

The Visual Artists' News Sheet

Critique

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Sinéad Ní Mhaonaigh, *Monument II*, 2020, oil on canvas, installation view, The Dock; photograph by Gillian Buckley, courtesy the artist and The Dock

Sinéad Ní Mhaonaigh

The Dock, Carrick-on-Shannon

16 July – 10 October 2020



Sinéad Ní Mhaonaigh, *Untitled*, 2011, oil on canvas, installation view, The Dock; photograph by Gillian Buckley, courtesy of the artist and The Dock

ENTERING THE DOCK, I head for Gallery 2 first; it's the brightest room and the optimist within me moves naturally towards the light. And it's spectacular, pouring through large, west-facing windows, highlighting individual works, or casting them into shadow according to its whim. The shifting light messes with the physicality of the paintings too, their luscious impastos emphasised one minute, only to be dematerialised the next. As a viewing experience this is frustrating but also a reminder of the act of painting itself, the painted surfaces remaining vexed and alive, seemingly never coming to rest. The Dock's exhibition spaces have proven remarkably flexible, and the team there – including Director Sarah Searson and Visual Arts Manager Laura Mahon – have presented memorable shows by Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, Marcel Vidal and Anita Groener, among many others, in recent years. The presentation of Ní Mhaonaigh's work is relatively straightforward, the paintings hung alone or in pairs, judiciously distributed between the two main spaces and the mezzanine, where a series of five small paintings provides a link between the larger rooms. Spanning a decade or so (the majority are from this year and 2011) there are twenty paintings in all, marked by their similarities as much as their differences.

Four paintings in Gallery 2 are called *Teorainn* (all 2020)¹. Their depictions of bounded space are typical of the artist, with borders painted within the physical border of the canvas support itself. The oil paint is applied thickly, with the appearance of being worked and reworked over a long period of time. In *Teorainn II* striations and layers are made visible by a comprehensive scraping back of the painted surface. Distressed pinks and glimmering yellows have the appearance of a body exposed. Normally accumulative, the painting process is revealed as mostly an act of attrition. The painting shares a motif with its neighbour *Teorainn I*, where evenly applied strips of grey and pink form a compressed, central stack. These little heaps of paint reminded me of discarded mattresses or piles of old books. I also thought of certain paintings by Phillip Guston, his great pile-ups of shoes and cakes. I'd hazard Guston is important to Ní Mhaonaigh; for his palette

and application of paint as much as his journey between abstraction and figuration.

In Gallery 1, where the light is more tempered, an arched recess offers an ideal home for *Monument II* (2020), the painting's golden hues and composition of raked, heroic building blocks well suited to hints of divinity inherent in the large niche. On the opposite wall a much smaller painting, *Untitled* (2011) hovers above a black marble fireplace. The smooth mantle reflects the lustre of the painting's filigreed skin, bringing both surfaces additionally alive. Elsewhere in Gallery 1, a black and white painting, also *Untitled* (2011), looks like a large, heavily worked Polaroid, its distinctive black frame as though the borders of the photograph had been reversed. Unlike the scoring technique often employed by the artist – where graphic forms are swiftly drawn into the surface layers – the cartoonish shapes inhabiting this painting have been incrementally built with short, dabbing brushstrokes. While this haptic quality draws your eye into and across the painted surface, the surrounding borders cut off the action like a theatrical curtain, lest you forget that painting is always some kind of act.

The five paintings (all *Untitled*, 2011) on the mezzanine are lined up above a wainscoting. As though through the windows of a train, their darkly-framed, squeegeed surfaces suggest a passing landscape. Dabbed, dragged and tickled, the paint in Ní Mhaonaigh's paintings seems always on the move. You sense that she too, is always moving, from one painting to the next, the act of painting an endless, restless enquiry. When a painting is finished, the viewer can take over at last. But this can be a cat and mouse game. Even the best paintings here never seem quite fixed. Their mercurial quality – that sunlight so accentuates – making them lively to look at but also curiously provisional. As a viewer I didn't always feel privileged with the finished version, as though the painter's commitment to painting makes her reluctant to let them go.

John Graham is an artist based in Dublin.

Notes

¹ 'Teorainn' is an Irish word that means boundary. It might also be translated as limit, border or frontier.

Bernadette Doolan 'The House That Built Me'

GOMA, Waterford

30 July – 26 September 2020

WATERFORD'S GOMA reopened its doors with an exhibition of oil paintings by Bernadette Doolan. 'The House That Built Me' presents a selection of figures and scenes said to explore memory and emotion. While the exhibition's title suggests a deeply personal reflection, Doolan acknowledges that "the figure in my paintings represents me as a child but also a universal self". With these paintings she aims to connect the viewer to their own lived experience, by creating what she calls "a psychological pause". The subject of this work is childhood, so where a viewer's experience comes into play, it inevitably lends itself to more personalised memories and concepts of childhood. 'The House That Built Me' refers to the influences which shape our growth into adolescence and her titles underline a clear imagery around these moments of development. In a gallery talk on 29 August with Aoibhie McCarthy, Director of Cork's Sample-Studios, we learned of the artist's early clay reliefs, as well as her studies in psychology. Both facets are utilised here to tell us something about imagined worlds.

Spaced over three rooms, we observe Doolan's figures in moments of play and isolation. Even before details are to be provided for contact tracing, three works in GOMA's reception space invite our attention. One of these works, titled *Imaginary Friends*, shows a figure wearing stripy pink socks and a shimmering tutu. The composition cuts off at the figure's torso, while the head of a hobby horse enters from bottom right. Against a background of uniform grey cloud shapes, the horse's hair plays off a lighter brushwork, suggesting shadows settling on chiffon fabric. One lone eye stares back from the picture, the horse's fixed expression conveyed as an open mouth submerging into a darker grey band. Those hanging clouds may constitute a particularly dour wallpaper or they may invoke a symbolism and subtext, providing additional colour to the other elements of the composition. In either case, their routine pattern and spacing offers a sense of motion, neatly bridging the planes that describe the scene.

If these dark clouds add intrigue to a seemingly idyllic and privileged childhood, the faux-forlorn expression of the girl in *Eat your peas* reminds us that what we see as tenacity

can sometimes appear to others as stubborn mindedness. Despite this weighty psychological reflection, *Eat your peas* is a simple picture. A magnolia coloured backing, with pink arabesques, props up the girl wearing a green school jumper. Her complexion, patched together and plumped out with layered tones, affords her a depth, even a story.

A smaller painting nearby illustrates a single object, a paper fortune teller, against a teal blue background. Ordinarily occupied by forefingers and thumbs, this origami instrument can be manipulated to deliver a speculative fiction about future loves and riches – a game highly reminiscent of school days. The title, *Pick a number, pick a colour*, echoes the phrase used by the initiator of the game's practice among players. These three works outline the themes and objectives which are returned to throughout the show, where performativity and the capturing of a subject indicate pauses in an emotional landscape.

The long rectangular painting, *Self-sufficient and breakfast*, contains only one figure, again a girl at a table. Light on detail, this filmic image instils the blankness of memory as a dramatic device. The question, if we should ask it, is how much of our memory is concealed by absence? But rather than references to theoretical psychology, it is the bodily experience of empathy which defines Doolan's work. Her handling of paint draws the viewer closer, and her almost two-dimensional style achieves just enough character to convey the quiet idleness of the unknown. Like marionettes and other forms of shadow play, the viewer animates the scene.

Victorian novelist, Violet Paget (who wrote under the pseudonym Vernon Lee) made perhaps the first literary attempt to describe what we call 'empathy'. *Einfühlung* was, according to Paget, "exercised only when our feelings enter, and are absorbed into, the form we perceive." Simply, and by example, 'The House That Built Me' encourages us to pause with that encounter.

Darren Caffrey is an artist and art writer currently based in the South East.



Bernadette Doolan, *The Oddballs My Besties*, acrylic on paper, 180 × 120cm; courtesy of the artist