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A formidable look at an epic of the every



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VISUAL ARTS

GARY COYLE'S RHA exhibition *At Sea* had its genesis in a notion that occurred to him during the summer of 1999: "The idea of the Forty-Foot swimmer as a performance artist." He was that swimmer and what he had in mind was the way performance artists such as Stuart Brimley and Nigel Rolfe engaged in gruelling, ritualised activities that tested their physical and mental limits. Wasn't the hardy swimmer doing exactly that, Coyle reasoned. Yet there was an element of irony in his equation of swimming with performance art. He wasn't at all convinced by 1970s performance art or of sculptor Richard Long's transformation of his lengthy walks into art. It all seemed a bit "pompous and self-important" to him.

Something happened, though, once he looked at the everyday practice of swimming "through the lens of art... it quickly moved away from parody and took on a life and momentum of its own." He looked at the details

of his daily ritual in a different way and he looked at performance art beyond the framework of pomposity. He liked, for example, the way French artist Sophie Calle took a job as a chambermaid in a Venetian hotel and "spent her time spying on the guests", documenting her subterfuge. He too had a mission in embarking on his daily routine.

The Forty Foot is surrounded by ritual. Coyle documented his daily trips to the bathing place, recording the weather, the quality of the swim and other incidental details, always in red ink. He noted the little mats - like "Islamic prayer rugs" - which swimmers used to mitigate the chill of the freezing concrete. He collected samples of the water, daily, and the train tickets he used. He started buying disposable waterproof cameras to take photographs when he was in the water and that became a routine. Gradually he realised that he was organising his life around the need to swim in the sea every day.

At Sea gathers the various strands of this obsessive project together for their most substantial showing to date. It includes greatly enlarged prints of the photographs, water bottled

in whatever container was to hand, his notebooks and pens, even his tickets. Taken in all, it's an epic work, an epic of the everyday. Coyle is best known as a draftsman and there are also drawings on view, some relating directly to the Forty Foot and others less directly related but relevant to the artist's underlying preoccupations. One set of drawings, *Ad Marginem*, incorporates representations of ornate gilt frames surrounding bare expanses of water, recalling the way Coyle began to look at the daily swim as being relocated within the frame of art.

The photographs don't pretend to any great technical properties, but they are pretty impressive. As Coyle notes, a swimmer at the Forty Foot goes through an identical routine daily, but "the sea is always different" and, he might have added, the sky is too. His elemental seascapes are richly textured, inexhaustible rearrangements of water, air, cloud and light. The sea, looked at from a distance or from the vantage point of pier or deck, is quite a different proposition if you are submerged in it.

Aesthetically, we can certainly say that many of his sea photographs are beautiful. Sometimes, as well, they are

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unnerving, conveying that alarming sense of a looming wall of water, a vast shifting mass that might easily swallow you up. It can look as solid as concrete, as dark as wet slate. Several images capture the pattern of rain drops smacking into the water surface under forbidding skies. A morning mist over the water evokes the work of the German Romantic painter Casper David Friedrich.

No matter what the conditions, Coyle observes, he is always refreshed and invigorated on coming out of the water, though

on the other hand: "I almost never swim without thinking of drowning." In a body of work about growing up in his native Dún Laoghaire, he has owned up to being fascinated as far back as he can remember by death. This shadows his work. The supposedly tame and safe suburban world is infused with disturbing, morbid associations, like the park in *I Went to Sleep*, a work in which Coyle picks up on an apparently innocuous song lyric.

There is a forensic quality to his densely worked charcoal and

pencil drawings, literally so in his *True Crime* series, which have crime scenes as their subject. Crime scenes are a recurrent subject in various ways in fact. Never take a Coyle drawing at face value.

Intricately detailed drawings of dense woodland harbour fragments of ominous imagery, like the photograph that turns out to include evidence of a murder in Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Blow-up*. Time and again profuse tangles of detail disguise disturbing visual information.

The watcher in the woods, the