

# The Arts

## Animal farm with a twist in the tail

The paintings of Dermot Seymour use strange images of animals to comment on the North's political landscape, writes Aidan Dunne

**D**ermot Seymour's exhibition at the Millennium Court Arts Centre in Portadown is not a fully fledged retrospective, but it does offer a representative selection of his highly distinctive work from 1983 until the present day. The show's title, *The Bloated Inability to Eat Flags* is typical of the kind of titles he devises for his paintings. Its giddy conjunction of wildly disparate references, and its tenuous but definite logic complements the bizarrely fractured world we encounter in his images.

In Seymour's alternative chain of cause and effect, cattle consuming bags of produce washed up on Mayo beaches become bloated and perish, a phenomenon that prompts thoughts of the flag-waving rhetoric of Northern zealots and the vernacular put-down: "You can't eat flags." But, metaphorically speaking, that is what people do, and the results can be fatal.

Latterly, he has become known for his paintings of individual animals, notably cows, bulls, pigs and dogs, exhibited in solo shows at the Kevin Kavanaugh Gallery. Though strangely abstracted and isolated, these subjects reflect his surroundings. The dogs are compact, pugnacious-looking animals encountered around Seymour's home for the last couple of years in Dublin. The cows are the rather forlorn creatures of the agribusiness industry, tagged and exploited, inhabitants of rural Mayo, where he is also based for part of the time. There is a sad, lost

quality to nearly all of the animals he depicts. More obviously, he often uses dead animals as subjects. A tragic, melancholy undertone is always there, but is never indulged or overplayed. His wry, sardonic humour would not allow for that.

He seems to have been drawn to the countryside from early on. Fishing expeditions brought him out of Belfast and over the West of Ireland where, from the late 1980s, he began to spend more and more time, eventually taking the plunge and settling there. He prefigured his move to Mayo at the start of the 1990s with one of his most iconic images, *On the Balcony of a Nation*, in which a cow perches indifferently at the tip of a disintegrating headland. It allows multiple interpretations, seeming, for example, to depict Ireland, and not just Northern Ireland, teetering on the brink, at the edge of Europe, at the edge of the world, its bovine inhabitants blithely unaware of imminent calamity.

He consistently paints cows and other farm animals with exceptional, sustained attention to detail, and surely with considerable affection, but without sentimentality. In their muteness, their helplessness, their apparent watchfulness, they perhaps stand in for humans imprisoned in their inherited identities, their wider histories, victims unaware of their victimhood.

While, in the recent work, dogs and cows float against amorphous coloured

or stark white grounds, bereft of context, earlier on space itself is fragmented and rearranged in the paintings, as though conflicting realities jostle for attention in the inadequate framework of classical one-point perspective. Seymour, born in 1956, grew up in the troubled urban landscape of the Shankill Road. When he began painting it was as a means of coping with difficult circumstances but he didn't so much set out to make sense of what was going on around him as subject it to cold, unflinching examination.

**TO THE SAME** observer, it was as if no one else could quite apprehend the madness around them, the way absurdity had substituted itself for reality. Seymour's paintings of the 1980s reflect a strange world in which the illusion of normality was maintained in the teeth of the evidence against it. The familiar fabric, of old urban neighbourhoods and agricultural countryside, was overwritten with the insignia and messages of sectarian hatred, shadowed by the paraphernalia of militarisation, overt and covert, subject to surveillance and imbued with all manner of hidden menace. Everything was burdened with symbols. Of course, the traditional never was benign because, as the artist has pointed out more than once, there is no history in Northern Ireland, because history is never allowed to become history. Everything, every slight, every victory and defeat, is as recent as yesterday's commemoration.

In the paintings he accentuates the oddness by drafting in unsettling imagery - Russian or Zimbabwean helicopters, headless men, dead turtles - and sharpens the edges of things with his harsh, acidic style of representation, but the strangest thing about his work is that despite his appetite for the exotic it