

REVIEW

ART What lies beneath

Blue Mist

by Robert Armstrong

Japanese ink on rice paper on panel
Courtesy of the artist and Kevin Kavanagh

BORN in Gorey, NCAD graduate Robert Armstrong — founding member of Temple Bar Gallery and Studios, art director of *In Dublin* and *Magill*, winner of a Guinness Peat Aviation Award and the Oireachtas Exhibition Painting Prize — returned to NCAD to teach in 1991 and was appointed Head of Painting in 2002.

Armstrong's own work has featured Wicklow and Wexford landscapes, the frozen pond surface at the Botanical Gardens, the volcanic landscapes of the Aeolian Islands, paintings in response to, and prompted by, his great interest and knowledge of classic Renaissance work — Poussin, Titian, Giotto, Raphael.

Those “religious or biblical themes like The Flood interest me because they resonate with contemporary issues like climate change” and in these “versions of several canonical paintings”, Armstrong was always concerned with “the visual dynamics rather than the grand narratives”.

In his version of *The Assumption of Our Lady into Heaven*, for example, “the figure of the virgin and saints are reduced to circles of colour”. And Armstrong's new show, *Three Distances*, celebrates real and imagined Chinese and Japanese landscapes.

Be it Wicklow, Hong Kong or Japan, Armstrong says landscape “is an ideal subject for the painter. It offers visual permission to explore light and form, distance and pattern, movement and colour. When I was younger, I thought art and painting should tell a story or address grand themes, but as I grew older, I realised that painting can be its own story,



containing its own history and traditions and its own internal aesthetics. The tension between ‘figurative’ and ‘abstract’ is always present in my work — possibly, I lean more towards the abstract”.

Though now retired from NCAD, artists, of course, don't retire. During a residency in Hong Kong last year, Armstrong was initially impressed by “the dynamism of the city and its ‘fragrant’ harbour”, but he became more interested in the “quiet, contemplative tradition of Chinese painting”.

He subsequently visited Japan, researched Eastern approaches to painting and, back in his Temple Bar studio, he made new work including this delicate and beautiful *Blue Mist*.

He hopes viewers will “enjoy the quiet

ethereal quality of my new paintings. I am very responsive to the materials I use while making the paintings — oil paint on canvas and Japanese ink on rice paper. The ink and paint spread and run in organic ways which parallel the effects of light and mist on a landscape. I would like the viewers to see the process — the bleeds and transparency and to let their eyes follow the action on the surface and see how these processes contribute to the making of the image”.

Blue Mist, with its enchanting blue and green dissolves, its depths and distances, “invites the viewer,” says Armstrong, “to travel through the mountains and air and to imagine landscapes behind and beyond any one vantage point. I hope it offers the prospect of a journey over

time. The 11th-century Chinese painter Guo Xi speaks of three distances: from the bottom of the mountains to the top is upper distance, from the front of the mountain to the back is deep distance, and the view from one mountain to another is level distance”.

Armstrong mastered eastern techniques using ink, rice paper and calligraphy brushes. “Stretching rice paper on wooden panels is difficult. Doing it badly in the studio in Hong Kong, three students were giggling at my clumsy efforts but the young women came to my aid and showed me how to do it properly.”

With oil paint “you can scrape or wipe it off if you make a mistake. This is why Chinese painters study calligraphy for years, to perfect an assured and confident mark-making. You only get one go at it”.

Eastern painting and Western paintings of the Sublime frequently included very small figures, but Armstrong thinks the inclusion of figures in his work “would invite questions: who is that? where are they going? what do they represent? And I prefer to keep the paintings more ambiguous and formal and avoid the narrative implications.”

Armstrong's father and grandfather were monumental sculptors and his parents, later, ran a printing works. The noisy background soundtrack of chiseling marble and the thrumming rhythm of a printing press contrast with the stillness and silences contained within Armstrong's recent work and he quotes de Kooning whose comment that “‘a painting should evolve as naturally as a flower’ has always stuck with me”.

Blue Mist blooms.

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