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Dermot Seymour 'Fish, Flesh and Fowl' Golden Thread Gallery 15 December – 4 February 2012

'Fish, Flesh and Fowl' at the Golden Thread Gallery in Belfast is a retrospective of Dermot Seymour's painting, spanning four decades. The show is large, with over 50 paintings and to see his work en masse in this way, it is hard not to be impressed by his singular, unchanging approach to the subject matter: the politics and culture of Ireland.

The politics of Northern Ireland has shaped much of the identity of the arts scene there since the 1980s, and Seymour has managed to carve out a particular niche within that canon. His detached, starkly realist style of painting, populated with animals and headless figures tottering precariously on precipices, sit somewhat uneasily with Northern Irish political artwork. The curator, Jim Smyth, remarks in the accompanying catalogue:

"In the sense that Seymour considers painting to be a means to an end, a way of transforming ideas into tangible form, he stands outside the mainstream tradition".¹

Seymour himself sees his work as closer to the tradition of magic realism, which would seem a much fairer assessment than the largely conflicting critical responses to his work, which have situated him within the realms of photorealism, surrealism and even postmodernism. Echoes of Frida Kahlo's straightforward representational approach to imagery is evident in much of Seymour's work. Yet, where her work focuses on the deeply personal, Seymour's cool detached eye never seems to turn towards the self. His personal vision charts the world around him, the politics and landscape of Northern Ireland in the 1980s and the 1990s examined with unflinching rigour.

For this exhibition, the curator has examined what he considers the four distinct phases in the development of Seymour's work. The first phase is the early works that explore 'the troubles' and the conflicting identity of Northern Ireland, as seen through the eyes of a young man from the working class, loyalist Shankhill Road community. The second phase – from the mid 1980s to the early 1990s – explores the political landscape of Northern Ireland, which perhaps to an outsider, is a bewildering and densely tangled affair. As Smyth says

"It is the juxtaposition of symbolic images, historical references a rag bag of illusions, an upended cabinet of curiosities that draw the confused viewer into these paintings".²

One particular painting from this era, *View from a helicopter with sophisticated surveillance equipment*, is a particular comment on the British military presence in Northern Ireland. The image is split between a close-up of a woman's legs and an aerial view of fields. This impossible dual perspective could be read as a metaphor for the convoluted politics of Northern Ireland. The third phase of Seymour's work sees his move from Belfast to the rural west of Ireland. Here the paintings explore wider issues of man's inhumanity to man with themes of war and politics set in a wider context, albeit through twilight zones populated with animal and bird metaphors and allusions. His more recent phase, in particular the 'Eyed' series, focuses on portraiture. Through it, he has explored the corruption and excesses of Irish

1 Jim Smyth Dermot Seymour, 'Fish, Flesh and Fowl': A Retrospective, 2011, 11
2 Ibid. 12

3 Seamus Heaney on Dermot Seymour 2011
4 Ibid.

society and politics under the 'celtic tiger'. Portraits from politics and media, such as those of Brian Cowen and Irish footballer Roy Keane, sit happily beside all manner of beasts and fowl. In one particular painting, from the series 'Hiberno God', a baboon stares wistfully out of the frame, not at us the viewer but beyond, perhaps at the world at large or his place within it. His eyes glint with an uncanny humanity that is absent from many of the human faces.

The exhibition is collated from both public and private collections with contributions in the catalogue from Ireland's leading literary figures, Seamus Heaney and Dermot Healy. The show will travel widely in Ireland and also to the Centre Culturel Irlandais in Paris.

Many critics have commented on the literary nature of Seymour's work and his work has graced the covers of literary anthologies. But perhaps it is best to let the pictures be pictures and express something in that way, rather than be reduced to language. Seamus Heaney says of the work, "What I admire about Seymour is that he has no obvious design upon me but leaves me alone with things that are entirely persuasive in their own right"³

One of the more recent paintings, *Hiberno Head*, expresses something of what Heaney describes. A headless figure presents a fish to us – the viewers – from a twilight landscape.

The image is in one way powerfully literal, but also expresses something nameless, something beyond words. Heaney writes:

"His [Seymour's] technique in the immediate painterly sense seems to me unquestionable, but he has a technique in the more important sense that the poet Patick Kavanagh once assigned to it, when he defined it as 'a method for getting at life'. And the fact of the matter is that getting at life is extremely difficult"⁴

Alison Pilkington