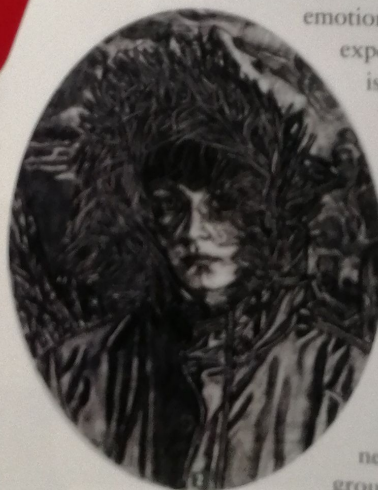


Wry existentialist

Gary Coyle's work is often unfairly regarded as Gothic in both concept and tone, writes **Gerry Walker**



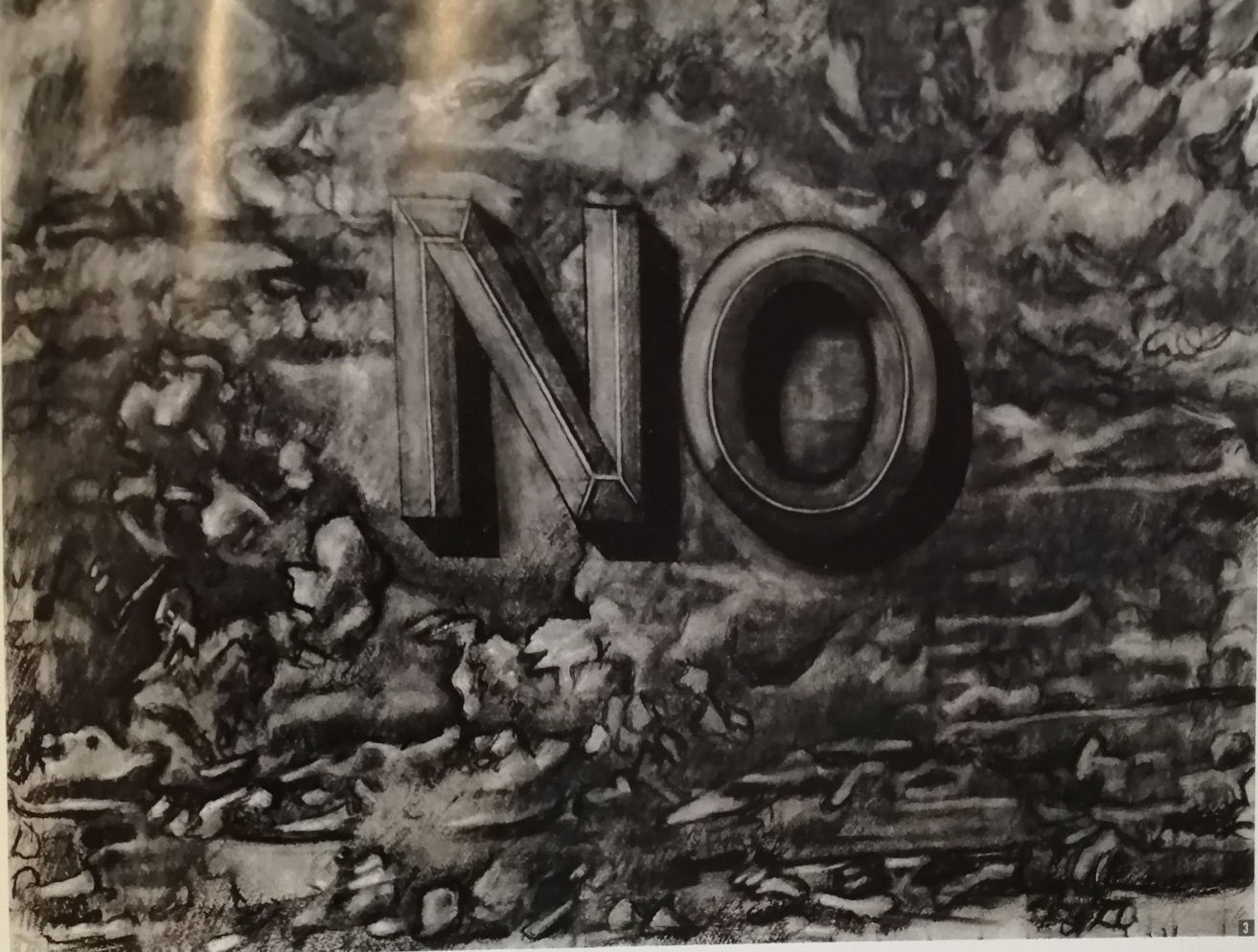
Two years ago, Dublin artist Gary Coyle mounted a personally significant exhibition at the Project Arts Centre in which he pondered the implications of loss of artistic direction in a literal and metaphorical sense. He works a lot in photography and performance, and is also a highly skilled draughtsman. He has an abiding interest in the familiarity of locality and the inheritance of a sense of place and this, in what at times appears as borderline obsession, is key to an understanding of his work.

Environments have a profound impact on our inner and outer selves. They are not static phenomena. They change and evolve. They demand constant surveillance. They have to be cultivated in order to provide sustenance and reassurance. They are a matter of life and death if misread. These are essential keynotes in the conceptual mainstream of his work and he tends to focus on documenting the visual and emotional impact of his surroundings in considerable detail.

His drawing imagery is often dark and deeply expressionistic. He is also on record as saying that he has a lingering fascination with death (mainly his own). He envisages the myriad ways in which he could die, presenting a compendium of possibilities from being knocked off his bike to being mugged and shot. Consequently, his oeuvre is often unfairly regarded as Gothic in both concept and tone. This is something of a misnomer and probably lazily references a superficial Victorian Gothic revival romanticism borrowed from a mainly literary genre.

To minimise the consequences of possible cultural disorientation, his strategy is to re-engage with his familiar environment and re-establish a definable location to determine a point from which to navigate towards an essential stability. To this end, history comes to his aid. Appropriately, he employs the figurative device of the *flâneur* (a 19th-century literary creation courtesy of French poet Charles Baudelaire and cultural critic Walter Benjamin). In this *flâneur* role, the artist is cast as a persona whose function is to observe and record places and emotions from a position as detached or engaged as the experience and/or situation dictates. Thus the choice is as wide as becoming, in Baudelaire's phrase, 'a botanist of the sidewalk' or a detached peripatetic stroller. The immediate Irish cultural reference would be James Joyce who, having documented Bloom's day of perambulation around Dublin, gave full expression to this aesthetic in his novel *Ulysses*.

The *flâneur* mantle was taken up by the Situationist International movement in Europe in the mid-1950s and, in particular, by a sub-group that became known as Psychogeography, one of whose main proponents was the Marxist theorist Guy Debord. This group stressed both politically and aesthetically the



1 GARY COYLE
AFTER WATTEAU
SELF-PORTRAIT 2015
charcoal on paper
130 x 100cm

2 *DRAWING OF A BOY*
2019 charcoal on
paper 130 x 100cm

3 *CREDO* 2019
charcoal on paper 80
x 100cm

4 *I'LL BE YOUR
MIRROR* 2016
charcoal on paper
130 x 190cm

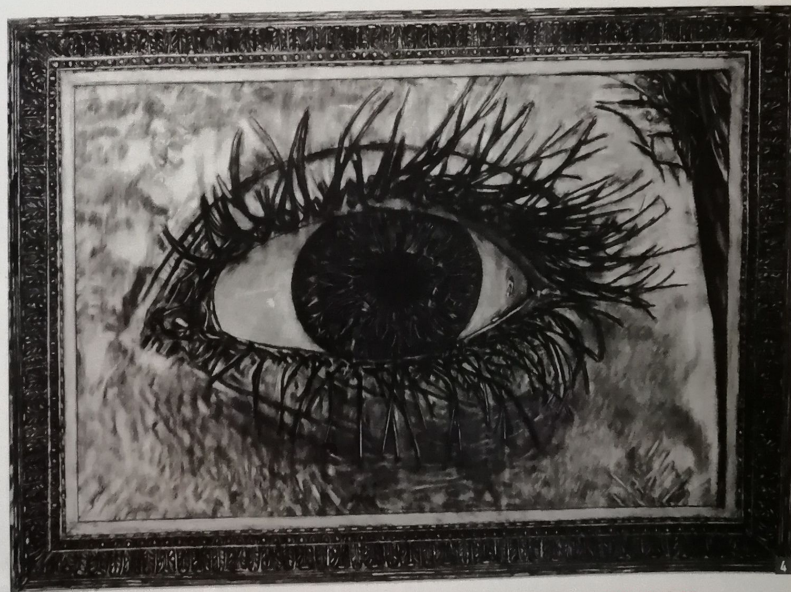
need to examine the effects of environment on the behaviours and emotions of individuals. These are Coyle's antecedents. This is the historical and cultural framework within which his themes may best be appreciated.

For him, drawing is a process of internal dialogue and his preferred medium is charcoal. His efforts are not designed to express immediacy. His methodology is laborious and calculated. He draws by subtracting rather than adding. He draws an image and then rubs it out up to possibly twenty or thirty times. Gradually an image begins to form that retains traces of each previous image. Over time the final image emerges and is selected. He recognises that this is a risky process, no matter how well the medium is suited, and the end result is often serendipitous and accidental.

However, as a working method it is in synch with his overall approach to assimilating experience and knowledge in his external environment: the studied observation, the decision making, the annotation, the final summation and the openness to interpretation of the concept are linked and allow both process and product to harmonise.

Coyle is sometimes viewed as having a dark world view that feeds inexorably into his work. Undoubtedly existential concerns are very much to the fore of his thinking, but he is not dark in a general northern European sense. There is no overarching sense of angst or ennui lurking in the dark recesses of his imagery – no Nordic despair or Germanic hard-edge fatalism. Neither is there any overt Gallic *longueur* in evidence. He is sometimes prone to the occasional verbal pun. He once entitled a drawing *Mal du Fleur* as an obvious inverted reference to Beaudelaire's publication.

His work generally possesses a wry laconic humour, which is in many ways reminiscent of Samuel Beckett. This



COYLE EMPLOYS THE FIGURATIVE DEVICE OF THE FLÂNEUR... WHOSE FUNCTION IS TO OBSERVE AND RECORD PLACES AND EMOTIONS

is particularly evidenced in his essay on his own death. He maintains that he derives comfort from thinking about it, is not afraid of it and could, on occasion, possibly find it a welcome relief. This is all intoned humorously and is entirely consistent with Beckett's view that existential humour provides people with the means to pass the time, alleviate boredom and afford some relief from awareness of the human condition. We're on Earth. There's no cure for that. Enough said. ■

Gary Coyle, Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, 5-28 March.

Gerry Walker is a freelance writer and critic.