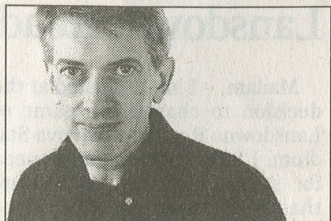


Conceptions of paradise

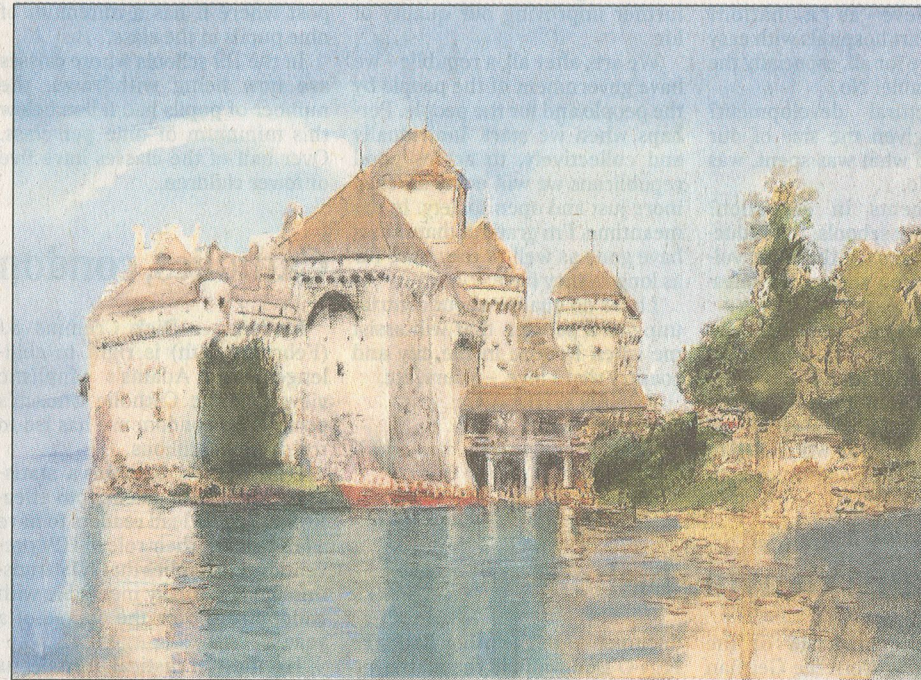


VISUAL ARTS
AIDAN DUNNE

WE SEE THE past in terms of the representational strategies used to describe it. This idea has been integral to the rationale of Margaret Corcoran's work. Her paintings have revisited historical eras with the aim of illuminating the world views implicit in the images and the ways they were constructed, generally with particular regard to the role of women in looking, seeing and making. Her engagement has been broadly critical and analytical. In her 2007 exhibition, *University*, she drew on works by Manet and Degas. Manet's iconic painting *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, featuring a barmaid looking directly at the viewer, was translated into a picture of a Chinese woman, Tong, behind the counter of Corcoran's local supermarket.

Other images imagined Tong's world, or how we might set about imagining it and it seems fair to say that Corcoran's current exhibition, *The Garden*, at Kevin Kavanagh, takes off from this point of imagining.

It was up to us to interpret several of the paintings in *University* in the light of what we gleaned from others in the exhibition, and sometimes we



were bound to be wrong. A mountain torrent turned out not to be, as it looked at first glance, a landscape in China, but one in Europe. Corcoran wanted to underline that the expectations we bring to an image help to determine what we see.

In *The Garden*, locations in Ireland, Europe and China are again juxtaposed ambiguously. All are imbued with a certain exoticism and, while one painting, *The Castle*, looks distinctly more European than Chinese, there is a homogeneous quality to the overall body of imagery. East and West, North and South are being treated with a visual equivalence, which might have to do with

living in a globalised world, or might have to do with actuality and imagination.

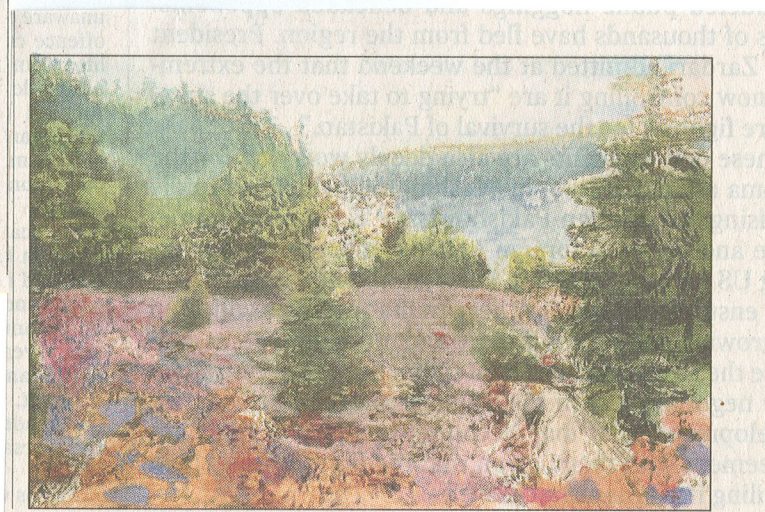
The show's title points to the fact that gardens are constructions in the landscape, orderly conceptions of paradise given concrete form. They are contrived spaces, not unlike paintings in some respects, but subject to many more variables and contingencies. While Corcoran is a painter of great natural facility, she also distrusts that facility, and distrusts representation itself. Her work in *University* recalled the casual, unfinished appearance of much of Degas' painting, and her new paintings are also calculatedly

Contrived spaces:
Margaret Corcoran's *The Castle* (above) and *The Appearance* (right)

sketchy and provisional, as though they feature an inbuilt commentary on the process of painting itself.

Each piece in *The Garden* prompts us not to take it at face value. Images are representationally faithful, but often on the point of dissolution. Some areas of a composition are mapped briskly in outline and filled in roughly with washes of colour that run freely down the canvas, while others approach the level of photographic verisimilitude. The results remind us that we are looking at something fabricated and incomplete, just as the sources are fabricated and incomplete. The implication is that representation is always problematic, but it is how we make the world around us in one form or another. *The Garden* is colourful, attractive, and thoughtful.

One of the best pieces, *Never Work*, is an urban landscape, a slice of a wall on a city building which has been decorated with a graffiti "garden", preaching a utopian message, just like an actual garden.



The Garden by Margaret Corcoran, Kevin Kavanagh, Chancery Lane, Dublin, until Feb 28th. *Adventuring*, paintings by Kate Warner, Cross Gallery, 59 Francis St, Dublin, until Feb 28th