

Familiar territory and spatial relations

Reviewed
Sean Shanahan, paintings, Kerlin Gallery until Mar 19 (01-8709093)
Spatial Notions, Dermot Seymour, Kevin Kavanagh Gallery until Mar 19 (01-8740064)
Drawings 2005, Hillsboro Fine Art until Mar 11 (01-6777905)



Visual Arts Aidan Dunne

Sean Shanahan's exhibition *Vidar* at the Hugh Lane Gallery a couple of years back still stands as a benchmark. It was a show that tended to polarise opinion. A group of monochrome paintings occupied the upper floor galleries in Charlemont House. Shanahan had clearly given careful consideration to every aspect of the work and its context. The proportions of the MDF supports, the pitch, weight and density of each colour, the relationship of paintings to the architectural setting: all were perfectly calculated.

Yet effective as the show was as an aesthetic ensemble piece, it was much more. Each painting had a strong individual character. Shanahan's work has a tendency to both seduce and challenge the gaze.

He uses a number of different colours, but they seem to share a certain ambiguous quality, a sense of being poised between flat surface and apparent depth. In a way, the most striking thing about *Vidar* was its lack of compromise. It was so resolutely itself, so exactly only what it had to be and nothing more, that it was, at first glance, almost daunting. And for some, that was too much.

A number of visitors could not or would not engage with work

that proceeded so completely on its own terms. Yet chances are that the show lodged in their memories, perhaps as a puzzle, a mystery or a provocation. As it happens, a point of provocation can be the beginning of a shift in perception, though more often than not the viewer tends to be provoked into merely reinforcing their own prejudices.

All of the above holds true for Shanahan's current exhibition at the Kerlin Gallery. As a piece of installation, it is outstanding. The gallery looks terrific though that, of course, is not the main point. Where *Vidar* refers to Conrad, the title of one of the paintings in this show, *Ahab*, refers to Melville. The main departure relates to scale. There are two very large diptychs and one of them, appropriately enough when you think of it, is *Ahab*. It's a good title in ways apart from scale, given that *Ahab* is in obsessive pursuit of an elusive quarry, a fair working description of most artists.



The increase in scale focuses attention on the question of surface. Again the colours, even the dark blue of *Crow*, have a certain give. They are demonstrably flat surfaces, they even bear the marks of their making in the form of fine vertical ridges created by the application of paint, yet they yield to the eye. Shanahan favours door-shaped vertical formats. There are some squarish proportions here as well, and *TV*, the title of two of the squarish pieces, seems to hint at the play on surface and depth.

With the big paintings, we are in a slightly different area in the way we must engage with them physically, moving across their space. Their central seams, the gaps between their constituent panels, are narrow but definite. Oddly enough, this interruption doesn't dispel the spatial ambiguity, a great deal of which depends on Shanahan's fine-tuned feeling for colour.

He has become expert with variations on an intense but muted pinkish red, for example. It is a

Minister for Space, oil on canvas, by Dermot Seymour

strong colour but it never seems strident and it doesn't repel the eye.

There is a soothing chalkiness to it that draws one in — so long, that is, as you are prepared to follow your vision and leave aside your prejudices about monochrome abstraction. It's a show that more than repays a little effort on the part of the viewer.

We know **Dermot Seymour** for his hard-edged, magic realist accounts of Northern Ireland during *The Troubles*, and for his sympathetic portraits of livestock in the west of Ireland — hapless pawns of giant agribusiness at the edge of the edge of Europe.

In fact animals have always been centre-stage, mute, put-upon and helpless. So much so that they may well stand in for the human subject caught in the maw of history. In his new exhibition at the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, *Spatial Notions*, he develops these preoccupations with animals, history and geography or, as it could be put, animals, place and space.

Unusually, the show incorporates portraits of three humans, all politicians who have or have had roles in relation to Northern Ireland.

Besides David Irvine, there are close-up views of Ian Paisley and the man he once fairly nastily insulted, Brian Cowen, during the latter's time as Minister for Foreign Affairs. Their varied concern for territory is given a new spin by Seymour's apparent transposition of Ireland's geography to outer space. Hence an affectionate portrait of one of the relatively few in-

habitants of planet Earth to have been there, the *Limerick Space Monkey*.

All of these are juxtaposed with other animal portraits — ran, cow, goose — and a view of a slab of dark, boggy ground *Earth Field*. Besides relishing the detail in painstakingly close-up, Seymour is presumably making a point about proportion, and the way we do not, on the whole, keep things in proportion.

As always, his animals are as richly characterised as humans in conventional portraits. While his style of hard realism is completely ungratifying, he has become polished and adept at it, and in many respects this is one of his most accomplished and coherent shows to date.

Hillsboro Fine Art's current show of drawing contains some outstanding works. The art-buying public is traditionally resistant to drawing. They want something solid, like oil on canvas. A visit to this show may go some way towards convincing them.

Works by David Crono, Tjibbe Hooghiemstra, Christopher Le Brun, Sibylle Ungers, Charles Cullen and the late Karl Weschke, among others, reveal something of the remarkable range of possibility contained within that simple word drawing. Weschke's drawings are beautiful exemplars of a fast, incisive line employed in the business of defining the essence of a form.

Totally different in temperament, Hooghiemstra's slow meditations allow us access to a dreamy, imaginative world.