

A careful look at the small details

Visual Arts Aidan Dunne

Reviewed

Robert Armstrong, Paintings, Kevin Kavanagh, 66 Great Strand Street, Dublin. Ends Mar 10 (01-8740064). **Waypoints** David Begley, Cross Gallery, 59 Francis Street, Dublin. Ends Mar 10 (01-4738978). **This time I promise to be more careful** Isabel Nolan, Kerlin Gallery, Anne's Lane, South Anne Street, Dublin. Until Mar 17 01-6709093

WH Auden's poem *Musée des Beaux Arts* addresses Brueghel's *Icarus*, noting how the picture's ostensible subject, the crux of the story, has been re-

gated to the margins, almost as an afterthought to everything else that is going on in the painting. The Old Masters knew the position that suffering occupies, the poet observes. It happens "while someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along".

In his paintings at the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, Robert Armstrong has taken another, though closely related, tack in his approach to the Old Masters. Most of the paintings in his show focus and elaborate on minor background details in classical compositions, or reconsider aspects of classical works that did not in the first place fit comfortably with our notions of particular artists or the their contemporary worldview.

Not that he is exclusively or obsessively interested in anatomising classical paintings in a revisionist vein. The processes and nature of representation are more the focus of his interest.

Underlying his work is the proposition that images are never neutral or transparent, as they are still largely presumed to be. That is to say, even with our awareness of spin and manipulation, we tend to treat images as if they are purely as they pretend in the daily media fest. Armstrong has two lines of argument. One is that an image is likely to har-



Look again: *The valley of the people who don't know anything* (oil on canvas), by Robert Armstrong

bour or conceal relevant information that is not immediately apparent, as in a view of a dwelling that seems to be a model of domestic security but is not quite. The other is that we may fail to appreciate what is staring us in the face – such as the startling modernity of Dürer's apocalyptic dream.

HIS SOURCES EXTEND beyond the realm of fine art, to news and nature documentary. In his lectures on literature, Vladimir Nabokov asserted that there is no such thing as reading, only re-reading, and the logic of Armstrong's work is that when it comes to paint-

ing, there is no such thing as looking, only looking again. He constitutes his paintings in a way that enacts a process of re-working and re-looking. We can see how they are made, built up in restrained, carefully considered layers. Lest that makes them sound too analytical, it should be said that they are also beautifully painted, displaying an unerring instinct for colour, for example. Rather than pinning down art historical points, he delights in the ambiguities and possibilities opened up.

He is certainly alert to the historians' tendency to approach a work of art as though it

were a crime scene, but his own aims are different. Like the crew from CSI, they go through the forensics. But he is more an art historical Lieut Columbo: "Been great taking to you, Mr Brueghel, and good luck with the exhibition. Make sure to give my regards to Mrs Brueghel – oh, before I go, there's just one little thing. You say you didn't notice anything unusual and of course I'm no art historian, and I'm sure there's some simple explanation for this, but isn't that a man falling into the water there in the corner of your painting?"