

Gary Coyle / Paul McKinley / Jim Savage Best three draw

"Drawing is deception," wrote Escher, and this is delightfully true of this exhibition. Traipsing up the spiral staircase to the upper gallery at Draíocht, Gary Coyle's charcoal on paper large-scale work, *Forest path*, is hung half way up, half way down the stairs. It is a hauntingly intense and disturbing piece, but due to its position, quite difficult to engage with. Unless you stop in the centre of the stairs, you can not view it full on and be seduced into its dark, eerily composed narrative, with two towering trees to the left and right pulling the viewer into a densely overgrown forest, reminiscent of a Hansel and Gretel nightmare with hidden and buried foliage, where only glimpses of light break the heavily etched charcoal lines. Coyle is a master of suspense, his drawings painterly in their tonal diffusion of thickly worked lines, rubbed for atmosphere, which lead us back through the darkened woods into a nightmarish underworld of our own imaginings. At the bottom of the picture plane is an obscured form that may be a corpse or may be a bundle of old clothes. Coyle leaves it for us to decide if this is an innocent thick woodland, or something more sinister. When looking down-on it from the upper gallery it loses its powerful impact, yet gives the illusion that we could sweep down into the forest like owls hunting at night.



In *Study for Dalkey pastoral (the enchanted castle)*, once again the artist's knowledge of past representations of landscape comes to mind, for surely the title is tongue in cheek. This work does not seem like an idealised landscape in the Claude tradition, but quite the opposite. This is a twenty-first century take on deconstructing the idea of pastoral. This 'ideal' landscape has a bleakness and heaviness expressed through dark rapid strokes intensified in the foreground as though we are literally digging down into a quarry. The forms are dense and weighty, the 'enchanted castle' in the distance depicted like a modernist factory building, placed in a rocky lunar-like landscape which has been literally bombarded by the artist's touch. Or Ireland blasted by the developer's bulldozers?

From his choice of title, *Study for Arcadia*, Coyle is certainly taking on the landscape traditions of the past in his own terms. One thinks of the Arcadian landscapes so beloved of Titian *et al* and the glorious depiction of a heightened natural environment of serene tranquillity. Here Coyle is particularly coy and humorous. For his depiction of Arcadia, is not a rolling landscape, but a formal, tightly compacted, well ordered garden, that could be a patio with cropped trees confined to pots, toy trees, topiary trees, clipped and trimmed. Man-made, cultivated, ordered. The scale is small and the composition is tight. We are swept into this claustrophobic landscape by a clever artistic devise on the left hand side, energetic whooshing lines, as though time is running out, the urgency contradicting the orderliness of the rest of the piece. By walloping off the treetops to fit in the dimensions of the paper the artist has created a cramped, compressed composition that feels truly suffocating.

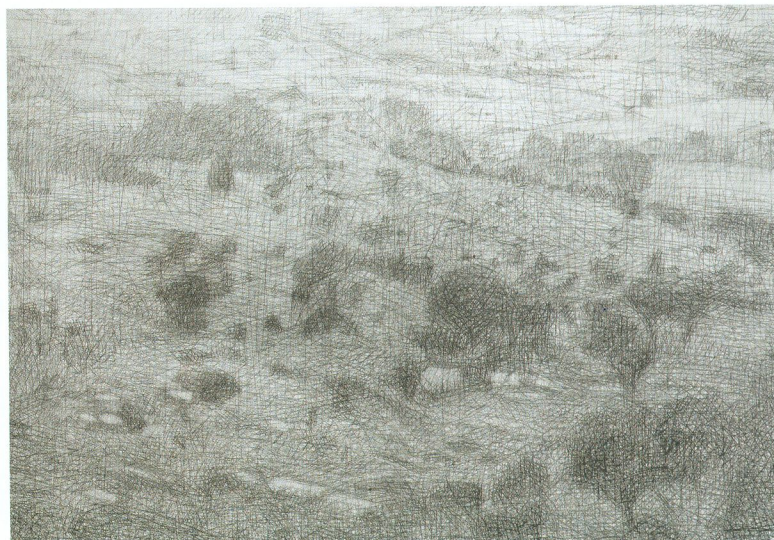
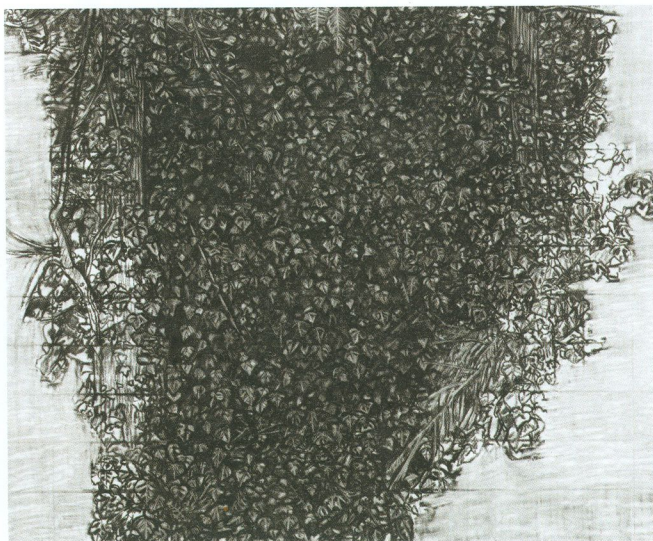
The last work from this artist, *Porn foliage*, an earlier work, is another clever and witty composition. On a crudely drawn grid, or wall, suggesting a perspective, which is then abandoned, the artist has imposed an abundance of broodingly drawn ivy-like leaves. This foliage resembles the shape of fig leaves used to camouflage genitals on nudes at particular times in history when the naked body was considered immodest or inappropriate to tastes or doctrines of the age. In Coyle's seemingly innocent work, the title suggests there is something more titillating going on underneath or submerged in the foliage, and entwined in the shapes are some phallic and vulvae forms. Or is the artist playing optical tricks with our suggestible minds? Whatever, the wicked sense of humour and dexterously drawn forms hold the attention and engage the mind. All in all there is a sense of the loss of idealised innocence in these works, as culture tries to control nature in a myriad of ways, be it cultivating gardens, building paths and artefacts or controlling our natural desires.

Though Coyle works in other mediums, to my mind drawing is his forte. He seems to enjoy the depiction of shapes and forms onto the paper surface, and the markings are tactile and expressive, creating atmospheric compositions that play on *chiaroscuro* in a wonderfully contemporary fashion.

Róisín Hughes, aged eight, wrote in the visitors' book, "From A Distance Is Nice," which is an honest assessment of the work of Jim Savage. Unlike the heavy dark charcoal lines in Coyle's work, Savage uses pencil lines to work up his massive linear pieces, which are his visual interpretations of some of the most beautiful and as yet unspoilt landscapes in Ireland; the Burren and West Cork.

In *Burren 2* and *Inlet, West Cork*, the effect of contrasting forms cannot be seen unless you stand back from the work. They are possessed with a magical transformation due to optical effects. Close up the pencil hatching, lines and marks seem random, haphazard, uninteresting as they are evenly applied with apparently no sense of depth or volumes or contours unlike conventional drawing practice. However, when you step back, it is as if a veil has been lifted from the work and it is transformed into an incredibly convincing landscape. You can sense the very movement of the landscape, gently rolling, modulating, yet desolate and isolated. As a viewer you feel part of this landscape, as if you have encountered the drawing's mystery for the first time and thus the landscape for the first time. In *Inlet, West Cork*, the mood is more emotive, there are more shades and depths and a fleeting change in the atmospheric depiction of changing light. The artist has focused on the left of the work and intelligently evoked an illusion that the viewer is standing on a hill looking down onto the landscape from above. This is achieved in a particularly clever play on lines and perspective and quite uncanny in the manner that a three-dimensional quality can be achieved only when we move further away from the surface. Interestingly, his last piece, *Rough ground*, appears to be less preoccupied with optical illusion and spatial recessions, in that it is flatter and more difficult to recognise as a specific landscape. Although the surface is worked in great detail, similar to the other two pieces, the overall effect is less obvious and more difficult to grasp.

Paul McKinley makes finely tuned drawings with pen on watercolour paper. This series *Park series drawing* has been on exhibition before and perhaps it would work better on its own, as beside the other two artists it gives a laboured impression, and was less interesting to this viewer, though these works are very beautiful. The composition is classical and conventional with a zigzagging quality leading the pictorial gaze inwards. Whilst technically very proficient and pleasing to the eye, from a purely visual interpretation they did not go beyond a pleasant depiction of trees reflecting onto water, bathed with a calm quality, despite the odd cut down tree trunk demonstrating an eminent destruction and whilst exquisitely executed, did not convey the ideas which the artist has suggested in his artist's statement. For the other artists my interpretation came from the work itself, but here I could find nothing in the work except quiet lovely depictions of an ideal landscape on a small scale, tenderly worked in pen and enjoyable for that. Paul McKinley's statement that the complexity of cultural memory – the idea that landscape is a product of culture before it registers as nature – is more apparent in words than it was visually. However, that may just be deception at work.



(previous page)
Paul McKinley
Park series drawing no. 2
2005
pen on watercolour paper
40 x 40cm
courtesy Atelier David Smith/
Drafocht

(below left)
Gary Coyle
Porn foliage, 2004
85 x 102cm
charcoal on paper
courtesy Drafocht

(right)
Jim Savage
Rough ground
pencil on paper
82 x 116cm
courtesy Drafocht