy kind of a place where the most banal subject or object had a very significant meaning," he says.

He was not campaigning for a cause, but rather portraying the incongruities of everyday life in a place where life was anything but ordinary.

After a period living and working in Co Monaghan, Seymour relocated to Co Mayo in 1990, a move he ascribes partly to serendipity and partly to his abiding love of fishing (he had been a regular visitor to the county on fishing trips since he was a child). Initially based in the coastal village of Lecanvey, outside Westport, Seymour moved to his current location in Leitir, a townland situated firmly in the rural hinterland between Westport and Castlebar. His is the last house before the rough track loses itself in the bog. It is a typical west of Ireland environment, with all its functional small-farm trappings. And cows.

With the move, the Northern accent of Seymour's imagery began to mutate into a language more synonymous with his new-found environment. Fertiliser bags and peat briquettes replaced flags and militaria. More significantly, the domestic animals that first appeared in his earlier work began to gain

centre stage, the act of juxtaposition giving way to a more singular focus.

Contexts yielded progressively to unspecified backgrounds of surreal, impossible landscape, vertiginous precipices and theatrical skies. For a while, even these disappeared, to be replaced by pure, simple white.

The currency of Seymour's subject matter is what he terms "the obvious". When asked about his bovine preoccupation, Seymour's explanation is direct: there are eight million cows living in Ireland, they are a ubiquitous feature of the countryside.

"The most common kind of thing you see living in Mayo is the cattle looking at you looking at them," he observes.

For Seymour, they are the obvious, and it is in the obvious that he finds truth.

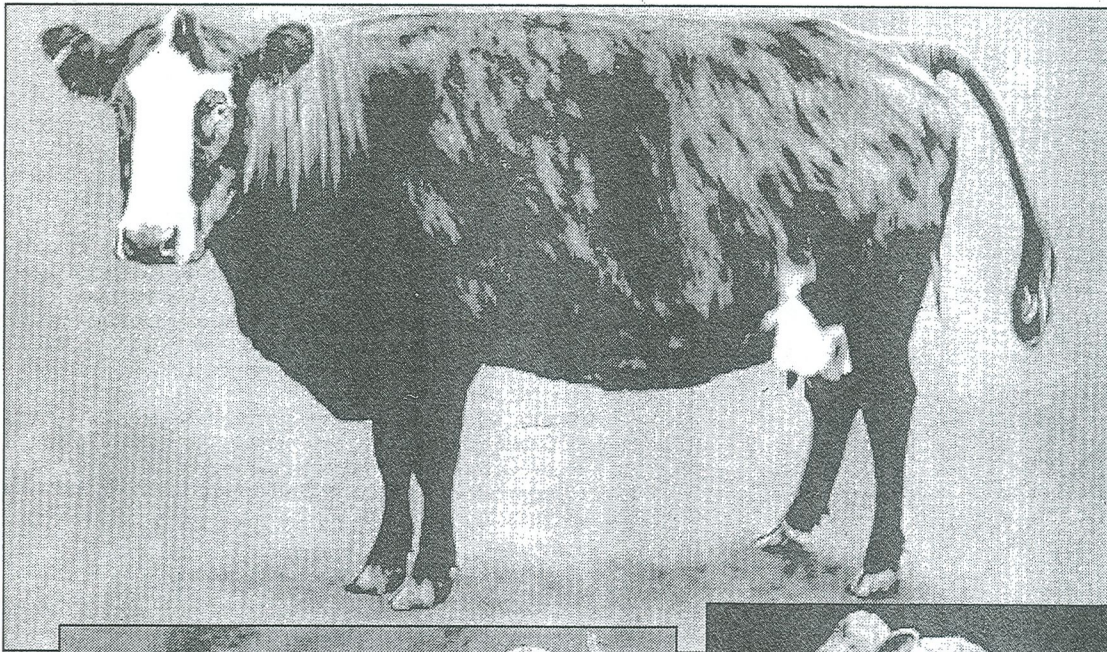
HE HAD been working on a series of single creature paintings for an exhibition at the Orchard Gallery in Derry in 2000, and the idea snowballed into 18 pieces featuring individual cattle under the collective title, *Cacophony of Coughs* – a veritable herd, as he describes them. It was a theme he was to continue in his show, *Consuming Units*, at the Kevin Kavanaugh Gallery in Dublin.

It is hard not to make a connection between these paintings and the tribulations that have beset the beef industry in recent years: the beef tribunal, BSE, foot-and-mouth. However, Seymour insists the timing is coincidental.

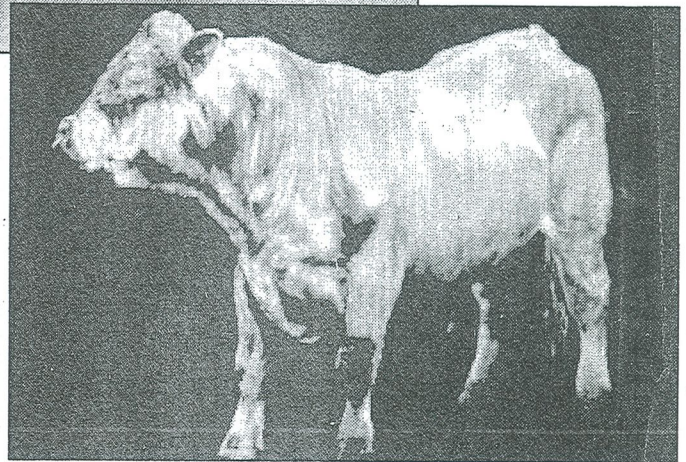
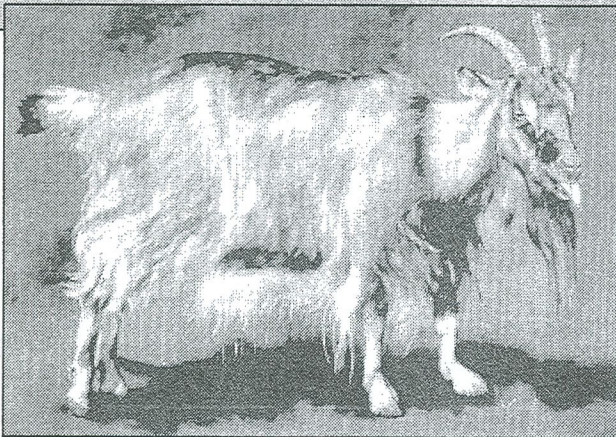
"It's like a zeitgeist: you're creating all these cattle, and next thing you look at the news and there is a serious, heavy-duty cattle crisis happening," he says. "I am certainly not illustrating any current crisis, no more than in my earlier work I would have considered myself illustrating the Troubles in Northern Ireland."

Since his celebrations of bovine monoculture, Seymour's focus has widened to encompass other representatives of the local livestock community, which are caught in the same deliberate, unblinking gaze. In his painstakingly accurate portrayals – portraits,





'The most common kind of thing you see living in Mayo is the cattle looking at you looking at them.' Clockwise from left: details from *Shorecow*, *Bogbull* and *Goatscape* by Dermot Seymour (below left)



even – Seymour presents his subjects in all their mud-spattered, ungainly, wide-eyed reality. These subjects match their gaze with our own, stance and stare infused with uncertainty, suspicion and passive accusation, as if aware of the precarious nature of their situation.

These paintings are large-scale, and getting larger, a device Seymour uses to increase the sense of the epic and the iconic in his unlikely subjects.

Even the titles now reflect this single-minded scrutiny, the idiosyncratic Seymour-esque prose of yesteryear supplanted by unadorned, pithy succinctness: *Bogass*, *Mosscow*, *Shorecow* and the like.

"Maybe the bigger you go the less you have to say," Seymour explains with a chuckle.

Another move in this latest work is away

from the simple white backgrounds of his earlier herd shows. The organic colours of the bog have begun to encroach into the backgrounds of the paintings in a non-specific way, an abstract notion rather than a literal one, but one that serves to contextualise.

While there is clearly a sense of Seymour's subtle humour at play in the aggrandisement of the ordinary, the unseen, the unglamorous, to view his work solely in terms of the mock-heroic does it a huge disservice. The imagery he presents is a distillation of his surroundings, an artistic vision that is eloquent and unflinching.

Seymour's paintings are objects of contemplation rather than didacticism, offering meditations on rural existence, environmental issues, even Ireland itself, holding a mirror up to ourselves. He focuses on isolated images

that send ripples into our conscious and subconscious, and allows us to reflect upon them in a setting free of distraction.

Because of the familiarity of the subject matter, Seymour's work has succeeded in engaging beyond the confines of the art milieu, and the degree of its populist accessibility may be gauged at least to some degree from the many book covers that bear reproductions of his paintings. He continues to create enduring imagery that reflects a profound, intuitive understanding of his environment.

In an age of abstraction and interpretation, Seymour's paintings stand out in their meticulously realistic depiction, their apparent visual simplicity and the sheer quality of their execution, while on a more profound level presenting a potent vehicle for his astute, open-ended artistic vision.