

Visual Arts/Aidan Dunne

Seymour's sacred COWS

Reviewed:

Dermot Seymour, Paintings, Kevin Kavanagh
Gallery until February 5th

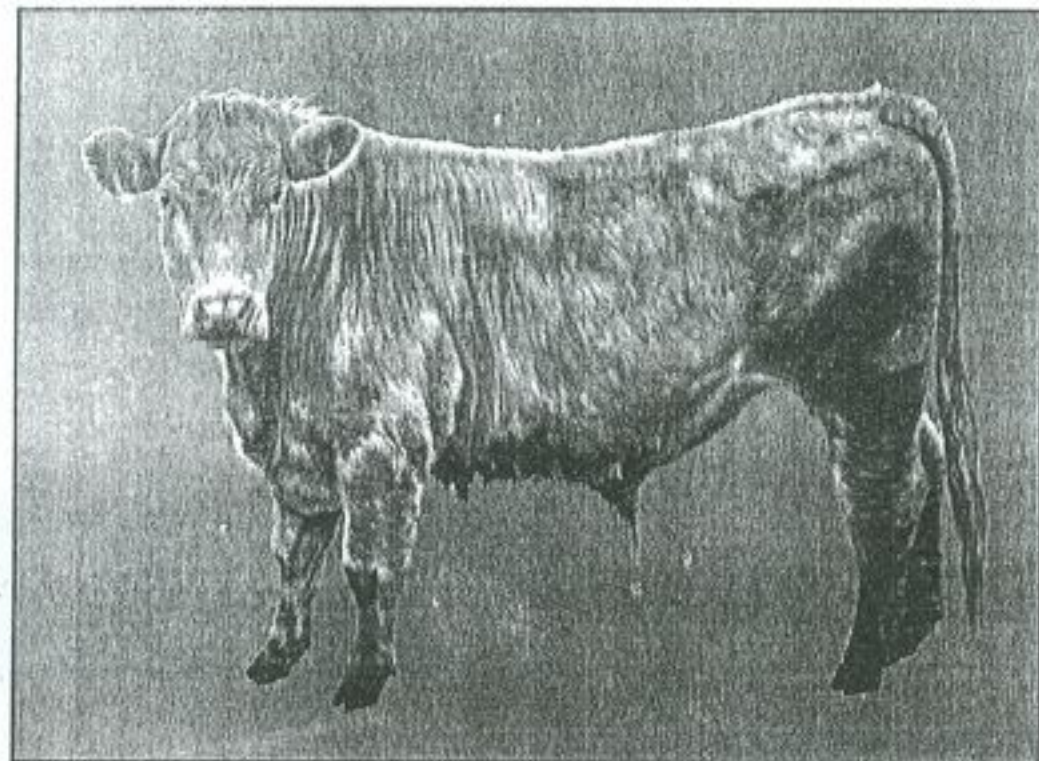
Felim Egan, Paintings, Kerlin Gallery until February 14th

Marc Reilly, Paintings, Paul Kane Gallery until January 29th

WITH an uncanny sense of timing, Dermot Seymour has filled the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery with cows — in painted form — to coincide with the latest crisis in what we euphemistically term the beef industry. His mute beasts, with their shaggy velvet coats and doleful eyes, their stately bulk and heroically grand skeletal architecture, are unidealised, spattered with muck and bedraggled. They are depicted realistically, but also, surely, with a degree of fondness. Seymour may not quite be to the hapless cow what

Stubbs was to the noble horse, but he certainly treats them as formidable individuals.

Each animal is painted against a blank background — rather incongruously floating against space, given its sheer mass. Cows have been presences in his work more or less from the start, from his first pictorial attempts to capture the surrealism of the everyday in Northern Ireland, where cows triggered booby traps and were blown to smithereens, or grazed in landscapes under helicopter surveillance. When he moved to Mayo, cows were again all around him.



Dermot Seymour's *Consumed Unit of Silver*. He paints 'messy, mucky reminders of an Ireland that many people would rather pretend didn't exist'

They were all around, but also curiously invisible, just an inconvenient segment of the beef industry taken for granted by the majority of the populace until the furore over BSE. Again displaying a sort of occult sympathy for the animals, before that particular crisis erupted Seymour presciently positioned a bull at the edge of a crumbling precipice, teetering above the waters of the Atlantic as the ocean fritters away at the western coastline.

Perhaps it symbolised Ireland itself, at the edge of Europe, characterised by bovine complacency or bullish confidence. And then a few years ago he, or rather the bulls and the cows, took the plunge out into empty space and didn't fall. They just stayed there, oddly abstracted but very concrete presences.

These are the images we encounter in his current exhibition. If the animals in some sense represent Ireland, then perhaps we

are supposed to infer that the country, or rather the people, have become detached from their roots. Or that the old, agricultural Ireland has been cast adrift. But then, Seymour doesn't usually work in terms of prescriptive symbolism. He has remarked in the past that real life provides him with more than enough strangeness to make his paintings. Still, those animals — stubborn and inscrutable — do seem strangely admonitory, and they

are a messy, mucky reminder of an image of Ireland that many people would rather pretend didn't exist — but it does, still. Every judge should have one.

There is a degree of correspondence between Felim Egan's work, at the Kerlin, and Marc Reilly's installation of paintings at the Paul Kane Gallery. Egan, an accomplished painter of poised, elegant abstracts, uses a pared-down, formal vocabulary. Usually a few diminutive geometric motifs, such as squares and circles, informally delineated, are set like windows in sand-textured grounds of tasteful, muted colour. The paintings are held in precarious balance, saved from blandness by variable degrees of austerity and playfulness.

Over the years, Egan has been quite agreeable to signalling his responsiveness to elements of landscape, including rivers and, notably, the expanse of shore and sky at Sandymount in Dublin, where he lives. His current show ups the ante slightly in this regard, and incorporates fairly specific references to just that kind of sand, sea and sky environment. Furthermore, his normally calm, even grounds have mutated into relatively agitated surfaces, rendered in broad textural swathes, in colours suggestive of stormy seas or skies. Yet, while this level of gesture and agitation is unusual for him, and could indicate a radical shift, it is all still poised and contained. Unruly nature is held in check by an innately orderly mind.

Though it consists of a number of individual works, Reilly's show is, as the gallery description of it suggests, best described as an installation rather than an exhibition in the conventional sense: