



REVIEW - 10 APR 2017

## Margaret Corcoran

Kevin Kavanagh, Dublin

BY GEMMA TIPTON

Margaret Corcoran's previous exhibitions at Kevin Kavanagh have demonstrated the artist's interest in art and feminist histories, painted in a style marked by its restrained beauty, with occasional exuberant counterpoints. In the works in 'An Enquiry' (2002) a young girl wanders through the National Gallery of Ireland, gazing at paintings on the theme of the sublime. It is a brilliant examination of representation, the role of the viewer and our changing capacities for wonder. In 2006, the centrepiece of 'The University' was *At the Spar: Tong* (2006): a reworking of Édouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882), here featuring a Chinese woman at Corcoran's local supermarket.

These exhibitions form a thematic continuum that 'Aspasia - An Influential Immigrant' extends, even as Corcoran's painting style becomes looser and more dynamic. Its starting point is a 1960s book on the subject of love, found in the artist's local Oxfam shop. In it, Corcoran came across a black and



white photograph of a couple wrestling, depicted here in the starkly monochrome *On Earth* (2016). The painting seems to describe not only the eternal wrangles between the sexes, but also our own internal struggles to relate and, thence, to love. It is not necessarily kind, but the gestures are urgent and the tensely held energy in the piece, immediate.



Margaret Corcoran, *The Prince and the King*, 1974, watercolour on paper, 70 x 56 cm. Courtesy: Kevin Kavanagh, Dublin

This core image then explodes across two further works, *The Courtship* and *Over Land* (both 2017). In each, the backdrops are riots of exuberant colour. *The Courtship*, conjures a medley of scenes from the historical 'grand tour': an image of George III's consort, Queen Charlotte, peeps out near a sailing ship, while mountains and artworks hover about – all overlaid by the black-painted form of the couple, locked together forever. In *Overland*, the figures are again portrayed in black, this time over a remembered scene from a painting by Pierre Bonnard. (Corcoran later found that Bonnard had borrowed his subject from Titian, a discovery that delighted her, adding to the work's overlaying of different temporalities.)



Corcoran's interest in historical echoes comes not from a train-spotterish desire to trace references but, instead, from a desire to show how our ideas of what history is – and what it means – come directly from the images art has given us. Retell it, as she does in *At the Spar: Tong*, and you begin to realize that there are other stories, ones that history may have missed.

<<http://www.poppositions.com>>



Margaret Corcoran, *On Earth*, 2016,  
oil on canvas, 122 x 122 cm.

Courtesy: Kevin Kavanagh, Dublin

One such story is that of *Aspasia*, the exhibition's title figure. Known only through the writings of men (albeit men including Plato and Plutarch) *Aspasia* was an immigrant to classical-era Athens. She was also the lover of Pericles, but as an outsider she was not subject to the laws of the city. Turning her non-citizenship to her advantage, *Aspasia* held influential gatherings: Socrates was a frequent visitor. The two paintings of her in this exhibition (*Aspasia* and *Aspasia II*, both 2017) show an introspective figure rendered in fluid yet hazy watercolour.

Corcoran pairs these with a portrait of *DH Lawrence*, another immigrant and a champion of both love and freedom, and also with a portrait of an unknown African woman, *Proud Girl – Blue II* (both 2017). By drawing attention to the role of outsiders in shaping – and reshaping – society, Corcoran pinpoints



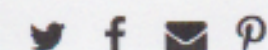
why fear often attaches itself to the idea of the incomer. Those outside a society's rules are frequently also strangers to its norms – the rejection of which may be positive, yet deeply upsetting to those who espouse them. Different cultures bring different values. A case in point: a trio of paintings look at the kingdom of Bhutan which, since 1971, has measured progress in gross national happiness rather than the more common gross domestic product. Corcoran's free-flowing gestures in both watercolour and acrylic demonstrate how much one can be learned from observing – and welcoming – the lives of others.

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