

Mark Swords The Living and The Dead

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Before visiting *The Living And The Dead*, I heard it discussed by two artists, both of whom work in paint. They talked about the show with the kind of passion-of-reaction reserved for cultural output, which stumps the barometer of our personal taste – an excellent sign that something significant was going on. Neither was quite sure where they stood between the poles of love and hate, and if the latter, whether this antagonism was, in fact, the blossoming of a deeper appreciation. There were no other shows in the city at that time which could have provoked such a guttural reaction. Here was an exhibition of rejection, willing and calculated. Rejection of craft, of design, of compositional ideals and – to a degree – of some romantic concept of good taste, however shy and retiring that is these days.

With the exception of *Tapestry* – a sort of exhibition composite hanging isolated on white opposite the gallery entrance – the show fills the space's two unbroken walls in parallel, with scatter-hangs of variously sized paintings upon stitched-together fabric backgrounds. This wallpaper comes in darkly subdued over-painted imagery, and sharp, multicoloured stripes and segments, the effect of which is both jarring and jelling. The aim is a holistic experience, and although this succeeds – by creating an initial, instinctual resistance to the idea of dislocating works from the ensemble; a dichotomous effect of harmony from dissonance – there are individual victories here too. One such, *The Play*, has audience and actors enveloped

in a colourful kaleidoscope of concentric lozenges; at home in its surrounding assemblage, but more than able to decamp to a white wall somewhere, should the opportunity arise. Swords has often crafted his paint in elegant symmetries and this is foregone here in the individual pieces, almost wholesale. Even a work called *Pattern* – featuring objects including turds and fish heads over a black background – sports a design, which is somewhat irregular and repeats prettily unfaithfully. The visuals of our everyday lives are by-and-large not constructed with the consideration of neat design principles and it is these quotidian arrangements that Swords has said he was particularly inspired by for this series of works.

Swords' mash-up style of constructing paintings (reworking, collaging, overpainting, augmenting) displays an intriguing balancing act between representation and (the seemingly) abstract in the thirty paintings here. With the work *Glenside Road*, I thought the artist was showing me a lonely house on a (curiously straight) boreen, until in an optical switch, I saw the road and house for what they really were: the horizontal rail of a sash window, with a pasty view of the real Glenside Road under a layer of pale paint above and below. However, along with this suburban (or surural?) quietude, the dominant theme is an air of the theatrical, the carnivalesque, or at the least, that of the staged public

spectacle: *Puppet Theatre*, *The Wrestlers*, *Family Magic Show*, *Handball Alley*. For all the drama, Swords' titles are characteristically matter-of-fact and essential, but visually these stories intertwine, like tangled small-town narratives of characters on a stage.

The living and the dead is a teasing of the boundaries to which Swords can push his broader working method within the framework of a new aesthetic; positioning his work between the edifice of received artistic wisdom and the chance encounter of the badlands beyond. Between this is a restlessness, bounded by artistic intention and the chance occurrences that take such preconceptions and happily corrupt them. With any luck, this tussle has only just begun.

Installation view, *The living and the dead* by Mark Swords, Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin April 15 - June 17, 2017.

Photo credit: Peter Rowan

